

democrats, point to his death from AIDS as somehow proof of his amoral, Nietzschean philosophy. Yet they fail to examine his quest closely enough. Foucault never saw death as his enemy. Rather, he argued that the failure to find beauty in death reveals an inability to discover beauty in our lives. In his language, death is the ultimate "limit experience." If our death is the paramount moment of our life, the answer to the enigmas posed in our previous "limit experiences" through which we hope to intimate what life is, ought we not cast it as beautifully as possible? The contemplation of a beautiful death meant the embrace of the idea of suicide. "I am a partisan of a true cultural struggle [to] teach people that there is not a piece of conduct more beautiful, or, consequently, more worthy of careful thought than suicide," he wrote. "One should work on

one's suicide throughout one's life."

Suicide, to most Americans, denotes a failure of will, a failure to order our emotions, our desperations. Foucault's message is the reverse. Since we all contemplate our death as the omega point of our lives, the consummation of our flesh, the release from our torturous aggressions, it behooves us to create a theater of our end. For him, for many of us, that is the theater of the darkened labyrinth in the sex club, that alley of aroused, anonymous, animal flesh, a collective production of what the French call *le petit mort*, the little death. To my Catholic friend, I would say the pursuit of the inside of the little death is the pursuit of the bigger life. While it may be anonymous and it may use sex as sacrament, it is hardly inhuman. To be fully human requires that we find a theater in life that permits us to shed the safe

and watchful security of personal order, even of personal intimacy, in favor of "cruel" transcendence.

As for AIDS, Michel Foucault took the epidemic very seriously, not as something to be sought out (as the pop psychologists would have it), but as a collective experience he would use to press further into the enigmas of death and eros. Those who see Foucault's final trips to the baths and the S/M parlors as desperately suicidal miss the essence of the man (and they misunderstand the disease since it takes years, not months, to move from infection to illness). It is much wiser to see those journeys, as he did, as working studies for the remaking of the body and the spirit. Or, as Foucault remarked to one of his Berkeley colleagues, "To die for the love of boys: What could be more beautiful?" □

BOOK REVIEW

Mothers and Children First

Nelson Lichtenstein

Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States by Theda Skocpol. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993, 693 pp.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton made the inadequacy of America's welfare state a centerpiece of his attack on the Reagan-Bush economic record. In contrast to virtually all other advanced industrial nations, the United States has no universal health care system and no federally mandated program of worker retraining. Meanwhile, U.S. assistance to the jobless, whether in the form of "welfare" or unemployment compen-

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sation, remains far less than that offered citizens in other industrial nations. Clinton's willingness to weigh American social policies on such a comparative scale proved refreshingly cosmopolitan, perhaps even a signal to the shrunken liberal-labor wing of the Democratic Party that the Arkansas governor was a stealth social democrat.

Of course, President Clinton is not the first U.S. policy maker who wants this country to catch up to Western Europe. The failure of the nation to offer a modern system of social provision has been at the center of political and social debate for almost a century. Historians and social scientists have long been puzzled by the fact that political elites in such class-bound societies as Edwardian Britain and Bismarck's Germany instituted old-age pensions, health insurance and unemployment insurance more than a generation earlier than did their counterparts in

democratic America. "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" asked the German academic Werner Sombart in 1906. His query is still relevant, although today scholars and policy makers are less interested in the absence of an actual socialist movement than with the political and institutional obstacles American society puts in the path of social reforms that might eliminate poverty and ameliorate class tensions.

In *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol answers Sombart in a perceptive but highly controversial fashion. According to Skocpol, the United States has not lagged behind Europe at all, for, by the early twentieth century, the American polity was well on its way toward embracing a distinctively "maternalist" system of social provision. Reformers and feminists came close to forging a female-dominated welfare

apparatus in which advocacy groups such as the Consumer's League and public agencies such as the Children's Bureau implemented regulations and benefits targeted at mothers, working women, and children. Their achievement has been largely obscured by our envious fixation with the European, "paternalist" model, in which male bureaucrats administer regulations and social insurance for breadwinning industrial workers. In the United States, however, the maternalist idea has seemed less alien and won far more political support than its social democratic rival.

Indeed, the Clinton brand of social reform seems particularly "maternalist." Marian Wright Edelman's Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is clearly making its weight felt in the corridors of power; both Hillary Rodham Clinton and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala are veteran CDF activists. Such traditional social democratic reforms as labor law revision and a higher minimum wage stand far down on the administration's agenda, but the Family and Medical Leave Act passed Congress in a flash. And President Clinton has proposed big funding increases for such CDF priorities as infant immunization, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program, and Headstart. To Clinton and Clinton the prototypical American worker may well be the hard-pressed working woman who juggles career, checkbook, and children in a barely successful effort to keep her modern family intact.

To understand why a maternalist road to the welfare state has proven so attractive, Skocpol takes pains to explain how the path toward a European-style alternative was blocked. In the late nineteenth century the United States did have the embryo of a paternalist welfare state: the Civil War pension system, which served as a crude but effective counterpart to the old-age insurance schemes of Germany, Britain, and New Zealand. Skocpol labels it a "precocious spending regime" on which the federal government spent more than 40 percent of its income, a higher proportion than Social Security takes today. For Northern white males of a certain generation, the government pension check was a virtual entitlement.

Benefits were generous, but eligibility depended upon a set of political, moral, and geographical criteria, not

unlike that of welfare recipients today. Thus, scandal and corruption were inherent in the system; just as some contemporary pundits find it easy to denounce teenage mothers and inner-city "welfare queens," so too did their nineteenth-century counterparts regularly uncover the cheats and schemers of that era's pension system.

The politicized character of Civil War pensions—a key element in the "patronage democracy" of that era—soured a generation of reformers on the idea that the state could effectively deliver social services. Unlike Germany or Britain, the United States had no elite corps of bureaucrats standing above the ebb and flow of partisan politics. Thus, even the most advanced Progressives, whose outlook and social standing were not dissimilar to that of such architects of the British welfare state as Sidney Webb and William Beveridge, hesitated to advance a universal system of old-age pensions.

The trade union road toward a European-style welfare state has been no less problematic. Today, liberals and leftists assume that whatever their other limitations, organized labor has been in the forefront of this struggle. After all, the AFL-CIO began pushing for some kind of universal health insurance even before Harry Truman first took on the American Medical Association in 1948. But labor has actually been a comparatively recent recruit to this struggle. During the era of Eugene Debs and Samuel Gompers, unions left and right had little confidence in a more expansive and powerful American state. Labor had no problem with patronage democracy, but its leaders feared the power of the courts, then a bulwark of *laissez-faire* economics and Lockean constitutionalism.

Skocpol brilliantly explores how America's uniquely independent and reactionary judiciary not only curbed social experimentation, but also shaped the ideological character of the reform impulse itself. In Great Britain, the Trade Union Congress, the Liberal Party, and the progressive wing of the civil service worked together to lay the basis for the great social reforms of 1908 and 1909, including old-age pensions, minimum wage boards, and unemployment insurance. But, in the United States, the judiciary made the legislative road to social provision virtually impassible, at least for male breadwinners. The AFL did endorse

old-age insurance: the unions proposed an "Old Age Home Guard of the United States Army," modeled directly on an enlarged version of the Civil War pension system. But the AFL's disastrous experience with the judiciary turned its leadership into right-wing syndicalists, obsessed with freeing unions from judicial repression. Declared Cigarmakers' Union leader Adolph Strasser in 1894, "You can't pass an eight hour day without changing the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of every state in the Union...I am opposed to wasting our time declaring for legislation being enacted for a time...after we are all dead." To which socialist Henry Lloyd replied, "I sometimes wish I had been born in any other country than the United States. I am sick and tired of listening to lawyers and laboring men like Mr. Strasser declaring everything we ask unconstitutional."

But if the judiciary's veto closed the door on the paternalist welfare state, it kept it open a crack for the maternalist alternative. The law presupposed that capitalists and workers were equal citizens, but if women were dependent, or in any event different, then reformers might well find an opening in the judicial armor through which their forces could march. And it is precisely this path that Skocpol seeks to chart.

If the United States had neither an efficient civil service nor a powerful labor movement, it did nurture one of the largest and most assertive "woman movements" in the world. Thanks to the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the predominantly female settlement house movement, the idea of a "separate sphere" for women had become a template upon which to measure and enhance social change. The "separate spheres" ideology denied women formal civic equality, but it did legitimize an activist role for them and for the state, based on what Skocpol calls "solidarity between privileged and less privileged women and honor for values of caring and nurturance." Thus Skocpol quotes clubwoman Rheta Childe Dorr on "municipal housekeeping": "Once 'men and women divide the work of governing and administering, each according to his special capacities and natural abilities, [the city] will be like a great, well-ordered comfortable, sanitary household. Everything will be as

clean as in a good home. Everyone, as in a family, will have enough to eat, clothes to wear, and a good bed to sleep on."

Skocpol celebrates this maternalist impulse, defining and distorting it as the social force that could substitute on American shores for that social democratic project having great impact on the other side of the Atlantic. Just as European workers conflated a movement for trade union power, social welfare, and a broader suffrage, so too did Progressive-era women combine a quest for greater political participation with a "state-building" strategy that established female-oriented commissions, bureaus, and regulatory laws to aid working mothers and their children. Among the monuments to this project were the Brandeis brief of 1908 (which persuaded the Supreme Court of the constitutionality of maximum hours laws for women), mother's pension schemes passed by more than forty states, and the remarkable Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, which briefly united conservative clubwomen and left-wing feminists behind a federal program that operated nearly 3,000 prenatal clinics, thus challenging private physicians' monopoly on the delivery of health care services to women and babies.

Drawing from this pre-New Deal experience, Skocpol offers the wish that "hopeful scenarios for contemporary American social politics will become more likely... if feminists can learn to recapitulate in contemporary ways some of the best ideas and methods once used by the proponents of maternalist social policies."

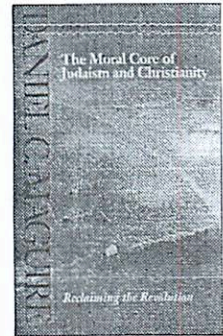
But she will be disappointed, and it's a good thing too. The problem with her maternalist schema is both historical and political. In the first instance, other students of the welfare state such as Gwendolyn Mink and Linda Gordon reject Skocpol's vision of an ideologically self-conscious, cross-class maternalist movement. Like the trade unions and the administrative elite, the Progressive-era women's movement was shot through with class and ethnic prejudice; virtuous motherhood (drawn from a Protestant, white, middle-class model) often became an excuse for condescending judgments. At the same time, the nineteenth-century doctrine of dual spheres was in radical decay among such welfare state pioneers as Florence Kelley, Jane Addams, and Grace Abbott, who understood

the nature of women's particular role in society, but whose outlook was solidly social democratic. While deploying maternalist rhetoric, they also aimed for a system of universal citizenship and class-wide social provision. One suspects that Hillary Rodham Clinton and Marian Wright Edelman have adopted much the same strategy. Certainly, it doesn't fool the "family values" Right, who recognize their liberal and feminist agenda.

Moreover, Skocpol's focus deflects attention from the more pervasive structures of American politics that have stymied the realization of a welfare state. The absence of a broad and powerful working-class movement on these shores may be a familiar tale, but it nevertheless remains a debilitating one. If, for example, one probes voting patterns at the height of the Progressive era, it is clear that the working-class franchise may well have been wider in Western Europe than the United States, where huge sections of the immigrant population and virtually all African Americans were without a vote. And the powerful congressional delegation that represented the interests of the Southern oligarchy waged a successful, half-century campaign, both at home and throughout the nation, to keep wages low, workers insecure, and racial and gender hierarchies intact.

Americans need a comprehensive welfare state, but a reborn maternalism will not deliver one by itself. It is hardly coincidental that such perspectives as Skocpol's have arisen during those decades—the 1920s, the 1950s, and the 1980s—when a hostile state and the absence of left-leaning social movements have thwarted egalitarian reform. When broader vistas opened up—in the 1930s and 1960s—American reformers again began fighting for a broad and inclusive citizenship, both social and political. This alternative—neither paternalist nor maternalist—generates an "entitlement" based not upon one's poverty or gender or occupation, but upon a minimum level of social provision due all by virtue of their residence within the same nation. Only such broadly inclusive programs avoid the invidious resentments and command the political support essential to their long-term legitimacy. These are lessons Bill, Hillary, and Donna should remember. □

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