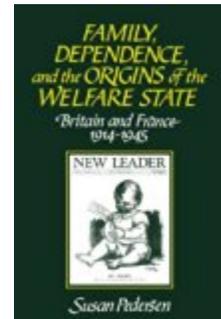


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Pedersen. *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 478 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-55834-1.

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Pedersen's *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State* is one of the best pieces of historical writing on social policy I've come across in a long time.

Pedersen sets out to unravel an intriguing comparative puzzle. Why did Britain, with its much stronger labour and feminist movement, end up producing a much inferior programmatic response to the needs of children than France, usually considered to be (inaccurately) somewhat of a welfare state laggard? The statistical differences in social spending on children are unequivocal and accelerating. In France, family benefits (aimed directly at children) absorb twenty percent of all spending on pensions, insurances, and allowances, compared to only 10.7 percent in Britain. Moreover, by the mid 1980s, rates of welfare spending in France at \$3,829 per head of population were more than double those in Britain at \$1,885 (pp. 417-18). These comparative and engendered differences were firmly in place by the end of World War II. Pedersen's book explains quite convincingly why the logic of the French rather than the British welfare state worked out better in raising children out of poverty.

At the risk of over-simplifying a complex and richly textured analysis, Pedersen argues that, paradoxically, the very strength and militancy of Britain's trade union and feminist movements worked against the development of social wage policies intended to offset the inability of wages to meet family needs. Within Britain, a far stronger trade union movement, operating through the Labour Party, resisted arguments for family allowances as destructive of campaigns for a male, breadwinner wage sufficient to support a family. Union strength thus embedded the centrality of the male breadwinner ethic (reinforced by the assumptions of male British policy-

makers such as William Beveridge) firmly within the core of the British welfare state. Each social policy initiative from unemployment insurance onwards, attempted to compensate (always inadequately) for the needs of women and children only as dependants of men and at a fraction of the male wage.

The campaigns of British social feminists such as Eleanor Rathbone for family allowances as an "endowment of motherhood" represented a potential counterpoint to the male breadwinner ethic. However, family allowances in Britain achieved only limited success, Pedersen argues, precisely because of their close identification with changing the balance of gender politics within the family. Motivated by a desire to endow economically women's work as mothers (rather than simply to attack child poverty per se) the campaign for family allowances (as articulated by Rathbone) met strong resistance not only from unionists who resented its challenge to the ideal of the "family wage", but from anti-feminists who feared its corrosive impact on male domestic authority. Confronted by such strong class and gender-based opposition, family allowances in Britain when implemented during World War II, fell far short of the benefit levels needed to mount a successful attack on child poverty or to crack the power of the male breadwinner wage model.

What about France? Pedersen's analysis of French family-centred social policy represents the most provocative part of her book. In France, unlike Britain, the campaign for family allowances was taken up by a conservative coalition of paternalist employers, social Catholics, and militant pronatalists. Employers saw family allowances as a means of forestalling unionization and reinforcing employee loyalty. The very weakness of the

French labour movement between the wars, in contrast to Britain's, allowed large industrial concerns in textiles and metal-working to develop a comprehensive and completely employer-funded network of family allowance "caisses" outside of the framework of state administration. Eventually this employer-driven system would form the shell of a state family allowance structure that, by 1949, would be paying out nine percent of the entire national wage bill in the form of allowances for children, a sum that effectively doubled the family income of a couple with four children (pp. 390-91).

However, the strength of family allowances in France cannot be explained by employer power alone. Equally if not more important, was the ideology of pronatalism: a campaign to reverse France's relative population decline which enjoyed widespread and relatively unchallenged support across class, gender, and regional lines. Pronatalist sentiment was fed by fear of rival nationalisms (within, for e.g. Germany); a conservative social Catholic quest for celebrating the primacy and organic unity of the family; and an obsession with France's population size. As Pedersen puts it, "Pronatalist economics were deceptively simple [...]. Children, as a national resource, should not make people poorer [...]. Unlike their British counterparts, however pronatalists were entirely uninterested in income redistribution across classes or sexes and never identified their goals with other 'progressive' causes. As a result, pronatalists espoused the most elementary vision of the parental welfare state...an ideal of family-based redistribution relatively unencumbered by other political aims" (pp. 366-67). Taken together, the combination of business support of family allowances as an alternative to higher across-the-board wage increases, and the strength of pronatalist nationalist sentiment was a potent combination in the creation of what Pedersen terms the French "parental welfare state," a state which since World War II has succeeded far more successfully than Britain's in channelling economic resources to children and thus reducing child poverty.

Pedersen's point is not to celebrate conservative, anti-union or anti-feminist social policies in contrast to the claims of trade unionism or social feminism. Quite the contrary. Her sympathies clearly lie more with British social feminists such as Eleanor Rathbone who wished economic recognition for women's domestic work, rather than with arch pronatalists such as France's Fernand Boverat who saw women as little more than bearers of the nation's babies. However, her book does draw our attention powerfully to the connections between the formative origins of national welfare states, and their ongoing structural evolution. Built around the primacy of a male breadwinner ethic, British social policy subordinated the claims of women and children to the strength of trade union power at the bargaining table, and male authority within the family. France's "parental" welfare state, in contrast, succeeded far better, despite its more conservative origins, in delivering the goods to children. As Pedersen concludes, "by targeting children, rather than the particular functional activities of breadwinning or full-time child rearing, French policymakers left negotiations over gender roles to individual women and men." At the same time, France's system of family allowances "has proven far more effective at safeguarding a decent standard of living than has the British pursuit of the elusive family wage" (pp. 417, 420). One doesn't have to be a "pronatalist," Pedersen concludes, to support the idea that children should be seen as a "collective charge" upon the nation's resources and thus to have some admiration for the more successful outcome of the French welfare state insofar as children are concerned.

As the above summary indicates, this is a book well worth reading. Seldom have I come across a more detailed or rich nuanced historical analysis of comparative social policy. The book should appeal to all those interested in the discourse surrounding the gender politics of welfare, welfare capitalism, maternalism, state structure, and the interaction between institutional power, ideology, and state welfare policy.

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