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The social contract: a framework for rethinking our common ground

Authors

Marion Bet

Research Fellow, Lifestyles in Transition

Mathieu Saujot

Director, Lifestyles in transition

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The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union in 2016, the Yellow Vests protests in France in 2018-2019, and the farmers' protests in early 2024 have exposed major tensions within societies in Europe. These frictions resurfaced during the European elections and they now constitute the background to the campaign currently underway for the legislative elections in France. Our hypothesis is that these tensions stem from implicit social promises that have not been kept, and that they attest to a failing social contract. The report published today by IDDRI and the Hot or Cool Institute, the product of a year of work, presents an in-depth analysis of the historical phases and drivers of our social contracts in France and the UK. What changes have they undergone? How does this affect our expectations and social norms? How can we devise new plans for the future that are also compatible with the necessary ecological transition? It is these expectations and arrangements–past and future–that form our social contract and must be put back at the

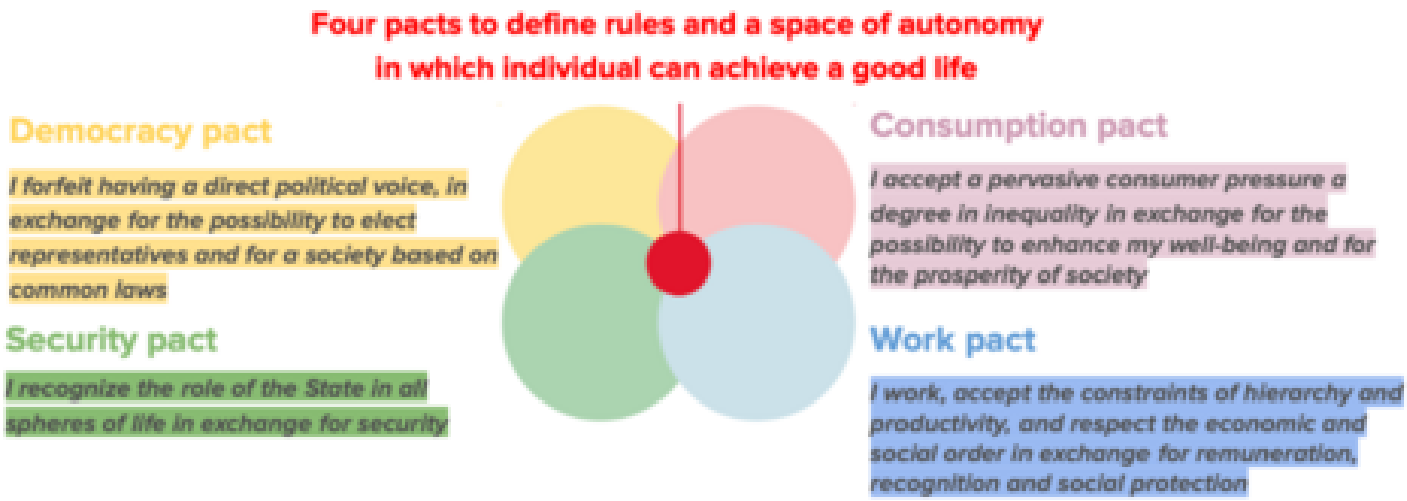
centre of the democratic debate; they are at the heart of the choices that societies in different European countries will make.

The social contract, a dynamic concept

The hypothesis behind this work is that we inherit social arrangements and promises which, when not implemented, fuel tensions and sometimes generate crises. For the most part, these social compromises are implicit and come to us from the past, but they have powerful effects on the current political and social life of our country, and on our collective expectations and our standards of justice, and for these reasons it is essential that they are fully explored–and, in the long term, renegotiated. This is also essential for the ecological transition, given the extent to which it overturns established practices (lifestyles, economic sectors and jobs, etc.) and the difficulty of promoting and implementing this transition given the current pressures facing societies.

Similarly to other organizations (notably the Green Economy Coalition, the UN, Friends of Europe), we use the concept of “social contract”, in a transdisciplinary approach, to designate these pacts and social arrangements that hold our collective life together, and these compromises that structure society and that can always be renegotiated, because no social contract is definitive, no social contract is inescapable.

The diagram below shows the pacts that the authors consider to be the most central to our social life (Democracy, Work, Consumption, Security), which have been redefined over the course of history.



This diagram represents the four pacts that make up our social life. At the intersection of these four dimensions is the space in which individuals pursue their autonomy and the "good life" to which they aspire. While the Security and Democracy pacts are traditional philosophical representations of the social contract, our modern, productivist society has seen the emergence of the Consumption pact, which refers to a promise of prosperity, and the Work pact, which

refers to a promise of solidarity.

There are very strong ties between these four pacts. For example, historically, leisure and consumption have been seen as compensation for alienating work and as a possible means of emancipation. Another example of interaction is how current changes in the way we work (e.g. the “uberization” of work, the reduced role of trade unions, etc.) are likely to influence our relationship with democracy. Similarly, the place occupied by work and that of consumption in the lives of citizens cannot be thought of independently, as every person is both a producer and a purchaser of goods and services. The social contract approach therefore shows that renegotiating compromises requires simultaneous consideration of all the dimensions that structure our lives in society.

Our study involved analysing the history of our society over the last two centuries, the compromises and our collective promises, from the perspective of these four dimensions. Through these pacts the aim has been to develop an empirical approach to the current social tensions, to understand the social and political issues at stake in the transition, and the way in which they are embodied, and to supplement the strictly economic analyses of the transition to which we are accustomed. This work was conducted for France and the United Kingdom.

What exactly do we mean by *social contract*?

The term refers to a system of collective expectations and compromises, specific to a given society, which encompasses the rights we enjoy, the duties we accept, the responsibilities incumbent on institutions and the narratives in which we believe. This contract should not, however, imply the unequivocal consent of the parties involved: even if the overall contract remains similar at the society level, the content of pacts may vary from one social group to another (inequalities in benefits and trade-offs, certain rights and duties that are specific to different social classes). Moreover, the social contract of each country has been–and still is, by definition–the subject of social struggles, of sometimes unequal power relations, of political choices that are not democratically debated. Throughout history, alternatives have been proposed by various political and social groups.

Each country has a social contract that is made up of several historical layers. In this sense, it is much more than the doctrine of a political party or the ideologies of a society, although it remains influenced and modified by these forces. What we refer to as the social contract is ultimately the heterogeneous model of collective organization that has prevailed for many decades, which has the imprints of a long history and is updated over the centuries by the dominant ideologies and social struggles of the time.

What can we learn from this analysis?

Our analysis shows the different dynamics of the four pacts, with the Consumer and Security pacts seemingly trapped in a never-ending race, and the Democracy and Work pacts apparently lacking in regeneration. In both cases, an update is required.

Regarding the **Consumption pact**, this now seems to embody the social activity par excellence, in the sense that consumption is expected to fulfil the promises formerly associated with work and democracy (acquiring a desirable social status in society by gaining access to certain goods; contributing to the common good and exercising sovereignty through ethical consumption). The State and the economic world organize mass consumption according to the principle that it is an effective guarantee of prosperity (public revenues and private profits raised are redistributed, while consumption guarantees individuals access to a certain social status). It is a never-ending race for all, with new services and products constantly raising consumption standards in what for many can only be an untenable pursuit, given that our societies are marked by resource inequalities.

The **demand for security** also seems to be rising steadily and the number of aspects of life that it touches on is increasing (civil society, military, health, occupational and food safety), while there is a growing aversion to risk–which was once synonymous with social progress (improvements in labour laws and safety standards, protection for the most vulnerable, etc.), but can also represent a frustration, where institutions and public policies cannot provide a systematic response to the demand for security.

Conversely, the **Democracy and Work pacts** have not really been the subject of renewed promises since the 1970s and 1980s. Have we really modernized the long-standing Fordist compromise on work and its objectives (to contribute to the material progress of society) and what is today's project underlying our vision of work (to fulfil ourselves, to strengthen the bonds of solidarity, to guarantee individual and collective prosperity)? As for our role as citizens, what directions and developments in democracy could we use to regenerate it? In France, associations and institutions remain popular, which shows that many have a strong desire to commit to the common good. How can we strengthen the sense of participation for all ("local" participation, participation in the workplace, etc.)? And on a broader scale, how can we develop our democratic system to better integrate a participatory dimension?

Cross-cutting lessons

Updating our social contract is particularly important because it determines our sense of belonging to society. In other words, **the sense of having access to the benefits derived from the promises of our social contract**. In this context, the gap between "promised" social positions and actual social positions, which can be disappointing, is politically very sensitive, which is an issue that economic indicators are not always able to identify. **In terms of the feeling of security, we can see that this results from the implementation of the four pacts**, because it is the social insecurities created by employment conditions, the state of public services and consumption inequalities that combine to have a major impact on individuals–which can have significant political repercussions. And security remains a prerequisite for autonomy, a sense of control over one's life and the ability to project oneself into the future.

A broken social contract for a large part of the population means a broken social contract for society as a whole. And the weakening of the rules and overriding narratives that we collectively share should give us cause for alarm: it means that our compromises no longer satisfy the standards of justice in which we believe, and no longer justify the constraints that we accept. It also means that a society under pressure can be a breeding ground for conflict, intolerance, inequality and a failing economy. The good news, however, is that our social contract can evolve, as our historical analysis clearly shows: the notion of the social contract must function as a political driving force, demonstrating the need for change.

How can this study be used?

Our study is far from being a simple diagnostic tool: it allows us to interpret the **intense political issues** of our time; it provides a basis for considering **new political narratives** (the better integration of ecology), which can be useful for political parties, civil society actors and the various economic actors wishing to commit to the transition; it also provides a basis for questioning, based on the relationship between the four pacts, the processes of **participatory democracy**; more broadly, it is a resource for organizing debates aimed at reconciling social progress and the ecological transition, for example by facilitating joint reflection with sectoral experts facing practical implementation difficulties, with promoters of initiatives that embody new models of society, and with a civil society that is committed to a fairer and more sustainable society.

Finally, this framework enables the consideration of whether the intensity and recurrence of current social, economic and political tensions are comparable to certain historical moments when pacts were redefined: in this respect, it

makes it possible to consider the conditions and social coalitions necessary for the advent of a new social contract, provided we examine, throughout history, the associations and alliances that have been successful and brought about real changes in society.

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