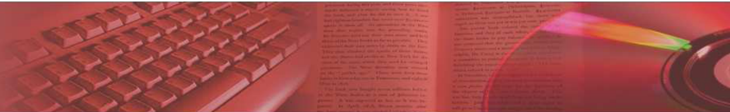
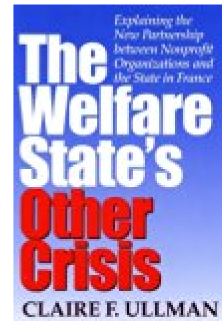


Claire F. Ullman. *The Welfare State's Other Crisis: Explaining the New Partnership between Nonprofit Organizations and the State in France.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. xi + 193 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33544-9.



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What is the Welfare State, Anyway?

This book makes the intriguing argument that the welfare state, far from heading into the dustbin of history, may simply be in a process of transition and adaptation. Drawing on data from France, Claire Ullman suggests that welfare states are actually faced with two distinct crises. The better known crisis is that of diminished tax revenues and reduced government budgets. The welfare state's other crisis, she argues, is related to a growing lack of confidence in the state's capacity to carry out its welfare functions effectively. One response has been to shift responsibility for providing social services to nonprofit organizations. In this book, Ullman explores the intellectual and political roots of this second crisis and the subsequent transformation of the welfare state as it has played out in France in the last thirty or forty years. At the same time, she raises interesting questions concerning the way scholars think about welfare states in general.

Ullman begins her analysis of the transformation of the French welfare state by observing that the number of nonprofit private associations there has increased dramatically in the last two decades. While this applies to all sorts of associations, since the early 1980s the increase in the number of groups specifically focused on public policy and social services has been especially notable. Many of these groups receive funding from the French government and provide services, such as job counseling and placement, housing development, and a wide variety of education and training programs. This new partnership between the French state and nonprofit organizations suggests a profound shift in relations between the state and civil society in France.

The participation of private groups in social services might not seem extraordinary to Americans. The U.S. is famous for the role of clubs, churches, and other organized groups in civic life. Depending on the issue, such groups often play an organized role in politics. In addition, a wide range of private organizations have long worked to provide social services using government resources. In France, on the other hand, such organized groups have long been viewed with suspicion. As Ullman explains, in France, no organized group (with the partial and significant exception of unions, about which more shall be said below) should stand between an individual and the state, which, of course, expresses the general interest of the people. Private groups that want to provide social services are considered likely to pursue sectarian or particular interests contrary to the will of the people. At the same time, state representatives, from ministers down to social workers and teachers, are invested with extraordinary authority. Although, as Ullman indicates, some charities have always provided social services (some even received state funding), until very recently nonprofit organizations lacked legitimacy in public life.

The French welfare state has long been organized around several different types of social insurance. Access to health care benefits, unemployment benefits, retirement, public housing, vacations and other subsidies

has been geared to meeting the needs of a working population. Unions and business groups are often designated as government's "social partners" in negotiations over the structure of benefits. While they have not generally engaged in providing benefits or services, unions have had a great deal of influence in the formation of the welfare state in France. Until recently, the only legitimate basis upon which to make demands on the state was as a worker or as a citizen, but not, for instance, as a Catholic, a homeless person or an environmentalist. Curiously, Ullman does not address the relationship between unions, business groups or other "social partners" and the French welfare state, but her analysis does suggest that other criteria–often not related to work status–have come to define legitimate social partners in recent years. In addition, services have been developed that are not linked to any form of social insurance. These changes set the stage for the addition of new social partners.

Ullman argues that this shift can be linked to three critiques of the welfare state that have developed in France since the 1960s. She links these critiques to three groups within the political elite. According to Ullman, reformist civil servants and intellectuals sought to strengthen civil society through an increased role for nonprofit associations. Working to develop and spread their ideas through a variety of socialist leaning political clubs, this group helped organize associations into a viable political lobby. A second group developed into what was known in the 1960s as the "second left." Centered around figures such as Michel Rocard (later prime minister under Francois Mitterrand) and Edmond Maire (head of a major trade union), this group developed the concept of "autogestion," or self-management, as an alternative to the centralized power of the state and large corporations. Members of the second left were probably instrumental in making decentralization a major part of the reborn socialist party's agenda in the 1970s. Finally, Ullman points to a series of studies and reports produced by a group of policy analysts since the early 1970s. These reports suggested that the welfare state was failing to meet the evolving needs of the population. Rene Lenoir, Father Joseph Wresinski, organizations like ATD-Quart Monde ("Aid for All Distress-Fourth World") and others inside the French administration argued that there were pockets of poverty that social insurance programs could not reach. They argued that nonprofit associations might be better able to serve these populations.

According to Ullman the new social movements that grew in the wake of May 68 (environmentalism, feminism, anti-poverty and immigrant rights groups, etc.) raised the political visibility of nonprofit associations in France in the 1970s. It was not, however, until the election of the Socialist Party in 1981 that nonprofit groups began to gain serious access to government resources. Many socialist officials had, as mayors and local officials, already developed strong ties to nonprofit associations and were interested in continuing those relations. To this end, the new socialist government reduced barriers to organizing and fund raising and actively sought to work with nonprofits as they developed new social services. This was especially true of anti-poverty policies, such as the national minimum income plan developed in the 1980s and of a wide range of jobs programs. At both the national and local level, government and administrative bodies began to reach out to nonprofits, recognizing them officially as "social partners" and designing social services with their participation built in.

By the late 1990s, in a France ruled again by a socialist government, the incorporation of nonprofit associations in the welfare state seems almost normal. Ullman's argument, then, is that an effective intellectual critique of the welfare state, combined with a perceived crisis in the state's capacity to meet the needs of the population, succeeded in reshaping the relationship between the state and civil society. Nonprofits, once seen as the likely source of resistance to the will of the people, have been incorporated into the structure of the welfare state. Instead of withering away, the French welfare state has adapted itself to new needs and new groups. Ullman provides a useful framework for understanding recent transformations of the French welfare state. However, by focusing on the development of ideas, manifested in books and reports, rather than on the substance of political debates and the strategies and tactics of politicians, parties and associations, Ullman's analysis tends to flatten out the substance of French politics. It is certainly interesting that the French socialists have become champions of decentralization and delegation to private associations while conservatives have generally resisted these movements. Yet I suspect more was at stake for the socialists than a new set of political ideas. Prior to 1981 the socialists had not held national power since the 1950s, but had (along with the communists) developed strong local political networks. Ullman suggests that the local experiences of Pierre Mauroy (Mitterrand's first prime minister) as mayor of Lille made him sympathetic to nonprofit associations, but it seems possible that ties to associations also formed the basis for the political support that propelled the socialists into office. Socialist aid to nonprofit associations may have been part of an effort to

build their political base and to pay back those groups that supported their electoral efforts.

In addition, by focusing very narrowly on the history of nonprofit associations, Ullman fails to examine the many ways in which French politics and the welfare state have been marked all along by partnerships with private associations. I have already noted the important role played by unions and business groups in regulating the welfare state. Mutual aid societies, organizations of professionals (teachers, doctors, social workers, farmers) and others have also helped define the French welfare state over the course of this century. While the French state may ideally need only itself to define the general will, in times of crisis (1936 and 1968 come to mind), these groups of "social partners" have all come to the bargaining table as representatives of the will of the people. The actions and ideas of these groups must provide, at the very least, a framework for political action and for the relationship between government and private associations.

As noted, Ullman's work focuses primarily on the changes in ideology among political elites. Her analysis might have also benefited from the perspective of people involved in nonprofit associations themselves. What understanding and expectations do activists bring to their interactions with the state? How have those expectations changed in the last ten or twenty years? Does it make sense to lump all nonprofits together as part of the same movement? By not examining the groups themselves, Ullman fails to illustrate some of the deeper cultural issues at stake in the transformation of the French welfare state.

Similarly, Ullman might have looked more closely at some of the cultural categories that shape French thinking about the state. For instance, near the end of the book (p. 136), Ullman declares that Catholicism was more important than any other factor in explaining why the French state has been successful in revitalizing the nonprofit sector. Although the role of the Church should not be underestimated, the history of such Catholic action movements needs to be linked with similar groups on the left, especially those organized by the Communist party, and with changing notions about the place of religion in society. More broadly, the very existence of a sector of life called "le social" as distinct from political, economic or cultural life, suggests that both associations and the French state are operating within a cultural framework that is different in important ways from the U.S. In addition, historically most "social partners" have been groups that represent workers of one sort or another, while the groups Ullman is most interested in address the needs of poor, often unemployed people. This is a critical distinction that needs to be explored. If the French welfare state is refocusing its attentions on the unemployed and "excluded" (to use the French term), does that mean that the welfare state will no longer operate as insurance, but, instead, take as its primary role the organization of assistance? How would this change the relationship between French people and their state? Would it redefine their expectations?

This book provides useful insights into recent changes in the French welfare state and raises a wide range of questions concerning the relationship between the state and civil society in France. Students of welfare politics in Europe will find this to be a useful read as will anyone interested in changes in the ways in which the French state manages civil society. Ullman's broader goal, however, was to suggest that the crisis of the welfare state (the generic one that exists only in theory) might simply be a transformation toward greater reliance on nonprofit organizations. Certainly a shift of some sort toward associations is going on in France. It would be interesting to see more research into this area that raises questions about what we mean when we speak of the state itself. Is this transformation a delegation of state responsibilities or, instead, an extension of the state? Where does the state end and civil society begin? Is it possible, when asking such questions, to usefully compare welfare states across borders? Readers of this book will no doubt find themselves compelled to ask such questions.

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