



David Garland

THE WELFARE STATE

A Very Short Introduction

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Contents

Acknowledgements xiii

List of illustrations xv

- 1 What is the welfare state? 1
 - 2 Before the welfare state 13
 - 3 Birth of the welfare state 26
 - 4 The welfare state 1.0 45
 - 5 Varieties 59
 - 6 Problems 81
 - 7 Neoliberalism and WS 2.0 98
 - 8 Post-industrial transitions: towards WS 3.0 115
 - 9 The indispensable welfare state 133
- References and further reading 139
- Index 149

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List of illustrations

- 1 The women's dining room, St Pancras Workhouse, London (1897) **23**
Getty Images/Hulton Archive
- 2 'The dawn of hope'. National Insurance against sickness and disablement, *Liberal Publication Department* (1911) **27**
© The British Library Board, 08139.c.97, leaflet no.2383
- 3 The diffusion of income maintenance programmes **28**
From H. Heclø, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden*. With permission from ECPR Press
- 4 Soup kitchen in Chicago during the Great Depression (1930) **32**
Getty Images/Rolls Press, Popperfoto
- 5 'Here's to the brave new world'. Cartoon by Illingsworth, *Daily Mail*, 2 Dec. 1942 **39**
© Solo Syndication. Images supplied by Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / National Library of Wales
- 6 'Full employment in a free society', by William Beveridge (1944) **40**
Marco Simola/Photographers Direct
- 7 'More security for the American family'. *Social Security Board poster* (1939) **72**
Mary Evans/Everett Collection
- 8 Gross public and net total social spending, as percentage of GDP, at market prices, 2009/10 **77**
Data taken from OECD, Social Expenditure database (SOCX) <<http://www.oecd.org/social/expenditure.htm>>, 2009/10
- 9 Percentages of Population in Eight Countries with Disposable Incomes Less than 1/2 the National Median **95**
Chart based on 'Public Policy, Economic Inequality, and Poverty: The United States in Comparative Perspective,' by Timothy M. Smeeding in 89 *Social Science Quarterly* 955 (2005)

- 10 Striking miners and police during the 1984–5 British miners' strike, Bilston Glen Colliery, Scotland **102**
Tophams/TophamPicturepoint/
Press Association Images
- 11 Average number of capital controls for fifteen OECD countries **105**
From *Continuity and Change in Contemporary Capitalism*, edited by H. Kitschelt, P. Lange, and J. Stephens. With permission from Cambridge University Press
- 12 Income share (excluding capital gains) of the top 1 per cent in affluent democracies **111**
From P. Pierson, 'Welfare State Reform Over the (Very) Long Term' <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2010/20101109t1730vOT.aspx>>
- 13 Standard pension benefit, 1971–2002, in social democratic, conservative, and liberal regimes **113**
From P. Pierson, 'Welfare State Reform Over the (Very) Long Term' <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2010/20101109t1730vOT.aspx>>
- 14 Sickness benefit, 1971–2002, in social democratic, conservative, and liberal regimes **113**
From P. Pierson, 'Welfare State Reform Over the (Very) Long Term' <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2010/20101109t1730vOT.aspx>>
- 15 Unemployment benefit, 1971–2002, in social democratic, conservative, and liberal regimes **114**
From P. Pierson, 'Welfare State Reform Over the (Very) Long Term' <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2010/20101109t1730vOT.aspx>>
- 16 Union density, OECD, 1960–2008 **120**
From P. Pierson, 'Welfare State Reform Over the (Very) Long Term' <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2010/20101109t1730vOT.aspx>>

Chapter 1

What is the welfare state?

What, in fact, *is* the welfare state? If you are reading this book, the chances are good that you live in a society with a highly developed welfare state and that you have, at various points in your life, come to depend on welfare state institutions. It is also quite likely that you have definite views about the welfare state—whether for or against—and that these views inform your voting behaviour, your political identity, and your attitude towards government. Those of us who live in developed societies are involved with welfare state institutions in all sorts of ways on an almost daily basis: and conflicts over welfare state policies—and the taxes that fund them—are always at the forefront of political debate.

Yet despite these involvements, very few of us could give an accurate account of what the welfare state is, what its institutions do, and what effects they have—let alone discuss its history and the different forms it can take. Welfare states are familiar, even mundane, but their true character remains elusive. And more often than not our supposed understandings turn out to be misunderstandings based on myths and misrepresentations that pass themselves off as facts.

One way of misunderstanding the welfare state is to view it as a thing of the past. Political commentators often talk of the welfare state in the past tense as though it were a historic episode that is