THE WELFARE STATE

At the beginning of the twentieth century, governments were mainly organizations for making war and protecting property. By the beginning of the twenty-first century they had taken on many other tasks—most especially the task of social provision, or insuring the welfare of their citizens and residents. Today, the world’s most developed states devote most of their budgets, much of their law, and a large share of their personnel to the project of providing their citizens with income security—by means of policy instruments that include poor relief, old-age pensions, sick leave, housing, child care, and dozens of others.

This is a course in the comparative political sociology of public social provision—i.e., a course on “the welfare state,” broadly construed. We will be trying to understand why different societies at different times take different approaches to this task. In other words, we will ask how welfare states arose, how they differ, why they persist, and how they change.

The study of social provision has been a staple of sociology since the founding of the discipline. But the political sociology of welfare states has assumed increasing centrality in the discipline over the last three decades, as scholars working on a wide range of topics have amassed evidence that public social provision affects many outcomes of concern to sociology—such as poverty and inequality, social mobility, health outcomes, urban development, and collective behavior.

Much of our empirical material will come from studies of the United States in comparative perspective—mainly, in comparison to other wealthy, democratic countries, especially those of Western Europe. The theories we discuss may well be of use in studying other societies—or other kinds of public policies—but (as we will see) the generality of these theories should be taken as problematic rather than assumed.

This year I have chosen to set aside the last few weeks of the course for a close consideration of cultural explanations in welfare state research. Scholars in the field are finding it increasingly useful to appeal to phenomena that we might call “culture” in order to explain social policy outcomes. But there is as yet little consensus among welfare state scholars on what culture is, what a cultural explanation of social policy ought to look like, or whether indeed it is worth doing at all. We will therefore consider a variety of ways of conceptualizing culture, with attention to whether they actually help us to explain the social policy outcomes of interest to us.
This topical focus will bring us right to one of the research frontiers of this field. But we pay a steep price for this trip to the frontier: we will pass too quickly by some topics that a well prepared scholar in this field should know, and also by some other topics that are less important but that are particularly dear to my heart.

The reading load is heavy in some weeks. In addition to the required reading on the syllabus, you are expected to be reading for your own research throughout the quarter. We can discuss strategies for dealing with the heavy reading load. But this is a good time in your career to start honing your skills at setting priorities and speed-reading when necessary.

I have ordered several of the required books at the campus bookstore. The rest of the required readings will be made available somehow, subject to discussion.

Each week also comes with lots of recommended reading selected because I think it is important.
I. INTRODUCTION TO THE POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF WELFARE STATES

1/6 INTRODUCTORY MEETING

In which we vote on which topic to read and discuss for the week of February 3.

1/13 AN OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD AND AN ORIENTING HYPOTHESIS


Recommended reading:

1/20 VARIETIES OF WELFARE STATES: WHAT SHOULD WE BE EXPLAINING


Recommended:


1/27 CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES: WHAT COUNTS AS STATE PROVISION


Recommended:


Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal.*
II. CLASSIC EXPLANATIONS FOR SOCIAL PROVISION

To save a week, we have to choose one or another of these topics:

2/3 either DEVELOPMENT AND MODERNIZATION


Recommended:

Francois Ewald, L’Etat Providence.
Ulrich Beck, “Risk Society and Welfare State”
Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation

or MILITARISM AND STATE FORMATION


Recommended:

2/10  POWER RESOURCES

Esping-Andersen, *Three Worlds*, ch. 5.


Recommended:


2/17  CONSTITUTIONS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS


Recommended:


III. CULTURE AND THE WELFARE STATE

2/24 MORAL BOUNDARIES


Recommended:


3/3 POLICY PARADIGMS


Recommended:


3/10 BRICOLAGE AND DIFFUSION

Isaac Martin, Permanent Tax Revolt, Chapters 4-6.
Daniel Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age, Chapters 1 and 10.

Recommended:

REQUIREMENTS

A WEEKLY QUESTION

Every week, by Monday at 6 PM, you should e-mail a critical question on the assigned reading. A critical question should point us to a particular passage in an assigned text; briefly explain why that passage is important to the text; and pose a question about it for discussion. In other words, this is not a big written memo, and you should not think of this as a burdensome writing requirement. The purposes of this assignment are (1) to nudge you to get some of the reading done before Monday evening, and (2) to give me information about what people are interested in discussing, so that I can plan our agenda and we can use our time to maximum advantage.

You can skip critical questions twice. More than twice, and I’ll start to be concerned about your participation.

A FINAL RESEARCH PAPER

If you enroll, I require you to write a final research paper of no more than 30 pages, addressing a research question that I have approved beforehand. The reason that I will not accept a literature review paper is that the sociology department has never to my knowledge offered a field examination in social policy, and I would not recommend it—the study of the welfare state is generally seen as an important but specialized subfield of political sociology, and it is better to use the field exam process to acquire and demonstrate greater breadth of knowledge. So there is little point in writing a paper that merely digests the course material.

I encourage you (but do not require you) to design your project to test a hypothesis. This can be a useful device for forcing clarity of thought about the link between your empirical research plan and your intended theoretical contribution.

NB. I am aware that ten weeks is a very short time to finish a research paper if you are starting from scratch. For this reason I will accept papers that take the form of a proposal (with a crisply delineated question, a focused literature review, and a feasible research design to answer the question). I will provide an example of the genre.

Given the time constraint, I assume you will be working with existing data (rather than generating your own data in the form of interview recordings or ethnographic field notes). I have plenty of suggestions as to where you might look for appropriate data. Some of these are general suggestions that we will discuss in class; but if you have a particular topic in mind, I can be even more useful. Come talk to me.