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**Timothy B. Smith**, *Creating the Welfare State in France, 1880-1940*. Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. viii + 241 pp. Notes and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7735-2409-6.

Review by Paul V. Dutton, Northern Arizona University.

The European welfare state must be counted as one of the great political achievements of the twentieth century. Timothy Smith traces the origins of France's welfare state by examining health care and unemployment policy in Lyon, with Paris and other cities drawn in to support the narrative. Smith's central argument is that "World War I gave rise to a strong social reform movement in France that had a significant amount of success in the nation's largest cities" (p. 3). This is hardly a novel thesis, but Smith's way of proving it is. He provides us with a finely crafted history of municipal social welfare between 1880 and 1940, relying heavily on Lyonnais sources but incorporating sufficient evidence from Paris and elsewhere to justify the book's title. Anyone who is interested in the workings of *assistance*, including Paris' renowned *Assistance Publique*--in whose archives Smith clearly passed much time--should read this book.

The book's early chapters cover the pre-Great War period and introduce us to a central theme of the text: the conflict between local and centralizing forces, especially between municipal authorities and the state. Indeed, Smith repeatedly invokes Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* in order to cast provincial social welfare institutions as equally important in the construction of national identity as Weber's schools, railroads, and military.[1] According to Smith, "backward peasants... were not the only ones who feared the central state with its alien laws, tax collectors, and military recruiters. Local elites, too, feared that the state would intrude into their fiefdoms, even if this entailed improving the health of the population" (p. 37). Whether or not one buys the Weberian thesis and Smith's extension of it, Smith provides a fascinating description of how provincial notables relied on their leadership of hospitals, local charities, and *bureaux de bienfaisance* to further their political careers and social standing. Membership on a local hospital board constituted a sort of rite of passage for all those who wished to climb the ladder of municipal politics or enter the local magistrature. Especially strong is Smith's account of the *Hospices Civils de Lyon* (HCL). Throughout the nineteenth century, its administrators were among the most outspoken opponents of national social legislation.

Smith effectively textures his story of the HCL by employing Philip Selznick's distinction between organizations and institutions.[2] Organizations are designed to achieve specific, measurable goals; they are mutable and may be expended altogether in the case of failure or after having achieved a desired effect. Institutions exhibit an identifiable mission, but they also possess social and psychological values in and of themselves. Institutions may fail to achieve their goals yet remain invulnerable to reform because of the community sentiments that they embody. Smith's convincing portrayal of the HCL--and French hospitals, in general, as institutions--permits a deeper understanding of their role in social assistance. It also helps to explain local notables' success in resisting national social welfare legislation prior to the First World War. In their opposition to dictates from Paris, local notables cast

themselves as defenders of provincial identity against foreign threats to centuries-old community practices.

The First World War was the crucible in which the welfare state was born. According to Smith, where “public assistance is concerned, the nineteenth century concludes abruptly with the end of World War I” (p. 51). The war engendered a massive change in social consciousness regarding social welfare; charitable giving rose but so did municipal taxes to pay for more programs. Taxes levied under the pressure of war were not repealed after the armistice; instead they created new possibilities for social spending and a growth in municipal government in general. Lyon used its expanded tax revenues between the wars to build an impressive “mini-welfare state” (p. 91). Of particular interest here is the story of Edouard Herriot, longtime mayor of Lyon, whose mediocre political career in Paris is well known, but whose transformation of social welfare in Lyon was truly remarkable. During Herriot’s tenure, Lyon emerged as a forerunner of municipal social protections. The city expanded its municipal housing, school and public health programs, employment centers, unemployment stipends, and hospital construction. Smith is quick to point out, however, that Lyon’s “mini-welfare state” was not unique; it was matched in Paris, Nancy, Strasbourg, Montpellier, Bordeaux, Lille and other cities.

Smith argues that municipal initiatives, especially in the hospital sector, engendered a popular acceptance, even expectation, of social welfare that would inevitably become national. As municipal and departmental programs expanded, beneficiaries “now thought of their new public hospitals, not their traditional charities” (p. 108). As hospitals became more public, private donations dried up. These developments brought about an extraordinary reversal in attitude among municipal hospital administrators, which Smith details in the case of Lyon. Faced with a rising tide of expectations that even new wartime municipal taxes could not meet, “the HCL transformed itself from...a staunch defender of local liberties against the idea of centralized, state health policy...into a leading force in the post-war movement for national health and welfare measures” (pp. 72-73). Hence, Smith concludes that grassroots efforts, paradoxically, resulted in national solutions. One city’s reforms were emulated by others, providing a model for state initiatives. Also, as localities attempted to tackle larger social assistance programs, their financial means were exposed as insufficient. Instead of giving up, local leaders appealed to departmental and then to state officials for help. “This, in turn, brought about a de facto nationalization of social policy, as funding from the central state came with new rules, regulations, and various strings attached” (p. 114). This is a provocative line of reasoning, one in which Smith appears to be on solid ground because of his extensive documentation from municipal hospital and local assistance archives.

Smith carries his Weberian theme of nation-building into the interwar years. “In effect, the war was the greatest impetus to national consciousness and national social welfare legislation since the Revolution” (p. 54). The growing national consciousness translated into a heightened awareness of the depopulation crisis, which, along with the popularity of the pronatalist movement, was “arguably the greatest impetus towards more general social reform...” (p. 86). Such a view inevitably leads Smith to the topic of family allowances, whose links to pronatalism have been the subject of significant research in recent years. Smith mentions the work of Susan Pedersen, Laura Lee Downs, and others to outline the development of family welfare during the 1920s and 1930s.[3] Unfortunately, and somewhat surprisingly, Smith fails to harness this previous work to further his own praiseworthy approach.

Having eschewed a national explanation in favor of local actors and institutions, one would have expected Smith to point out the similarities between the industrialists who popularized family allowances in the 1920s and local notables who jealously guarded their prerogatives over hospitals and local charities before the First World War. Both sought control of welfare in order to further their own financial and social interests. Industrialists paid family allowances in order to avoid general wage increases and to divide workers’ unions. During the rampant inflation of the 1920s, it was much cheaper to provide wage hikes only to workers with dependent children. Like Smith’s local notables who cast

themselves as defenders of local pride and institutions, industrialists cloaked their family allowance wage strategy in the unassailable rhetoric of pronatalism. This helped industrialists elude state intervention until 1932. True, many industrialists were pronatalist, such as the Michelin brothers, whom Smith mentions. But his relatively short treatment of the link between industrial paternalism and family allowances represents a missed opportunity to compare employers to earlier municipal opponents of state-directed welfare. Instead, Smith emphasizes a 1920 law through which a small number of families with four or more children could claim a state-funded stipend. Quite simply, this misses the point. It was not the state, but rather employers who built France's family allowance *caisses* into a national network of welfare providers. Well before a 1932 law that compelled employers to pay family allowances, one half of all industrial workers and one quarter of all commercial wage earners worked for employers who paid allowances upon the birth of a first child.

Smith's treatment of family allowances raises a critical question in this reviewer's mind. What does Smith mean by "welfare state"? Most of the family welfare and social insurance programs that became France's welfare state after 1945 grew out of employer initiatives or in conjunction with mutual aid societies in the 1930s. The 1928 and 1930 social insurance laws are a case in point. They brought unprecedented medical, disability, and retirement protections to a large swath of the urban working class and, by 1935, to the countryside. Smith notes that these laws, not the 1945 decrees that get most attention, constitute "the Magna Carta of the modern French welfare state" (p. 131). If this is the case (and I believe it is), Smith provides a frustratingly short discussion of this legislation, its motivations, and its implementation. Notably absent is any sustained analysis of the mutual aid movement whose transformation from adversary to advocate of compulsory social insurance made the 1928 and 1930 laws possible. Lobbying by the *Fédération Nationale de la Mutualité Française* (FNMF) was so successful during parliamentary deliberations that mutual societies comprised a majority of the nation's social insurance *caisses* by 1931. Smith notes the statistic but never mentions the FNMF (p. 135). The mutual movement's participation in interwar welfare permitted compulsory social insurance laws to inherit the popular mantle of self-help and independence, or in French, *prévoyance*. The importance of this development cannot be over-emphasized. Non-state actors--especially employers and mutual leaders but also union heads, rural corporatists, and feminists--played a formative role in creating France's welfare state. Yet Smith's definition of welfare state is so narrowly drawn that he largely ignores these private and para-public actors.

That said, Smith's focus on communal, municipal, and departmental authorities rests on a certain logic of its own. His is a book about *assistance* and its substantial contribution to the building of France's welfare state. Indeed, he insists that, "*assistance* was transformed into *assurance*..." (p. 134). The book's relatively narrow range of evidence does not permit a convincing demonstration of this point. However, Smith provides an irresistible argument that assistance, especially hospitals and unemployment relief, which originated and were administered at the local level, played a fundamental role in the development of French social welfare. His concise and insightful account of how local leaders fought, embraced, and affected national social policy thus makes a vital contribution to the literature on the welfare state.

## NOTES

[1] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1976).

[2] Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

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[3] Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995); Paul V. Dutton, "An Overlooked Source of Social Reform: Family Policy in French Agriculture, 1936-1945," *Journal of Modern History* 72/2 (June 2000): 375-412.

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