



**E. P. Hennock.** *The Origin of the Welfare State in England and Germany, 1850-1914: Social Policies Compared.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xviii + 381 pp. \$35.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-59770-8.



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In 1987, E. P. Hennock published a magisterial book comparing the development of social insurance in Britain and Germany.[1] At the time, the comparison of social services across national boundaries was a frequently discussed subject,[2] in line with the historiographical preferences of the day. International comparisons were a favored methodology; the examination of social insurance and welfare services coincided with an interest in the history of social inequality and in quantitative history more generally, while the political relevance of responses to inequality and injustice appeared unquestionable in the context of broader debates regarding the competitiveness of existing welfare states or their compatibility with the ideas and ideals of European economic cooperation.

Twenty years on, much has changed. The history of social conflict and of social inequality has lost much of its appeal, given the novel attraction of middle-class, and, more recently, nobility studies. Quantitative approaches have been displaced to a certain extent by in-depth analyses of qualitative sources in the framework of the new cultural

history, and challenges to the nation-state as the main framework for analysis have questioned the value of comparing developments in two or more nation states, with each treated as a homogenous entity.

Twenty years later, E. P. Hennock presents us with another comparative study of two national paths towards modern welfare states far broader chronologically and conceptually than its predecessor. Comparing Britain and Germany appears particularly instructive for a number of reasons. Both are seen as opposite poles among industrialized and wealthy European countries. While Germany, a late-comer to industrialization, was a pioneer in comprehensive schemes of state-run social insurance, Britain, although it industrialized sooner, held back. Where the German insurance system quickly acquired a reputation for generosity, and was often described as the natural predecessor of the Bonn republic's model,[3] the British welfare state frequently serves as a metaphor for inadequate benefits. In Germany, the creation of national insurance schemes that limited differences in state practices is often seen as one of the

decisive elements of the "second foundation" of the German Empire in the 1880s. In Britain, by contrast, the national insurance and assistance system appears to have done little to turn the United Kingdom into a more homogenous nation-state, and was only moderately successful in reducing regional imbalances in wealth and services. Hennock's book sets out, however, to question whether such perceptions, based largely on a sometimes simplified view of the present, are valid for the period in which both paths towards modern welfare states began.

Hennock's book pursues a number of aims. It provides a detailed description of the evolution, aims, and function of welfare provision and insurance systems between the 1840s and the outbreak of the First World War in Germany, with a focus on Prussia. At the heart of Hennock's account are the regulation of poor relief, accident insurance and workmen's compensation, provisions against the effects of sickness, invalidity, and old age, as well as unemployment insurance. The description of British regulations is not quite as detailed (though still comprehensive), as Hennock assumes that these will be more familiar to English-speaking readers. Finally, Hennock compares and contrasts British and German developments, challenging a number of assumptions in doing so.

The book begins with a comparison of the law of settlement and the urban administration of the poor law. In this field, Hennock highlights similarities rather than differences. In both countries, the law of settlement tended to encourage labor mobility by reducing poor law unions' or parishes' ability to reject newcomers, without, however, providing for national financing. In both countries, the role of nonprofessionals in assessing poor relief claims was significant, calling into question the distinction between a British system administered by amateurs and a German one governed by professionals. With regard to factory legislation, Hennock highlights the different contexts

in which laws governing working hours and safety at work must be seen: in Britain, a factory inspectorate acted more or less on its own; in Germany, it did so within the context of a more intensively policed society with more active civil servants willing to act decisively against perceived abuses.

The most important changes in perspective Hennock illustrates concern insurance schemes. It is well known that Germany launched invalidity and health insurance for dependent workers in 1883, but that Britain relied on voluntary insurance against industrial accidents. Hennock argues that many of the decisive decisions in Germany were made not in the 1880s under Bismarck, but in the 1840s, when the problem of poverty as an unintended outcome of the politics of economic liberalism (which resulted from the abolition of guilds and the liberation of the peasantry) first attracted the attention of the public and of government officials.<sup>[4]</sup> The notion of replacing defunct guilds with some form of public body that could compel membership first emerged in the field of sickness insurance, though very few towns established insurance funds with compulsory membership. The proposals for accident insurance, sickness, and pension insurance thus represented the resolution of long-running debates under the specific economic and political circumstances of the 1880s, which Bismarck influenced, but could not entirely control. In Britain, these innovations took longer to materialize because little pressure for reform came from parliament or the civil service. What Hennock affirms, however, are the differences traditionally highlighted between the two insurance systems, not least in his own work. German solutions tended to be bureaucratically managed and emphasized compulsion in combination with the public interest; British solutions tended to rely on persuasion and/or private-sector alternatives to state management. Although German insurance systems soon turned not just to preventing want, but to maintaining a standard of living (particularly with the advent of insurance

for white-collar workers in 1911), Hennock also finds that British benefit payments were frequently more generous, at least in cash terms. Whether this is also true of differences if purchasing power or living standards are taken into account is a more difficult question, but there are at least indications that, in many locations, Britain's benefit recipients were better off than their German counterparts.

There are also some surprising insights in detail. British factory inspectors were quicker to recognize the existence of work-related illnesses and to press for some form of compensation. German insurance bodies were more active in intervening in public health issues; for example, by funding treatment centers for tuberculosis.

A final point Hennock makes forcefully is the need to look beyond the central state to poor law boards, trade unions, mutual funds, and municipalities (which were particularly crucial in the realm of unemployment insurance) for a full picture of what social safety nets really looked like for individual contributors and claimants. Local diversity remained at least potentially important in both systems, although British solutions, once adopted, tended towards greater uniformity than German ones.

There is very much to praise here (and very little to criticize). Anyone who has ever dealt with the complexities of social insurance systems in the past or the present will marvel at how simple they appear in Hennock's lucid exposition. The book provides key data in easily understandable tables, a clear and balanced survey of the political maneuvers that led to particular legislative outcomes, and an exposition of contrasts between stated intentions and practical results.

Hennock has mastered an immense literature. If the footnotes are a reliable guide, he judges the most important work on social insurance system to date from the 1980s and 1990s. This conclusion coincides with the historiographical trends outlined above, and has the benefit of a

long-term view of historiography rather than chasing the latest historiographical fashion. Some of the most recent work is not cited, but the only instance where it would seem to challenge Hennock's account is with regard to British old age pensions, which have recently been assessed much more positively than Hennock judges them. [5] As much recent work deals with the extent of local variation in practice, it would in any case have been extremely difficult to incorporate into a concise account. However, there are—very occasional—instances where I would have been curious to know more about Hennock's assessments of how his reading of the evolution of welfare and insurance systems in Britain and Germany connects to some of the broader questions about the relationship of states and individuals, some of which appear to be coalescing into new master narratives in this field: the potential link between comprehensive insurance schemes, the medicalization of labor relations and the advance of eugenics,[6] or the consequences of a redefinition of unemployment as an insurable risk for the subsequent, largely failed, attempts to regulate and manage labor markets.[7]

But the fact that one can wish for more pages on what would appear at first sight to be an exceedingly dry topic indicates that Hennock has produced an outstanding work, one that represents the best introduction to German social insurance and welfare schemes in the long nineteenth century in any language, and a masterful contribution to Anglo-German comparison.

#### Notes

[1]. E. P. Hennock, *British Social Reform and German Precedents: The Case of Social Insurance, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

[2]. For another example, see Gerhard A. Ritter, *Der Sozialstaat. Entstehung und Entwicklung im internationalen Vergleich* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1989).

[3]. For example, Gabriele Metzler, *Der deutsche Sozialstaat. Vom bismarckschen Erfolgsmodell zum Pflegefall* (Stuttgart: DVA, 2003).

[4]. This judgment agrees with some of the results of Hermann Beck's research on the public and official reaction to "pauperism": Hermann Beck, *The Origins of the Authoritarian Welfare State in Prussia: Conservatives, Bureaucracy and the Social Question, 1815-70* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[5]. Martin Pugh, "Working-Class Experience and State Social Welfare, 1908-1914: Old Age Pensions Reconsidered," *Historical Journal* 45 (2002): 775-796.

[6]. Such issues are discussed in Amir Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Pascal Grosse, *Kolonialismus, Eugenik und bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland 1850-1918* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2000); and Amy L. Fairchild, *Science at the Borders: Immigrant Medical Inspection and the Shaping of the Modern Industrial Labor Force* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

[7]. See, for example, Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur 1880-1910* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).

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