

Paul V. Dutton.

Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France 1914-1947.

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Not all welfare states are created equal. Tracing their emergence can shed considerable light on their present condition and their uncertain future. Since France has gradually developed some of the most generous welfare provisions in the world, a fresh look at their origin is both important and timely. Although this is a book of finely crafted history, complete with ample archival sources and rich empirical detail, it will be of interest to a much larger readership than period or area scholars only. This is the case particularly because Dutton is interested in the associational origins of the welfare state, a topic that has generated a great deal of research of late (e.g. Kidd, 2002).

The book asks two specific questions: How did the decentralized evolution of welfare initiatives in the first half of the 20th century influence the French welfare state and its comparatively late and incomplete post-WWII unification? And what was the role of the two-stream (mutual and industrial) pattern of welfare provision in this process? Starting with the latter question, Dutton traces both the development of mutual benefit societies which provided medical insurance (and to some extent continue to do so) and the family allowance system developed by industrialists. The period investigated here saw the emergence of this double institutional structure based on the one hand on grass-roots mutualism and on the other on the paternalism of industrialists, intent on providing benefits they could control. These often inimical roots of welfare are common to many other settings. "Welfare capitalism", or the provision of various benefits to workers by industrial firms, also became widespread in early 20th century North America, for instance (see Jacoby, 1997), where industrialists were eager to both stave off unions and limit the reach of government. Dutton's research on France, in other words, is relevant to more general processes.

This leads to the first general question. How did this decentralized and conflictual process affect the overall development of the French welfare state? Without going into details, the environment in which welfare evolved was highly heterogeneous and contentious: internally divided mutualists feared the influence of employers and government, employers sought to preserve their independence, and the government attempted to position itself between these competing interests. The result was a series of compromises that preserved some of the aspects of mutualism, increased centralized regulatory control, and saw employers lose some, but not all, of their prerogatives. While unions and mutuals for instance won legislation in favour of medical insurance shortly after the First World War, employers were able to retain a high level of control over family allowances, which proved to be instrumental in dividing workers and keeping wages down.

The main conclusions of this work revolve around three themes: 1) the two-stream process of welfare provision proved path-dependent to an extent still visible today; 2) the influence of industrialists delayed the implementation of generalized family allowances for decades; 3) mutualism had a generally positive effect but also resulted in a somewhat fragmented system. These conclusions have more than historical significance. Clearly, the voluntary sector has repeatedly shown an impressive ability

to construct complex systems of mutual help, in France and elsewhere (British Friendly Societies come to mind). This provides further justification to the renewed interest in the possibility of expanding the welfare role of the third sector. But it also sounds a cautionary note: mutualism and other related voluntary social protection systems may be weakened by factionalism and the inability to oppose corporate paternalism. Likewise corporate "welfare capitalism" can provide a useful impetus for some social programs, but may prove self-limiting in the long term. This suggests an interesting line of inquiry, to which this book makes an important contribution: is it possible to foster the flexibility and innovation of civil society and the private sector while still providing the administrative efficiency and universality of state-provided services? Dutton's research suggests that this is precisely what the French welfare state has been accomplishing, with a great measure of success but not without serious challenges and limitations.

References

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Philippe Couton has done research on the origins of immigration and labour policy in France, and on nationalism, civil society, and immigration in Canada. His very existence is in part due to the book's subject matter.

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