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Review Essay: Welfare States Without Borders

H. Obinger, K. Petersen, and P. Starke (eds), *Warfare and Welfare: Military Conflict and Welfare State Development in Western Countries*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

T. Fitzpatrick, *A Green History of the Welfare State*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2017.

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The phrase «war socialism» entered popular discourse in Britain during the First World War.[1] «War socialism» initially had a mixed meaning. It made clear the hypocrisy of politicians who had claimed before 1914 that it was either impossible or undesirable to spend more on the welfare of the British people but had no such problems with the extraordinary levels of taxation and spending that were required for a conflict that had seen the state pile up debts in excess of £8,000 million. At the same time, though, the phrase was also something of an endorsement. The war had seen the creation of new ministries, laws, and economic strategies. It seemed that all kinds of things could be done, if the state decided that it wanted to do them. Indeed, the irony of the situation was not lost on many of the politicians themselves. According to Winston Churchill, then a Liberal MP who had served as First Lord of the Admiralty, Minister of Munitions, and briefly on the Western Front itself, the Great War was probably «the greatest argument for State Socialism ever produced».[2]

«Socialism» was used in these discussions less as a reference to any particular political ideology or doctrine and more as a loose term to describe a range of approaches to the economy that departed from classical free trade, which had dominated British politics during the mid-nineteenth century. The abolition of tariffs, in particular the Corn Laws in

[1] See, for example, *War Socialism*, *The Manchester* Guardian, 19th March 1915, p. 6.
[2] "Mr. Churchill & State Socialism", *Manchester Guardian*, 24th January 1919, p. 8.

1846, had been the most prominent symbol of the free trade philosophy. But, in reality, tariffs were just one target for reformers who aimed to construct a modern liberal state. For example, the Poor Laws, which provided for the destitute and dated back to the medieval era but had been codified at the start of the seventeenth century, were overhauled during the 1830s by thinkers inspired by the likes of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Jeremy Bentham. Controversial as these reforms were, especially with industrialisation and urbanisation generating problems of a type and on a scale that had not been envisaged, they were not the British state's only welfare interventions during the nineteenth century. There was also legislation limiting working hours, permitting the demolition of poor-quality housing, and encouraging the construction of sanitary infrastructure, alongside many other better-known developments, such as the expansion of the school system. Indeed, by the start of the First World War, Britain, like a number of other European nations, most notably Germany, had established a social insurance system, funded by individuals, their employers, and the state, which offered millions of people limited protections against unemployment and injury at work, as well as the right to see a government-approved doctor, in addition to a non-contributory but means-tested old age pension that had been had been introduced three years earlier.

«War socialism» was therefore an argument about the extent, rather than the principle, of public spending on welfare in Britain. For this reason, the phrase is a helpful starting point for questions about the history of welfare states, in Britain and elsewhere. Some of these questions are broad and sweeping. Why, for instance, do we have welfare states at all? Others are more specific but no less important. Did welfare states develop when they did because governments had the technical capacity to actually build them or were there other reasons? In between the general and the specific, though, are a range of questions about what drives the growth of welfare states and shapes their identities. In this respect, we are brought to ask whether the histories of welfare states are highly specific, with each country having its own individual story to tell, or if there are transnational issues that play similar roles everywhere?

II

A key theme in the writing about the history of the welfare state in Britain is sacrifice. According to many accounts, free healthcare, subsidised housing, and a comprehensive social security system – all features of the British welfare state's «golden age» during the third quarter of the twentieth century – were earned by a population that had made huge sacrifices in two world wars during the first half of the twentieth century. In popular culture, as well as strands of the scholarly literature, this view has often resulted in a kind of socialist nostalgia for the achievements of Clement Attlee's post-war Labour administration, with the years immediately after 1945 heralded as a drive to build a «New Jerusalem».[3] Accounts of this kind frequently have a deeply moral tone, with the welfare state explained as a kind of reward or fair return on the effort that people – at home and abroad – had put in to securing victory over Germany and Japan.

Yet despite serving a particular purpose in histories of this kind, the link between war and the development of the welfare state in Britain is actually a general feature of the historiography on the topic. The association was made in 1950, for instance, by the social policy scholar Richard Titmuss, sometimes referred to as «the high priest of the welfare state», in his book *Problems of Social* Policy, the first account of the development of Britain's post-war social services.[4] While he certainly acknowledged the importance of people's sacrifices, Titmuss also drew attention to the way war had created infrastructure, such as the Emergency Medical Service, as well as shared experiences, such as evacuation from cities to the countryside, which he suggested were the foundations of the infrastructure built after 1945. War government and the war economy were not only a catalyst for a greater sense of collectivism that was characteristic of social reconstruction, he argued; it also expanded the role of the state in ways that made the post-war social services possible.

Titmuss was hugely influential in setting the tone for thinking about how the Second World War turned the collection of social services Britain had developed over almost 150 years into the more coherent thing we have come to call *the* welfare state. Almost every scholarly history of the topic (including, it must be admitted, my own) acknowledges that the effort to secure victory over Germany and Japan is an indispensable part of explaining

[3] For an example of this framing of events in the popular sphere see Ken Loach's 2013 film «The Spirit of 45».
[4] Richard M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, London, HMSO and Longmans, Green & Co., 1950.

why Britain ended up with the welfare state it did after 1945.[5] In so doing, though, historians have explored how other conflicts have played a role in the longer history of Britain's social services. One obvious point of discussion has been the aftermath of the First World War, when politicians such as David Lloyd George promised «homes fit for heroes», which largely failed to materialise.[6] But a range of other wars and military interventions are also frequently judged significant. The second Boer War, at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, is seen as important because Britain's failings, allied with an outcry over the physical condition of men who tried to enlist in the army, were the trigger for a raft of public health legislation during the first decade of the 1900s.[7]

The connection between war and welfare in the historiography is therefore deep and wide ranging, incorporating topics from the emergence of full employment as a legitimate and achievable aim for governments to the distribution of different types of healthcare professionals around the country. However, according to Herbert Obinger, Klaus Peterson, and Peter Starke, editors of *Warfare and Welfare: Military Conflict and Welfare State Development in Western Countries*, the causal relationship between warfare and welfare state development is not as well documented or discussed in national contexts beyond Britain.

While Obinger, Peterson, and Starke's claim to be occupying such uncharted territory is likely to be news to a number of scholars, such as James Sparrow and Jennifer Mittelstadt, who have published work on the development of welfare policy in twentieth-

[5] Chris Renwick, *Bread for All: The Origins of the Welfare State,* London, Allen Lane, 2017. For examples of works that emphasise the role of war in shaping social reconstruction after 1945 see, for example, Arthur Marwick (ed.), *Total War and Social Change,* Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1988, and Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War,* London, Jonathan Cape, 1975. See also Nicholas Timmins, *The Five Giants: A Biography of the Welfare State*, London, Harper Collins, 2001.

[6] Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British People,* 2nd edition, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003*;* David Vincent, *Poor Citizens: The State and the Poor in Twentieth-Century Britain,* London, Longman, 1991; Ross McKibbin*, Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998; Michael Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England*, London, Faber, 1987; Mark Swenarton, *Homes Fit for Heroes: The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain*, London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1981; Anne Digby, *Medicine and the English State, 1901-1948,* in S. J. D. Green and R. C. Whiting eds, *The Boundaries of the State in Modern Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[7] R. A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1990; Bentley B. Gilbert, *Health and Politics: The British Physical Deterioration Report of 1904,* «The Bulletin of the History of Medicine» 1965, 39; G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971.

century America, the general thrust of their argument raises a number of questions.[8] The most important, of course, is whether the British case really is exceptional or if the history of welfare states in other countries includes the same kind of role for war. If such similarities are found, can we make a broader claim about the relationship between warfare and welfare?

The answer for Obinger, Peterson, and Starke, who use studies of welfare state development during the past two centuries in 13 different countries, including Germany, Japan, Australia, and Britain, is that there is a definite and general relationship between war and welfare. They argue that this relationship covers both what they refer to as the «demand side» of welfare state history (calls from citizens for greater social protections) and its «supply side» (the capacity of states to actually provide those protections). Indeed, they claim that variations between welfare states, not only the time at which they developed but also the extent of support they offer to citizens, are frequently attributable to different countries' experiences of war; for example, whether war decimated domestic infrastructure, resulted in large-scale casualties, or caused a realignment of party politics. This analysis is supported not only by bringing together the conclusions of each of their contributors but also by their own separate aggregate quantitative analysis, which indicates strongly that spending on the First World War had a long tail, impacting on welfare spending through to the 1960s, with some trends seeming to hold for the Cold War too.

In this respect, *Warfare and Welfare: Military Conflict and Welfare State Development in Western Countries* is a cross-national comparative analysis—one featuring both historians and political scientists. To a certain extent, then, historians' evaluations of Obinger, Peterson, and Starke's conclusions will depend on attitudes towards that approach and, in particular, the high-altitude conclusions, which some historians will believe are too distant from detail on the ground. Nevertheless, even a sceptic of the comparative method that has been taken will find much to learn from essays on welfare in such a wide range of contexts. Israel, for example, is a country that is seldom, if ever, covered in histories of welfare states. With a fairly unique – not to say controversial – experience of warfare during

[8] James Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011; Jennifer Mittelstadt, *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015;

the second half of the twentieth century, it provides an interesting case study in which to test some of the editors' claims.

Positing a strong link between warfare and welfare also inevitably makes nations and the nation state an important part of the histories in question, which in turn underscores the importance of thinking about welfare states as having deep histories that go back much further than the Second World War. In this respect, it is worth turning to recent scholarship by David Edgerton, who contributed the chapter on Britain to *Warfare and Welfare*.[9] As Edgerton argues in *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, the 30 years after 1945 were considered a golden era in Britain – one that now elicits a huge amount of nostalgia – not because the state was technically capable of delivering things it could not before (though that certainly is part of the story) but as a consequence of a new kind of political, social, and cultural identity, which emerged as the country came to conceive of itself as less a global free trading entity and more a self-contained, distinct, and frequently inwards looking unit.[10] In this environment, people established strong connections with nationalised industries and other emblems of state activity, which, in turn, helped generate a new national identity.

Edgerton's argument is important to the history of the welfare state, including the arguments advanced by Obinger, Peterson, and Starke, for a number of reasons. For the most part, welfare states in the West have been predicated on social insurance schemes, conceived as operating within broadly capitalist – frequently variations on social democratic – societies. Individuals have paid into these schemes in order to receive payments triggered by specific events, such as injury at work, unemployment, or old age. Entitlement to welfare was a sign of many things, including an individual being embedded in a part of capitalism – for example, dangerous industries such as mining – that was highly likely to fail them regularly. By the second half of the twentieth century, the British welfare state was part of this new national identity, with the social compact allowing citizens to buy into the protections of post-war managed capitalism. Entitlement to welfare was a sign of belonging. Welfare states, if the British case also tells us something about their development

[9] David Edgerton, *War and the Development of the British Welfare State*, in H. Obinger, K. Petersen, and P. Starke (eds), *Warfare and Welfare: Military Conflict and Welfare State Development in Western Countries*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018

[10] David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation,* London, Allen Lane, 2018.

elsewhere, are therefore part of broader histories of nations and nationalism, with inclusion and exclusion at their heart – something one could deduce from the way immigrants' access to social services has been a prominent topic of populist politics in the West during the past three decades.

III

Although histories of welfare states have been written largely as national stories, with a focus on internal logics and developments, the further one digs below received histories of their origins and development, the clearer it is that welfare states are entangled with issues that go far beyond national borders. Industrialisation and the emergence of the trade cycle during the nineteenth century, which were central motivations for the creation of the first social insurance systems, are obvious and self-evident examples of developments that saw nations bound together in bigger units. The instability of domestic politics, within an international order where radical and revolutionary ideologies circulated freely, were another reason European states paid more attention to their citizens' welfare. Moreover, empire was a key reason for governments finding themselves interested in the condition of the populations they ruled. Yet it is not always obvious how to relate the welfare state to a number of the historiographical developments of the past 40 years and the concerns that have underpinned them.

Environmental history, which is focused on understanding how humans and nature have impacted on each other and takes the environment to be an agent of historical change, is an example of just such a historiographic development. As Andrew Seaton has argued recently, environmental history – qua a meta-narrative or way of doing history – has had a patchy impact across the discipline, despite having been first established during the 1970s and «the anthropocene» having become a strongly emergent object of interdisciplinary interest in recent years.[11] In the case of British history, for example, while the early modern period and studies of the country's engagement with its colonial

[11] Andrew Seaton, *Environmental History and New Directions in Modern British History*, «Twentieth Century British History» 2019, 30.

territories are relatively well served by scholars using an environmental perspective, the twentieth century has not been subject to anything like the same kind of level of scrutiny.[12]

Does environmental history matter for histories of welfare states, which, both chronologically and thematically, intersect with fields that have been subject to the environmental gaze? One scholar who argues that it does is the social scientist Tony Fitzpatrick, whose thought-provoking but at times frustrating book, *A Green History of the Welfare State*, is an effort to chart the relationship between environmental and social policy in Britain and, in the process, suggest ways an environmental perspective might change our thinking on the subject.

Fitzpatrick's starting point is the argument that classical welfare states – those that were created immediately after the Second World War and maintained until around the late 1970s – were defined by a particular relationship between human society and the environment. Classical welfare states were premised on the idea that economies could be managed, with full employment keeping enough of the population away from the benefits system and paying tax to make the system functional. This approach, Fitzpatrick argues, elevated a specific way of thinking about and governing society – one where ideas such as GDP and economic growth were fairly suddenly at the forefront of politicians' minds and a common economic strategy, which included nationalisation of key industries, was adopted as the means of delivering it.

According to Fitzpatrick, we have largely taken these issues for granted. To be sure, we are used to thinking about post-Second World War developments from an economic perspective. Nevertheless, we have not interrogated their environmental dimensions properly, especially when it comes to the question of whether socioeconomic relationships like those contained within the welfare state were made possible by or dependent on

[12] On British empire and environmental history see, for example, Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995 and William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007. As Seaton explains, environmental history is strongest in the USA, where it was first established during the 1970s in the context of a national debate about pollution. Some of the best-known and most influential early US works of environmental history include Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985 and Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

specific types of relationship with the environment. Natural resources – coal, in particular – were absolutely central to the economies that were intended to deliver full employment, continual growth, and the material needs of Western populations during the third quarter of the twentieth century. Classical welfare states were therefore the counterparts of coal economies: humans considered themselves separate to nature, treating nature as an unlimited resource to be extracted whenever, and in the quantities, they deemed necessary to feed the economic machines they had created.

These descriptions of both the post-Second World War economic model and their relationship to the classical welfare state are clearly intended to be pejorative, with things such as the polluting aspects of industry given equal attention to their perceived economic benefits. But, as Fitzpatrick points out, while this perspective involves a reasonable amount of retrospective re-categorisation, the environment – including the negative impacts that human activity had on it – was not entirely absent from political thinking in Britain at the time. For instance, the smog that engulfed almost 700 square miles of Greater London in December 1952, which brought the city to a standstill and led to more than 4,000 deaths, not to mention tens of thousands more casualties, was a direct consequence of burning coal and pumping smoke into the atmosphere. The government was forced to admit what it already knew (and, indeed, had acted on in other spheres since the early nineteenth century): economic activity eroded the environment in ways that not only impacted on day-to-day life but also health, one aspect of welfare to which they were notionally committed strongly. Their answer was greater regulation, including the Clean Air Act 1956, which indicated that a problem had to be solved, even if departing from the economic models that were their root cause was a long way off.[13]

Regulation is, of course, an important, though often marginalised, part of the history the British welfare state, with the nineteenth century seeing a raft of legislation outlawing practices such as child labour and putting limits on the number of hours in a working week. The question, however, is whether the relationship between the environment and social policy goes any further than this? If it does not, the extent to which an environmental perspective can change our understanding of the history of the welfare state would seem to

[13] On these topics, see Christine L. Corton, *London Fog: The Biography,* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015 – one of the books reviewed by Seaton in *Environmental History and New Directions in Modern British History*, «Twentieth Century British History» 2019, 30.

be limited. Yet if the answer is that there is more to the relationship than regulation, then there would seem to be a prima facie case for revisiting the way we write that history. Perhaps predictably, the answers to these questions are complex and at the root of what makes Fitzpatrick's book so frustrating.

To see why these questions are so complex, it is important to draw a distinction between «environments», on the one hand, and «the environment», on the other. Mitigating the impact of different environments on individuals has been at the heart of welfare state activity for more than a century and a half. In Britain, for instance, following on from the Sanitary Movement, led by the likes of former Poor Law reformer Edwin Chadwick, and slum clearances of the late nineteenth century, house building was a major site of state activity, which included the creation of entirely new towns, precisely because environments were seen not only as central to life outcomes but also things that could be improved.[14] «The environment», however, is a much more recent concept, one associated with the rise of «green politics» and environmental history itself during the 1970s. With the status of individual human actors diminished and the role of the material world elevated, «the environment» is intended to provide a different means of assembling agents of historical change and therefore of viewing history itself, albeit in a way that owes debts to Marxism and Actor Network Theory, among other schools of thought.[15]

Following on from events that led to the Clean Air Acts, Britain took action on environmental concerns such as marine pollution, greenhouse gases, the hole in the ozone layer, and acid rain from the early 1970s onwards. In many ways, these actions seem continuous with the tradition of improving environments, dating back to at least the Sanitary Movement. However, the reason Britain had taken steps to tackle these problems was instructions from institutions outside its borders: notably the European Community (now European Union). In this respect, historical events were entangled with an emerging awareness of «the environment», understood as a different category to the environments that had been the objects of past activity. «The environment» was – and is – a transnational issue requiring collective, global solutions, as shown by the rise of Ecology as discipline, the

[14] For more on the strong environmental strain in early British welfare thinking see Dorothy Porter, *"Enemies of the Race": Biologism, Environmentalism*, and Public Health in Edwardian Britain, «Victorian Studies» Victorian Studies.
[15] See Seaton for more on these debts and resemblances.

creation of organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, and the emergence of climate change as an issue that bodies such as the United Nations recognised as needing agreement.[16]

How might the collective and global be reconciled with the national and contained, which is so closely associated with the welfare state? Fitzpatrick tries to do this through two approaches. One involves pointing out the commonalities between reforms of the welfare state since the early 1980s and environmental policies during the same period. These are essentially similar, he argues, because they are neoliberal in character, with initiatives such as the internal market in the National Health Service and cap and trade policies in emissions reflecting the drive to embed markets and competition in corners of society that had hitherto not experienced them. In essence, though, this aspect of the relationship between the state, the welfare state, and the environment, is similar to an earlier era's approach to the problems generated by industrial capitalism; that is to say, this is really a description of a neoliberal, rather than liberal, form of regulation.

Fitzpatrick's second approach, however, is to explore the environment's role as a source of problems that the welfare state has to tackle. This is potentially a much more significant move from the perspective of historical and contemporary political analysis. It should allow us to think more deeply about the connections between the environment, the economy, our way of living, and the welfare state – in particular, the tricky multi-dimensional issues that social policy has increasingly confronted since the Second World War. Fitzpatrick has a small set of examples to illustrate what he means in this respect. One is the pollution produced in urban areas by motor vehicles, which reflects decades of policy decisions, as well as cultural preferences for individualised, rather than collective, modes of transport, which have been encouraged and reinforced by those policies. This pollution results in respiratory difficulties, among other problems, which have to be treated by the NHS and are therefore a cost to be met by the welfare state. Fitzpatrick's problem, though, is that these examples are few and far between, in part because the 'ecosocial' politics his analysis is intended to serve does not, by his own admission, exist yet. As a consequence, a purported environmental history is less about both the environment and, in reality, welfare

[16] For more on the history of environmentalism in a global context during this period see Marco Armiero and Lise Sedrez (eds), *A History of Environmentalism: Local Struggles, Global Histories,* London, Bloomsbury, 2014.

and more about the kind of familiar critique of neoliberalism that has been commonplace since the turn of the century.[17]

IV

There is a tendency in writing about the history of welfare states – particularly in Britain but no doubt elsewhere – to take the 30 years after the Second World War, the «golden age», as the main point of reference. This is as true for those who write teleological histories of the welfare state, in which the arrangements of the third quarter of the twentieth century are the natural and logical end point of incremental but unnecessarily painful progress during the previous five decades, as those who see the past 40 years as a neoliberal project to dismantle it. The vast majority of arguments about how and why the welfare states of the late twentieth century came to be are, of course, complex, bringing together a range of factors, incorporating explanations that feature structural, contingent, national and local issues. Yet there does seem to be a problem when it comes to relating those histories to bigger and transnational things such as war and the environment. Why?

Part of the explanation is surely that, at times, these transnational issues can seem to be everywhere and nowhere. War, like empire, is something that can be so all-encompassing that it can explain everything while seeming to account for little in a satisfactory way for those who are not already committed to its explanatory power. This is a problem because it means historians can find reasons to marginalise issues that are clearly of the utmost importance to the development of institutions such as the welfare state. Indeed, this is not a problem for just the welfare state, as the struggles of historians of the British empire have shown.

Another reason, however, is that the welfare state itself is a slippery concept. For some scholars, it has a fairly narrow meaning that requires us to look at relatively small range of services, most obviously the cash benefits that governments pay to the unemployed. For many others, though, the welfare state is a much broader idea, covering

[17] See, inter alia: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty, and the Logic of Competition*, London, Sage, 2015; Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, London, Verso, 2013.

not only a fairly obvious set of services – benefits, pensions, education, and healthcare among them – but also the accompanying strategies for governing society that were built around ideas such as full employment. In this respect, histories of the welfare state have always seemed most coherent when contained by clear boundaries. The challenge for future historiography is clearly, therefore, to imagine what histories of welfare states look like without them.