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Shared social responsibility : a concept in search of its political meaning and promise

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Shared social responsibility – A concept in search of its political meaning and promise

This paper examines the concept of shared social responsibility. The author provides significant theoretical insights on shared social responsibility and its place in democratic theory, especially the liberal theory of justice. This article further explores ways of implementing practically the notion of shared social responsibility into socio-economic policy in order to address the democratic deficit within modern states.

Keywords: shared social responsibility, democratic theory, liberal theory of justice, capitalistic democracies.

There can be no doubt that responsibility and responsible agents are good things to have. Both democratic theory and the liberal theory of justice rely on “responsibility” as a core concept. As to democratic theory, it is always good to know who is responsible and for what and to whom, because then we, the citizens, can turn, individually or collectively, to the responsible agent (be it a court, an elected legislature, a government) and ask for the correction of things that went wrong or demand action that will bring things in line with our own notion of the common good and what is deemed valuable, desirable and just. We, the people, can also turn to each other and to ourselves, as it is ultimately “all of us” who are responsible for authorising the political authorities to do what they are doing, and doing “in our name”. Either way, being aware of the institutional location of responsibility allows citizens of liberal democracies to act rationally by allocating their demands, complaints and expression of political support to the right address, as it were.

1. Responsibility in democratic theory

Today, however, citizens of European democracies are often at a loss when it comes to the

question of who is actually responsible for matters of collective relevance and for policies addressing these matters. Is it the local, regional, or national state? Is it other states that exercise an influence over our national policies and well-being? Is it remote supranational entities – such as the European Commission – which govern over us? Or is it market forces of an anonymous and opaque nature, as well as the fiscal and financial crises triggered by them, that must be considered the ultimate causal determinants (as opposed to responsible agents) shaping the conditions under which we live? Or is it, equally anonymously, “all of us” who fail in our democratic responsibility by allowing, in an attitude of indifference, things to happen in public policy that we virtually all agree can and should be avoided. Answers to these questions are not often easy to come by. To make things worse, it may even be the case that all of the above share responsibility, be it through their action or inaction, in ways that are virtually impossible for ordinary citizens to disentangle in any reliable way.

Arguably, there was a time when the question of “who is responsible and therefore can be held accountable?” was comparatively easy to answer. The answer was “the incumbent government”. Government that in the past successfully sought to be entrusted by voters with “governing responsibility” (*Regierungsverantwortung*, the German household phrase) and which risked losing it on the next election day if it had failed to make good use of responsibilities mandated to it in the eyes

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of popular majorities. Yet the days when the place of responsibility was so unequivocal and easily located are definitely a thing of the past. Let me point to four developments that can explain why this is so.

First, incumbent political elites are not only the objects of popular scrutiny and periodic responsibility tests by being monitored and held accountable for what they do and fail to do, they are also strategic agents that spend much of their time and resources on managing their mass constituency's perception of responsibility. They do so in the three most common communicative modes by which elites address their constituencies: blame avoidance and finger-pointing (in the case of undesirable developments and outcomes), and credit claiming (in cases of favourable ones), and the rhetorical taking of what they can safely assume on the basis of opinion polls to be popular positions. The ubiquitous use of these patterns of strategic communication by political elites, assisted by communications specialists, makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to assess with any degree of certitude who "is" actually responsible for which outcomes, and who, accordingly, deserves to be praised and supported, or blamed and opposed. Unless independent reporting and investigative media analyses assist in this cognitive challenge, the voter/citizen can fall victim to and be seriously misled by the increasing ingredient of stagecraft, that is the strategic creation of appearances, in the practice of statecraft (as Wolfgang Streeck has observed).

Second, the opaqueness of the question of responsibility and to whom it must be assigned in democratic politics is not just a matter of modes of strategic communication; it has a foundation in changing institutional realities having to do with the transformation of government into governance (Offe 2008). While "government" stands for the clearly demarcated and visible competency of particular governmental office holders and parties in legislative chambers to make collectively binding decisions, "governance" stands for more or less fleeting multi-actor alliances which span the divides between public and private actors, state and civil society, or national and international actors. The more such alliances – often referred to as "network governance", "multi-level governance", multi-par-

ty coalition governments or "private-public partnerships" – come to prevail in the conduct of public policies in core areas such as health, education, transportation, housing, even security, and so forth, the more difficult becomes the problem of "imputability" (Rummens 2011), the problem of establishing clear links between decisions, their authors and their outcomes.¹

Third, due to the endemic and seemingly chronic fiscal crisis that has befallen virtually every state in Europe (both as a consequence of them having transformed themselves into low-tax "competition states" in an open global economy and as a consequence of the bail-out-needs ensuing upon the financial market crisis), the range of solutions that the state and political elites can at all credibly promise and take responsibility for, its very "state capacity", has been shrinking quite dramatically. As a consequence, removing garbage from the streets of Naples, or snow from German highways during harsh winter weather, are problems that the state can no longer be relied upon to fix or held effectively responsible for – to say nothing of issues like child poverty, or the educational deprivation of migrants' children, or the sustainability of financial markets, climate or the environment. While not being able to extract higher taxes from the earners, of high incomes and owners of wealth due to the anticipation of their adverse reactions and resulting competitive disadvantages, the fiscally starved state reduces the agenda of its previously taken-for-granted responsibilities and retreats to a minimalist agenda of enhancing competitiveness, subsidising innovation, developing the supply of human capital and, increasingly, servicing public debt.

¹ This is not to deny that the co-production of policies on the basis of shared responsibilities does not have its virtues, as I will argue in the final part of this chapter. A case in point was a "food scandal" in January 2011, brought on by livestock in Germany being fed substances contaminated by the carcinogen dioxins. The political process that unfolded as a consequence consisted for several weeks of strategic yet inconclusive attempts to determine and place the blame *on* who was actually *responsible* – the federal ministry, the state ministries and legislatures, individual farmers, individuals within the food safety administration, unscrupulous industrial suppliers of fodder, or overly price-conscious consumers themselves who brought economic pressures to bear upon agricultural suppliers?

Correspondingly, and this is a fourth aspect of the democracy problem of political responsibility, fiscally starved governments have for several decades now – decades of the ascent of “neo-liberalism” to the status of a hegemonic belief system guiding public policy – resorted to strategies of shedding and re-assigning responsibilities. The basic intuition is that the government is not – and therefore cannot be held to be by citizens – responsible; citizens themselves are “responsibilised”, with the only remaining role of government consisting in “activating” and “incentiv-ising” citizens so that they live up to their individual responsibility rather than asking and expecting government to take responsibility for them.² Appeals to self-help, self-reliance and self-provision, to philanthropy, charity, foundations, mutualism and so forth, together with policy revisions following patterns of privatisation, marketisation and contractualisation of claims to benefits, make heeding these appeals the only option left to ordinary citizens. (This is true only to the extent that they have the material means to do so). Such policy shifts, designed to rescind public responsibilities and associated expenditures, are abundantly encountered in the areas of labour market, pension, education, public transport and health policy. Such appeals to the corrective powers of “civil society”, occasionally bordering on what I call “political kitsch”, are often little more than a cheap excuse of political elites to get rid of their responsibility for “social” problems by transferring them to private hands and pockets. As the state withdraws, fully or in part, from funding services and entitlements, citizens are left with no choice but to comply and to take on responsibility for their present and future selves – to the extent, that is, that their incomes allow them to do so.

As a consequence of such public policies of abandoning public responsibilities, democratic rights of holding governments accountable tend to lose much of their leverage concerning the quality, distribution, security of the life chances

of voters and the services they can count upon as citizens. Citizens come to learn that in core matters of their socio-economic well-being, government is no longer a promising address to turn to with complaints or demands concerning issues of distributive justice, social security, the provision of services and collective well-being. The shrinking scope of what governments – and increasingly governments of every political colour, as all of them are driven by the imperatives of the fiscal crisis and competitiveness – can afford to accept responsibility for discourages major parts of the electorate, mostly the less well-to-do, from taking an active interest in political life, addressing their interests and demands to governments and holding governments to account.

In the course of this two-sided dynamic – the retreat of governments from major areas of responsibility, followed reciprocally by the retreat of up to a third of the citizenry from virtually all forms of political participation – the democratic idea of responsible government, or governmental accountability, is in the process of evaporating. To the extent that it does, it gives way to a condition of what has been termed “post-democracy” (Crouch 2004).

Exclusionary and inegalitarian trends in European polities are not just of a social and economic nature, but also extend to the political realm. Here, we can speak of increasingly pronounced patterns of “participatory inequality”. Its major symptom is that those at the bottom third in terms of income, education and security have in many countries largely given up exercising their rights of citizenship. They know little about politics; they do not vote; they do not join social or political associations; and they certainly cannot afford to donate to political causes. Taken together, these trends amount to something similar to a social (as opposed to legal) disenfranchisement and political marginalisation, a condition that many authors fear may become a seed bed for populist and xenophobic mobilisation. Observing these trends and dilemmas, we cannot but conclude that our democratic institutions, as well as the political economies in which they are embedded, have generally failed to provide a vehicle for the effective sharing of responsibilities through governmental action.

² In a nutshell, this is what British minister Norman Tebbit had in mind when he recommended to the unemployed that they *had better “get on your bike and look for work”*. The clear trend is a move from government responsibility to the “responsibilised” citizen.

2. Responsibility in liberal theories of justice

Let me now turn to an equally brief discussion of what the concept of responsibility refers to in the liberal theory of justice. The key normative principle of liberalism is that individuals should enjoy legally secured liberty to make choices concerning their life – choices whose outcomes they alone are responsible for and in which no outside force, least of all political power holders, should be allowed to interfere. However, it is widely acknowledged among political theorists that the realisation of this ideal of liberty faces two kinds of problems. For one, we often observe that the consequences of freely chosen individual actions affect not just themselves, but others as well. If the external consequences of my action, or externalities, are negative in that they adversely affect the well-being of others, then the freedom of choice of one person can be said to constrain the freedom of choice of others. Therefore, in order for liberalism's highest value of freedom to be universally enjoyed, it must be limited at the level of individuals through statutory regulation, rules of criminal law and so forth: no one must be allowed to inflict (uncompensated) damage upon anyone else.

The second problem that the liberal theory of justice faces is this: the range of an individual's free choice is not just determined by the legal guarantees securing it, but also by favourable or unfavourable conditions which can dramatically expand (such as through "unearned" inherited wealth) or severely restrict (due to congenital physical handicaps or the fact of being born in a poor country, for example) the range of choices individuals have at their disposal, particularly as these adverse conditions are due to "brute luck" and can in no way be causally attributed to any behaviour that those benefiting or suffering from them are causally responsible for. Liberal theorists take care of the first of these two complications by imposing negative duties upon the uses individuals can make of their freedom; for instance, they declare as illegitimate and propose to impose constraints on the freedom to pollute the environment, to steal or to fraudulently appropriate your neighbour's property, and so forth.

Liberalism, in short, presupposes a regime of restraints, law and order. Liberal political theorists try to take care of the second complication (and by consistently doing so qualify as "leftist" liberals) by imposing positive obligations upon "everyone else" with regard to the bad luck and ensuing losses of freedom of those suffering from various sorts of handicaps for which they cannot be held causally responsible. They do so in part by imposing taxes on those favoured by lucky circumstances, as opposed to the fruits of their own voluntary efforts. These collective, positive obligations can consist of public measures designed to prevent, compensate for, alleviate or overcome and so forth, individual hindrances (to the extent that it is at all feasible) that are due to "luck" rather than choice. In so doing, they aspire to the ideal of equality of opportunity. The underlying intuition is that only after the playing field has been made more level, can individuals seriously (as opposed to cynically, as in the case of victim-blaming) be held responsible for the uses they make of their liberty and the individually reaped fruits in which these uses result.³

The conceptual distinction between luck determinants of a person's degree of well-being and choice determinants is the basis of any liberal theory of justice, with "individual responsibility" being the criterion by which this distinction is made. "Luck" is the total of conditions, favourable as well as unfavourable, for which a person in question is not responsible, while "choice" is everything pertaining to the responsible exercise of a person's free will. Put differently: "luck" is everything for which I can plausibly hold others responsible, including anonymous circumstances, and which is beyond my control. Everything that follows from action within my range of deliberate control is something that nobody but myself is causally responsible for and, in the case of undesirable outcomes, must be self-attributed, or traced to my own //responsible action, such as my lack of ambition, effort or readiness to

³ Needless to say, further difficulties are encountered when it comes to the *extent* to which negative externalities can and must be ruled out through regulation, as well as the extent to which "luck" factors can and must be *neutralised* in order for the ideal of equality of opportunity to be sufficiently redeemed.

take precautions for risky undertakings. Under the banner of equal opportunity, luck-related conditions are roughly the same for all of us so that individual outcomes can justly be accounted for in terms of choices that individuals have made, thus adding up to a pattern of supposedly justified inequality of outcomes.

The rigid dichotomy of luck vs. choice, circumstances vs. personal responsibility, structure *vs.* agency and so forth, is deeply engrained in liberal political thought. Neat and elegant though this distinction between “luck” and “choice” may seem, I shall argue that its applicability and usefulness is strictly and increasingly limited, and that it rarely if ever works in practice. Let me briefly elaborate why I think it doesn’t (Kibe 2011).

First, even if the responsibility criterion leads to a clear demarcation line between what is due to luck and what is due to choice, observers often substantially differ as to where precisely the line is to be located. Trivially, the better-off will tend to claim causal responsibility for their advantages, that is attribute them to their own effort and ambition, thereby legitimating them. The worse-off will be inclined to attribute their inferior condition to circumstances beyond their control, thereby minimising their responsibility and justifying claims for compensation. Conversely, if the worse-off try to assess the situation of the better-off, they will probably tend to magnify the luck factor, while the wealthy, looking at the poor, will emphasise the choice factor that is responsible for their condition, particularly as that allows them to fend off compensation claims coming from the poor. If this is so, the criterion works for each individual using it, but it works differently for different observers, due to their interest-biased perspectives and legitimisation needs with which they approach the question at hand. While both sides make use of the dualist code of luck vs. choice and effort, they tend to draw the dividing at very different locations. And rightly so.

For, secondly, the ability to take your fate into your own hands and to act self-confidently on the assumption that it is largely *your own* choice that matters is a frame of mind which itself is nurtured and encouraged by specific socio-structural conditions. Take the case of a school boy who excels in every subject at school. Can this be attributed to and hence explained by the

voluntary effort he spends in doing his homework? Or must it be attributed to the fact that he happens to have been brought up in a family which values scholastic achievement very highly and enforces this value very strictly (perhaps applying “Chinese” or “Japanese” methods of education)? Putting the question this way makes it virtually unanswerable. Or rather, both of the supposed alternatives apply – the first (effort) is present *because of* the second (parental strictness), and the distinction is made meaningless because causal responsibility is *shared* between the two sides, with the effect that the dichotomous liberal frame of choice vs. circumstance, and so forth, breaks down. As one author has put it: “It is hard to disentangle luck and responsibility as my present capacity to act responsibly may be impaired by previous experiences of bad luck” (Dowding 2010: 89). Moreover, whatever we do “voluntarily” is bound to be embedded in and shaped by patterns of what Michael Walzer (2004) has called “involuntary association”, such as family, ethnic, religious, class or national membership and belonging. Even if I try to radically distance myself from such belonging, it remains the belonging that shapes the mode and effective extent of my distantiating.

Prosperous members of the educated middle class tend to be brought up to adopt the mental habit of seeing the world through a lens of self-attribution of both favourable and unfavourable outcomes; either outcome is seen as flowing from the determination with which they have exploited opportunities and the cleverness with which they have avoided risks. In contrast to this liberal ideology of individualist causal responsibility, the view that is more likely to be found among less privileged social groups is that outcomes are determined by the constraints inherent in differential resource endowments on the one hand, and co-operative and collective modes of action on the other: what happens to “me” is ultimately a function of how “all of us” act, including the agents of public policy whom all of us, ultimately and at least implicitly, authorise to do what they are doing or fail to do. The disadvantaged will tend to blame “society”, and the better-off to credit themselves. Both answers remain caught up in the liberal dichotomous scheme. The right answer is, I submit, that all of us share (in ways that are immensely complex and hence impossible to

disentangle) in the causal responsibility, through acts of commission or omission, to what happens to (or is achieved by) each of us. Shared causal responsibility, thus understood, is not a lofty ideal to strive after; it is simply an important fact of social life.⁴

That, at least, applies to the analytical level where the question of causal responsibility is addressed: how come someone has succeeded or failed? It does, however, most certainly not apply to the normative issue concerning the assignment of what I propose to call remedial responsibility – who should be held responsible for taking action if things have gone wrong? While it is often not difficult to convince people that causal responsibility is in fact largely collective (think of climate change and other cases of environmental disruption), we need a lot more persuasive power to convince the same people that, therefore and due to interdependence, remedial responsibility must also be shared rather than remain individualised and addressed selectively to victims and those least able to cope.

Even if problems remain individualised (rather than affecting “all of us” equally) as to their incidence and immediate consequences, they can clearly be collectively caused. Take the examples of child obesity, drug addiction, violent crimes or teenage pregnancy. These often do have devastating effects upon the life course and well-being of those directly affected, but it can by no means be said that the causal responsibility for

these outcomes rests with the individuals and their “wrong” behaviours alone. For statistical and epidemiological analysis suggests that, in international comparison, the incidence of those social pathologies is greater the greater the inequality of income and wealth is in a given society (and that applies even to different incidences between the more and the less equal American federal states, cf. Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Again, we have a case that could be labelled “co-production” of social problems: as “all of us”, in our capacity as citizens and voters, are ultimately responsible for the prevailing profile and distributional effects of income and tax policies, as well as social and education policies, it is somehow “all of us” who are co-responsible for the effects that those inequalities generate which we more or less thoughtlessly or in pursuit of our individual interest allow, through acts of commission or omission, to prevail.

A third point on the dilemma of the liberal dichotomy of luck vs. effort is this: any system of social security and services institutionalises, under liberal premises, a demarcation line between where individual choice is appropriate and where collective provision is called for. The classic case is the distinction between the “undeserving” poor (who have supposedly made the “wrong” choices, adopted unwise life styles, etc.) and the “deserving” poor (the victims of circumstances beyond their control). This line divides categories of risks and contingencies that belong to a sphere that the respective individuals affected by such conditions can be expected to cope with by their own means and choices, on the one hand, from those categories of conditions that require collective arrangements, on the other. If I suffer from a common cold, I am, according to the logic of welfare states and their health systems, on this side of the line, as I am supposed to know what to do (and actually act upon that knowledge) in order to achieve a speedy recovery and to pay for whatever it costs to get there. In contrast, if I suffer from pneumonia, the remedial measures to be taken are typically specified by, provided for, and financed through public and other collective arrangements (social insurance, licensed medical institutions, tax-subsidised occupational health plans, etc.). In this way, welfare states can be looked at as sorting machines which assign deserts,

⁴ This claim is reminiscent of the Marxist theorem of the “increasingly *social* character of production” that evolves under capitalist modernisation – lending itself to the understanding that an ever deeper division of labour in the economy renders it eventually impossible to trace back the final outcome (goods sold at a profit) to individualised inputs, as the organisation itself (the firm), its managers, the workers that it puts to work and its ties to the outside world generate a kind of *holistic* or *systemic* causation that can no longer be disaggregated in terms of individual contributions of agents but is based upon *interdependency* – however asymmetrical that interdependency may in fact be. This view is of course contradicted by the grotesquely implausible economic doctrine (and meritocratic dogma of justice) which claims that each worker is (or should be) remunerated according to his or her individual “marginal product”. However, no one has an idea of how this might be measured independently of the balance of market powers.

rights or legitimate needs-to-be-taken-care-of to categories of people in specified conditions, while leaving other conditions to the sphere of what can be left to the prudent choice of individuals. The implicit message is: you have to cope with them by your own means, relying on markets and family support, or, failing that, simply accept them as unfortunate facts of life.

Finally, powerful economic, political and philosophical forces, together often summarily referred to as hegemonic “neo-liberalism”, have drawn European societies, since about the mid-1970s of the 20th century, ever more in the direction of privileging the individualist frame according to which most of our individual outcomes, good or bad, must be read as deriving from choices, right ones or wrong ones, made by individuals. Therefore, remedial responsibility, or so the gospel of the market proclaims, must also rest with individuals. Having made those choices, they deserve the associated outcomes (be it the extremes of wealth, be it those of poverty), which are hence rendered unproblematic in normative terms as they are just manifestations of the supreme value of individuals’ freedom to make choices. The implicit warning is: moving the demarcation line too far in the “wrong” direction, thus providing “too much” space for collective provisions, would be both wasteful (“fiscally inefficient”) and detrimental to the core value of freedom of choice. The latter is said to be the case because individuals would be weaned and “disincentivised” from making their own choices, relying instead upon collectivist provision, thereby becoming dependent upon (that is, defenceless against) the state and its bureaucratic and centralising control. Social and economic “progress” is, according to this doctrine, measured as nothing but increments of the aggregate total of individual incomes. All that you need to control your fate, or so the message reads, you can purchase, be it bonds to provide for your retirement income, be it health food and “anti-ageing-pills” to postpone retirement for as long as possible. If you happen to dislike and feel threatened by the people in your neighbourhood, you move to a “gated compound”; if you want to get ahead in your career, you enrol in commercial training courses; if you want to enhance your mobility, you buy a faster car; if you are unhappy with the temperature, cleanliness and humidity

of the air, just do your own private corrective climate change policy by having a good air conditioning system installed in your home. It is all your personal preferences, your individual choice and your responsibility to match the two within the constraints of your means. We might well speak here of negative externalities following from institutionalised individualism itself, that is, of the hegemonic fixation on individual choice as the prime remedy to problems of well-being.

The plain absurdity of such individualist and “presentist” understanding is evident if we think of inter-temporal negative externalities, such as damages affecting future generations or our future selves. Climate change and other aspects of intergenerational justice are probably the most serious cases in point. As the future victims of the consequences of our present action and inaction are not yet present as actors and thus cannot possibly raise their voice and intervene, all of us, and now, need to prevent these long-term externalities from occurring. Otherwise, as we know (or could know), the long-term effects of our present action and inaction will soon become impossible to reverse or neutralise.

Even if someone were to summarise the messages of neo-liberalism in a somewhat less pointed fashion, I would still feel certain about one conclusion: this individualist ideology of (consumer) choice is currently on its way out due to its manifest failure to accurately depict contemporary realities.⁵ The obsolescence of neo-liberal ideology, or so I wish to demonstrate in the rest of this chapter, applies both to the problems we suffer from and the solutions we may find to them. As to the former (the problems), I can perhaps illustrate what I mean when we think of a person sitting in his car being stuck in a huge traffic jam. Looking out of the window, he or she sees (as actually once happened to me) that someone had painted on

⁵ Ideologies, or configurations of ideas that amount to everyday theories of how the world does work and should work, can be either repulsive or appealing in evaluative terms; yet they can also be subjected to a test of their truth. The precise meaning of “ideology” as a concept of the social sciences is that it is a configuration of ideas that is both appealing (at least to some) and at the same time demonstrably untrue – a mistaken or biased representation of the world and how it works, or interest-distorted reasoning.

the side of the pavement: “You are not stuck in the jam, you are the jam!” The rather compelling message is that many of the problems from which we suffer today (environmental damages, climate change, financial market breakdowns, poverty) and which so patently interfere with the well-being of all of us are by their very nature self-inflicted and collectively “co-produced” ones. As things stand, there is nothing individually objectionable to the attempt of the man to get by car from A to B at time *t* (rush hour), but it is exactly the wide use made of that freedom by so many others that leads to the frustration of the seemingly innocent intention.

3. Recognising and sharing social responsibilities in practice

The distinction I have introduced between “causal” responsibility and “remedial” responsibility suggests the solution that the two must be made to coincide. That is to say: all those causally responsible for the creation of a problem must be made to co-operate in its solution rather than relying on individualist solutions. But how could such congruence be brought about? As a first approximation to an answer, we have the theoretical choice between civil society, economic incentives and coercive state policies as three potentially promising arenas in which the problem of congruence can be approached – or probably rather in a reasonably intelligent combination of the three. For if we succeed in finding and implementing solutions to problems for which we collectively are causally responsible, we will do so not *alone* through coercive regulation or through (dis)incentives addressed at individual utility maximisers (although these two tools of public policy have their indispensable role to play); in addition, we need to strengthen the awareness of ordinary people and their readiness to co-operate in the achievement of common goods – their willingness to “do their share”, and do so even in situations where the “right thing to do” is not demanded by legal rules or a selfish calculus of individual gain under politically set incentives. Such awareness, most likely generated by associations and movements within civil society, relates to knowledge about – and the readiness to

pay attention to in the practices of everyday life – the negative and positive externalities that we inescapably cause for others as well as for our future selves. Many examples illustrating those practices of self-assigned and deliberate remedial responsibility have to do with consumption: the food we eat, the textiles we wear, the amount and kind of energy we consume, the extent to which we enjoy our mobility are all known to generate critical impacts upon our individual as well as, through externalities, our collective well-being. The same applies to how we educate our children, recognise the rights and dignity of strangers, deal with gender and inter-generational conflicts, and extend help and support to others, including distant others.

Yet before we get overly idealistic and start moralising at our fellow citizens, we should pause to note that the ideal practices I just referred to – the practices of widely self-assigned responsibility for improving collective conditions, precautionary awareness of sustainability issues, solidarity with one’s future self, civility, attention and “considerateness” – are not simply adopted as a result of insight and determination; their choice is itself constrained by “conditions”, among them the prevailing conditions of income, wealth and access to good-quality education. The sobering truth is that those least endowed with these critical resources find themselves often in a condition which makes their engagement in the practice of sharing responsibilities quite unaffordable *or* otherwise inaccessible. Their time horizon (as well as their social horizon of all those to whom they feel obligations) is known to be much narrower than that of the educated middle classes with their greater cognitive endowments. To put it in a nutshell: poverty can positively make people act irresponsibly. If you have to live on a tight budget and under precarious job security, you cannot afford health food for yourself and your children, and neither are issues of sustainability likely to be close to your heart; all you can do is to look for the cheapest food, textiles, means of transportation and so forth, that you can find – which arguably makes it a very high political priority to fight poverty, and doing so at a national as well as a supra-national level (cf. Schmitter and Bauer 2001). Complying with the priority is not just a matter pursued for the

sake of the poor, but for the sake of “all of us”, as the poor (people as well as countries) would have to be enabled to share long-term responsibilities which they otherwise, while remaining poor, do not have a reason to share. Also, this priority would have to be premised on a revised notion of social progress. Rather than measuring it in terms of aggregated individual incomes or, for that matter, individually achieved upward mobility, the concept of social progress would have to be reformulated in ways that highlight the need to “fix the floor” – the need, that is, to raise the material welfare and security of the least well-off first in order to facilitate their readiness and ability to share responsibilities which they otherwise are very unlikely to comply with.⁶

Yet even those for whom it would be feasible, given their resources and security, to engage in practices of voluntary responsibility-sharing, are by no means consistently likely to do so. In a way (and perhaps to provoke my leftist friends), we might say that we live in a society in which there is no “ruling class” any more – a class that could be held causally responsible, due to its power to exploit and to cause crises, for most of the ills and evils of the world; or rather, we have (almost) all become acquiescent accomplices, wilful supporters and self-deluded beneficiaries of that class. To paraphrase a model suggested in writings of Robert Reich (2007), ordinary middle-class people are complex entities who live their lives in constant tension between no less than four socio-economic capacities: they are citizens, consumers, income-earners and investors/savers. Given the corresponding configuration of motivations, chances are that an “individualist” coalition of consumer, earner and investor defeats the citizen, the bearer of political rights and shared social and political responsibilities, three to one. The economic individualism on which the former three roles are premised can and actually does easily translate into an attitude of “indifference”, inattention and wilful disregard for the negative externalities we cause and the corresponding

precautionary and remedial responsibilities which “ought” to follow from them. Also, given the fact that “my” contribution to both causing the problem and possibly sharing in the responsibility for implementing a solution (think of climate change and energy consumption, the production and separation of household garbage, or charitable donations) is at any rate infinitesimally small, I need to trust in my fellow citizens’ disposition to actually share responsibility and join me too, in order to make my own costs and efforts of doing so myself meaningful and instrumentally rational. From the perspective of individuals, it is not easy, given the opaqueness and anonymity of “everyone else”, to build, maintain and restore such trust.

However that may be, the trust in some effective corrective action coming from the trust that citizens extend to each other concerning their willingness to share responsibilities, thus forming a powerful centre of agency by the name of “civil society” – this analytical trust in the power of social trust is probably somewhat ill-founded. I have heard advocates of “civil society”-generated remedies to sustainability problems argue that the only thing that remains for constituted state power to do is to “get out of our way” – implying that any state action is inherently corrupted by interests of gain and power, whereas spontaneous and voluntary communal action emerging from civil society provides a more promising alternative to political institutions. I strongly disagree with this view, which upon closer inspection is just a mirror image of the neo-liberal critique of the state, this time not celebrating the liberating potential of market forces, but of “civil society” and the communal remedies it supposedly harbours. We should certainly not allow ourselves to forget (in spite of all our dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of public policy I have alluded to in the first part of this paper) that the democratic state with its powers to tax, to spend and to regulate remains the major instrument of society to share responsibility among its members, thereby exercising some measure of control over its own fate. If that is right, this instrument must not be done away with (in favour of either the market or “civil society”), but rather strengthened and supplemented.

Similafly, I believe (for reasons that I have no time here to elaborate in much detail) that

⁶ It is well known in debates on climate-change policy that poor countries of the global South can only be brought to co-operate with those policies if they are compensated for the short-term opportunity costs of co-operation by the countries of the global North.

we would be ill-advised to leave the sharing of responsibilities to economic agents, such as investors in the stock market and business corporations and their practices of “corporate social responsibility” (CSR). Socially conscious investors discriminate, for moral reasons, against so-called “sin industries” (Elster 2008), referring to industries which produce liquor, tobacco, fire arms, land mines and so forth, or did business with the apartheid regime in South Africa or (today) Sudan; or act contrary to environmental standards by, for example, shipping toxic waste to poor countries; or are known, as is the case with certain manufacturers of sports shoes and supermarket chains, for systematically violating in their production process union rights and basic ILO standards of labour protection. What they also do, if unknowingly and by implication, is to increase the return on investment of investors who are not morally discriminating, as stock prices in “sin industries” and for investments in rogue states will be lower than they would otherwise be and as the respective companies and states will have to offer, in order to attract needed capital, higher yields per share than they would have to in the absence of morally scrupulous investors. As to corporations engaging in CSR, the standard doubts come (a) in the “doing well by doing good” version according to which CSR must be suspected as little more than a marketing and branding strategy, and (b) with reference to their lack of accountability in terms of how they select their CSR priorities as well as in terms of the quality and continuity of services they provide (and remain free to discontinue whenever they see fit to do so).

All of which suggests that constituted and democratically accountable state power should not be written off as an important arena in which we can come closer to a solution to the problem of sharing social and environmental responsibilities. The democratic state, in spite of the rather gloomy observations I have offered at the beginning of this chapter, remains (or must be restored as) a key strategic agent, and often so in supranational co-operation with other states, if it comes to the sharing of responsibilities – both for the responsibility to keep under control and contain the negative externalities of individual choice and to create and implement (not least

through the extraction and spending of fiscal resources and the regulation of private behaviours) collectively binding solutions.

Yet there are many ways in which state power can be combined with the specific resources of civil society agents to promote the sharing of responsibilities between these two centres of agency, develop their synergetic potential, and thereby maintain and further social cohesion. For instance, state policies can provide institutional spaces and incentives for all kinds of civic engagement; it can use policies for the increase and redistribution of disposable time, including work-time reduction, in order to improve the temporal conditions for civic engagement; it can promote and encourage the spread of co-operatives and other forms of social enterprises; it can initiate “attitude campaigns” on individual and public affairs, such as in the fields of health, education, consumption and family relations; it can monitor institutional qualities, such as inclusionary *vs.* exclusionary effects of schools, families, enterprises, commerce, cities and mobility regimes, and publish data on these institutional qualities so as to stir debates and encourage complaints. In my view, such initiatives of tapping synergetic effects of public policies and civil *society* belong to the most promising – and currently most active – field of attempts to institutionalise a greater capacity of modern societies to relate responsibly to themselves and their future.

Conclusions

I have argued here that many of the most serious problems modern capitalist democracies face are caused by a logic of aggregate external effects: all of us, through the unintended side-effects of what we do or *fail* to do, cause physical and social consequences which are typically impossible to trace back to individual wrong-doing, such as the violation of institutionalised social, legal or moral norms. While we at least begin to understand our collective *causal* responsibility, we are still far from having available the ideas and institutions by which we might exercise our shared *remedial* responsibility. Problems such as environmental destruction, climate change, various kind of health hazards, financial market

crises, the dumping of financial and other burdens on future generations, growing inequality, declining social cohesion and political exclusion are all cases in point which illustrate the logic of “co-production” of collectively self-inflicted problems of sustainability and social cohesion. The latter are caused by the way in which “all of us” (or, at any rate, many of us) consume, eat, move, invest, relate to others and use our political rights in our perfectly legal and even subjectively innocent conduct of life. As to the latter point, the use of political rights, we often mandate and allow the holders of governmental office and democratically constituted power (for the use of which, after all, “all of us” share responsibility as citizens) to *turn* a blind eye to our co-produced problems and to follow the patterns of inaction, procrastination and “democratic myopia”. Therefore, arguably, the greatest deficiency in the conduct of governments today is not that *they fail* to do what voters want, but that they opportunistically, in the interest of their own continuation in office through a favourable record of having promoted “economic growth”, follow too closely the given interests and preferences of voters – without, that is, any promising attempt to alert and enlighten their constituency as to the adequacy and appropriateness of these preferences in relation to collectively relevant conditions “all of us” must face – and cope with.

Needless to say, democratic governments are not – and should not be – endowed with the authority to rule what the “objective interest” of the political community is. But they may well assist constituencies in finding out for themselves, and in full access to relevant information and normative arguments, about the answer to that question, for instance by creating institutional space for consultation, deliberation and collective self-observation within civil society and by committing themselves to take the results of the resulting “preference laundering” (Goodin 1986) seriously in the formation of public policies. Another way to assist civil society in the process of preference formation is to ensure that voters and associated citizens are adequately informed about trends and conditions that do not affect them as individuals, but rather the qualities of political society as a whole.

A way to do so, and to provide, as it were, the raw material for an adequately sensible formation and revision of preferences that measure up to the ideal of “shared social responsibility”, would be to make available scientifically valid information on “holistic” qualities of societies. In contrast to most of the statistics supplied by statistical offices and survey research agencies, such holistic data would not measure the income, age composition, attitude, opinion and so forth, of individual entities (such as citizens, workers, students, firms, etc.) which then are aggregated, but qualities of entire societies to the extent they are presumably relevant for the formation of preferences and attitudes. Such indicators of the *quality of societies* (cf. Hall and Lamont 2009) would suggest the question of whether or not a society showing these features is a society «we», the citizens, consider acceptable and sustainable and what, in case the answer is negative, can and should be done about it. These indicators would each have to come in three versions. First, the state of affairs at point *t* in country (or region or city) *x*; second, a longitudinal measure that indicates in which direction things are empirically changing or staying constant across time; third, a cross-sectional measure showing the state of affairs «here» compared to other places where the same measure has been applied.

What are the indicators that could mirror those holistic qualities of societies and at the same time could help in the formation, revision and upgrading of public attitudes and political preferences? All I can do at this point is to suggest a number of measures the operationalisation of which, I trust, will not be overly controversial. All of them relate to collectively relevant outcomes rather than the properties of individual entities within society. Examples are measures of socio-economic (wealth, income) and political (i.e., participatory) inequality; the incidence and prevalence of relative poverty; indicators of social cohesion and social exclusion; the prevalence of intergenerational status inheritance; the overall accessibility of judicial and administrative agencies; a measure of “governability”, or fiscal and administrative “state capacity”; the quality of democracy; a measure of gender equality; the integration of migrants and internal ethnic minorities; the incidence and prevalence of unem-

ployment; a measure capturing the levels of *anomie*, crime and incarceration; a measure indicating the level of public awareness of issues of consumption externalities and mobility externalities; and overall behavioural indicators of prevailing kinds and levels of fear and hope.

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Koncepcja współdzielonej odpowiedzialności – w poszukiwaniu jej politycznego znaczenia i nadzieje z nią związane

Celem artykułu jest analiza koncepcji współdzielonej odpowiedzialności. Jego autor dzieli się swoimi spostrzeżeniami na temat sposobu ujmowania tego rodzaju odpowiedzialności w teorii demokracji, w szczególności zaś w liberalnej teorii sprawiedliwości. Dokonuje też oceny możliwości praktycznego zastosowania koncepcji współdzielonej odpowiedzialności w polityce społeczno-ekonomicznej, mającego na celu ograniczenie deficytu demokracji we współczesnych państwach.

Słowa kluczowe: współdzielona odpowiedzialność, teoria demokracji, liberalna teoria sprawiedliwości, demokracje kapitalistyczne.