

# Empirical Inquiries and the Assessment of Social Progress in Western Europe: *A Historical Perspective*

*Jean-Michel Collette*



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## **Preface/Préface/Prefacio**

### ***Preface***

It is a great pleasure to introduce this work of Jean-Michel Collette. In less than 100 pages, he has succeeded in giving us a clear, complete, rigorous and highly entertaining panorama of an important facet of the intellectual history of Western Europe. It is the story of those who understood, as early as the seventeenth century, that it would be intellectually rewarding and politically useful to observe and measure the living conditions of people.

Listen to William Petty, who was not only the first to publish an estimate of the national income of England but also founded the new science of “political arithmetics” – a name widely used until it was replaced by “statistics” at the end of the eighteenth century. To justify the use of “numbers, weight and measure” in dealing with social topics, he said: “For falsity, disproportion and inconsistency cannot be rectified by any sermonizations, though made all of figurate and measured periods..., [any] more than vicious wines can be remedied with brandy and honey”. Listen to Rowntree who, among other achievements, refined the “poverty line” invented by Booth and drew the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” poverty:

To raise the material standards of those in poverty may prove difficult, but to raise the mental and spiritual life to a markedly higher level will be an infinitely harder task. [Y]et on its accomplishment depends the lasting greatness of the State.... A totalitarian State does not demand high intellectual or spiritual standards from its people.... A democratic State can only flourish if the level of intelligence of the community is high and its spiritual life dynamic.

This was written in 1941. A century before, Le Play had argued that prosperity was defined not only by “material consumption” but also by “stability” of social mores and moral values. Still earlier (even before Villermé had founded empirical sociology with his famous surveys), Quételet developed new statistical techniques and Ducpétiaux classified, in 1853, households’ expenditures in three categories: expenses of a “physical and material” nature; of a “religious, moral and intellectual” type; and of a “luxurious and improvidential” type. Who could ever think that work on statistics and indicators is dry and somewhat boring?

The great human beings evoked by Jean-Michel Collette obviously were characterized by intellectual curiosity, a strong appetite for knowledge, and a burning desire to understand their society and the world. (Le Play measured the budgets of working-class families not only in Western Europe, but also in Scandinavia and in the Russian and Ottoman Empires!) They also had genuine sympathy for the subjects of their inquiries and an active interest in the reforms that their findings were to stimulate and orient. These clergymen, physicians, self-made social scientists, wealthy merchants and prominent academics worked very hard, with patience and steadiness, and with enthusiasm. With joy, it would seem. For they were convinced that it was necessary and possible to improve the human condition. Neither detached nor cynical, they studied and learned, measured and published to make a difference in their societies. No doubt

they had their pettiness, their personal ambitions and quarrels, but their work and lives breathe dignity, nobility and faith. They believed in the possibility of human progress.

These same pioneers obviously had ideas and assumptions about the meaning of the social conditions they were analysing and measuring. Their minute descriptions had a purpose, and their interpretations had a theoretical framework. Some years before the French Revolution, for instance, Lavoisier assembled data to help reform the fiscal system and economic policy of his country. In the late nineteenth century, Booth embarked on the monumental work that culminated in his *Life and Labour of the People of London* in order to discover “the numerical relations which poverty, misery, and depravity bear to regular earnings and comparative comfort”. But their respect for facts was much stronger than their desire to prove their point. At least among those described in this superb essay, intellectual honesty and integrity appears to be beyond any doubt. Is it because Jean-Michel Collette has selected only the authors he could be comfortable with? Or is it because this line of work is simply not possible without constant preoccupation with the truth? At any rate, none of these thinkers was encumbered with a comprehensive theory of social change or an all-embracing vision of what constitutes a good society. They had moral principles and sharp intellectual tools rather than ideological convictions.

If lessons should be drawn, the virtues evoked above offer plenty of inspiration. But a few additional comments, in the form of suggestions for reflection and research, are perhaps in order. The most obvious is that this type of synthetic and yet extremely well researched and informative panorama, drawn by Jean-Michel Collette for Western Europe with an incursion into North America, should be undertaken for other regions and cultures as well. Keeping as a point of entry the assumed relationships between “good statistics” and “good government”, what is the historical experience of China, Eastern Europe, India, Japan, Latin America or the Middle East? International and national statistical techniques and publications unquestionably have their origins in the work summarized in this essay. But this is precisely one of the reasons to look elsewhere for traditions and ideas that dominant forms of modernity have ignored.

The intellectual curiosity and innovative spirit that was required in the seventeenth century to measure the levels of living of “temporal and spiritual lords”, as well as of “cottagers”, “paupers”, “common soldiers” and “vagrants”, is now required to understand and measure such phenomena as the process of economic and financial globalization, the apparent concentration of power in the hands of a new international class, and the living conditions of the unemployed and marginalized in different cities of the world. We need new typologies of social groups that would capture differences not only in income, but also in security and hope for a better future. There is certainly much work to be done in such domains and many others. But are basic concepts and basic data sufficiently questioned? Is there sufficient interrelation between the work of philosophers and sociologists and the work of statisticians and other national and international civil servants, for instance, on the conception and measurement of poverty? Could more conceptual and statistical work be done on Rowntree’s distinction between “material” and “spiritual” poverty – a distinction reaffirmed in terms of “needs” by the World Summit for Social Development, convened in Copenhagen in March 1995?

The “social investigators” and “social reformers” discussed here were disturbed, often shocked, by the misery they encountered in the households they surveyed. And they provided hard data and sober analyses to inform the ruling elite and the benevolent and educated public of this state of affairs. Although Jean-Michel Collette had no space to treat this question, he would probably agree that these writings had a role in the measures that were taken and in the progress that was achieved in Western European societies throughout these three centuries. For enormous progress was achieved, at least in material comfort. The world community as a whole, and notably the international organizations of the United Nations system, need to receive the same kind of service and the same kind of pressure from intellectuals and scientists concerned with the common good. Again, many examples could be given of such efforts. But they are dramatically insufficient.

Originally, Jean-Michel Collette prepared his essay in the context of the 1999 Copenhagen Seminar for Social Progress, organized by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The topic of this seminar was “defining, measuring and monitoring social progress and social regress”. Its report will be issued in a few months. UNRISD has also done significant work on statistics and indicators, including aggregate indices, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. A resumption of this work, with a renewed approach, would make sense on the part of an institute with a demonstrated capacity for intellectual rigour and political imagination. The readers of the following pages will certainly agree that this is worthwhile endeavour.

Jacques Baudot

### ***Préface***

J'éprouve un grand plaisir à présenter cet ouvrage de Jean-Michel Collette. En moins qu'une centaine de pages, il réussit à nous brosser un panorama clair, complet, rigoureux et très divertissant d'une facette importante de l'histoire intellectuelle de l'Europe occidentale. C'est l'histoire de ceux qui ont compris, dès le XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, qu'il serait intellectuellement gratifiant et politiquement utile d'observer et de mesurer les conditions de vie des gens.

Ecoutez William Petty, qui non seulement a été le premier à publier une estimation du revenu national de l'Angleterre mais a aussi fondé une nouvelle science, celle de l'“arithmétique politique”, appellation largement employée jusqu'à ce que celle de “statistiques” ne vienne la supplanter à la fin du XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Pour justifier l'emploi de “nombres, de poids et de mesures” dans l'étude de sujets sociaux, il dit ceci: “Car des propos moralisateurs, bien que faits de périodes figurées et mesurées, ne sauraient pas plus corriger la fausseté, la disproportion et l'incohérence que le cognac et le miel amender un méchant vin”. Ecoutez Rowntree qui a notamment à son actif d'avoir affiné le “seuil de pauvreté” inventé par Booth et introduit la distinction entre pauvreté “primaire” et “secondaire”:

Améliorer la condition matérielle des pauvres peut se révéler difficile, mais porter la vie mentale et spirituelle à un niveau sensiblement plus élevé sera une tâche infiniment plus ardue. Pourtant de son accomplissement dépend la grandeur durable de l'Etat.... Un Etat totalitaire ne demande pas à son peuple un niveau intellectuel ou spirituel élevé.... Un Etat démocratique ne peut prospérer que si la collectivité a un niveau d'intelligence élevé et une vie spirituelle dynamique.

Ceci a été écrit en 1941. Un siècle plus tôt, Le Play faisait valoir que la prospérité se définissait non seulement par "la consommation matérielle" mais aussi par la "stabilité" des mœurs et des valeurs sociales. Plus tôt encore (avant même que Villermé eût fondé la sociologie empirique avec ses fameuses enquêtes), Quételet mettait au point de nouvelles techniques statistiques et Dupcétiaux classait, en 1853, les dépenses des ménages en trois catégories: les dépenses de nature "physique et matérielle", de type "religieux, moral et intellectuel" et de type "luxueux et somptuaire". Qui songerait à juger ingrat et quelque peu rébarbatif le travail sur les statistiques et les indicateurs?

Les personnalités évoquées par Jean-Michel Collette se caractérisaient de toute évidence par leur curiosité intellectuelle, une grande soif de savoir et un ardent désir de comprendre leur société et le monde. (Le Play a mesuré les budgets des familles ouvrières non seulement en Europe occidentale, mais aussi en Scandinavie et dans les empires russe et ottoman!). Ils éprouvaient aussi une sincère sympathie pour les sujets de leurs enquêtes et s'intéressaient activement aux réformes que leurs conclusions devaient encourager et orienter. Ces hommes d'église, médecins, autodidactes des sciences sociales, riches marchands et grands érudits ont travaillé avec acharnement, patience et régularité, et avec enthousiasme. Avec joie aussi, semble-t-il. Car ils étaient convaincus qu'il était nécessaire et possible d'améliorer la condition humaine. Sans détachement ni cynisme, ils ont étudié et appris, mesuré et publié pour changer quelque chose à leur société. Ils avaient sans doute leurs petites ambitions et leurs querelles personnelles mais leur vie et leur oeuvre respirent la dignité, la noblesse et la foi. Ils croyaient en la possibilité d'un progrès humain.

Ces mêmes pionniers avaient à l'évidence des idées et des hypothèses sur le sens des conditions sociales qu'ils analysaient et mesuraient. Leurs descriptions minutieuses avaient un but et leurs interprétations un cadre théorique. Quelques années avant la Révolution française, par exemple,

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