The Evolution of the Welfare State
Social Rights and the Nationalization of Welfare in France, 1880-1947

Kristen Stromberg Childers
University of Pennsylvania


In late May 2005, French voters resoundingly defeated a proposal to adopt a new constitution for the European Union, voting 55 percent to 45 percent to reject a document in which President Jacques Chirac had invested more than a little of his personal political capital. While there were many reasons cited for this negative vote, one issue that surfaced frequently in discussions of the constitution was the French people's concern for their social security benefits and the fear that "liberal" and "Anglo-Saxon" models of the welfare state might come to dominate the EU and would threaten France's hard-won social rights. Here, of course, "liberal" referred to a model of unrelenting laissez-faire economics, rather than the moniker hurled in contemporary American political debates. It is highly significant that the deathblow to the constitution should come from France, where the EU symbolized for many a chance to regain grandeur on the international scene and an opportunity to counterbalance the "hyperpower" of the United States. Fears about the evils of unrestrained capitalism generated a vigorous popular defense of the welfare state, representing French citizens' powerful and abiding connection to the social rights inherent in citizenship. How could social benefits figure so largely in

the French national consciousness, and how could their preservation outweigh what supporters of the constitution presented as France’s true long-term interests? To quote Paul Dutton, “Why are the French so attached to their welfare state?”

The history of the French welfare state is an important and timely subject for research, and all three books listed above are excellent testaments to the vibrancy of this field. Current historiography on the welfare state is undergoing a profound transformation, as scholars move further away from class-based analyses of the welfare state and also distance themselves from the politics of dénatalité in the Third Republic. In past years, scholarship on welfare in France was enriched by careful attention to the gendered dynamics of social assistance, transcending chronicles of family allowance associations to examine how state assistance both shaped and was shaped by gender roles. Now a new theme must be considered alongside these concerns: the development of social assistance schemes was constitutive of France as a nation. Social solidarity was created through the expansion of social rights, as French citizens shifted their loyalties from local and traditional forms of assistance to nationally administered welfare. The success of this process, these authors lead us to conclude, can be seen in the high degree of consensus that surrounds the French welfare state today.

Timothy Smith’s Creating the Welfare State in France examines social services in the city of Lyon, particularly its hospitals, from the 1880s to the start of the Second World War and demonstrates how World War I transformed the meaning and necessity of social reform in France. Beginning at the local level, “mini welfare states” were created throughout the early twentieth century, which paved the way for greater state control and intervention in national welfare administration. Janet Horne’s A Social Laboratory for Modern France chronicles the rise of the welfare state and the Musée social as an early “think tank” that emerged from the 1889 Universal Exhibition. Horne’s main concern is “to query the historical and cultural underpinnings of consensus on the French welfare state,” examining the reports and deliberations of the (mostly) men who took up the social question under the auspices of the Musée social in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France. Finally, Paul Dutton’s Origins of the French Welfare State explains “how social reforms during the first half of the twentieth century shaped the welfare system that emerged after 1945.” Analyzing the industrial and mutualist models for welfare, Dutton describes the actions of employers, mutualists, and agricultural syndicalists who helped to shape the most important social reforms in France prior to 1945, namely, family allowances and social insurance.

These three books offer distinct and important contributions to the social history of modern France, providing an overview of the historiography of social reform, as well as breaking new ground in the field. Collectively, they force us to reconsider received wisdom on the history of the French welfare state. In broad terms, there are four areas in which these works propose new
directions on the history of social legislation and both the state’s and the people’s interest in reform.

First, all three works take up the question of timing in the history of the welfare state, challenging the notion that sécurité sociale emerged fully grown in 1945. Smith and Dutton in particular take issue with the notion that the interwar years were “hollow years” of decadence and immobility, at least in the area of social reform. Rather, examining the careful archival work of these authors, it is clear that long before de Gaulle’s Provisional Government announced a massive reform of the country’s social welfare system, many essential elements of the social security system were in place. Even prior to World War I, this could be seen, for example, in the debates surrounding the 1898 workers’ compensation law, which members of the Musée social helped to shape through a series of congresses in the late nineteenth century. Horne deftly chronicles the history of ideas about social reform, from Comte de Saint-Simon and Frédéric Le Play to papal encyclical letters such as Rerum novarum, and demonstrates the intellectual antecedents of legislation that benefited workers. Whether in dealing with “the social question” in the late nineteenth century or public parks, zoning, and social hygiene in the early twentieth century, groups of like-minded activists from across the ideological spectrum gathered to discuss and plan for the amelioration of workers’ lives.

For Smith, World War I was essential in breaking down the resistance to national social services that emanated from fierce attachment to local models of charity. Local budgets and the number of people assisted grew exponentially in the interwar years, bellying the notion of a stagnant French society, at least in welfare initiatives. In fact, the years following the Great War were the high-water mark for municipal social spending and activity. Smith cites the fact that in 1935, French social spending was well above the European average, though it lagged behind Germany and Britain. Welfare provisions were expanded and enriched following World War II, but by 1928 a new law would provide millions of people with medical insurance, maternity benefits, modest pensions, and disability benefits. “France’s success in introducing important social reforms may require us to rethink—or at least modify to a certain extent—the common view of interwar France as a time of utter political, economic, and social failure.” Smith sees politicians during the Vichy and Liberation eras as promoting a “creationist myth” that the welfare state was born during and after World War II. His research in the municipal archives in Lyon, which he argues can also be extended to other major cities in France, demonstrates that the Third Republic deserves far more credit than it has been given in the creation of this welfare state, and not just in the domain of family policy.

Dutton’s work also suggests that we must look away from the centralized state to find benefits and plans that fit the title of “welfare state” during the interwar years. Private mutual aid societies and employer initiatives were responsible for the bulk of welfare expenditures during the interwar years and
were outside the purview of the state. Yet, as Dutton writes, this fact "should not diminish our appreciation of France's sophisticated family welfare and social insurance systems between the world wars." The emphasis on private and decentralized efforts at social protection throughout the early twentieth century transforms our understanding of the French welfare state and the issues that have animated reformers in the past and present. All three authors concur that by shifting one's focus away from the organs of the central state and the activists in the Chamber of Deputies, a very different view of this history emerges—one that is far more complex and ultimately more accurate. When gazing through this lens, the Liberation appears less radical in its new departures, and the "stalemate society" of the Third Republic looks decidedly more dynamic as well.

The second theme that emerges from these works concerns a plethora of often overlooked influences that have shaped the history of the welfare state in France. These forces range from international congresses on social policy in the late nineteenth century to the deliberations of the expatriate Section sociale in London during the Occupation. Yet these spurs to social reform are not reducible to any one overriding concern, even the ever-present fear of depopulation in France. The population crisis does appear as a kind of universal solvent, adding an edge of urgency to considerations of the welfare of families and children. However, these authors build on Susan Pedersen's seminal work on family policy in Britain and France by demonstrating that although pronatalism was a cause likely to garner widespread consensus across political lines, it was by no means the only impetus to social reform in France.

Horne, for example, emphasizes the role of exhibitions, particularly the 1889 Universal Exhibition, in drawing like-minded reformers together to debate and compare assistance schemes. The two major themes of the exhibition—celebrating the centennial of the Revolution and celebrating industrial culture and society—"served to generate a specifically republican rhetoric of social reform that marked the beginnings of an official social welfare policy in modern France." In the years before the First World War, members of the Musée social turned their attention to urban planning and promoted espaces verts as key elements of urban hygiene in Paris. Adding an international component to the debate, comparisons were drawn up between the health of citizens of London and Berlin and the open spaces accessible to their citizens. Horne writes, "A pervasive nationalist discourse—expressed in terms of 'national hygiene'—ran as a common thread through all prewar discussion on public parks, playing fields, and physical exercise."

For Smith, World War I was all-important in the history of the French welfare state. The war both ground down the resistant localism that balked at the centralization of insurance and provided the citizens of Lyon with an experience of national unity that demonstrated that their first attachment was to France as a whole rather than their own municipality. "The war," Smith asserts, "was the greatest impetus to national consciousness and
national social welfare legislation since the Revolution. Above all, it accelerated the ‘collectivization process.’” In a compelling extension of Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Smith reasons that public assistance institutions are also demonstrative of a people’s sense of social and national solidarity: “Weber argues that the French nation was finally made ‘one and indivisible’ during the late nineteenth century, through a state-led program of school and railroad building, military conscription, and a general plan to unite the nation in the cultural and linguistic sense. We must add social welfare reform to this equation.”

Dutton, on the other hand, brings to light the importance of the recovery of Alsace and Lorraine following World War I in forcing social insurance onto the national agenda. The populace of Alsace and Lorraine had enjoyed the benefits of a compulsory social insurance scheme introduced by Bismarck in the 1880s, and many were afraid of losing their welfare and retirement benefits upon reintegration with the French nation. “Questions from the inhabitants of the recovered territories about their place in postwar France became an urgent political issue immediately after the Armistice. In fact, an autonomist movement appeared as a potentially disruptive force in the recovered territories by 1919 and helped to focus French government attention on the transition from German to French rule.” This led Parliament to consider welfare with a new urgency, eventually unveiling the much-debated Vincent Bill on social insurance in March 1921. It is clear, therefore, that although pronatalist rhetoric could be eminently useful, it was certainly not the only factor prompting France’s legislators to consider the health and well-being of the population. From the concern for France’s international reputation to the sense of solidarity forged in the heat of battle, there were many incentives for expanded social legislation in the years before 1945.

The third theme that emerges in these recent histories of the French welfare state concerns the personnel behind many of the initiatives for welfare reform in the early twentieth century. We have become accustomed to thinking of activist deputies, such as Radical Adolphe Landry, or leaders of the Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation, such as Fernand Boverat, as major players in the push toward family allowances and social reform in the interwar years. But what of Maurice Thorez, secretary-general of the Communist Party, or Albert Thomas, Socialist Minister of Labor? What of liberal economists such as Émile Cheysson, or Comte Aldebert de Chambrun, aristocratic heir to the Baccarat crystal works fortune and benefactor of the Musée social? These three works offer a fascinating array of new personalities and groups who were all involved to a greater or lesser extent in fashioning the welfare state in the years before World War II.

Dutton, for example, introduces the radical agrarian politics of Henry Dorgères, who fought against deputies in Paris and their “malicious neglect and disrespect of rural France.” One of Dorgères’ favorite themes was the social insurance and family allowance laws of the 1930s. He denounced compulsory
employer-paid family allowances and argued that family allowances should be a national expense, with peasants receiving employment benefits like any state functionnaire.\textsuperscript{21} One of the impressive strengths of Dutton's work is the expansion of his argument to include the rural sector and to mine the departmental archives of Aveyron, Eure-et-Loir, Meuse, and Moselle, in addition to the national archives, in his research.

In Smith's \textit{Creating the Welfare State}, we learn a great deal about Édouard Herriot—Radical, professional politician, and humanitarian—who was never very successful in his role as a national political figure but was extremely effective as mayor of Lyon, a post he held virtually uninterrupted from 1905 until 1957. Smith writes, "Herriot was a smashing success. Between the wars Herriot created one of the most advanced urban welfare states in France. Municipal activism between the wars in such cities as Lyon, Paris, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, and Nancy would pave the way for important national social reforms."\textsuperscript{22} Noting that most histories of social policy development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have constructed their analysis in national terms, Smith points out that "modern welfare states also represent the displacement of local identities, local solidarities, and local philanthropic institutions by a higher (state) authority."\textsuperscript{23} In his careful analysis of local elites in Lyon, particularly doctors and municipal councilors, Smith helps us to see exactly how this happened and is persuasive in demonstrating the importance of the local and municipal level of welfare reform.

Horne makes a case for attentiveness to the wider public dimensions of the debate on welfare reform, arguing that many previous studies of social policy have limited themselves to parliamentary circles or the elites of industrial management. "Lawyers, doctors, university professors, civil servants, reformist labor leaders, cooperative and mutualist activists all participated in republican social reform circles and questioned the relationship of the individual to the state." This debate challenged the liberal orthodoxy of the early twentieth century and led to what Horne refers to as social liberalism, a "transformation in liberal thought that took place in France during the later decades of the nineteenth century and that questioned the liberal orthodoxy of laissez-faire with regard to the role of central government in social policy."\textsuperscript{24}

This observation leads to the fourth, and perhaps most significant, theme arising from these works: the role of the central state and the tremulous way in which the line between public and private realms was often crossed in the development of social policy. In contrast to the invasive, predatory administration portrayed by Jacques Donzelot's \textit{The Policing of Families}, the French state in these accounts often appears as a hesitant, sometimes clumsy, but rarely monolithic partner in the intricate dance that took place between reformers, state administrators, and the private citizens they hoped to help.\textsuperscript{25} Far from taking the initiative in legislation that crossed the threshold of citizens' lives in new ways, the state was often summoned in after other welfare schemes had proved inadequate, inequitable, or unworkable for a variety of
reasons. Advocates of liberal, laissez-faire solutions to the social question were certainly worried about the impact of "state socialism" and the mandatory imposition of charity, but it was rarely because the central administration had already imposed a national solution on unwitting private citizens, even if there was legislation on the books.

Smith offers an eloquent description of just such a dynamic in his description of hospitals in Lyon. Many doctors and local notables in the late nineteenth century resisted social insurance legislation because charity was an intrinsic part of the self-image of the elite; helping the poor was something one did because of one's station in life, not something to be regulated by the government. Smith describes the difficult intellectual leap many doctors had to make in becoming state employees, as opposed to independent, frequently religiously motivated, benefactors of the local poor. "Prior to the war, conservative Catholics feared the expansion of public assistance because they believed it would usher in a depersonalized bureaucracy—the very antithesis of the ideal Catholic charity, with its face-to-face, paternalistic client relationships," Smith writes. World War I changed all this, and with the sheer scale of destruction and immense local need, it became clear to these same advocates of local authority that the state was not simply to be feared but was a potential source of resources and community support that they could now call upon.

Horne agrees that until the Great War "the precise role to be played by the state formed the crux of all social policy debate in France. ... [S]hould legislators require compulsory forms of social protection for workers or merely rely on the wellsprings of voluntary initiative? Any attempt to answer this question invoked larger issues of social philosophy concerning the relationship of the individual to the state." Horne introduces the participants in these debates, many of whom were convinced that the state ought to play as minimal a role as possible, yet were convinced otherwise by the circumstances of the war. Paradoxically, employers also played a key role in developing welfare legislation that they opposed in principle. Dutton describes how organizations of the grand patronat threw their weight into the battle against social insurance as a state-mandated national scheme. They hoped to avoid state intervention by demonstrating the feasibility of voluntary employer-controlled caisses. Short of this goal, however, "If national social insurance could not be stopped altogether, employers hoped at least to achieve a secondary goal: a predominant position in the new regime." Employers ultimately helped to shape the sweeping legislation of 1932, in which the state played a much more direct role, yet Dutton is careful to point out that this was not the first major intervention by the state; this had begun with state-sponsored welfare and industrial mobilization during the Great War.

In discussing mutualist groups and other voluntary associations active in early twentieth-century France, Horne writes that "a particular image of France and national identity permeated the debates on the legitimate role of the state
in social policy. Those who were opposed to compulsory or state-administered insurance often equated the word obligation with a 'German' or 'anti-French' solution that was in contradiction with the true national French spirit and culture. This phrase has a contemporary resonance, I believe, but while a particular image of French national identity continues to surface in debates on welfare reform today, it is opponents of an "Anglo-Saxon" model who claim that any more liberal models of social insurance are contrary to French national culture.

It is here that Dutton’s original question, why are the French so attached to their welfare state? can be answered more fully. Dutton argues that French social security “is an intrinsic part of French democracy. It is simultaneously both the agent and evidence of national solidarity.” Horne and Smith would both agree that sécurité sociale should be added alongside republican primary education and a national network of roads in the constitution of a modern French republic. The French are so attached to their welfare state because it has become an integral part of their national identity. Anyone who was in Paris in December 1995, as Paul Dutton was, would recognize the remarkable French solidarity in evidence during the strikes that paralyzed much of the country. Prime Minister Alain Juppé had attempted to tamper with France’s generous social benefits, but there was little acrimony against the Parisian transport workers, even among motorists who spent hours each morning stalled on the périphérique. Overcoming this entrenched resistance continues to be one of the major challenges of any present or future French government. Thanks to these recent works on the history of the welfare state in France, we have a better understanding of how and when this solidarity took shape.

Kristen Stromberg Childers is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of Fathers, Families, and the State in France, 1914-1945 (2003). Her current research focuses on decolonization and immigration in post-World War II France, particularly with respect to those colonies that chose to become Départements d’Outre-Mer.

Notes