Could a Different Approach to the History of European Welfare Lead us to Tell a Different History of Europe? A Tale of Cross-national Collaborations

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For me, the questions of why Europe, which Europe, and how contemporary historians might do European history differently are profoundly imbricated. This is so for one simple reason: I work on the history of social Europe (as opposed to the study of European welfare states), and this demands writing histories that are at once social and political, cultural and institutional. So how and why is this so, you may ask?

Welfare and democracy: A very European story?

Over the past fifty years or so, Europe (i.e., the CEE/European Union) has told a very revealing story about itself. It is revealing not for what it professes to reveal – that here in
Europe, welfare and democracy go hand in hand (as opposed to the USA or China) – but for that which it obscures, namely, the very long history of welfare and social care in those regions and nations that lie on the European continent and which, taken together, form the deep history of present-day welfare states. As even the most cursory glance at this deeper history shows us, the question of who would provide social services to whom and on what terms has long been a subject of sharp and many-sided political/ideological contest across the many territories that have composed modern and contemporary Europe.

In the context of this longer history, it must be stressed that the links that were consciously forged between social welfare and democracy in mid-twentieth century Europe were almost entirely without precedent. Hence, over the period 1800-1945, Europe boasted no large-scale welfare schemes beyond those proposed by paternalist employers running company towns, or by Otto von Bismarck, who, in alliance with large employers in heavy industry, used social welfare policies to calm late 19th century Germany's restive socialist parties and trade unions. There were also the networks of hospitals and orphanages run by the Catholic Church and its charitable orders (notably Saint-Vincent-de-Paul), all of which operated in alliance with the wealthy bourgeois patrons who supported their work.

Given who its main authors were, and the ends to which such assistance was wielded, the term ‘welfare’ understandably left a bitter taste in the mouths of fin-de-siècle Europe’s main democratic forces, namely, those socialist and anarchist movements which, for their part, designed smaller-scale forms of collective security and social protection in the form of working-class cooperatives, labor exchanges and socialist ‘cradle-to-grave’ municipalism.

Yet social democratic structures of mutual aid, though important, were but a drop in the bucket next to the large-scale state and employer strategies that used welfare as a tool of social pacification/discipline. As we know, such strategies flourished in pre- and post-WWI Europe. Indeed, those states and employers who deployed them created veritable hothouses for the development of novel institutions of social pacification/discipline, among them family allowances, which would enjoy a long after-life in Europe's post-1945 welfare states.

Far from being the simple fruit of prewar Europe's social-democratic movements and the social policies and structures that they had created, the welfare states that emerged in postwar Europe were, in fact, a palimpsest of previous employer and state initiatives, with an admixture of those smaller, but very popular structures drawn from the (left) social Catholic and socialist/anarchist/communist playbooks: colonies de vacances,
neighborhood centres sociaux (settlement houses à la française), cooperatives, neighborhood clinics and dispensaries, mutual aid societies and the like.

The backbone of Europe’s postwar welfare systems were, nonetheless, the large national social insurance systems. Heir to the large-scale state and employer schemes of the prewar world, these latter were systematised and expanded after 1945 so as to cover most native-born or naturalised adult male workers – and, in some countries (France, the socialist republics of eastern and south-eastern Europe), some adult women workers as well – plus their dependents. Far from reflecting the longer history of Europe’s left-leaning, social-democratic minority – and thus enshrining Europe’s allegedly ‘eternal’ pact between welfare and democracy – the welfare states that emerged after 1945 were the far more complex outcomes of many-sided political struggles, negotiations and choices, all of which were made in the shadow of WWII. As the rise of right-wing and populist welfare chauvinism in present-day France, Italy, Poland, Hungary and elsewhere testify, the connections between welfare and politics (especially democratic politics) can be, and are being re-thought, with dramatic consequences for the rights of individuals.

Western Europe’s aspirational but increasingly beleaguered foundation-myth, which proclaims that in Europe, welfare and democracy have long marched forward, hand in hand, though hardly credible as history, carries a further, important implication, namely, that the EU’s vision of an ever-more social Europe is in fact no more than the mere realisation of what has long been an immanent ‘truth’ about Europe.

Now historians have, by and large and until quite recently shown scant interest in the study of welfare systems and welfare states, and so left their analysis to colleagues in the adjacent social sciences, notably political science and sociology. As these disciplines privilege synchronic analysis, so as order to show how a system, when held in place, actually functions, this has, not surprisingly, produced a highly teleological vision of the birth and evolution of welfare states; one that begins with the post-1945 outcome and then works its way backward in order to discover what produced that result. As a consequence, European welfare ‘history’ is more often a compilation of very shallow national histories that begin during the 1940s (William Beveridge’s famous Social Insurance and Allied Services report of 1942 is always a popular starting place). These are often juxtaposed to create regional welfare ‘families’ – Nordic, Mediterranean, etc. – which are then sometimes compared with one another.

European welfare ‘history’ is therefore badly in need of a less teleological way of conceiving the analysis. Here is where history, (and the historians who write it) may enter in. For a
A properly historical approach requires turning the lens around and focusing not on the state-level outcomes of long historical processes but rather on the history of Europe's many and diverse traditions of social protection and social care, approached from the bottom up. Starting from those local contexts where such protections are first created and enacted may well, moreover, offer one basis on which to write European history in a new and different register.

Writing European history in this new register will require deploying the jeu d’échelles in such a way as to privilege the local, regional and transnational levels, which is where this longer, deeper and richer history of building social welfare has taken place. This must be done without sidelining the national level but rather relativising it as one level among many, particularly when it comes to creating forms and institutions of social care. Such a history must also refuse to obscure the local conflicts and collaborations that have shaped and informed Europe's many and diverse national welfare systems. Indeed, this new kind of European welfare history that I am envisioning must focus precisely on those overlapping, and at times competing, structures of social provision that shaped systems of social welfare before 1945. For it is only by analyzing the interplay of collaboration and competition that we can explore the constant movement back and forth between inclusion and exclusion that has long shaped European welfare provision. Over the past twenty years, I have been experimenting with this kind of locally-focused socio-institutional history, and I would like to share some of the results of these experiments here, in the context of this forum.

Between families, associations and states: developing a ‘triadic approach’ to the study of social welfare

So what has this journey taught me? It began in France, where municipalities, parishes, trade unions, religious associations, political parties and neighborhood associations have long constituted both the relevant actors and the relevant sites of action, tales of long-standing centralism from Louis XIV to France's five 'Jacobin' Republics notwithstanding. I then made a few comparisons with Great Britain via a common event: child evacuation from 1939-45. Such evacuations were organised and carried out quite differently in the
two nations, and held very different meanings for the working people of Paris or Lyon and their banlieue versus those of London, Birmingham, Glasgow or Liverpool.⁶

Life and work then carried me to Italy, where I began nosing around in local archives in Torino, Firenze, Bologna and Roma in search of archives that would enable me to broaden considerably the scope of my child evacuation studies. As it turns out, mine was a vain hope, given that Italy organised very few child evacuations, properly speaking (as opposed to kids heading out into the surrounding countryside/hills each night to crouch in the fields and wait out the nightly bombing raids). Those few organised evacuations that actually took place were tiny affairs indeed, often just ten or twelve children per convoy, and they only came once the heavy bombardments of the industrial north had begun, in 1942.⁷

Finally, Italy’s (few) evacuations were quite haphazard affairs that were organised by the Italian Red Cross. This latter shipped a pitifully small number of children from the heavily bombarded industrial cities of Northwestern Italy (Torino, Milano and Genova) to the Tuscan countryside, beginning in winter 1942-43. They have left no written trace in any archive that I have seen (and I have visited many). Were it not for the diary of Iris Origo, who took in 23 such children on her estate in the Val d’Orcia (south of Montepulciano) in January 1943, we would have no idea that any such evacuations had ever taken place to begin with.⁸

Thus did I come to understand that, during my first months of research in Italian archives, I had been sniffing down a dead trail. About the same time that I was reluctantly reaching this conclusion (spring/summer 2015), a dear friend invited me to join her for a few days of vacation in Trieste, where she was working in the archives. Any plans I might have had for touring around that remarkable city as my friend nerded away on the via La Marmora were immediately laid to rest the morning after my arrival by the 40 degree temperatures that swiftly wrapped the city in their fiery embrace. Surrendering almost instantly to the suffocating heat, I quickly joined her at the (slightly) air-conditioned regional archives. As she madly ordered up one box after the next in her carefully planned archive strike, I began to poke through the archive’s many catalogues in hopes of appearing to have some motive other than their feeble air-conditioning for taking up a desk in their very small reading room.

Given that I knew nothing about this part of the world, I hit pay dirt surprisingly quickly in the form of a fascinating post-WWI aid association, the Opera Nazionale Assistenza all’Italia Redenta (‘Assistance to Redeemed Italy’), which arrived in the region just months after the Armistice. It’s aim was to distribute badly-needed socio-medical assistance to civilians in the devastated war zones of the Isonzo while at the same time using that
assistance to make propaganda for the Italian state, to which these formerly Austrian territories had been given just a few months earlier at Versailles, in spring 1919. After just two boxes of documents, I had fallen in love with the idea of working on Italy’s highly contested northeastern frontiers, where, as of autumn 2020, Friuli/Venezia Giulia meets Slovenia and Croatia, plus a piece of Austria’s southern frontier; a handy reminder of just how far south the Austro-Hungarian empire stretched at the end of the 19th and turn of the 20th centuries.

Over the course of this journey across three countries and many different kinds of archives, I came to understand the space of social action as a gendered space of political/parapolitical action where families, voluntary associations, municipalities and states (both regional and national) meet as co-creators of locals forms of social welfare and social care. My intuitions about localities (especially cities but also towns and even villages) as sites of social action were both fueled by and emerged from a series of individual research projects: around France’s large and variegated network of colonies de vacances; around socialist and communist municipalism, comparative studies of wartime child evacuation, and ‘imperial projects’ of Giolittian, then fascist conquest along Italy’s ‘oriental’ Balkan frontiers.

But these ideas are also profoundly collective in their origin. For my own research itinerary has been deeply influenced by my larger scholarly milieu at the EHESS, where teaching is grounded in research seminars that are often co-taught. From these collaborations grow research groups of greater or lesser longevity. For me, the two most important of these groups were Études sociales et politiques des populations, de la protection sociale et de la santé (ESOPP), and the Programme de recherches interdisciplinaires ‘Mondes britanniques’ (PRI Mondes britanniques). ESOPP and the PRI Mondes britanniques both stimulated and shaped my thinking in profound ways while connecting me to larger, international groups of scholars in two fields – British history (including imperial and postcolonial history), and histories of social politics and social welfare – both of which were quite new to me.

When fate banished me from Paris to Florence in autumn 2012, I lost these rich, interwoven contexts for my developing research project, and I felt the loss most keenly. Of course, I also gained an important new context in the form of my new colleagues at the EUI. This was a mind-stretching context in so many ways, beginning with global history (with which I had but a glancing familiarity in 2012, thanks to seminars with early modernist colleagues at the EHESS), and to the EUI History department’s commitment to studying ‘Europe in the world.’ With one of my colleagues, Lucy Riall, we quickly set about realising the Department’s
ambition to reframe European history through its global encounters via an international conference marking the centenary of the First World War entitled ‘The Long Global Crisis c.1912-c.1922.’

As exciting as this all was (and it truly was), I still lacked the more precise context that a research group like ESOPP had until recently given to my own research as it was then developing in the mid 2010s. So I set about building that context myself. This initially took the form of an international research network, *European Trajectories in the Quest for Welfare and Democracy (1880s to the present)*, which I created in partnership with Clarisse Berthezène; my partner in crime since spring 2004, when we first began to build together the EHESS-Paris Diderot collaboration that became the *PRI Mondes britanniques*. In order to shape the Quest, we put together older, Paris-London connections with new ones further south. In 2014-15, a veritable laboratory for the large-scale comparative and transnational analysis of welfare and democracy took shape in Florence.

From the outset, the Quest collaboration allowed us to articulate with great precision a novel approach to the study of social welfare. Inspired by the mixed economies of welfare approach, a number of us soon noticed that, within that broad framework, we were all doing something that was a little bit different. One way or another, we had each begun, in our own research, to place families in the foreground as active players in the creation and delivery of social welfare and social care. Without consciously intending it, we had each broken away from the dyadic approach of the mixed economies of welfare (which looks at associations and states) and had moved, independently, toward what, together, we would come to call a ‘triadic’ approach to studying social welfare.

Adapted to a bottom up and multi-scalar analysis, the triadic approach understands families, voluntary associations and states as co-constructors of social welfare and analyses their interactions by looking at the circle of relationships that connects these three very different actors at the local level, versus thinking in terms of top-down impositions. The *jeu d’échelles* is an indispensable component of the triadic approach, as it allows us to navigate actors’ movements back and forth as they circulated within local, regional, national and transnational arenas, occasionally crossing from one level to another, but also moving in the opposite direction, from the national or transnational back toward the local and regional levels.

Many of us have found in the triadic approach the analytic tool that was missing from our toolkits, as it has allowed us to articulate with far greater precision things we were all
seeing in our sources and that a number of us had been trying to articulate for several years or more before the Quest finally put us all in the same room.

Let us now fast forward to three years later, when our EUI-based funding was winding down (2018), and we all felt the need to rethink the Quest on an even larger scale. Thus was born the COST Action ‘Who Cares in Europe?’ (35 countries, ca. 250 members and growing), as well as my own ERC project ‘Social Politics in European Borderlands, 1870s-1990s’: A Comparative and Transnational Study (September 2020-September 2025). Both the COST Action and my ERC take as their point of departure locally-focused and multi-scalar analyses that are grounded in the triadic approach. As hinted at above, this approach does not exclude the national level but rather relativises it as one site among many (and rarely the most important one, if we look over a longer durée), where forms, structures and institutions of social welfare, large and small, are created.

In the case of my ERC project, I will explore the social politics developed by public and private actors as they worked together in three of in Europe’s highly mixed borderlands. For in borderland regions, the reach of central states has been episodic and fluctuating, and local welfare structures, based on national, but also non-national forms of solidarity/identity (occupation, gender, religion, etc.) have therefore flourished. The sheer range and variety of local welfare schemes in these three regions will allow me and my team to analyze their overlapping, competing or mutually reinforcing structures of social provision. This will create a lens through which we can then examine those interplays between inclusion and exclusion that have long shaped European welfare, turning the spotlight on those borderland contexts where such developments were particularly visible.

Indeed, it is our conviction that the long-range historical analysis of local actors’ ideas and practices around social protection in European borderlands has much to tell us about the development of welfare across the continent in general.

The moral of this story is twofold. First, Europe needs far more funds dedicated to networking. When I first arrived full-time on the continent (2001), we were still in the framework of the PCRD 7, which was all about creating networks. I’m not sure when that gave way, as I dropped fairly quickly out of this European world and back into the national and local (Parisian) levels in order to better understand my new research world. But I do know that sometime over the next ten years, the focus on networking ceded the ground to a love of big projects. This seems like a mistake, as writing European histories in a transnational and comparative way will require far more material and moral support to Europe’s many and varied research networks. As it stands in fall 2020, the COST Association for Cooperation in Science and Technology is the only Europe-wide foundation
offering any support to young networks right now. While COST is a terrific structure and functions very well, it seems very short-sighted to pile all of Europe’s research networks on its back.

Before closing I would like to make another observation of a different order. For I cannot help but notice that when the agenda moves outward from the local to the European, global, or even national level, questions of gender and sexuality tend to slide rapidly off the screen. Perhaps this not surprise me, as the dominance of men over women is, probably, the last bastion of theories which maintain that certain kinds of human bodies carry ‘inborn superiority.’ Women and their bodies can never be part of this élite. On the contrary, so long as patriarchal societies persist, female bodies can never even belong to those who walk around in them in precisely because the appropriation of women’s productive and reproductive capacity is the keystone of patriarchy. (Spoiler alert: if only one sex is capable of making new little humans, who are the only source of new value in the world, then various patriarchal mafias will inevitably gather around that capacity and try to figure out how to appropriate it as securely and efficiently as possible.)

The best way that I know to get around the impossibility of women’s presence/agency in history is to track local and social histories. Because the social world is where wacky meta-theories must inevitably cede to how the world is, in its actual, quotidian workings, even if no one cares to dignify such mundane matters by writing them down in the form of philosophical treatises. For this reason, going local, social, and transnational looks to me like precisely what we need right now in order to write a different kind of European history.

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1. These two are often cast as ‘non (or un)-European’ in part because they fail to display the social democratic concern with universalising social care that postwar (western) European states have aspired to.
2. Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945*, Cambridge 1993; Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France, 1914–1947*, Cambridge 2002; Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State, 1875–1975*, Cambridge 1990. As Susan Pedersen points out, family allowances were a strategy to support families and insure that they would produce a new generation of workers while keeping overall wage levels down by paying these allowances solely to breadwinning fathers and mothers. This was opposed to the British strategy of paying skilled men a so-called ‘family wage’, irrespective of whether they had children or not, and then paying everyone else – semi and unskilled men and women, male laborers, childless or otherwise – far lower wages. Among other things, this produced far larger wage gaps in Britain between skilled and unskilled workers; male and labor (including skilled women workers).

3. After the precarity that migrant workers and known during the 1930s, then the genocides of WWII, Europe favored social citizenship models of welfare.


7. To put these tiny numbers into perspective, one needs only look at the numbers of children who were re-evacuated from the Paris *banlieue* from spring 1942 on. Here, a convoy from a single industrial suburb could easily reach 1.000, and many such convoys departed in spring/summer/autumn 1942 and then again during those same months in 1943. See Laura Lee Downs, *Au Revoir les Enfants: Wartime Evacuation and the Politics of Childhood in France and Britain, 1939–45*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 82.1 (2016), pp. 121–150. From 1940 onwards, the British began bombing Italy’s industrial north, but with far less intensity than from 1941-2, when the raids grew increasingly murderous and, unlike those in France, specifically targeted civilians (including children) in hopes of breaking civilian morale and so getting Italy out of the war as swiftly as possible. (So went the British strategy.) See Steven Harvey, *The Italian War Effort and the Strategic Bombing of Italy*, in: *History* 70.228 (1985), pp. 32-45.

8. Iris Origo, *War in Val d’Orcia. An Italian War Diary 1943-1944*, London 1947. Her diary makes vague mention of several other small clusters of refugee children from the North sheltering in the vicinity, but the numbers were vanishingly small. On p. 2 of her war diary, Origo wrote the following highly revealing footnote to her own text: ‘In theory, the evacuation of these children was planned by the Fascist organisations in each province. In practice, we waited for three months for the Genova Fascio to send us the children for whom we had applied – and then, as none came, I asked the Principessa di Piemonte to request her Red Cross inspectresses in Torino and Genova to select 12 especially needy cases – whereupon the children arrived in a fortnight.’ The Genovese children had all been living in a dark, bitterly cold underground tunnel beneath the city, with no light and hardly any water, their own homes having been completely destroyed in the autumn 1942 bombings of the city. *Ibid*, p. 28.

9. I co-founded both groups in 2004-2005 with Paul-André Rosental (ESOPP) and Clarisse Berthezène (PRI Mondes britanniques).

10. 2-3 June 2014. As Sonja and Jörg have observed, WWI has long been a happy home for transnational study, beginning with battlefield histories but then widening and deepening with the more recent (since the 70s)
ambition to understand war and society. [11]

11. Including Efthimis Avdela, who was working in Athens and Rethymnos along remarkably similar lines with an exciting multidisciplinary project on ‘Forms of Public Sociality’. [11]

12. In its three short years of life, the Quest expanded rapidly from a handful of 10-12 researchers from 4, largely Mediterranean countries (plus Britain) to well over 50 from 18 countries. [12]

13. The project’s eleven case studies focus on the Northeastern Adriatic, Galician and Franco-Belgo-Germano-Luxembourgish borderlands. [13]

14. The project will therefore enable us to contribute to contemporary debates about welfare reform at a time when the social rights (or lack thereof) of populations in Europe are the subject of acrimonious, even violent dispute. [14]

15. Some national funds support both individual research and international collaborations, including France’s Agence nationale de la recherche or the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council. [15]