

For a genealogy of paternalism

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Response to A. Villéger's article, "From paternalism to 'patronhumanism'".

Amélie Villéger's article, "From paternalism to 'patronhumanism'", asks us to take a fresh look at an increasingly present current of thought. It traces the origins of "patronhumanism" back to paternalism, its accomplishments and successes. Perspectives are thus opened on the "new world", to borrow the phrase of the President of France elected in 2017. Without trying to reshape with hammer blows the vision of a sometimes idolized past, it is, in my opinion, worthwhile adopting a genealogical view that looks beyond good and evil in order to move away from preconceived ideas.⁽¹⁾

The article recalls the historical setting at the origin of paternalism. What I find significant is that the new industrialists borrowed the model of the 18th-century's enlightened agrarian aristocracy by advancing the same political claim to social utility.⁽²⁾ In both cases, the legitimacy of economic domination was grounded on a concern for the well-being, at first, of peasants and craftsmen, and then of the latter's children or cousins, namely workers — and now of wage-earners. For sure, a Christian (and not just Catholic) ethos was involved, a point that the author has tended to overlook. After all, the HSP (Haute Société Protestante) represented by the families Peugeot, Hottinguer and Dollfuss played a full part in this current of thought. At stake was a clear vision of a stable social order, since the fight against poverty had to be undertaken not just for reasons of Christian charity but also owing to its dangerous political consequences (a point of view also adopted by Tocqueville).

The same concern about social organization and the same focus on wage labor underlaid, it should be pointed out, the utopias of Saint-Simonianism and Fourierism, which proposed political and social alternatives. In the mid-19th century, employers, or part of them (like socialists but with fundamentally different intentions), wanted to recreate a more harmonious organization (for the purpose of order in the case of employers but of equality and emancipation from poverty in the case of socialists) that would create the

conditions for the realization of individuals and the re-organization of society in the new world of industrialization with workers now concentrated in towns (and no longer rural villages). Regulatory institutions had to be set up to succeed the feudal parish system. Paternalism thus arose as a means for locally regulating the social tensions resulting from the shock of industrialization and the metamorphosis of towns of craftsmen and merchants into concentrations of workers. No more than fifty years passed between the ideal city imagined by Ledoux at Arc-et-Senant and the "coron" housing developments with their company stories.

The sudden development of big industry in Great Britain, Germany and France was shattering the Fourierist utopia at a time when this employer paternalism was achieving its first successes in managing labor. This utopian strand of thought was replaced with a much more radical critique. Marxists insisted on the alienation caused by wage labor, some of them going so far as to see in company services for labor a response to the moral bankruptcy of capitalism and the concern for the redemption of bosses tormented by their conscience.

Villéger has borrowed an admirable quotation from G. Lyon-Caen (2004, p. 56): the right to a job was forced to address a dialectics expressing "simultaneously the system for exploiting people and the means for limiting its severity and fighting against it". This makes it clear how, in this state of tension, paternalism sought to strike a balance between humanistic intentions (even before the law imposed obligations) and economic constraints. This tension was described without wishful thinking in Engels' well-known *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1887), which set employer paternalism in matters of housing in a very different light. Engels showed how housing for wage-earners (often in better conditions than in rural areas at that time) was also a good business for employers. The latter thus reinforced their domination through not only the wage-earning relationship but also their control over housing — a benefit that could be lost in case of dismissal (cf. Zola's *Germinal*).

⁽¹⁾ This article, including quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France).

⁽²⁾ Cf. Stendhal (1825) *D'un nouveau complot contre les industriels*.

But why, we must ask, has paternalism in France been discredited for so long? A detour through the history of labor relations in Germany tells the story. At a very early date, the German state imposed by law many of the arrangements that were left up to the willingness of employers in France. Institutionalized and made compulsory by acts of law that, under Bismarck, were passed to counter socialist agitation, these social welfare institutions deeply altered labor relations in Germany. Thus was systematically undertaken what, in France, would be left to the good will of bosses, and would thus depend on the personal views adopted by humanist employers.

In her account of labor relations during the 19th and 20th centuries, Villéger, unfortunately, devotes one sentence to the French state during a period, 1940-1944, when political power-holders wanted to impose new employer/worker relations by promoting a paternalistic, Catholic approach. This lack of attention is unfortunate because this period signals the origin of the lasting taboo and ideological discredit surrounding paternalism in France since 1945. At the time, the labor movement was being revived through an ideology of resistance both against a totalitarian regime (which ignored citizens and saw them merely as a community of producers where there were neither unions nor collective actions) and against the alienation caused by work, an alienation that was spreading beyond industry into the service sector. The paternalistic approach has, for a long time, been ideologically discredited because power-holders who betrayed the ideals of the French Republic and the rights of citizens had tried to put it to use on a large scale. Is the upsurge of this current of thought among employers who claim to be humanists an accident at a time when the labor movement is in the throes of an unprecedented crisis in France?

Oddly enough, this article's genealogy of certain social, humanist achievements enables us to grasp the principal motivations of Christian employers, who wanted to instill loyalty in labor, in particular skilled labor. The commentators who, during the debate in the spring of 2018, forgot that the well-known "status" of railway workers (with its health, retirement and other benefits) were instituted for this very same reason before the war in 1914. At the time, the rail system's private management had motivations more economic than moral. To be convinced of this, you need but read the magnificent sociological studies on the major industries in France by Pierre Hamp, one of the founders of the Office of Labor Inspection.

What characterizes the current context is the heavy impact of globalized trade. This brings to minds the upsurge in trade between 1880 and 1910, when the doctrine of employer paternalism was expanding. Pierre-Noël Giraud's analyses of the labor market have shed light on the cleavage between the jobs exposed to global competition and those that, basically related to local sources of production and consumption, cannot be "outsourced". Might we not be able to argue that paternalism corresponded to a bygone era of local markets protected from globalization? that the emergence of neopaternalism can be analyzed differently depending on whether an industry is exposed or not to globalization? The state is being asked to "save" the jobs menaced by international competition — to save them by lowering employers' contributions to health or retirement funds or by intervening in housing or transportation — while employers are concentrating on the amenities that help them retain skilled workers, who can easily change their place of work (We need but think of the brain drain from southern Europe). This might be related to the "patronhumanist" approach, while local jobs are locked inside a low-pay sector where economic activities depend on the value created by the sectors open to international trade. For these local jobs, patronhumanism would be a new form of territorial solidarity, an acknowledgment of the state's retreat so as to concentrate its resources on defense and the development of the sectors the most exposed to globalization.

To end this brief historical analysis, I would like to draw attention to the absence of the labor movement in the discussion of "patronhumanism" — as if only the direct, personal relation between employer and employee, each taken separately, counts in this approach to management.

To conclude, we have entered a new world in the throes of an economic shock comparable to the sudden transformation wrought by the first two industrial revolutions. Social and economic equilibria have been massively overturned, and this has had strong repercussions on corporate management. In this setting, we observe not the eternal return of paternalism but instead a quest for new means of management, evidence both that the previous means are no longer adapted and that state institutions are unable to respond rapidly and effectively to these disequilibria. There is definitely an ideological crisis, the precursor for laying a new foundation for social regulation.