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Productive entanglements.

The dynamics of public-private interactions in the history of social protection¹

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Abstract

This introduction analyzes the important scholarship on the ‘mixed economy of welfare’ in order to emphasize the main innovative features of the book. It develops its main argument – that of the productiveness of public-private entanglements –, and presents the eight chapters of the book. The two main historiographical lessons yielded by our approach thus come into sharper focus. Firstly, the choice to devote equal analytical consideration to a wealth of public and private actors allows us to set aside for good historiographical state-centrism in the history of welfare. Instead of the classic comparisons between national welfare ‘systems’, the book studies the mechanisms that foster public-private interactions and their productiveness, everywhere in Europe and at all levels, thereby illuminating the roles of a plethora of actors such as associations, corporations, municipalities, religious orders, international organizations, and NGOs. Secondly, a close look at the way public-private interactions work at the micro-level sheds new light on those individuals whose professional and activist careers straddle the two realms. Looking at public-private interactions from below reveals that the ability of those middlemen and middlewomen to navigate between the public and the private played a crucial role in fostering the productiveness of public-private interactions.

Thinking productiveness

The formidable, multifaceted challenge to the post-war welfare state was undoubtedly one of the major phenomena that shaped the political life of the protean 1980s. In Western Europe and in the United States, neoliberal state policies openly contested the idea that the state should protect the socio-economic well-being of its citizens and actively promote a more equitable distribution of wealth. A growing cohort of social policy experts of different political leanings gave their support to policies of ‘privatization’ – one of the buzzwords of the decade – arguing for a transfer of the production of goods and services from the public to the private sector. The rightness of the dismantling of the welfare state in the West seemed to be corroborated by the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the rapid shift of

¹ This book was made possible by the generous support of two European research programmes: the international network ‘European Trajectories in the Quest for Welfare and Democracy: Voluntary associations, families and the state, 1880s to the present’, hosted at the European University Institute in Florence (2014-15), and the COST Action 18119 ‘Who Cares in Europe?’ (2019-2023). The editors would like to express their deepest gratitude to Sam Ferguson and Đại Lâm Tait for their thoughtful help in proofreading these texts.

half of the continent from centrally planned to market economies. It was in this context of a general withdrawal of the state that social scientists started to debate the idea that welfare provision should involve not only the state, but also a multitude of private actors including voluntary associations, religious institutions – and, of course, companies.

In such a political climate, many historians aptly remarked that arguing for a ‘mixed economy of welfare’ was, in a certain way, reinventing the wheel. Building on many different national and local case studies, they demonstrated that the establishment of the welfare state was not solely to be understood as a response to the post-1945 national and international context. Instead, they showed how welfare policies had been slowly forming since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, ‘through the central state’s gradual adoption and expansion of private local initiatives’.² Focusing on interactions and exchanges between the state and private organizations, this scholarship not only contributed to the writing of a longer history of welfare in the West, but also demonstrated that that history is *constantly* ‘a complex mix of public/private provision’.³ This body of research also showed that, even after 1945, the ideal of an all-encompassing, universal system of state welfare never entirely excluded private action. Quoting a well-known speech delivered by Lord Beveridge in the House of Lords in 1949, many historians referred to the line between public and private as a ‘moving frontier’,⁴ never fixed once and for all and constantly renegotiated, even in those countries where welfare is considered to belong fundamentally to either the public (Germany, France) or private (United States) realm. In the following decades, this new way of looking at the history of welfare continued to be fruitful. Indeed, the same reasoning has since been applied to international relief and philanthropy, suggesting the idea of a ‘mixed political economy of giving’⁵ as a way to understand the close partnership between private philanthropy and the state in the United States since the end of the eighteenth century. Other research, focused on the British context, demonstrates how the state’s consistent intervention and funding of private humanitarian action overseas since the 1920s engendered a ‘mixed economy of relief’⁶ based on the continued dependence of the private sector upon public funds and support.

In what is now a rich body of scholarship, public-private connections in the field of social protection are usually analyzed through three main questions. The first deals with the respective *proportions* of public and private provisions in the ‘welfare mix’, and how these proportions evolved over time. This is the key theme of a wealth of historical studies published from the 1990s onwards, whose objective has been to recognize the role of private actors in the ‘welfare mix’. For example, researching the case of Britain, Geoffrey Finlayson has shown that ‘between the years 1911 and 1949, while the frontiers of the state expanded,

² L.L. Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land. Working-class movements and the colonies de vacances in France, 1880-1960* (Durham and London, 2002), XIV.

³ M.B. Katz and C. Sachße (eds), *The Mixed Economy of Social Welfare. Public/private relations in England, Germany and the United States, the 1870s to the 1930s* (Baden-Baden, 1996), 10.

⁴ G. Finlayson, ‘A Moving Frontier. Voluntarism and the state in British social welfare 1911-1949’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 1, 2 (1990), 183-206.

⁵ O. Zunz, *Philanthropy in America. A history* (Princeton, 2014), 6

⁶ E. Baughan, ‘Mrs Jellyby Nation. The British state and overseas aid in Europe, 1918-1925’, paper given at the European Social Science History Conference, Valencia, Spain (2016).

they did not expand to the extent that they left no room for the activity of voluntarism'.⁷ This statement is furthered by pinpointing which parts of the voluntary sector 'declined', which 'remained strong', and which 'could not coexist with a universalist welfare state'. Other scholars – as Bernard Harris and Paul Bridgen have pointed out – have even attempted to quantitatively assess the respective weight of voluntary and statutory contributions to the mixed economy of welfare in various countries.⁸

It is often observed that public and private actors themselves played a crucial role in working to increase their respective shares. This leads us to a second key question in the history of the welfare mix, namely, that of *power*. The financial and regulatory dependence of private organizations upon public authorities often lies at the heart of this line of enquiry, as well as the shifting relationships of collaboration, rivalry, and competition between private and public welfare initiatives. For example, in his innovative work on the history of old-age pensions in Switzerland, Matthieu Leimgruber has shown that the famous Swiss three-pillar pension system was the result of ongoing 'struggles over the boundaries of state and private providers'.⁹ His book analyses how private companies, which had set up occupational pension schemes since the First World War, defended their 'territory' against attempts by the political elites to establish a statutory and universal old-age insurance scheme. Interestingly, Leimgruber repeatedly uses the metaphor of 'containment' to describe how private insurers successfully prevented public social insurance from encroaching on their 'turf' and safeguarded their 'preserve'. At the same time, because corporate schemes have remained a key component of the old-age welfare mix in Switzerland, their regulation by public authorities, whether cantonal or federal, was a constant matter of conflict during the twentieth century.¹⁰ Similarly, in his important book on philanthropy in America, Olivier Zunz has underscored that state and federal tax laws, in particular tax exemptions, have played a key role in enabling philanthropic foundations. Yet these laws also offered the federal state a tool to 'regulate charity' by circumscribing what fell within its scope (for example, education) and what did not (advocacy), thereby effectively influencing the activities and campaigns that philanthropic institutions could or could not engage in.¹¹

Taking note of the density of relations between public and private social welfare providers, scholars have developed a third line of enquiry when examining the welfare mix: that of the very *nature and thickness of the divide* between private and public realms. In an interlocking field of social protection in which people, money, practices, policies, and sometimes whole infrastructures circulate between the public and private sectors, it is sometimes very hard to draw a line between the two. As Zunz and others have shown, philanthropic institutions in the United States have developed an organic bond with state and federal social agencies over the years. For example, president Johnson's Great Society was based on 'an original fusion of private and public funds to deliver social services to the poor,

⁷ Finlayson, *op. cit.*, 204.

⁸ B. Harris and P. Bridgen, 'Introduction: The "Mixed Economy of Welfare" and the Historiography of Welfare Provision' in B. Harris and P. Bridgen (eds), *Charity and Mutual Aid in Europe and North America since 1800* (New York and London, 2007), 6-7.

⁹ M. Leimgruber, *Solidarity without the State? Business and the shaping of the Swiss welfare state* (Cambridge, 2008), 287.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 108 and following.

¹¹ Zunz, *op. cit.*, 76-103, 207, 214-243.

many of which emerged from philanthropic pilot programs'.¹² During these years, the federal state became the primary funder for privately-managed social programmes, carried out according to the priorities set out by the state.¹³ The blurring of the lines between public and private social action is not specific to the history of the United States and can also be found in continental Europe. Writing on the situation in Austria during the First World War, Tara Zahra has underlined that the newly-created Ministry for Social Welfare 'harness[ed] the private [...] child welfare system to achieve its own goals' and chose to 'expand an infrastructure that nationalist activists [...] had already created from the bottom up'.¹⁴ In carrying out its assistance programs, the Austrian state relied heavily on these private, nationalist groups, who were able to raise large sums of money.¹⁵ Eventually, such close collaboration resulted in the creation of 'hybrid welfare structures in which the lines between public and private were far from clear'.¹⁶

These three questions remain crucial to any historical account of social protection, but the objective of this book is to explore yet another fundamental dimension of the history of the welfare mix, namely, its *productive* nature. This question is not completely absent from the aforementioned works, but it is never at their centre. What do interactions between public and private actors produce? How do they impact on the social protection effectively provided – its scope, its content, its underlying ideology? How do they change what social protection even covers? Indeed, the interaction between the public and private sectors does not amount to a zero-sum game, that is, a situation in which each party's gain or loss is balanced by the losses or gains of the other party. Though straight transfers of policies from the public to the private realm (and vice versa) do happen, more often than not the interaction between the two sectors changes what these policies encompass, their contents and targets. As Pat Thane recently observed with regard to the case of the UK, 'far from the "Big State" growing *at the expense* of a vibrant "Big Society", they have worked and changed together, often in *creative tension*, *constructing* and sustaining the "mixed economy of welfare"'.¹⁷ These critical views also echoed works on the history of the state in France that substitute quantitative approaches – that is, those that measure a greater or lesser degree of involvement of the state – with approaches focused on the various forms of the relationship of the state to society.¹⁸ Moreover, recent research addressing transnational schemes of social protection has demonstrated how the interaction of public and private actors engenders the creation of new fields of intervention, including the domains of the protection of children¹⁹ and of migrants²⁰

¹² *ibid.*, 6.

¹³ *ibid.*, 214 and following.

¹⁴ T. Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National indifference and the battle for children in the Bohemian lands, 1900-1948* (Ithaca and London, 2008), 95.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 104.

¹⁷ P. Thane, 'The Ben Pimlott Memorial Lecture 2011. The "Big Society" and the "Big State": creative tension or crowding out?', *Twentieth Century British History*, 23, 3 (2012), 408-29, 22.

¹⁸ P. Rosanvallon, *L'État en France de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 1990).

¹⁹ J. Droux, 'L'internationalisation de la protection de l'enfance. Acteurs, concurrences et projets transnationaux (1900-1925)', *Critique Internationale*, 52, 3 (2011), 17-33.

²⁰ L. Guerry, 'Mobilisations transnationales. Le cas de l'International Migration Service, 1921-1939', *Monde(s). Histoire, Espaces, Relations*, 1, 5 (2014), 219-37.

respectively at the global level. In these cases, private-public interactions even managed to generate new organizations and new areas for both public and private action.

The remainder of this introduction develops this new perspective. The next section lays out the organization of the book and sums up each of the eight chapters. After this, we discuss two historiographical and methodological lessons yielded by our approach and case studies. Firstly, our choice to devote equal analytical consideration to a wealth of public and private actors allows us to set aside for good the historiographical state-centrism that has previously been found in the history of welfare. Secondly, a close look at the way public-private interactions work at the micro-level leads us to shed new light on those individuals whose professional and activist careers straddle the two realms, thereby playing a crucial role in fostering the productiveness of public-private interactions.

Scaling and unpacking the public-private divide

In order to explore the different ways in which public-private entanglements can be productive in the field of social protection, we have chosen to organize the eight case studies of this book by scales of analysis, starting from the local level and ending with the international and global level. By varying the scales of analysis – instead of sticking to only one such scale, for example the national one – this organization allows us to look at public-private entanglements from different viewpoints and shows us multiple versions of the same reality. Inspired by the work of micro-historians, we argue that there is no value hierarchy between the scales: they all have something relevant to say, and the change of focal length itself is particularly useful for exploring the complexity of social phenomena.²¹ This means in particular that this collection, contrary to most works in the field of social protection, does not take the primacy of the national level for granted and deliberately moves away from methodological nationalism. This starting point allows the contributions in this book to unpack the categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’, by focusing on the plurality of collective actors that populate the environment straddling the two realms. The ‘public’ is therefore not limited to the state, and includes local or regional authorities, or, at the international level, intergovernmental organizations. Similarly, ‘private’ does not refer only to voluntary associations, but also to political parties, trade unions, churches, and companies.

The first two chapters of the book subvert methodological nationalism either by breaking the national level down into its constituent parts – in the case of federal Switzerland – or by using city-level comparisons between France and Germany, respectively. In her chapter on the policies towards illegitimate children in Switzerland in the twentieth century, Joëlle Droux focuses on the cantonal level in French-speaking Switzerland. Through a detailed analysis of exchanges between the public (cantonal and federal institutions) and the private (charities), the article explores the specific possibilities for social protection provided by the organization of the Swiss Federation, which make it possible to set up specific organizations devoted to each sector of intervention. This specific institutional architecture created what Droux calls ‘an ecosystem of close-knit relationships between the public and private sector’, in which new social protection schemes could emerge, especially in the

²¹ J. Revel (ed), *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Paris, 1996).

domain of child adoption. In the next chapter, Catherine Maurer compares French and German poor relief in the late nineteenth century at municipal level. Through the study of fifteen cities on both sides of the Rhine, Maurer shows how the private (institutes and associations administered by Catholic orders and laity) and the public (city councils) never ceased to exist and cohabit in a peaceful, often virtuous way, even in two historical contexts that were apparently dominated by harsh opposition between the two, namely, the French Third Republic and the German Kulturkampf. This change in scale thus allows the author to reveal – especially for the French case – a rather unexpected ‘philanthropic consensus’²² at municipal level, far from the conflictual relationship between Church and state observed at the national level. In their texts, Maurer and Droux explore not only organizational dynamics, but also the outputs that this organizational interdependence at different scales had with regard to the actual provision of social protection on the ground.

Following a well-established practice in the scholarship of social protection, the next three contributions in this book assign a major role to the national scale. In so doing, they not only construct a detailed chronology of public-private interactions, highlighting the dynamic tensions that shaped and reshaped them in the different spaces and time periods in question; they also tackle case studies that are in some way unexpected, or focus on spaces that have been neglected in the scholarship on the mixed economy of welfare. Axelle Brodriez-Dolino’s chapter focuses on late twentieth-century France, a period conventionally described as being characterized by the retrenchment of the welfare state, and parallel expansion of private agencies. Challenging this dominant narrative, the author argues for an analysis through the prism of the mixed economy of welfare – a concept largely overlooked by the French research works on this topic, and which makes it possible to emphasize the concomitant growth of, and harmonious relations between, public and private welfare. She shows that in the early 1980s the French state tackled rising levels of poverty by massively subsidizing private charitable associations – a new practice, considering a century-old history dominated by conflict and separation between the two domains. Similarly, the new public employment schemes of the 1990s were strongly supported by private associations, who had in fact been the drivers behind this policy and had tested it at the local level before it was given a statutory, national scope.

The next two chapters pursue the same goal of extending the concept of the mixed economy of welfare beyond the areas where it is more commonly applied, by addressing national cases from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Firstly, Morgane Labbé’s chapter, focused on interwar Poland, explores the creative tension between a private organization (the Institute of Social Economics, a voluntary association dominated by socialist activists) and a public agency (the official Central Statistical Office, gathering experts restricted by an ethical code of neutrality with regard to public service) in carrying out scientific studies to investigate the conditions of the working class. The text demonstrates how the complex interactions between these two expert organizations, ranging from mistrust to competition and collaboration, fostered a dynamic environment for carrying out surveys that produced expert knowledge, and thereby led to the construction of a more reliable cost-of-living index.

²² C. Bec, *Assistance et République. La recherche d’un nouveau contrat social sous la III^e République* (Paris, 1994).

Secondly, Efi Avdela's contribution draws attention further South, with a focus on the network of voluntary associations offering social provision to various vulnerable groups in twentieth-century Greece. Avdela's text, examining the interwar years, the Second World War, and the post-war period in turn, explores how actors in the public (the members of the governmental administration) and private realms (activists in voluntary associations) produced new geographies of interactions, and in so doing managed to extend the borders of social protection in various ways. Labbé and Avdela's findings not only contribute to the 'missing history'²³ of social protection in a region usually considered as constituting the periphery of Europe, and whose nation-states are viewed as latecomers in a space dominated by continental empires; they also call into question the predominant view that these are weak states that have failed in providing social protection to their citizens. With this critical attention, both authors challenge the assumptions of a prevailing historiography on Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, which are founded on the features of the Western welfare states.²⁴

The last three chapters in this book address the welfare mix at the international scale, a perspective that is rarely considered, despite the fact that there are significant relationships linking an array of collective actors at this level. Célia Keren's chapter focuses on the evacuation scheme set up in order to bring children from the short-lived Spanish Republic to France in the late 1930s. By reassessing the respective roles played by the public (the Spanish government) and the private realm (foreign private committees in France), this article shows that the child evacuation programme was in fact inspired, promoted, created, and widely run by activist groups outside Spain. At the same time, Keren argues that this private activism contributed in no small part to the gradual building of a complex, albeit short-lived, Spanish welfare state. Linda Guerry's contribution on the first few years of activities of the International Conference of Private Organizations for the Protection of Migrants focuses on the interactions between this private umbrella organization and an international agency whose mandate is to advance social and economic justice through setting international labour standards, the International Labour Organization. The chapter demonstrates that international public and private organizations that were deprived of the power to enact laws were mutually dependent and required mutual support, learning from and imitating each other in order to put pressure on the member-states. Echoing Labbé, Guerry shows that the ILO, which did not have access to grassroots information on the living conditions of migrant populations, had to rely on data produced by private organizations. In the last article of this book, Auriane Guilbaud analyzes the interactions between a private, for-profit organization, the US pharmaceutical giant Merck, and a public international institution, the World Health Organization, between 1975 and 2000. Focusing on the joint efforts of these two bodies in the fight against a tropical disease, the article highlights how the relationship between the two resulted in the creation of a seminal drug donation programme in 1987, the Mectizan Donation Program, which became a model for other similar schemes implemented later. The article demonstrates how the interactions between public and private resulted in changes not

²³ W. Lorenz, 'Social Work and History' in S. Hering and B. Waaldijk, *Guardians of the Poor, Custodians of the Public. Welfare history in Eastern Europe, 1900-1960* (Opladen, 2006), 7-12.

²⁴ M. Labbé, 'De la Philanthropie à la protection sociale en Europe centrale et du Sud-Est (fin du XIX^e siècle-entre-deux-guerres)', *Revue d'histoire de la protection sociale*, 11, 1 (2018), 13-22.

only in the two actors themselves, but also in the field of medical relief, thereby redefining the scope and nature of the fight against onchocerciasis.

Taken together, this polyphonic, empirically-grounded collection demonstrates that organizations and policies do not simply shift from private to public and back, and indeed that the respective perimeters of the public and private sectors may grow and shrink together, changing the extent and borders of the field of social protection as a whole. In so doing, and through their interactions, both sectors constantly reshape, expand, or shrink the field of social protection and the organizations that operate within that field at the local, national, and international scale.

Going beyond historiographical state-centrism

As mentioned above, well-established historiographical narratives on social welfare are still very much centred on the state as the dominant actor. Although this position sometimes remains implicit, the welfare state is still held to be the gold standard of social protection, serving as the basis for comparison. Even recent literature on the crisis of the welfare state still largely focuses on the state.²⁵ As shown by the two chapters of this book dealing with France, the reluctance to think about private action is the result of a complex interplay between political and historiographical cultures. Catherine Maurer, referring to the French case in particular, remarks that ‘the new ideological and political significance of welfare issues, and the conflicts that were sparked at the end of the nineteenth century’, made it impossible, over a long period, to conceive of a constructive relationship between the state and the Catholic Church. Axelle Brodiez-Dolino, again writing on France but focusing on a period one century later, comes to a similar conclusion when she states that a supposed long-term conflict between the Catholic Church and the state made public-private entanglements seem ‘improbable’, or even ‘inadmissible’, both in French public discourse and in historiography. Several articles of this book therefore suggest that the border between national political cultures and social sciences is anything but impermeable. Other articles in this book go a step further, tackling state initiatives that positively aim to render their private counterparts invisible. This is the case, for instance, of Célia Keren’s text, which shows how, as early as 1937, the Spanish Ministry of Education publicized the ongoing evacuation scheme as a state policy only, thereby hiding the crucial role that foreign humanitarian committees had played in it, and continued to play. In this case, the project to make private action invisible reflected a precise political agenda of the nation-state, aimed at reasserting – at least on paper – its monopoly over ‘its’ children.

As a whole, this book questions an established historiography that identifies the emergence of the welfare state with the extension of civil rights to include social rights. This historiography entails a sequential view of the history of welfare centred around the successive figures of the state²⁶ – the welfare state being considered inseparable from the liberal and democratic state. This view is reinforced by most of the theoretical works in

²⁵ A. Kessler-Harris and M. Vaudagna, *Democracy and the Welfare State. The two Wests in the age of austerity* (New York, 2017).

²⁶ P. Rosanvallon, *op cit.*

sociology and political science on welfare state regimes, which are themselves based on the political history of Western European states. Their typologies attribute a central role to the state and to the instituted and legal forms of protection, and assume a founding association between the advent of capitalist liberalism and the emergence of the welfare state, whereby the latter was intended to correct the effects of the former.²⁷ These models, with their ideal-typical historical references, such as the ‘Beveridgian’ and the ‘Bismarckian’ welfare states, have held significant appeal because they help to classify the diversity of systems that exist across time and space, and to make comparisons between welfare regimes and between the public policies adopted within these regimes. Historians have often criticized how these systemic analyses make an oversimplified use of historical temporalities, thereby obscuring the heterogeneity of social welfare provisions that have existed since the end of the nineteenth century.²⁸ In this book we argue that these founding and characteristic features of the welfare state, which are taken up in these macro-comparative syntheses, marginalize or exclude other forms of social welfare that developed in Eastern or Southern countries and under various political regimes, or at the international level.

The attempt in this book to overcome historiographical state-centrism has three main consequences. Firstly, and contrary to most collections on the mixed economy of welfare in several countries, this book is not concerned with comparing various national welfare ‘systems’ – which, in practice, are usually limited to Britain, Germany, the United States and the Nordic countries, with the occasional addition of France. We are interested instead in the mechanisms that foster public-private interactions and their productiveness, everywhere in Europe and at all levels. Secondly, once historians look past this Leviathan, they find a plethora of nonprofit and for-profit actors such as associations, corporations, municipalities, religious orders, international organizations, and NGOs which, with competing agendas in mind, made a significant contribution to the expansion of social protection in Europe. In this sense, this book aims to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the well-established sociological view that civil society organizations, for-profit and nonprofit alike, must be considered to be independent and clearly separate from the state. On the contrary, the chapters in this book explore the grey area between public policies and voluntary action, showing that ‘their borders were porous, shifting and subject to constant negotiation’.²⁹ Thirdly, moving beyond state-centrism allows the historian to shift their attention from national governmental decision making to other public actors, such as municipalities (as is the case in Catherine Maurer’s study) or international organizations (as in Linda Guerry’s chapter). Once we free ourselves from the state-centered teleology, the resulting picture of the field of social protection becomes multipolar, relational, and populated by many different kinds of actors. This is why one may ultimately wish to follow Efi Avdela’s suggestion, who proposes to abandon the term ‘welfare state’, which always entails a kind of ‘dichotomous conceptualisation of “civil society” as the opposite of the “state”’, and instead to approach

²⁷ G. Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge and Princeton, 1990).

²⁸ M. Dreyfus, M. Ruffat, V. Viet and D. Voldman, *Se Protéger, Être Protégé. Une histoire des assurances sociales en France* (Rennes, 2006).

²⁹ F. Giomi and S. Petrunaro, ‘Voluntary Associations, State, and Gender in Interwar Yugoslavia. An introduction’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 26, 1 (2019), 1-18.

these phenomena as the ‘mode of production of collective action in the field of social provision’.

Public-private interactions from below: focusing on brokers

Several chapters in this book focus not only on structures and institutions, but also on individuals, and more precisely on those middlemen and middlewomen who managed to manoeuvre between careers in public institutions and private organizations.³⁰ As has sometimes been observed,³¹ scholarship on social protection has often failed to take account of these kinds of figures. Firstly, they have often been perceived as being peripheral to both worlds, and as a result they have often occupied only a liminal place, or no place at all, in conventional narratives on welfare. Secondly, and moreover, even when these figures do hold central positions in both public institutions and private organizations, they are usually remembered for only one of these roles. The goal here is not only to produce a new narrative that takes account of the scattered pieces of an individual experience, but rather to demonstrate how their very ability to navigate between the public and the private can engender an expansion of social provision. This book therefore assigns crucial importance to brokers, notably inspired by the rich interdisciplinary scholarship on brokerage.³² In other words, the focus on brokers’ careers allows us to see ‘productive entanglements’ at their smallest, and in a sense primordial, scale.

Overall, the texts in this collection present a varied range of trajectories of people moving from one sphere to the other. Efi Avdela’s chapter on social provision in twentieth-century Greece follows the story of different sorts of ‘public agents... acting in a private capacity, [who] were able to instigate the creation of, participate in or create for themselves voluntary associations’, thereby ‘extend[ing] the field of social protection’. These individuals are therefore examples of public agents who decided also to engage in associational culture, in a way that blurred the border between the two. This strategy turns out to be particularly creative in Greece, especially in moments of greater political instability, upheavals, and military conflicts; Avdela observes that ‘public employees and civil servants acting as private actors together with volunteers’ were so effective that they ended up substituting and ‘performing the state’ in several domains of social action. But the movement between public and private domains does not flow in only one direction. Axelle Brodriez-Dolino, for instance, detects the opposite movement as well, from the private to the public. Analyzing the public-private entanglement in social provision in late twentieth-century France, she remarks that ‘several humanitarian figures have also gone in the opposite direction, holding ministerial offices’, thus further complicating the picture. According to Brodriez-Dolino, the proximity between ‘advocates defending the “cause of the poor” and “elites of the Social State”’ is a permanent feature of the French case, which peaked in the 1980s, such that one could even

³⁰ O. Fillieule, ‘Some Elements of an Interactionist Approach to Political Disengagement’, *Social Movement Studies*, 9,1 (2010), 1-15. On a more theoretical level, see M. Darmon, ‘La Notion de carrière: Un instrument interactionniste d’objectivation’, *Politix*, 82, 2 (2008), 149-67.

³¹ Leimgruber, *op. cit.*, 13.

³² S. Schaffer et al., *The Brokered World. Go-betweens and global intelligence, 1770-1820* (Cambridge, 2009); B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An introduction to actor-network-theory* (Oxford, 2005).

speak of a “revolving door” between public and private welfare’. However, focusing too much on the different possible directions of movement could be misleading. Indeed, the chapters in this book stress the importance of actors being *simultaneously* engaged on both sides of the public-private divide. This is particularly true, for instance, in the chapter by Joëlle Droux. In her case study, brokers are simultaneously active on both sides of the public-private divide, establishing a relatively stable ‘symbiotic relationship’, which, in the context of Francophone Switzerland on which her chapter focuses, was at the very origin of new mechanisms of social protection for illegitimate children. Multipositioning, in both its diachronic and synchronic dimensions, therefore appears to be key in making brokerages possible and in allowing public-private entanglements to be productive.

The chapters in this book testify to a vast array of circumstances in which brokers have met, developed skills and knowledge, and in this way contributed to the transformation of existing schemes of social protection. For example, in her study on interwar Poland, Morgane Labbé draws attention to the ‘creation of joint study commissions’ between the Central Statistical Office and the Institute of Social Economics. In other words, Labbé’s case study stresses how public-private interactions often took place in ad hoc institutional frameworks where people coming from both sides of the divide competed and cooperated. This institutionalized cooperation was, in this case, productive: as well as generating ‘a better measurement of the real living standards of workers’, the commission gave an ‘impetus to the implementation of statistical studies and surveys’. A similar stress on the institutional dimension of the public-private entanglement is found in Auriane Guilbaud’s study: in this case the WHO and the pharmaceutical company Merck, after a period of mutual mistrust, established a set of bodies (including the Secretariat of the Mectizan Donation Program and the Mectizan Expert Committee) which became the forum where the different parties could gather, negotiate, and design a programme against onchocerciasis. Important though they might seem, these formalized, institutionalized loci are not the only ones that deserve to be taken into account. The foundations for public-private entanglements in social protection were built not only in official meetings, plenary sessions, commissions and so on, but also, and sometimes very significantly, in the world of informal interactions. The vast array of practices subsumed under the term ‘associational sociability’³³ appears to be important for building trust and familiarity between different actors. As remarked by Efi Avdela for the Greek case, a ‘growing number of men and also women, of varied professional and social backgrounds... as well as numerous state officials... encountered each other in numerous voluntary associations and in social networking, enhanced by political affinities, social sensitivities and the increasing, even if uneven, institutionalization of social provision’. Voluntary associations thus appear to be a space of encounter for individuals operating on both sides of the public-private divide, and the starting point for the opening of a ‘new common space of collective action’.

Through their focus on a range of different times and places, the chapters in this book present to the reader a rich array of brokers’ careers. Even without mobilizing the Bourdieusian notion of ‘capital’, it appears abundantly clear that circulation across the public-private divide allowed brokers to build different sorts of cultural and relational assets,

³³ M. Agulhon, ‘Introduction’ in *Pénitents et francs-maçons de l’ancienne Provence* (Paris, 1984).

and sometimes even to strengthen their professional position. This is the case, for instance, in Auriane Guilbaud's study, which shows that brokers may be able to navigate between different cultural systems and speak different languages – that is, those of the administration and of voluntary action respectively. The ability of key figures to stand at the crossroad of different regimes of legitimacy is particularly clear in her text: the fact that several key figures from Merck had formerly worked with the World Health Organization played a crucial role in building reciprocal trust between private and public and helped both parties to realize the benefits of collaboration, which were not otherwise self-evident. Yet mobilizing and exchanging different cultural and relational assets does not seem to come without a price. Linda Guerry's chapter in particular shows how gender affected the possibilities for such a 'capital conversion', especially in the case of movement from the private to the public sector of social protection. Focusing on the case of women social workers leading the international movement for the protection of migrant women, this text demonstrates clearly that there is a price – in Bourdieusian terms, a 'conversion rate'³⁴ – for moving from one field to another. Focusing on brokers – a concept that has spread from politics to social sciences, and in particular to science studies – thus leads us to look at the history of welfare from a wider range of disciplinary perspectives, beyond social policy studies, and allows us to look at this history from below.

The eight texts that make up this book are the result of a joint effort to bear witness to the enduring presence of public-private interactions in social protection in a wide range of political formations – the centralized or federal state, nation or empire, municipality, international organizations, and others. They draw conceptual inspiration from critical works on the established historiography of the welfare state, mainly from leading British historians. These attempts to investigate social welfare through the lens of the mixed economy of welfare have proven to be fruitful: the book demonstrates the primordial role of both institutions and individuals in expanding the domain of social protection, and thereby contributes to the enrichment of this theoretical framework. One further goal of this book is to develop this framework for a comparative and transnational approach to social protection, in order to provide the foundation for future studies in global welfare, including the history of non-European worlds and colonial experiences.

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³⁴ P. Bourdieu, 'The forms of capital', in I. Szeman and T. Kaposy (eds), *Cultural Theory: An anthology* (2010).

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