



The State of Social Welfare: The Twentieth Century in Cross-National Review

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With the end of the 20th century, Dixon and Scheurell decided it was an opportune time to critically assess what governments have achieved with their plethora of public social welfare policies. While Marxist socialists, democratic socialists, social democrats, and reluctant collectivists were all eager, at various times, to construct their vision of the ideal society, the idea of state welfare was slow to take root. As Dixon and Scheurell point out, at the turn of the century, only a handful of industrializing countries were willing to grapple with the problems of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Two world wars and the Great Depression of the 1930s, however, sensitized many societies to the human, social, and even political costs of un-met social welfare needs. Thus, the milieu needed for the birth of state welfare came into existence, first in Western Europe, then in Australasia, followed by North and South America and, finally, in parts of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

The state welfare dream was that citizenship would guarantee every individual a secure lifestyle, with a minimum degree of insecurity, and the wherewithal to develop to the greatest possible extent as individuals and as members of society. It is, Dixon and Scheurell argue, the most significant set of social institutions developed in the 20th century. Admittedly, it is one that had within it the seeds of its own potential destruction—the vicious circle of growing welfare dependency, increasing state control, deepening poverty, and the emergence of an intractable underclass—that has legitimized calls for the individualization of the social. Undoubtedly, this collection of essays on key states, charting the rise and fall of state welfare, examines a monumental 20th century event and will be of interest to scholars, researchers, and students involved with social welfare issues, as well as policy makers and concerned citizens.

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