

Sonya Michel

## Public & Private

Ideal Types, Real Social Policies. Afterword

As with many abstract heuristic terms, the real-world referents of “public” and “private” – and the relationship between them – change over time and space. At times, “private” may refer to the family, home, and household, but it may also mean civil society and the realm of philanthropy, voluntary organizations, and the like, or even include the market, as opposed to “the state” or government. “Public” is generally thought to refer to the state (in all of its manifestations, from the local to the national and even international organizations), but it may also invoke the market and even civil society when considered *vis à vis* the home. Thus, when studying Western Europe and North America during, say, the first half of the nineteenth century, historians generally use private and public to distinguish between home, family, and household, on the one hand, and the expanding sphere of the market and civil society on the other, with the state a distant third term. Surveying developments over the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, however, historians are more likely to distinguish between a private sphere composed of expanding markets and civil societies (what Jürgen Habermas, confusingly, calls “the public sphere”) and a public sphere composed of expanding states, on the other.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as the authors in this special issue argue, the distinctions were rarely that clear. Indeed, their articles shed light on moments in the history of public and private in parts of Europe when the distinctions between them (if they in fact ever existed in pure form) appeared to be collapsing. In France, Germany and Switzerland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sonja Matter, Matthias Ruoss, Irma Gadiant, Jürgen Schallmann, and Axelle Brodiez-Dolino argue, public

---

Sonya Michel, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC; Department of History, University of Maryland, Francis Scott Key Hall, College Park, Maryland 20742 USA; smichel@umd.edu

and private forms of social welfare constituted a “mixed economy of social welfare.” Charitable and governmental institutions appeared to claim equal status and expertise when it came to social reform, as Chris Leonards discovered in his study of the penitentiary congresses held in London from 1880 to 1910. At the same time, the issue illustrates that the spheres of public and private were themselves in flux internally; as Michael Werner contends, the trajectory of private foundations in Germany was “discontinuous” from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth, largely due, of course, to the country’s tumultuous shifts from Empire to Reich. Yet, the emergence of strong welfare states in the twentieth century did not “crowd out” charitable organizations, Ruoss finds in Switzerland and Sarah Haßdenteufel in France and Germany.

Persuasive as these articles are in demonstrating the instability of public and private, I would nevertheless suggest that it is worth considering these terms for a moment as distinct ideal types in order to understand what each might bring to the “mixed economy” and what is at stake when they become entwined. When we speak of the private sector of philanthropy and voluntary organizations, for example, we generally have in mind entities formed, run and financed by elites, initially upper-class or even noble, but, over the course of the nineteenth century, increasingly middle-class. These organizations could be devoted to a number of issues including – as here – social welfare, but also to cultural, civic, and national causes. Then and now, voluntary organizations often earned praise not just for the generosity and vision of their donors, but also, especially when considered vis à vis their governmental counterparts, for their flexibility and innovativeness – their ability to identify and address problems with alacrity, to adopt experimental approaches without becoming entangled in government bureaucracies, but often leading to the creation of new government programs and policies. And, as many gender historians have pointed out, voluntary organizations afforded women entrée into the public sphere at a time when their citizenship was otherwise severely limited.<sup>2</sup>

While acknowledging these strengths, critics of voluntary organizations also point to their limitations. Many, especially in the nineteenth century, have been religiously based and motivated, their beneficence limited to adherents of specific denominations. Many are erratically, even arbitrarily, funded, their very existence dependent upon the whims of wealthy donors and/or the health of a particular economy (the latter risk, of course, not limited to private organizations). And the arbitrariness is not restricted to funding but can also determine the focus of voluntary organizations. Founders and leaders have the power to define their targets and set their priorities, and while they may be constrained to some extent by the need to attract donations from the general public, the public has little input otherwise.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, until fairly recently in many advanced market democracies, voluntary organizations have

operated with little governmental oversight or regulation while enjoying, as “non-profits”, favoured tax status. Indeed, one might argue that by means of tax expenditures – the taxes foregone on donations to non-profits – the public is, in effect, supporting private charitable organizations and allowing them to set public priorities without democratic control. Finally, critics note, private charities seldom have the capacity to deal with large-scale national crises, such as economic depression or war.

Public institutions and agencies project a sharply contrasting image: they are seen as hide-bound and bureaucratic where private organizations are nimble, but they also rest on the broader financial base of the state and thus have the capacity to address national crises. Insofar as their mandates and policies are determined by legislatures, they are, of course, far more democratic than voluntary organizations, but that does not mean that all public welfare policies are universalistic – far from it. Indeed, we see crossovers and transfers from private to public when it comes to selectivity and “targeting”, not only in ideologies but also in practices; consider, for example, the treatment of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor by both charities and governmental agencies.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to women as policymakers and practitioners, government agencies have been less hospitable than their private predecessors; as they “modernized”, adopting civil service standards and service norms, they substituted volunteers with trained professionals, often replacing women with men, especially in leadership positions (though in many countries, public social welfare agencies and branches of government devoted to social policy became, in effect, ghettos for female civil servants).<sup>5</sup> Public and private agencies have taken different stances with regard to incorporating gender ideologies into their policies. In the early days of emerging welfare states, governments tended to absorb the conservative maternalist notions of female domesticity and motherhood that had undergirded many women’s voluntary organizations,<sup>6</sup> but in later years, both public and private agencies could be seen to advance feminist principles through policies such as child care, maternity leave, and female labor force activation – sometimes with public agencies in the vanguard, sometimes with private-sector feminist organizations prodding them to take action.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there is the question of the relationship between public and private in terms of responsibility for social welfare. As sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen has pointed out, the private and public sectors often engage in a kind of reciprocity, whereby states sometimes take up the burden of providing services and benefits that are not offered by the private sector (namely the market – employers), while at other times, governments seek to fob off such responsibilities on the market through tax expenditures for both individuals and corporations.<sup>8</sup> This kind of reciprocity has, indeed, become the hallmark of twentieth- and twenty-first-century public-private or “resi-

dual” welfare states. At the same time, in the U.S. and elsewhere, governments have been limiting their footprints by contracting out services to non-profit private-sector organizations. As political scientists Kimberly J. Morgan and Andrea Campbell point out, this type of “delegated governance” allows states “to respond to pressing social needs without seeming to expand the size of the federal government”<sup>9</sup> – an especially important political maneuver in periods when opposition to governmental growth runs strong.<sup>10</sup>

So what do these ideal types tell us about what is lost and what is gained in the “mixed economy of social welfare”? Do private-sector organizations lose their critical edge when their policies are taken up by the state, or they become public contractors? Or does the ability to reach a broader swath of the public and perhaps gain financial stability make it worth the sacrifice of autonomy? From the opposite perspective, does the public lose its power to set priorities and exert oversight when governments delegate responsibility to private contractors and foundations, or do the gains in efficiency and agility outweigh the loss of democratic control? Clearly, each case will be different, but the articles in this issue begin to answer such questions by engaging in the kind of detailed probing and careful reflection that historical investigation allows, thereby expanding our understanding of the origins of the mixed economy of social welfare and the patterns that have emerged as public and private engaged in a complex *pas de deux* over the ensuing decades.

## Notes

- 1 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge/MA 1989.
- 2 See Seth Koven/Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World. Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, New York 1993; Karen Hagemann/Sonya Michel/Gunilla Budde, eds., *Civil Society and Gender Justice. Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, New York 2008.
- 3 See, for example, Sonya Michel, *The Rise of Welfare States and the Regendering of Civil Society*, in: Hagemann/Michel/Budde, *Civil Society*, 245–264.
- 4 The literature on this subject is vast; for the United States, for example, see Seth Rockman, *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic*, Long Grove/IL 2014; for England, Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty in the Early Industrial Age*, New York 1983, and *Poverty and Compassion. The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*, New York 1991; for France, Christine Adams, *Poverty, Charity and Motherhood. Maternal Societies in Nineteenth-Century France*, Urbana/IL 2010; for Germany, Andrew Lees, *Cities, Sin and Social Reform in Imperial Germany*, Ann Arbor/MI 2002; for Switzerland, Frauke Sassnick, *Armenpolitik zwischen Helfen und Strafen. Das Problem der Armut in Winterthur vom Ancien Régime zum 19. Jahrhundert*, Winterthur 1989.
- 5 For these developments in the United States, see Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist. The Emergence of Social Work as a Career*, Cambridge/MA 1965; and John Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination. A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States*, Ithaca/NY 1985. For Europe, see Gisela Hauss/Dagmar Schulte, *Amid Social Contradictions. Toward a History of Social Work in Europe*, Opladen, Germany 2009.

- 6 See Koven/Michel, *Mothers of a New World*.
- 7 Again, the literature on this is vast. To take just one country (France) where this kind of transition occurred, see Adams, *Poverty, Charity and Motherhood*; and Jane Jenson/Mariette Sineau, *Who Cares? Women's Work, Childcare, and Welfare State Redesign*, Toronto/CA 2001.
- 8 What I have in mind here is "occupational benefits" such as health insurance and old-age pensions, which are offered and paid for by employers (sometimes with employee contributions as well); see Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton/NJ 1990, chap. 4. See also Christopher Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State. Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States*, Princeton/NJ 1997.
- 9 Kimberly J. Morgan/Andrea Louise Campbell, *The Delegated Welfare State. Medicare, Markets, and the Governance of Social Policy*, New York 2011, 3. Morgan and Campbell note similar patterns in Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. For an earlier discussion, see Sheila B. Kamerman/Alfred J. Kahn, eds., *Privatization and the Welfare State*, Princeton/NJ 1989, esp. chapter by Michael O'Higgins, *Social Welfare and Privatization. The British Experience*, 157–177. In the U.S. at least, these practices have been going on since the nineteenth century; see, for example, Julie Miller, *Abandoned. Foundlings in Nineteenth-Century New York City*, New York 2008.
- 10 In the United States, the sectarian character of many private agencies has often barred them from receiving public support; see, for example, Catherine Rymph, *From 'Economic Want' to 'Family Pathology'. Foster-Family Care, the New Deal, and the Emergence of a Public Child Welfare System*, in: *Journal of Policy History* 24/1 (2012), 7–25, here 15. In other political cultures, religious affiliation may not constitute an impediment (and may, in fact, provide an incentive for public support). More research is needed on this question.