

Bearing tales: networks and narratives in social policy transfer

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Abstract

In the concluding contribution to this issue, this article asks how patterns in the movement of social policies between nations can be explained. It particularly highlights the ways in which policies often move in clusters from 'model' nations outward. The article finds answers in the asymmetries of social policy networks and, most importantly, in the power of the narratives through which policy models travel.

Keywords narratives, networks, policy clusters, social policy transfer, socialized Germany

Introduction

The history of social policy is in the midst of a global and transnational turn. Older, state-centred explanations for social policy development have not been repudiated. But, as the articles in this special issue emphasize, those state-centred explanations rest now within awareness that the policy initiatives to which state actors responded were never confined within their borders. Policy ideas, frameworks, and ambitions circulated widely across nations and empires to be adapted, modified, remade, repudiated, or re-imagined. From old age pensions and social insurance to labour legislation, maternal and child welfare measures, anti-poverty initiatives, and beyond, social policy history now tracks a history of transnational motion, transplantation, adaptive policy appropriation, and global exchange.

Accounting for patterns in this world of policies in motion, however, poses a challenge for historians working on the global stage. Policy initiatives and debates moved quickly between some polities and yet lost traction in other, outwardly comparable ones. Certain policy regimes took on 'model' status while other, closely matched ones failed to make that leap. Social policies rarely moved one by one as the best fit for context and circumstances. More often they moved in clusters: in bundles of loosely connected policies only roughly linked by logic or ideology. Efforts to explain patterns in transnational social policy circulation through the effects of socioeconomic macro-variables or of distinct formations of political culture have often had a *post hoc* quality to them. Meanwhile, accounts of the work of individual social policy intermediaries, critically important as their accomplishments often were, seem too slender an explanatory reed to support the transit of policy measures across the globe.

In concluding this special issue, this article explores a range of intermediate-level explanations for the problem of patterns in social policy exchange. It first examines the role of networks as social policy historians have traced and uncovered them. It moves from there to consideration of policy clusters in social policy exchange, with the emergence of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany as a ‘model nation’ as a case in point. It turns, finally, to the importance of narratives in transnational social policy circulation, stressing the ways in which stories not only construct policy clusters but give those social policies the momentum and power that cross-border movement requires.

Networks

Twenty years ago, to write about social policy was to begin not with the global scene and context but with the nation. For those who took competition between interest groups as key to social policy formation, it was an all but unchallenged axiom that the nation formed the key arena within which economic and social groups wrestled to whatever compromise or victory they might achieve. The nation framed the terrain on which the iron triangles of policy domination did their work. Even in a federated nation such as the United States, where divergence in social policy between states and regions was often striking, the central stage on which modern politics and policy-making took place was assumed to be the nation-state. Scholars sceptical of interest-group theories of politics, who in the 1980s and 1990s rallied around the call to ‘bring the state back in’, only sharpened all the more clearly the framing power of the nation-state. States, the new state-centred political historians and political scientists argued, were not only the main arenas in which the social forces of politics contended. They also had their own distinctive capacities, their own strong or weak state structures, their deeply etched policy traditions and path dependencies – all of which played a critical role in shaping policy outcomes and forms of policy administration, even in adjudicating which issues were the proper subjects of public policy to begin with.¹

A head-on challenge to nation-centred theories of politics could, of course be found from those who worked in the traditions of Marxist historical analysis or its liberal mirror, modernization theory. From both standpoints, nations were not the primary arena of analysis. On the contrary, macro-forces of social change drove the nations down the tides of history, whether towards structural crisis or towards structural convergence. From these structuralist perspectives, communication, learning, and exchange between nations were beside the point. If their policies converged, it was the consequence of social and economic pressures that bore down, in one way or another, on all the nations in the global scene. But as the currency of these larger, meta-historical schemes faded in the historical profession in the 1980s, the nation re-emerged as the focal point of analysis. To study social policy was to start with the nation: sharply defined and contextually dis-embedded, an amalgam of diverse and essentially autonomous institutions, traditions, and historical conjunctures. Where historians of nation-state policy formation met to compare notes, it was largely within the context of comparative politics’ ideal types and exaggerated polarities.

1 Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Reuschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the state back in*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Now, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, the analytical and historiographical terrain is vastly different. Nation-states were more porous than we knew and more intricately connected. So were empires and the policy traffic between them. Communication was continuous, and it mattered. It is as if the tariff barriers between nation-centred histories had suddenly fallen and a new world of transnational policy motion had suddenly come into view.

If at the outset there was an analytical engine driving this work, it was network theory. Among the most influential early demonstrations of the movement of social policy across borders was the work of women's historians, who, following the trail of connections and institutional relations between social feminists in the early twentieth century, recovered a transnational social-maternalist project which, though it took different forms in each location, brought a powerful new agenda into modern state politics. The social-feminist networks that Seth Koven, Sonya Michel, Anja Schüler, Susan Pedersen, and others reconstructed were the first of many that have reshaped historians' understanding of cross-border politics and policy-making.² Some were tightly organized, others loosely braided together. Some were funder-controlled from the top, like the webs of connection that the Rockefeller Foundation and its counterparts set into being; some were made on the ground, like the continuously replenished ambitions that Scots miners or German *Arbeiter* brought to US labour politics. Some were made through books and academic exchanges, such as Henry George's single tax movement or the rival German and British economic schools, whose influence, as Tamotsu Nishizawa emphasizes in this volume, could be felt across the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century globe.³ By and large these were 'issue networks', to use Hugh Hecló's phrase; they formed around distinctive issues and policies and fell apart when those issues faded or their circulating stock of remedies and solutions lost their power to rival schemes. But their consequences could be momentous.⁴

If one takes the field of modern US history, long one of the most splendidly isolated of national histories, its reconceptualization within these newly recognized webs of transnational connection has been profound. Historians have begun to recognize that, just as slavery was transnational, so was the anti-slavery movement, the pivot on which American history turned and broke in the nineteenth century. So were the movement for women's rights, the artisans' organizations of the early nineteenth century and the labour unions of the century's end, the ideology of *laissez-faire* and the progressive rival to it of the early twentieth century, the social politics of race and racial segregation, the ambitions and techniques of empire, and the politics of democratization and nationalism. We now see that none of them, central as they are to US history, can be understood outside the push and pull of transnational forces

2 Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a new world: maternalist politics and the origin of welfare states*, New York: Routledge, 1993; Kathryn Kish Sklar, Anja Schüler, and Susan Strasser, eds., *Social justice feminists in the United States and Germany: a dialogue in documents, 1885–1933*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998; Susan Pedersen, *Family, dependence, and the origins of the welfare state: Britain and France, 1914–1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

3 Tamotsu Nishizawa, 'The economics of social reform across borders: Fukuda's welfare economic studies in international perspective', in this issue, pp. 232–53.

4 Hugh Hecló, 'Issue networks and the executive establishment', in Anthony King, ed., *The new American political system*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1978, pp. 87–124.

and networks of transnational connection.⁵ The case of the United States is not distinctive in the way in which new attention to the efficacy of global and transnational transmission systems of ideas and policies has reshaped the older, nation-bounded frame of its history. The flux and flow of policy models and agendas from one venue to another has been a constant across the modern world, as historians have now realized.

If there is weakness in the current stress on networks and exchange it is not to be found in its expansive, global framing. It is the risk that, in stressing communication, motion, and connectivity, in stressing the fluidity of models and influences, we may be led to emphasize only the voluntary side of the movement of social policies from one venue to another. One of the points that sceptics have levied against the turn towards transnational history is that its emphasis on motion and exchange unconsciously mirrors and reinforces the ideology of contemporary neoliberalism – that it maps a world made up only of choice, possibilities, adaptations, and flexibilities. It understates how much of social policy transfer in modern history has been the work not of communication but of direct and indirect coercion.

A powerful mode of policy export has been conquest: policy transfer in the wake of a victorious army. One thinks of the massive imprint of Napoleonic social policies on early nineteenth-century Europe, or of Soviet forms of political and social administration on central and eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. Even more widespread as agents of coercive policy transfer have been empires: factories of social policy production and communication that were saturated by power. Social policies not only moved from imperializing nations to be imposed, sometimes with high and brutal certainty, on the subjects of the empires. There was also, as Ulrike Lindner's discussion of infant health policies in German and British Africa emphasizes, a good deal of social learning between the empires.⁶ At still other times, empires served as laboratories for policies that, having a freer field for experimentation in the colonies, were then brought back home, in the process that Paul Kramer has called imperialism's reflex action. The agencies of modern internationalism have been engines of coercion as well, sometimes by directly imposing standards of labour or human rights as a condition for international trade and recognition; at other times by reshaping the social policy norms against which aspiring regimes have found themselves assessed and respected.⁷

Social scientists looking at the contemporary world of social policy transfer often make a distinction between four different dynamics involved in the adoption of another nation's

5 Mary Nolan, *The transatlantic century: Europe and America, 1890–2010*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Emily S. Rosenberg, ed., *A world connecting, 1870–1945*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012; Ian Tyrrell, 'Reflections on the transnational turn in United States history: theory and practice', *Journal of Global History*, 4, 3, 2009, pp. 453–74; Gary W. Reichard and Ted Dickson, eds., *America on the world stage: a global approach to U.S. history*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008; Thomas Bender, *A nation among nations: America's place in world history*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

6 Ulrike Lindner, 'The transfer of European social policy concepts to tropical Africa, 1900–50: the example of maternal and child welfare', in this issue, pp. 208–31.

7 Paul A. Kramer, *The blood of government: race, empire, the United States, and the Philippines*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006; Matthew Connelly, *Fatal misconception: the struggle to control world population*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008; Rob Konkel, 'The monetization of global poverty: the concept of poverty in World Bank history, 1944–90', in this issue, pp. 276–300.

policy or policy idea: *emulation*, the desire to bring a nation's institutions up to the standards of model or competitor nations; *harmonization*, the drive to synchronize a nation's institutions with that of others in order to facilitate trade or investment or administrative efficiency; the force of professional-dominated *issue networks*, with which historians are most familiar; and *penetration*, by which they mean the coercive rules of international lenders, military occupiers, proconsuls, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank officials, and the like.⁸ None of these can be understood independently of the fields of power that gave them efficacy and, at the same time, bounded their work.

The problem of patterns

In this article, however, I want to focus on a different question that the very success of the global history of social policy has raised, and that is the problem of patterns in this world of adaptation and exchange. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as these articles re-emphasize, social policy ideas were almost riotously abundant. They moved through the formal and informal issue networks with great rapidity and often with great power and important consequence. At times, they took the form of sharp shifts in policy direction, as in Meiji Japan, where the new government literally began in a grand tour of the institutions of the US and Europe, instructing the caretakers it left behind not to make any permanent moves until the group returned, and ultimately importing thousands of foreign experts to advise on the reform of its schools, military institutions, police and civil service, labour legislation, transportation, and courts and constitution. Even in less striking contexts, the movement of policies and policy ideas across borders has formed a part of the everyday fabric of governance. The problem is not in identifying these instances or tracing out the networks of communication involved. The problem is that the processes seem so chaotic, the choices so random, the movement of ideas and attention so incoherent.

This is the conclusion of much of the current social science work on contemporary policy transfer and diffusion. What those with access to precise, present-day evidence show is that the process of adapting other nations' policies almost never begins with a systematic canvassing of the field of possibilities. There are, in fact, agencies that take the systematic collection of policy information across borders as their field of work. But even in the contemporary era of international standards and norms, these rarely have a determinative effect on the formation of policy movements. The effective agents are typically small handfuls of individuals strategically placed in the policy-making apparatus – policy entrepreneurs, as they are called – who catch hold of a policy idea through less formal channels. That idea is rarely subject to close comparison with other, potentially adaptable alternatives. Rationality is 'bounded'. If this is 'social learning', as some analysts persist in calling it, it is vastly more informal and accidental, shot through with more chance

8 Frank Dobbin, Beth Simmons, and Geoffrey Garrett, 'The global diffusion of public policies: social construction, coercion, competition, or learning?', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33, 2007, pp. 449–72; Jonathan M. Miller, 'A typology of legal transplants: using sociology, legal history, and Argentine examples to explain the transplant process', *American Journal of Comparative Law*, 51, 4, 2003, pp. 839–85; Colin J. Bennett, 'What is policy convergence and what causes it?', *British Journal of Political Science*, 21, 2, 1991, pp. 215–34.

and coincidence, than the kind of learning that universities imagine they foster in tutorial and seminar.⁹

The rarity of systematic search sets the tone, in this literature, for the haphazardness of the policy-making process as a whole. Problems do not occasion the careful design of policy solutions. Solutions circulate independently through the circuits of exchange, connecting, at times, with those problems to which they might be imagined to be suited, and with policy figures who sense political advantage in making that match. Policies may acquire the power of fads and fashion; policy ‘bandwagoning’, as John Ikenberry calls it, breaks out, as deregulation did in the United States in the late 1970s, moving quickly from cases where it was carefully engineered to others where it had barely been worked out at all, to a generalized political goal, and, finally, to a world-circulating policy recommendation. The same could be said of the privatization of state enterprises in the late 1970s and after. There are tipping points in the history of policy formation. Windows of opportunity open and close quickly and arbitrarily. Public attention bears down tightly on certain policy domains and schemes, only then to shift and wander. The field of politics now seems far more strewn with chance than it did twenty years ago, when strong notions of path dependency and of state and social structures drove it.¹⁰

The policy-exporting industries have grown exponentially since the period on which the articles in this issue focus. Governments, international NGOs, transnationally linked think tanks, and international agencies now press models on nation-state policy-makers with an intensity unknown before. When the Soviet systems in eastern Europe and the former USSR disintegrated after 1989, an extraordinary number of agents rushed into the void with advice, conditionalities, and pre-packaged policy schemes – the European Union, the American Bar Foundation, the Ford and Soros Foundations, the World Bank and the IMF, the German, French, and US governments being the heaviest institutional players.¹¹ Neoliberal economic and social policies, human rights, and trade liberalization all have powerful institutional backers. But as the vectors of potential influence have grown denser and more complex, while evidence of rational

9 Harold Wolman, ‘Understanding cross national policy transfers: the case of Britain and the US’, *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, 5, 1, 1992, pp. 27–45; Joel Best, ed., *How claims spread: cross-national diffusion of social problems*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2001; Christoph Conrad, ‘Social policy after the transnational turn’, in Pauli Kettunen and Klaus Petersen, eds., *Beyond welfare state models: transnational historical perspectives on social policy*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011, pp. 218–40; Kurt Weyland, *Bounded rationality and policy diffusion: social sector reform in Latin America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

10 Etel Solingen, ‘Of dominoes and firewalls: the domestic, regional, and global politics of international diffusion’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 56, 4, 2012, pp. 631–44; John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1984; G. John Ikenberry, ‘The international spread of privatization policies: inducements, learning, and “policy bandwagoning”’, in Ezra N. Suleiman and John Waterbury, eds., *The political economy of public sector reform and privatization*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990, pp. 88–110; Martha Derthick and Paul J. Quirk, *The politics of deregulation*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1985; John T. S. Keeler, ‘Opening the window for reform: mandates, crises, and extraordinary policy-making’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 25, 4, 1993, pp. 433–86; David P. Dolowitz and David Marsh, ‘Learning from abroad: the role of policy transfer in contemporary policy-making’, *Governance*, 13, 1, 2000, pp. 5–23; Zachary Elkins and Beth Simmons, ‘On waves, clusters, and diffusion: a conceptual framework’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 598, 2005, pp. 33–51.

11 Gianmaria Ajani, ‘By chance and prestige: legal transplants in Russia and eastern Europe’, *American Journal of Contemporary Law*, 43, 1, 1995, pp. 93–117; Jacques deLisle, ‘Lex Americana? United States legal assistance, American legal models, and legal change in the post-communist world and beyond’, *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Economic Law*, 20, 2, 1999, pp. 179–308; Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin, and Geoffrey Garrett, eds., *The global diffusion of markets and democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

policy search and comparative policy analysis is much harder to find than chance and occasion, many of those who now study contemporary policy transfers have shied away from trying to sort out this cacophony of voices, from asking how these networks were organized, what they carried, how they competed with one another, or which kinds of transnational policy recommendations were capable of institutional translation and which were not. Instead, many have turned back to nation-centred analysis, to argue that internal elites shape their international borrowing strategies to their own ends and internal needs in order to get what they essentially wanted all along. Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth call this the ‘internationalization of palace wars’, and their stress is not on cross-border traffic but on the structures and competing interests already in place.¹²

Historians of the movement of social policies across borders have begun to map expansive new worlds of communication and exchange. But in their demonstration of fluidity, ubiquity, and chanciness in transnational policy exchange, in their demonstration of the capacity of its networks to carry such varied products and to result in such varied outcomes, their work may not turn out to challenge the focus on the nation as a self-contained political institution as much as we might hope.

Narratives and policy clusters

A more pointed question may help push back against that critique of incoherence: why do social policies so frequently cross borders not one by one – each as a best fit to a given problem, as rational-actor assumptions might have it – but in clusters? The phenomenon is familiar. Model cities, such as Glasgow in the early twentieth century, and model nations, such as Kwame Nkruma’s Ghana or the Shah’s Iran, become emulative not simply for this or that social policy development but across a wide range of different and sometimes only marginally related social policies. Analogies bind distant sites together that might, under closer examination, fall apart along the seams of their dissimilarities. Policy ideas and innovations themselves come in baggy clusters, often more coherent in export than on the formative ground, and held together by something looser than ideological coherence or practical reason. The American New Deal is only one of many cases in point.

Part of the reason for these clustering effects is that the networks that carry social policy ideas and proposals across borders are always markedly asymmetrical. There were overwhelmingly more social scientists in the turn-of-the-century United States who had been educated in the German universities than had been educated in the more insular university system in Britain or the more state-dependent universities in France, and the results weighed heavily on policy formation in the United States in the Progressive Era.¹³ After the Second World War, in turn, the power and prestige of the graduate schools of the United States made them magnets for ambitious social science students across great stretches of the globe. These sojourns formed nodes in networks that were often lasting and consequential. Within the post-war Soviet sphere, Moscow and its sister showcase cities drew social travellers from across the non-aligned world. Model nations cast powerfully rays

12 Yves Dezalay and Bryant G. Garth, *The internationalization of palace wars: lawyers, economists, and the contest to transform Latin American states*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

13 Dorothy Ross, *The origins of American social science*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

of influence across their regions. Networks, in short, are weighted and asymmetrical. They constitute systems of prestige and power and mutual advancement as well as communication. It is a rare network that is not anchored, tangibly and specifically, somewhere.

There is a second aspect to the clustering phenomenon, however, and that is that what the networks of policy communication carry is not simply an array of projects and plans, or prefabricated responses to perceived social problems. They convey not only agendas and social diagnoses, policy frames, or even ideologies. Beyond the rhetorical tools and discursive frames that some political science investigators of social policy formation have begun to emphasize, they carry something looser and more broadly generative.¹⁴ They carry stories. They surround everything that moves successfully through them with narratives and social fictions. It is by virtue of those narratives that social policies become transportable, that something embedded in one place – with all the legal, institutional, historical, and administrative specificity that that entails – can travel elsewhere. Homologies, creation stories, oppositional dyads, before-and-after vistas, metaphors, and narrative logics – these are not the only things that travel through these border-crossing networks, but they form a powerful part of it.

The example of ‘socialized’ Germany

An illustration of the way in which narratives can concentrate and cluster social policy appropriations may help to make the larger phenomenon clearer. A case in point was the way in which a braid of stories about the social politics of imperial Germany cast an exceptionally powerful influence on American progressive social policy construction between the 1890s and 1914. Germany was the not the only nation that American progressives looked to during these years. The era was shot through with an increasingly nervous sense that the political and economic institutions of the mid nineteenth-century United States were no longer adequate to the economic conditions and social strains of high industrial capitalism and, in response, with active policy scavenging for the best practical progressive proposals that the world had to offer. But the central role of imperial Germany in the imaginations of American progressives caught up in the early twentieth-century transnational networks of policy debate is unmistakable. German models of social provision and social insurance, German models of administration and bureaucratic efficiency, German models of city design and conservation forestry poured into the United States in the Progressive Era.¹⁵

And this took place despite handicaps that might have been imagined to have cut off this circulation from the outset. Few of the American players in these networks were German immigrants or children of German immigrants. The socialist movement in the early twentieth-century United States had, indeed, a very heavy German inflection, but those who moved in the circles of progressive politics rarely had family ties to Germany. German universities opened their doors far wider to American students in the natural and social

14 On discursive frames, see Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox, eds., *Ideas and politics in social science research*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Deborah Stone, *Policy paradox: the art of political decision making*, rev. edition, New York: Norton, 2002; Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston, ‘What a good idea! Ideologies and frames in social movement research’, *Mobilization*, 4, 1, 2000, pp. 37–54.

15 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic crossings: social politics in a progressive age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; Axel R. Schäfer, *American progressives and German social reform, 1875–1920: social ethics, moral control, and the regulatory state in a transatlantic context*, Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2000.

sciences than did the closed corporations of the elite British university system. Nevertheless, the broadest avenues of communication through books, journalism, and travel ran to England not Germany. So did the lines of emulation for turn-of-the-century American imperialists.

Germany was not only distant territory in regard to language and culture; it was still more alien territory politically. The United States in the late nineteenth century was a flawed republic (the massive constitutional disfranchisement of black voters in the US South was just underway in 1890; it would be complete by 1908), but it was a republic nonetheless. Late nineteenth-century Germany, by contrast, was presided over by the most glittering emperor in Europe; the republican elements in its political constitution were weak and its aristocratic ones overwhelming. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote of it as a nation ‘clad in spurs and shoulder straps’, where the ‘all-pervading government works about and around the new-comer, with a military precision’. And yet here was Du Bois writing enthusiastically of imperial Berlin as ‘the best governed city on earth’.¹⁶ Here was Frederic Howe, veteran of progressive municipal politics in Ohio, later a central figure in labour-left politics in the United States, writing in the 1910s of ‘socialized Germany’ as the reform model for the world.¹⁷

Part of what made a sense of analogy between the American republic and the German empire possible for progressive admirers of imperial Germany was a narrative about both countries as young, just emerging as unified nation-states through the furnace of war. But it was, still more, a story about contrasts that clustered these policy imports together. The story turned on a nested set of terms – ‘society’, the ‘social’, and their synonyms – that pervaded American commentaries on Germany. In Germany, one of the American students remembered of his Berlin years, the ‘individual man is regarded ... as a member of a great organism’.¹⁸ There, Du Bois wrote, ‘socialism’ was pervasive, not in the sense of working-class socialism, which he barely noticed during his two-year stay in 1890s Germany, but in the sense of a consuming interest, from the emperor down, in the social and industrial interests of the people. The terms ran through descriptions of German municipal governance: the efficiency of its administration and the extent of its municipal enterprises and services. They ran strongly through accounts of German social policy as well: the new experiments in social insurance legislation, the provisions for tramp workers, and the ventures in subsidized housing. All were gathered up under the rubric of the ‘social’.

What made this effective as a policy narrative was the stark contrast embedded in the story between the civic and social ideals that American progressives were drawn to abroad and the pervasive individualism of which they were so critical in the United States. American society was anarchic, it was said, torn apart by the unrestrained ambitions of aggressive capital, crippled by the weakness of its public agencies, unable to imagine a politics larger than mere property rights. What one learned about society in America, Garrett Droppers wrote, seemed terribly ‘thin’ compared to discussions in Germany.¹⁹ The two parts of the story fitted together, ordered in the Americans’ minds as a historical progression. Socially and

16 W. E. B. Du Bois, ‘The present condition of German politics’ (1893), *Central European History*, 31, 3, 1998, p. 171; W. E. B. Du Bois, ‘Some impressions of Europe’, c.1894, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

17 Frederic C. Howe, *Socialized Germany*, New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1915.

18 William C. Dreher, ‘German experiments with the land tax’, *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 35, March 1907, p. 334.

19 Garrett Droppers, response to a 1906 survey by Henry W. Farnam, Farnam Family Papers, Yale University.

politically, the United States was trapped in the archaic individualism of the eighteenth century, in a formal, rights-centred understanding of democracy that was increasingly unsuited to and incapable of reacting responsibly to the collective, social forces of the new age.

Stories such as these are shaped, like gnarls in the grain of a tree, by the way in which they surround and manage the inconvenient and intrusive. To imagine the thrust of world history as moving beyond the thin, formal, excessively individualist democracy of the past to a thicker, more socialized democracy of functions was a way of understanding the lessons of imperial Germany that pushed past its authoritarian elements as minor threads in a larger story of worldwide, practical democratic progress. Hanging on to that story was not easy. American admirers of German social policies struggled to hold a coherent narrative together. A common effort was to break imperial Germany into two: to set off the army and the Junker class as reactionary and anachronistic, radically removed from the forces of progressive history sweeping through the German cities. These tales of Germany's radical twoness were highly vulnerable to their critics, as the outbreak of war in 1914 made clear. There is barely a word written by an American on early twentieth-century Germany that is not saturated with some ambivalence.

But powerful narratives are rarely simple moral tales. What the story of a progressive Germany – emerging not only out of the blood and iron of the German past but also out of the brittle, anarchic, individualism of the eighteenth century – did was to bundle together pieces of social policy that had radically different origins and forms of administration and join them together as expressions of democracy's new social consciousness. The social insurance innovations of the 1880s, unlinked from the project of political repression which had helped fuel them; the new city-planning ambitions of the German urban elites; the state-owned railways, canals, and forests; the labour arbitration courts; the socially tiered system of education from vocational schools up to the great public universities; the experiments in municipal utility ownership and public subsidies for low-cost housing – all this was wrapped into a common story of advancing social consciousness. The homologues marched in ordered rhetorical array. Progressives could move from one to another without pausing to ask exactly who was served by each of these ingredients, or how the fierce play of competing interests had produced their compromised outcomes. They could all be framed within a general movement from thin to thick, anarchic individualism to social and civic consciousness.

This was not what we think of as an ideology, a deeply structured way of understanding history and politics. It was constructed by stringing together its very particularities, and it was capable of being shattered when those particularities cracked and shifted. But it was the way in which this narrative surrounded and enfolded these diverse social policy measures that helps explain their clustered movement onto the agenda of American social politics. When, one by one, each of these came into US social policy practice during the twentieth century – city planning boards, vocational schools, social security, labour mediation systems, even, during the First World War, state-run railways, and the rest – pieces of that narrative trailed with them, connected them, made them seem the course of progressive history.

Stories and social action

Stories of this sort organize social action. Working by association, implication, and analogy, by foreshortening time and by collapsing the distance between the specific and the general, narratives can make policy measures portable, extractable for purposes far beyond their

points of origin. They can block as well as facilitate the processes of policy transfer, freezing some forms of social action in narratives of local particularity. They may run aground on incommensurable and ambiguous social concepts such as 'labour' or 'family' or 'welfare'. But they may also translate across gulfs of culture, history, and political context that might be otherwise unbridgeable. And by simplifying and reframing the search process, they may sharply concentrate and delimit its attention. Policy-clustering is one of the potential products.

Stories of this generative sort are not all structured in the same way. Some turn on axes of time, such as the fiction of New Zealand as a 'younger' Britain that helped sell New Zealand's old age pension scheme to British advocates of more adequate old age security, as Edmund Rogers shows in this volume.²⁰ Some turn on the narrative of a 'clean slate' from which the past has been erased overnight. Revolutionary stories work in this way, with powerful export effects. Stories built around the trope of the clean slate can work in non-revolutionary conditions as well, as demonstrated by the way in which neoliberals turned accounts of social insurance privatization in Chile in the 1970s into policy exports for the globe. Extracted from the conditions of military governance in which they originated, they were effectively repackaged as the achievement of a nation which had left the false start of the Beveridge-modelled welfare state behind.²¹

A third variant on the themes of time is supplied by stories of restoration, powerfully active now across sites as far flung as the rural United States and the nations of the Islamic world. They propagate social visions of purity and return, of sexual propriety and manly value. That they are almost always partially fictional versions of the past, streamlining its jagged edges and contingencies, bundling together family and social policies with highly diverse origins in time and political context, only energizes and propels their exportability.

As with time, analogues form a second powerful axis upon which social policy narratives may be structured. In this case, one imagined case subsumes and overwhelms the others. Thus, for many British imperial policy-makers, as Ulrike Lindner shows, a story about London – with its seemingly fearful population degradation, its negligent mothers, and its neglected infants – became a controlling policy narrative for central Africa, shunting aside the effects of extractive labour and imperial economic policies as if they were beside the public welfare experts' proper point of consciousness.²² Other examples of the tyranny of a powerfully framed analogy will quickly come to mind. On the communist left, the search through the shifting mazes of working-class organization for analogues to the Bolsheviks of 1917 was long an obsession of labour policy and politics. Urban planners have rarely had great city analogues out of the dominant centre of their mind's eye as they have mapped variants of Paris or Rome across often recalcitrant stretches of the globe. Policy-makers at the World Bank in the 1970s, collapsing the widely varying populations and circumstances of the poor into a single monetary measure analogous across the globe, eased the addition of poverty onto the Bank's agenda, as Rob Konkel demonstrates.²³

20 Edmund Rogers, 'A "most imperial" contribution: New Zealand and the old age pensions debate in Britain, 1898–1912', in this issue, pp. 189–207.

21 Juan Gabriel Valdés, *Pinochet's economists: the Chicago school in Chile*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Sebastian Edwards, *Crisis and reform in Latin America: from despair to hope*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Paul Craig Roberts and Karen LaFollette Araujo, *The capitalist revolution in Latin America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; Aiqun Hu and Patrick Manning, 'The global social insurance movement since the 1880s', *Journal of Global History*, 5, 1, 2010, pp. 125–48.

22 Lindner, 'Transfer'.

23 Konkel, 'Monetization'.

In still other cases, fictions may in and of themselves drive social policy construction. This is the point that Teyhun Ma emphasizes in describing the way in which a story about modernity helped convince national Chinese planners in the 1940s that an aspiring nation required a Beveridge Plan, even if it were universally conceded to consist only of words on paper. Human rights policy declarations in our own day often serve much the same purpose, as their architects hope that a broadly enough shared fiction about civility may bring about its own policy realization. Ma shows that to speak in fictions on the global stage was not necessarily to speak ineffectually; it was also to play a part where the politics of narrative and performance mattered.²⁴

In none of these cases, as this issue's articles demonstrate, were stories the only propulsive force in the circulation of policies across borders. Sponsors, institutional funding, and windows of political possibility all played indispensable roles. So did alignments of domestic institutions and pressure groups. Differently organized systems of state and economy offered radically different possibilities for cross-border traffic in social policy formations. But the power of stories helps to explain an important part of the clustering effects that are so striking a part of social policy's history.

Conclusions

In the twenty years since the history of social policy transfer came of age, several trends may be observed. The first and overwhelmingly most important has been extension of the global reach of the subject. The field's centre of gravity still clings to the North Atlantic and the nations that at the beginning of the twentieth century found themselves, suddenly, at the cutting edge of the new accumulations of capital and industry. 'Social policy' was a term of their invention. But the scope of transnational social policy history has dramatically widened with the growth of global history itself. The interplay of policies across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Near East is now widely recognized. The intersection of policy history with histories of both formal and informal empires has become a pressing field of investigation. Social policy transfer under conditions of economic globalization – whether in an era of coerced labour and commodity flows, or in the modern age of mobile capital, labour migrants, and refugees – beckons as a field. Space in the history of social policy, as Julia Moses and Martin Daunton emphasize in their introduction to this volume, has become more extensive, important, and challenging to social policy historians.

A second trend has been a growing focus on the work of international organizations. Important case studies of bi-national policy transfer and influence continue. Regionally extended policy regimes (the 'Nordic welfare state', the social politics of Latin America's southern cone, the regimes of *sharia* law) offer important cases for closer examination.²⁵ Much of the field's energy in recent years, however, has moved to the post-First World War and post-Second World War agencies of international organization: the International Labour

24 Teyhun Ma, "The common aim of the Allied Powers": social policy and international legitimacy in wartime China, 1940–47, in this issue, pp. 254–75; E. M. Hafner-Burton, 'Human rights in a globalizing world: the paradox of empty promises', *American Journal of Sociology*, 110, 5, 2005, pp. 1373–1411.

25 Gösta Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990; Nicola Phillips, *The southern cone model: the political economy of regional capitalist development in Latin America*, London: Routledge, 2004; Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Shari'a politics: Islamic law and society in the modern world*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011.

Organization, the IMF, the World Health Organization, and their counterparts. Whether this turn towards more formally organized systems of policy influence is due to the growing importance of these agencies in contemporary times, to the transparency of the networks they created, or simply to the accessibility of their records, is not so clear. One effect, however, has been to turn the main spotlights of attention away from the amateurs and popular social movement organizers who, in the days when the historians of transnational social feminism helped pioneer the field of transnational social policy history, once occupied its central arena. More prominent now are bureaucratic elites and social policy experts. Figures such as these were quintessential network operators, scanning, collecting, and putting into circulation great reams of social information. Focus on their work helps to foreground the search and deliberation aspects of social policy transfer and to clarify their importance.

But at this juncture the next move may be to revive the presence of power in the study of policy-making across borders. Reconnecting the history of transnational politics and transnational social movements with the history of policy construction is part of that task. Workers' movements, religious and moral revitalization movements, business and trade associations, environmental movements, political-ideological movements, environmental and feminist movements, empire-making and human rights movements, traditionalist and moral revitalization movements all worked across national boundaries with powerful effects.²⁶ Social policy was as much their co-production as it was the product of social science knowledge and expertise. Historians would know much more about relations across these levels of action if social policy histories and social movement histories were not so routinely sorted out into separate specializations, each with its distinctive questions, preoccupations, and political-academic temperaments.

In all these ways, the field may see a return to questions of power: not only in its more naked forms but in its more subtle, epistemologically framing, forms as well. For, in the last instance, networks and narratives, too, are both produced by and producers of power. Effective as they are as transmitters of data and designs, networks are not merely systems of circulation through which policy choices flow, one by one, as polities look for the best 'fit' and the most reasoned solutions. Networks mobilize resources. They construct and transfer prestige. They normalize and often they coerce. And, finally, they carry stories across borders: narratives whose distinctive power to propel and cluster, to etch patterns on the welter of possibilities in motion, is worthy of our close attention.

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26 Doug McAdams and Dieter Rucht, 'The cross-national diffusion of movement ideas', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 528, 1993, pp. 56–74; Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *Transnational protest and global activism*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005; Leon Fink, ed., *Workers across the Americas: the transnational turn in labor history*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.