

Introduction



Welfare states everywhere are the targets of controversy. Crippling financial strains and uneven demographic pressures are forcing all industrialized nations to reevaluate the viability of their social welfare provisions. Deep in the throes of a national debate, Americans have dramatically overhauled the legislative edifice comprising the system we have come to know as “welfare.” But nowhere else does “welfare” mean quite the same thing as it does in the United States. Our system targets discrete segments of the national population more than the citizenry at large. Our debate focuses on the legacy of the New Deal and the War on Poverty and is rooted in what has been described as “a collapse of confidence in the public sector.”¹ Dependency on government programs is widely seen as undermining family life and generating a social pathology among poor, young, unwed mothers. Discussions about human nature are frequent, and proposals are framed with the intent of transforming individual behavior. In a nation that takes pride in its tradition of pragmatic consensual politics, the American debate on welfare reform has been unusually probing and ideologically charged.

Whether referring to Europe or the United States, systems of public welfare are clearly much more than a set of regulations defining eligibility and payment schedules. Underlying the social policies of welfare are deep-seated, often unexamined suppositions about the relationship of the individual to society. Welfare has also acquired cultural meanings that extend far beyond the realm of public policy and into the realm of social imagination, where boundary lines of class, race, and gender are frequently drawn. To reexamine welfare is to reexamine our identities as individuals and as nations.

My purpose here is to explore the cultural underpinnings of another system of welfare — the French welfare state — and to suggest that public

policy is the product of multiple historical and cultural factors, many of which are not visible at first glance. Recent scholarship on the rise of welfare demonstrates how helpful an understanding of historical precedent can be in shedding light on today's debates as well as on the limits and possibilities of future policy making.² Each welfare state has its own "personality," and each has developed its own characteristic blend of institutional elements and political compromises. Each welfare state reflects a particular national context and history. But social welfare of any ilk is more than a legislative history of bills passed and amended. To examine a nation's welfare state is also to open wide the history of that nation's value systems — to investigate, for instance, not only the political pressures but also the religious, philosophical, and cultural influences exerted on policy makers.

France presents a curious irony. It is a nation with a proud tradition of ideological sparring, where social debate is often raised to a form of high public drama and where political disputes are easily paraded through the streets or across the pages of newspapers, manifestos, and petitions. Partisan debate on the crisis of the French welfare state, however, has been curiously muted. Granted, *consensus* is a word scarcely uttered with reference to contemporary France. Yet there is one major phenomenon of the twentieth century on which Left and Right appear to have agreed for quite some time: the ultimate goals of the welfare state. Even the massive strikes and demonstrations in defense of the public sector that paralyzed France during the fall and winter of 1995 cannot be understood if analyzed merely according to long-standing political and ideological divisions.³ Specialists and government officials in France may quarrel intensely over how to avert financial disaster, liberals may propose individualized solutions to retirement pensions, but the general public remains overwhelmingly committed to the ideal of a system that guarantees social protection to its citizenry. So thorough is acceptance of the welfare state in France that the system appears as a normal, "obvious," and necessary feature of social life; almost everyone benefits by it; almost everyone accepts it. Mere mention of the absence of a comprehensive welfare system, as in the case of the United States, provokes reflex utterances in France about the American "struggle for life," straight from a Herbert Spencer-like primer on social Darwinism. As an American observer of contem-

porary France, I have found this observation to be both unsettling and intriguing.

My concern in this book has been to query the historical and cultural underpinnings of consensus on the French welfare state. What forces have contributed to this apparent consensus? This question cannot be answered fully through an analysis of traditional French political formations. Although politics is certainly a crucial element of the story, agreement on the goals of the welfare state in France crosses political, class, and gender lines. The basis for such widespread consensus must therefore also be sought in more general cultural and historical factors.

Terminology used to speak of welfare in France embodies this broader cultural and historical bias in a compelling fashion. Even today the French welfare state is still commonly referred to as “l’État-providence” or “the Providential state,” an early-nineteenth-century term suggesting that welfare is rooted in the long intertwined history of church and state in France. The historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle has linked, for instance, the history of French social Catholicism — an essential ingredient of the social welfare compromise in France — to the traditions of the legitimist monarchy. But why today, in a country that adamantly defends its secular and republican values, is the term “État-providence” still culturally meaningful? This question warrants a brief detour through history.

After the French Revolution of 1789, l’État-providence invoked a new representative order of society. The secular state, revolutionaries believed, should replace both the Catholic Church and the monarchy in their traditional roles as protectors of the poor. But during the nineteenth century, liberal republicans initially fought any proposal that portrayed the state in a providential role. They distrusted the centralizing, potentially authoritarian capacities of central government. It has taken more than two hundred years for the French to collectively transfer their expectations of social protection from the king and the church to the secular state. But French citizens today look to l’État-providence as an essential agent of social cohesion.

This book addresses the problem of French social welfare from the perspective of an early “think tank” that emerged in the aftermath of the 1889 Universal Exhibition, held during the year of the French Revolution’s centennial. The Musée social (or “Social Museum”), known to many present-

day researchers as a splendid archive in Paris on French social and labor history, has a rich history of its own: it played a crucial role in the unfolding debate on social welfare reform in France during the early years of the Third Republic (1870–1940).

A precursor to modern policy foundations such as the Brookings Institution or the Russell Sage Foundation, the Musée social assembled a professionally and ideologically diverse group of reformers, beginning in 1894, to study contemporary social and economic problems. It attracted experts in the nascent social sciences, financed research groups and study missions both in France and abroad, and intended to have an impact on social legislation. Thus, the Musée social was often referred to by contemporaries as “the antechamber of the Chamber” since it worked outside of government to effect change. Although they are widely accepted today, mediating institutions such as the Musée social, which gather data, analyze arguments, and “help form the knowledge base for public policy,” were novel inventions in the nineteenth century.⁴ Musée social members saw themselves as embarking on a modern quest since the need for social reform was a consequence of industrial and urban growth. The Musée, therefore, unlike any other institution of its day, offers a penetrating vantage point from which to understand the social, political, religious, and professional networks that undergirded the quest for a renewed social contract in republican France. These networks are at the origin of the rise of the French welfare state.

Traditional histories of the French welfare state often begin in 1945 when the first general ordinance of Social Security became law.⁵ But social welfare reform did not, of course, spring full-blown from the forehead of Zeus in 1945. As the political scientist Douglas Ashford has pointed out, although the institutional and political compromises were not worked out until 1945, the basis for a philosophical and ideological consensus on modern social welfare in France had been mapped out as early as 1910, the year Parliament passed a national pension law.⁶ This book’s primary focus is on this early debate. Although the two World Wars undeniably played catalytic roles in propelling social welfare legislation into existence, their impact does not fall within the scope of this book. Instead, this history of the Musée social assesses the broad implications of the period before the First World War for the social thought and policies that laid the foundation for the rise of the French welfare state. The history of this early

period, moreover, serves to illuminate contemporary debates both in the United States and in France.

The Musée social provides a lens for understanding this crucial process of transformation in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century France. But much as a telescope both affords a new angle of vision and is an instrument of measure, the Musée social opens new vistas on the origins of the welfare state but also gauges and defines that vision. By using the Musée social as the primary lens through which to analyze transformations in French social welfare, I shift the analytical focus of this book away from the formal arena of parliamentary politics and argue that the extraparliamentary debate on social politics at the turn of the century, which often preceded the parliamentary debate, was central to the rise of the French welfare state.

During the late nineteenth century a dense network of extraparliamentary reform groups emerged in France, attracting individuals who were often not directly involved in politics and giving them a strong voice in the ensuing debates on social reform. The sociologist Christian Topalov has labeled this close-knit network of organizations a “reformist nebula” and has, moreover, pinpointed its international dimension.⁷ In this book I study a “parapolitical sphere” that existed in the interstices of government, philanthropy, and industry, midway between the public interests of the state and the private interests of individuals. Ideas generated within this parapolitical sphere helped achieve the transition in France from nineteenth-century concepts of charity, to twentieth-century concepts of social insurance. The historian Sanford Elwitt previously identified “bourgeois parapolitical associations,” including the Musée social, as the “off-stage precincts” of a conservative ruling-class bloc.⁸ I contend, however, that the importance of these groups goes far beyond providing a vehicle for a class-based ideology of social peace or a mouthpiece for industrial and business lobbies. They delve into the heart of French civil society. The reform groups comprising the parapolitical sphere channeled a vital process by which the French reexamined the basis of the Third Republic’s social contract and their collective identity as a nation; it was a debate that involved every level of society.

Within this parapolitical sphere, the Musée social sought to coordinate the efforts of voluntary reform groups focused on “the social question” addressed in chapter 1. The fact that so many reform groups emerged on

the fringe of government in fin de siècle France suggests that the process of defining social politics in the early Third Republic was occurring beyond the traditional purview of the parliamentary hemicycle. Parliament became an echo chamber for debates rooted in civil society. Consequently, our notions of what constituted the boundaries of government must be re-examined if we are to understand the conceptual changes that ultimately gave rise to the French welfare state.

One original aspect of the French system of social welfare is its “hybrid” nature, which sought from the outset to integrate private initiative and the public sector. The history of the Musée social helps to shed light on the means by which civil society exerted pressure on the political process to negotiate a solution to the social question in France—a solution that bears the marks of this early period, that is complex and curiously “non-statist” in a country where state centralization has such a long tradition. To focus on the Musée social, a group formed in this parapolitical sphere on the margins of traditional government, is to focus on the tension between the central state and civil society that is such a characteristic feature of French politics, history, and culture. This tension is palpable, too, in the formation of the French welfare state. Central government’s role in providing social services in France has been mitigated, both historically and presently, by mutual aid societies, cooperative associations, private contractual arrangements, and elected social security boards. A main theme of this book is therefore to analyze how the members of the Musée social understood the role of central government in social policy. The rise of the particular model of French social welfare was shaped by this tension between a strong Jacobin state and the liberal republican desire to achieve national unity and identity, but not at the expense of regional, local, or private interests. Because of its status on the periphery of government, the Musée social offers a unique vista on this process of state building.

Recently, general historiographic debates have centered around the causal role of culture, language, and identity in the processes of historical change.⁹ In light of these debates, it is also necessary to reframe the problem of the emergence of the French welfare state within the larger context of discursive practices and the struggle for representational hegemony in fin de siècle political life. Such questions are important to this study of the Musée social. Reformers who engaged in debate on the social question during the final decades of the nineteenth century did so with a height-

ened awareness of the power of public discourse. Throughout the period under study, they carefully used rhetorical conventions, cultural symbols, and political traditions to promote their agendas for reform. They operated within the highly charged political arena of a still-vulnerable republic and manipulated discerningly both new and old media forms to further their ends: journals, newspapers, public meetings, posters, slide shows—and later, even the cinema—were used to promote causes such as public hygiene. Musée social reformers considered the public reception of reform ideas to be crucial to their implementation. Therefore, the deliberate shaping of public opinion was never absent from their strategies and rhetorics of reform. These republican reformers were consciously engaged in the formation of a new public discourse on the role of the individual in modern industrial society.

The contours of this new public discourse were also a gendered construction. Because of the exclusion of French women from the body politic of the Third Republic, women who wished to engage in reform politics were forced to do so from within a highly circumscribed sphere of action. The limits of this public sphere of activity were determined as much by the traditions of a male-dominated republican political culture as they were by the rules of citizenship and parliamentary democracy in the Third Republic. As a result, although gender constituted a primary structuring vector of reform discourse, women were denied membership in the Musée social until 1916.¹⁰ The absence of women from the Musée only highlights how male reformers shaped social policy from within the guarded preserve of their gender-exclusive political culture.

Historiography on the French welfare state is now vast.¹¹ Mirroring the now-discarded interpretation of French industrial growth as “slow,” the generally accepted view on the Third Republic’s prewar record on social reform has been that it was “backward”: paltry, halting, and failure-ridden; as stodgy and “mired in . . . routine” as the bourgeois Republic itself.¹² The implied standard here, as one might imagine, was Bismarckian Germany with its pioneer status in social welfare.¹³ When France did enact legislation, the impetus has thus been attributed to underlying nationalist and imperialist impulses to compete with Germany. In this light, national anxiety in fin de siècle France over the country’s perceived low birthrate was channeled into a concern with public health, maternity, and sanitation.¹⁴

The primary interpretation of French welfare reform, however, has been built around the notion of social defense, whereby reform was enacted in a defensive compromise between big business and ruling elites to preserve social order. The only existing scholarship on the Musée social, that by Sanford Elwitt, falls within this latter category.¹⁵ Although Elwitt's *Third Republic Defended* pinpoints the importance of the parapolitical sphere, his restrictive analytical framework does not explain the collaborative effort of economic elites and the rising professional middle classes to achieve reform, nor does it account for some of the broader implications of this period for public policy in the areas of health, welfare, or housing reform.

Another view, expressed by Judith Stone in *The Search for Social Peace*, widens the interpretive framework of social reform to include coalition building within traditional party formations. This careful reading of legislative debates on factory reform and old-age pensions highlights the role of Radical leaders, often inspired by republican values, as the essential agents in the formation of social policy. It elucidates the mechanics and blockages inherent in parliamentary alliances and offers important insights into why social legislation of the French Third Republic seemed to progress, in the words of Gordon Wright, "at the speed of glacial action"; however, it does not encompass the wider extraparliamentary debate.¹⁶

Alternatively, reform has been investigated as a technique of industrial management. Such studies emphasize the existence of paternalist practices in industry. They offer a detailed understanding of how reform policies were implemented to achieve specific short-term management goals and how employers and workers reacted to interventionist legislation.¹⁷ Although essential to an assessment of the impact of social reform policy and discourse on the industrial world, such studies do not generally attempt to link industrial reform with public policy. Recent studies have stressed the primacy of scientific innovations and gender biases that had an impact on policy in the areas of public health, child welfare, women's and children's industrial employment, and maternalist policies.¹⁸

Each of the above interpretations has helped bring the rise of the French welfare state into sharper focus. Yet there is a need to diversify the equation and include the dimension of public debate on welfare. The Musée social provides a focal point for this broader approach to understanding the evolution of French social thought and policy. During the

final two decades of the nineteenth century, the push for social reform in France quickly moved beyond the world of industrial enterprise and big business to address larger societal concerns. 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. The results of this broad-based interrogation that reached beyond the social limits of the industrial bourgeoisie and the political limits of the Radical Party were new attitudes toward the law, the role of the working class in the Republic, and the legitimate sphere of government in relation to society.

These changes constitute the legacy of this period, and their practical effects have had sweeping implications for the twentieth century in the areas of public health, urban reform, education, and social welfare. Moreover, these debates called into question the reigning “liberal order of 1900” and led to transformations in liberal thought that were crucial to the establishment of a welfare compromise in France.¹⁹ Whereas a renovation in liberal thought was occurring elsewhere — in England with the New Liberals and the Fabian socialists, and in the United States with the Progressives — no specific term was ever used to describe the similar movement of ideas that evolved in France.²⁰ I will therefore employ the term *social liberalism* to refer to the 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.

This late-nineteenth-century transformation of French liberal thought was not without precedent, however. To an important degree, the liberal economic and social order ushered in by the Revolution of 1789 had never been fully accepted in France. Some contemporaries rejected the new social and economic order because of the sheer violence of the Revolution, which made them loathe to consider postrevolutionary France as an improvement over the *ancien régime*. Strong attachments to corporatist language and practices persisted in the workplace long after they were supposedly abolished.²¹ Catholic social thought also dictated against the full acceptance of a liberal order wherein the individual theoretically severed ties with the organic community of family, parish, and state. Instead, social Catholics, too, strove to make sense of the industrial world of the nineteenth century by relying on older corporatist imagery and structures. The

social Catholic tradition thus stood in stark contrast to the basic tenets of liberal thought: it exerted considerable influence on the evolution of a social liberalism in France and on the development of social welfare policy well into the twentieth century.

Part one of this book is devoted to an analysis of the rhetorics of social reform in nineteenth-century France. I employ the term *rhetoric* in its most general sense to refer to that dimension of language which is engaged in the art of persuasion. As an analytical device, the mapping out of rhetorics of reform serves to highlight the underlying social conflicts and political tensions that they both reflected and sometimes helped engender. From the rhetorical devices used in the debate on social reform, patterns emerge that traverse the century—some of which have endured even to the present day—and suggest that public argument obeys a more unified set of parameters than is often supposed. The nineteenth-century reformers cited here all commented on the “social” state of France and were increasingly aware of participating in a form of public argument. As such, their statements and writings were carefully crafted and relied on “common devices of rhetoric: metaphors, invocations of authority, and appeals to audiences,” themselves often “creatures of rhetoric.”²² Chapter 1 examines the debate in France on “the social question” and the specific conditions that gave rise to a reformist discourse during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century that caused a break with the liberal tradition. This discussion is based, in part, on the unique pattern of French industrialization and the changes in traditional social and political arrangements brought about by the French Revolution. Chapter 2 analyzes the Third Republic’s first “official” position on the social question, as portrayed at the 1889 Universal Exhibition, and incorporates the problematics of rhetoric and representation into a more traditional approach to social history. It also traces the steps leading to the foundation of the Musée social in the aftermath of the 1889 Exhibition and suggests that the parapolitical sphere was essential to the elaboration of a new language of social reform in the Third Republic.

The second part of this book focuses on the Musée social itself: the institution and the men who comprised it. Chapter 3 details the Musée social membership based on an initial sample of five hundred reformers. What social characteristics did reformers share? Did they make professionally motivated decisions during their involvement with reform efforts? And

to what extent were their opinions influenced by religious and political culture? Chapter 4 describes the mechanics of the Musée social's operation and addresses a general problem posed by any institutional history: how can the historian account for the multiple human interactions that occurred within the walls of an institution designed for one purpose but perhaps put to another? This chapter attempts to trace the various social meanings ascribed to the Musée social during its first five years of existence.

Part three of this book examines two case studies of the Musée social's reform activities. Chapter 5 analyzes the Musée's involvement with the French mutualist movement from the end of the nineteenth century until the passage of the 1910 national pension law. The role of mutualism is presented as illustrative of the tensions between state centralization and the liberal republican value of self-help, and of how those tensions influenced the development of social policy in France. Finally, chapter 6 focuses on the shift that occurred among Musée social reformers from a late-nineteenth-century concern for workers' housing to an early-twentieth-century preoccupation with public hygiene, urban planning, and conservationism.

Although the period prior to World War I in France is often portrayed as one of relative stagnation in the realm of social welfare, a closer look reveals that this era was, in fact, one of initial transformation to a more interventionist conception of the state: from private philanthropy to public assistance combined with the action of voluntary associations, and from the benevolent activities of social-minded bourgeois reformers to the acceptance of social rights guaranteed by social law. This history of the Musée social, therefore, brings into focus the people, the ideas, and the organizations that helped move France through a crucial period of transition and that laid the foundations for the rise of the modern French welfare state.

