Social Provisions and the Life of Civil Society in Europe: Rethinking Public and Private

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Studying the long-term history of systems of poor relief or mutual assistance – what I shall generally call "social provision" – provides an opportunity to understand commonalities and differences between early modern programs for the care of the poor and those that are more characteristic of modern welfare states. It also affords us the opportunity to observe the early emergence of an expansive sphere of public life in west European society in which programs were invented and implemented.

In a recent book, I argued that providing relief for the poor – especially those known as the "worthy," or the "house" poor – was critical to the community-building process across centuries of European history, from the small, face-to-face communities of the medieval world to the "imagined" communities of the emerging nation state.[1] I justified my focus on the "respectable" poor by my belief that the most recent generation of scholarship on the history of poor relief had privileged the study of the most impoverished and most fearsomely repressed elements of the poor of preindustrial Europe, those who had been marginalized or entirely excluded from entitlements to assistance reserved for those thought to be worthier.[2]

I located my study in European towns and cities because I believe that we can see most clearly there the growth of two important models of community that recurred periodically in the European past and that inform present circumstances as well. The two of most interest to me are a Christian or confessional model and a "civic" one. They are readily distinguishable from one another, as I will argue below, but in the life of towns and cities they frequently reinforced one another.

Indeed, some historians of early modern European towns, following the parlance of those whom they write about, often refer to "civic religion"[3] – an ethic that combined love of one's fellow citizens with the love of one's co-religionists. Values and practices of civic religion probably benefited the respectable or "worthy" poor, who could in many instances claim assistance in their place of residence on at least these two foundations. Indeed, it is a truism that the poor have historically benefited when their claims for assistance rest on multiple foundations of entitlement such as friendship, family bonds, neighborhood connections and membership in formal associations for mutual aid as well as bonds of religion or citizenship.[4] These two principal models of formal community building, as I argue, became familiar and, then, structural features of European culture and society, gradually shaping traditions of public life.

Although twentieth-century welfare states can arguably trace their genealogies back to the urban *civic* model of social provision, the religious model was, I argue, just as important or perhaps even more important in helping to create a public world for men and especially for women. Within this public world, which existed beyond the boundaries of domestic life but outside the realm of political authority, lay people gradually organized associations for their own protection and sometimes for assistance to the local poor.

In this paper, I draw on findings of my earlier study and marshal them to critique the distinction sometimes made between private and public efforts for the relief of the poor. I argue that characterizing its development from private to public forms from the medieval to the modern period does not accurately capture the history of social provisions. Second, I believe that historians need to enlarge

the notion of what is properly "public," and, in expanding its definition beyond the formal sphere of political authority, to include within it the life of "*civil society*." I try to show that that civil society emerged early in western Europe as evidenced by the flourishing of a rich variety of associations that often had mutual assistance and poor relief as part of their functions. These forms of association and sociability involved "private" individuals, yet the activities and consequences of those activities were eminently public, according to my enlarged definition. I suggest how and why it was that the public sphere of civil society developed so early and remained so vital across the centuries. Finally, I suggest that the study of urban systems of social provision provide a kind of pre-history of the modern welfare state that becomes obscured in the overuse of dichotomies between "private" and "public" programs or entitlements.

Models of Community-Building and the Problems of Social Provision

The creation of systems of social provisioning has been an integral part of the community-building process across the "longue durée" of European history. This fact was articulated best in the work of Abram de Swaan, who famously showed how systems of poor relief in communities of increasing geographic scale succeeded one another. Systems of poor relief, he argued, grew from the parish level, through more regional systems, finally culminating in modern welfare states. Membership boundaries of the communities whose members were linked together by entitlements to assistance thus expanded spatially as well as substantively. De Swaan suggested that social provisions have been an important tool for – not a consequence of – community formation.[5] My book tried to

illustrate this process empirically through a set of case studies beginning with medieval society and ending with the French Revolution. It differs from de Swaan's work, however, both by focusing more on the “respectable” poor and their entitlements, and in rejecting his social control explanation for the development of systems of social provisions – of which more will be discussed, below.

Integrating the history of “civil society” into the definition of the “public”

Although English-speaking writers have used the term civil society to refer to constituted society in contrast to a “state of nature,”[6] continental theorists such as Rousseau or Hegel saw civil society as a particular realm of modern life that they distinguished sharply from the life of citizens in the "public" realm, which they restricted to the realm of the state. For Hegel and Marx, life in civil society comprised the family and the economy – a world where “private” or selfish interests prevailed. Hegel contrasted this with the universalistic sphere of the modern state, where citizens' private interests were necessarily subordinated to the interest of the whole. It is arguably from this strand of continental thinking that we retain the notion that “public” is synonymous with formal political affairs of a centralized nation state. It is also, importantly, the source of the association of the term “public” with “disinterested,” “impartial,” or “for the common good” in contrast to “private,” meaning self-interested, selfish, or partial.[7]

Critics of this view, including myself, see civil society also as the realm of social life where solidarities may be built in the neighborhood, the workplace, and

formal associations – not merely as a sphere of competition, strife and inequality. According to this more benign view, civil society constitutes a realm of experience in which individuals form their personal networks and may have the freedom to found or join associations that they can sometimes use to improve their lives and perhaps even the lives of others.

Where did this "sphere" of civil society thusly conceived come from, and how does studying it help us to understand the history of social provision? My own work on poor relief suggests that what we now call civil society was the earliest-constituted realm of public life in western culture, and was in part an unintended by-product of key ethics and practices of medieval Christianity, including what I see as the "sociability project" of the church. By public, here, I mean *literally* public – civil society as a realm where individuals, both men and women, left a purely domestic or family sphere and entered into sustained, face-to-face relations with others who were not necessarily related by blood or marriage. It was the sphere in which programs for the relief of the poor and organizations for mutual assistance were formed. This space of civil society existed in both countryside and city, but grew more rapidly and became more elaborately filled with formal bonds of voluntary association in urban areas for reasons that are vital to an understanding of the history of social provision in the west. It was maintained and reinforced by several key, long-term features of Europe's religious, demographic, economic, and social circumstances.

Emphasizing the critical contribution of Christian culture and the church itself to the formation of European civil society will seem surprising to some, who consider that there was no civil society in Europe until the seventeenth or

eighteenth century, when forces of secularization brought on by the Enlightenment resulted in new forms of sociability and the emergence of what Jürgen Habermas famously termed the "bourgeois public sphere."[8]

Habermas developed the concept of the bourgeois public sphere to trace the emergence of networks of discussion, writing, and publication in European society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He and other scholars traced how groups of "private" individuals thereby forged a notion of themselves as the legitimate bearers of "public opinion," whose activity increasingly entailed a rational critique of the political status quo. The establishment of this bourgeois public sphere, Habermas argued, lay at the foundation of the development of liberal and democratic politics. The activities of private persons thus had vast public consequences. That Habermas's bourgeois public sphere emerged in Europe's cities was no accident.[9] For centuries, Europe's towns and cities had provided the main settings for patterns of associational life and sociability that formed the foundations for the eventual emergence of the bourgeois public sphere.

Despite sharing an interest in exploring public and private spheres and focusing on urban areas, however, my notion of public life and the focus of my analysis are quite different from those of Habermas and others responding to his work. First, while Habermas's definition of persons as "private" privileges their relation to the state, I extend the notion of public to people's roles in civil society.[10] My view of civil society emphasizes its public character, whereas Habermas conceived of it as an essentially private realm consisting of private individuals.[11] Third, my study of the public character of civil society highlights

the actual activities of ordinary people and is more socially inclusive than studies of the bourgeois public sphere, since the worlds of the street, the marketplace, and the parish have always been peopled by a broader cross-section of Europeans than the world of literary production and consumption that are privileged in analyses of the bourgeois public sphere.

What was the role of the church and of Christianity in opening up an early sort of public life in Europe? From the early medieval period onward, the church – as is well known – sought to insert its own power and ethics into all sorts of relationships among people, including kin groups, which in most other societies remained nearly entirely closed off from such important and organized external influence.[12] Its goals were various: to teach doctrine, control violence, increase its own wealth, and even to break down those forms of blood and kinship relations among the powerful that often underlay patterns of violence. With a model of "spiritual" kinship, exemplified by an unmarried clergy whose elite dwelt together in communities based upon these ties, the church provided powerful and practical *models* of community – ways that unrelated individuals of the laity might join together for their own mutual edification and/or charitable assistance. Formal voluntary associations such as confraternities, guilds, or residential communities of single and widowed lay women known as beguines or beatas – flourished in medieval and early modern towns of northern and southern Europe.[13] They involved huge proportions of urban lay people not only because of their association with dominant religious ideals of solidarity or ties of the spirit, but as solutions to very real problems of survival in urban settings.

Problems were caused by a demographic regime characterized by high levels of mortality, high levels of rural-to-urban migration by both women and men, and wage economies that experienced huge variations over the short and long term. These and several other features of urban areas made their populations particularly vulnerable to what Michael Anderson famously called "critical life situations" – risks of disease, disability, premature death, and unemployment, exacerbated for many in-migrants by the fact that they were often separated from their own kin on whom they might depend.[14]

What is more, research has shown that households of the common people of urban Europe were predominantly nuclear or two-generational in composition, a fact that may have made urban inhabitants even more vulnerable to the vagaries of everyday life. Peter Laslett's work on what he called the "nuclear hardship" hypothesis provides the theoretical link here between particular forms of family and household organization and the demand for assistance from sources that we can characterize as collective, community-based, or even public.[15] Laslett argued that the more an area was characterized by the nuclear household form, the more households and their members would be vulnerable to poverty in critical life situations. Since nuclear households were, he believed, less able than extended ones to spread risks among a large number of kin, their members would have to seek assistance from extra-familial sources. Thus, the need or *demand* for systems of social provisioning in towns and cities, from the medieval period onward.

What was less apparent in Laslett's work, and what my own work tried to do is to show, first, that the problems that Laslett associated with nuclear family

systems were in fact much more widespread in urban Europe than he imagined. Not only nuclear families but wealthy, extended families in regions of Europe known for their complex family forms also felt the need to establish extra-familial organizations for the care of the poor. These institutions sometimes focused on the vagrant or "unworthy" poor, but more generally on the care of the respectable poor, sometimes including certain members of their own kin. By founding and endowing places for the worthy poor, donors believed that they were fulfilling both private and public obligations – religious as well as civic ones.

In addition to generalizing more broadly from Laslett's theoretical work, which focused on ways that demographic and household systems helped structure the *demand* for assistance outside the kin group, my work also tried to show where the *supply* of associations came from – focusing on Christian or confessional, and civic models of community and social provisioning.

One highly successful kind of organization inspired by what I see as a Christian model of community building were urban lay confraternities, which varied widely by type and composition. Although confraternities seem to have originated in the medieval period from associations of clergy, the model was soon widely adopted by different sorts of lay people, with spiritual solidarity and goals of mutual assistance at their core. Confraternity members often worshipped together, cared for special chapels, and – very importantly – were very present for one another in the experiences of death and mourning. Confraternities of all types required dues, which excluded the poorest from them. And though a number of well-known studies have focused on the importance of large confraternities of patricians for the development of urban political life, lesser-

known groups created at the parish level brought together men and women of the middling ranks. Indeed, men and women often joined these latter groups as married couples.

Practices of charity seem also to have been central to confraternal life. Here, I noted that charity was considered first in its original Christian sense of creating bonds of love and solidarity among individuals (within the confraternity) who maintained face-to-face relations. A second form of charitable practice often grew out of these organizations, however, especially during shorter-term periods of economic distress or famine, and during periods of rising religious fervor to address the needs of the poor who were not themselves members. In many instances, outreach was restricted to assistance to the local poor or the so-called "shamefaced poor," who could be might be already linked to confraternity members by ties of family or neighborhood.

Women's participation in confraternal life in medieval towns and cities, and later in charitable efforts that proliferated during the Catholic Reformation, was particularly important in enhancing their public identities within civil society. European women's participation in these sorts of voluntary associations, when combined with their presence in wage labor markets, ensured that European urban women were never entirely restricted to a domestic sphere that was cut off from the public world.

By the time of the Protestant Reformation, of course, confraternities came under increasing criticism from many who saw their activities as entirely self-regarding. Observers such as Martin Luther mainly criticized urban confraternities – particularly the wealthiest ones – not only for their faulty

theology of a "treasury of grace," held jointly by confraternity members but also for ignoring the needs of local, worthy poor. For him and for many other urban reformers – both Catholic and Protestant – the restoration of solidarity required breaking down the intensive bonds that linked confraternity members to one another and substituting for them renewed bonds of a wider Christian community. The creation of local poor relief systems based on the idea of a community chest could serve as a tool for creating this more extensive model of an urban Christian community.

The process of European confessionalization that followed and the religious rivalries, forced migrations, and warfare that characterized it often illustrated the critical importance of poor relief in creating new communities of belief with new spatial and theological boundaries. Provision to the worthy poor proved critical to the solidarity of members of different denominations-in-the-making. Indeed, a major determinant of the success of different confessions was their success in taking care of "their" own poor.

The Christian model of solidarity that had laid the foundations of western confraternal life was, it seems, immensely appealing to vast numbers of lay people from the medieval through the early modern periods. Although heavily criticized during the Protestant Reformation, confraternities reappeared with great force during the Catholic Reformation, reinfused with ambitious plans for charitable outreach and evangelism now extended even to the unworthy poor in the context of such new institutions as the Hôpital-Général. The confraternal model, in a new and secularized form, arguably laid the foundations for new

forms of male sociability and civic activism associated with Freemasonry and its Enlightenment values.

The original goal of a Christian model of community – to bind together members with spiritual bonds of peace and harmony – was obviously challenged during the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, when boundaries dividing the different confessions grew more restrictive. It is clear, however, that like the construction of face-to-face confraternal communities, the process of building confessional ones rested firmly on the provision of assistance to group members.

Civic Models of Social Provision in Medieval and Early Modern Cities

In what ways did builders and leaders of *civic* programs for the protection of the poor conceive of the their projects? Did civic projects add anything to the Christian or confessional model of social provision?

The civic model, as I study it, was a model of community formation that emphasized entitlements to assistance based on ties fostered by blood, marriage, inheritance, geography and choice. In places where towns or cities enjoyed high levels of autonomy from imperial, royal or seigneurial control, citizenship rights were usually limited to a minority of male inhabitants. Wives', widows' and children's rights usually devolved from those of husband or father. Newcomers who met certain requirements –principally financial solvency, could purchase the status of citizen. However, in many places, acceptance into the bonds of citizenship also required a reputation for good morals.

In many respects, becoming a new citizen of a town resembled nothing so much as joining a voluntary association of laymen like a confraternity. Becoming

a new urban citizen in the medieval and early modern west involved elements of voluntariness (as evidenced by the importance of formal oaths of allegiance), rituals of fraternity, dues (taxes), obligations of service to the community, and moral standing. Like members of the same confraternity, citizens were enjoined to refrain from violence against one another. The body of urban citizens could be seen as a confraternity writ large. Since formal political structures of urban life clearly emerged from forms of solidarity and governance born in civil society, it is no surprise that rights to assistance from the civic community became a key feature of membership.

Many urban institutions for the relief of the poor could claim public or "civic" status by limiting their resources to citizens. Creating collective institutions to help families of citizens address critical life situations was often based upon leaders' desire to encourage social integration and help support civic solidarity by creating bridges across social class boundaries. Let us consider two examples from different parts of urban Europe in the early modern period, episodes in which civic grounds of entitlement were quite obvious.

The first comes from Anne McCants' study of the civic orphanage of Amsterdam. The history of Amsterdam's municipal orphanage from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries illustrated the role of social provision in consolidating civic ties. Originating in 1523 from the bequest of a pious Catholic laywoman, the institution had a clear civic character from its earliest days, admitting only children of citizens. For children of non-citizens, there was a separate (and unequal) institution, a dual system legitimized by the widely-shared notion that children of citizen families were entitled to better treatment

than children of the unenfranchised because of their citizen status.[16] McCants notes: "...the scope of the institution's reach was embedded in the medieval political tradition of the rights and obligations devolving from membership in a civic corporation (instead of the medieval religious conception of charity as an act centered on concern for the state of the donor's soul)."[17]

With the conversion of the city to Reformed Protestantism after 1579, eligibility for aid was narrowed further to provide only for children of Calvinist citizens, adding a clear confessional dimension.[18] The link between citizenship and the possession of an entitlement to have one's children received into the *Burgerweeshuis* was made clear by the fact that approximately one-fourth of the funds received from the costs of purchasing citizenship was devoted to maintaining the orphanage.[19] The Amsterdam *Burgerweeshuis* was thought to serve the civic or public interests of the city by preserving the honor of its leading, or most entitled families. Although members of Amsterdam's elite directed the orphanage's operations and made their own charitable contributions to it, it was the middling ranks of the citizenry who appear to have benefited most from its services, relying on it to support their children in the event of parental death.

McCants is doubtless correct to distinguish the different foundations of Christian-confessional and civic models of community. Membership in religious and civic communities could overlap, to the reinforcement of both. In many cities of southern Europe where religious homogeneity prevailed, large, affluent confraternities of laymen were often simply granted civic functions, taking responsibility for running the town's poor relief system, for example.[20] In Reformation northern Europe, however, conflicts over the control of city poor

relief funds frequently pitted those committed to a civic model of solidarity among all citizens with those who defended their confession's right to control the distribution of assistance held in city coffers.[21]

While we therefore need to distinguish religious versus civic foundations of entitlement to assistance, we should not exaggerate the "private" nature of the former versus the "public" nature of the latter. As the Amsterdam orphanage example shows, like citizenship rights, civic entitlements to assistance could be as narrowly bounded as those of many "private" confraternities or other mutual assistance organizations that required dues and existed for the protection of their members. Indeed, civic communities in the early modern world could usually provide more benefits for their members —especially those of the middling ranks – than other contemporary political formations *because* of their restrictiveness. The civic community entailed an *intensive* rather than an *extensive* approach to social provision.

Those who strove to build civic communities often competed for political authority against other sorts of leaders who based their legitimacy on forms of assistance to the poor that contrasted sharply with the civic model. In her study of Turin, Sandra Cavallo examined the growing competition between the Duke of Savoy and an increasingly self-conscious city council for power.[22] This rivalry stemmed in part from the fact that a rising mercantile elite was attempting to gain civic authority, basing their efforts in the capital of the dukedom. As members of the group rose to preeminence, they brought with them a new idea of the community they sought to lead and an accompanying vision of the best way to use poor relief to build that community. Cavallo notes: "Investment in welfare

was not only a consequence of the enhanced political identity of the City, but *also an instrument for its formation*; for the expansion of the civic welfare system boosted the authority of the municipal government, and support for it."[23] [my emphasis]

The struggle between the council and the Duke took place during a time of severe economic decline. One of the issues of contention was the perennial problem of how to deal with begging, which involved both strangers and poor citizens of the city. After 1586, the city council sought to draw an increasingly clear distinction between the entitlements of Turin's citizens and non-citizens to relief. Accordingly, they decreed that foreign beggars were to be more rigorously distinguished from the indigenous and made subject to expulsion.

The Duke's protests against these practices cited the inefficiencies of the city's council's policies and the failure of such policies to provide for *all* the needy. Against the city council's vision of a limited civic community, the Duke offered his own more extensive model, which expressed concern for all of those he thought of as his subjects – people inhabiting the entire territory under his control. Conflicts between the city council and the Duke thus hinged upon two visions of the poor's entitlements to assistance – one based on the status of urban citizen and the other on the status of subject. The council's policy of discriminating sharply between citizens and non-citizens was part of a larger process. Consolidating and reshaping poor relief policies in the name of ideals of urban citizenship enhanced the city council members' and their milieu's claim to a greater role in civic leadership.

By the seventeenth century, the fortunes of those who had earlier led in creating an effective civic vision and a citizenship-based system of assistance were in decline. In an eighteenth-century atmosphere of growing social insecurity among Turin's merchants as well as its fading court aristocracy, what had been civic poor relief programs now began to appear like social insurance for a limited group with mainly private benefits. The groups' sense of insecurity was expressed in the growing number of legacies and wills to the *Compania di San Paolo*, the city's most important lay confraternity, for assistance to the shamefaced poor, who now included impoverished merchants and ennobled bureaucrats as well as nobles, attesting both to the rising status of these groups and to their increased sense of need for *collective* institutions for the care of their families. Bequests to the *Compagnia* and the House of the *Soccorso* – a temporary refuge for young women – for the support of poor members of their own kin increased, left in the form of perpetual or temporary annuities.[24]

The growth of poor relief institutions designed especially for the shamefaced poor of upper-middle-class families signaled the fragmentation of the social order at a time when many families of Turin's older elites were being excluded from royal patronage. The increasing concentration of many of these families on trying to make a more secure future for their kin through the endowment of collective institutions like the *Compagnia* and the *Soccorso* doubtless helped reinforce extended family ties within a fading civic elite. The loss of a civic vision of poor relief, however, meant reduced ties between these same elites and people of the lower classes.[25]

Against the background of a waning civic vision of community and an increased sense of societal insecurity, the Piedmontese state – in the process of its own self-construction – began to pay more attention to poor relief issues, but in a quite different way from earlier systems. In the process of constructing his own state, the Duke focused not principally upon those shamefaced poor whose fates were of such great concern to an earlier generation of civic leaders, but increasingly on the vagrant poor – precisely those who had little claim to assistance on the basis of their membership in the civic community.[26]

There are several conclusions to be made from these two extended examples illustrating the growth and decline of civic forms of social provisions. Groups that were concerned with building or maintaining urban civic communities could successfully use bounded systems of poor relief for their construction. These systems were meant to stand as public resources for full members of that civic community, who, however usually constituted only a minority of city populations. Political competitors who sought to substitute both their own models of political authority and of social provision could challenge these systems.

Private or Public Interests?

Did confraternal associations and early modern civic communities, which had limited membership or limited goals, truly have the "public" interest at heart? Did their contributions towards helping (sometimes only) the worthy poor have real public benefits? Or did such partial communities: confraternities, later Reformation-era confessional groups or urban civic communities – each with its

scheme for protecting its own poor – in fact retard and hinder the development of more universalistic systems of social provisioning? Is it possible to speak of public systems of social provisioning before the advent of modern welfare states?

There are those who argue that the strength of certain forms of voluntary associations for social provisioning could have mainly negative consequences for the formation of truly universalistic welfare states. This position is illustrated in a recent book about the history of fraternal organizations in the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Arguing against a powerful current of scholarship that has vaunted the benefits of voluntary associations for building habits of democracy and social solidarity, Jason Kaufman's study suggests that the mutual insurance systems that were administered by fraternal organizations such as the Knights of Labor were, in fact, inimical to the public interest. They intensified ethnic divisions within American society, he argues, and by protecting some instead of all, inflicted real harm on American society by helping to delay the creation of modern, universal forms of social provisioning.[27] Although Kaufman's study admittedly lies far from our concerns with early modern Europe, the theoretical argument is an interesting and provocative one. Can the public interest be furthered if only *some* of the poor benefit from it? Or, do all systems of such partial (what Kaufman sees as private) systems of poor relief or mutual assistance represent barriers to the eventual triumph of a truly public (organized by the central state) system?

Before tackling this question, we have to consider that it is not only earlier, voluntary or restricted sorts of associations for the assistance of the poor have been criticized for their partiality. State-run or (by the older definition)

public systems of poor relief have been identified as such within the terms of a Marxian or Marxist perspective, one that emphasizes the repressive or "social control" aspects of systems of social provision in the present as well as the early modern past.[28] Through social control lenses, any policy for the protection or relief of the poor that proclaims itself in the public interest is liable to be exposed as promoting private interests – mainly those of ruling elites. Under this interpretation, even the notion of "public" in its current usage may be seen as a mere construction of bourgeois ideology that conceals what is essentially a class-dominated enterprise. From this point of view, not only formally private, or voluntary organizations for the relief of the poor are suspected of partiality. Since the modern state merely represents narrow bourgeois interests, even state-sponsored programs can be thought of as lacking truly public status. [29] A completely disinterested and completely public system of assistance seems a near impossibility.

The problem seems to lie in the limits of a social control model. The social control position arguably served a bracing revisionist perspective at one time – a useful antidote to earlier kinds of social welfare history that were insufficiently critical or even hagiographic in nature. It proved useful for explaining policies directed against the able-bodied poor, vagrants and foreign beggars. It proves less satisfactory, however, in explaining social provisioning for the respectable poor who appear to have presented little threat to the status quo.

Even granting this, we are still confronted by the public-private dichotomy. Is it useful to link voluntary (including religious) associations within civil society and local-level civic programs whose claims to public benefits bear so

little resemblance to modern a systems of social provision based on values of social citizenship? How can we accept that these earlier kinds of programs born within civil society contributed to the public good if they largely involved the protection of private interests? Where should historians draw the boundary between the two spheres in studying social provision?

In a recent essay, Susan Gal has provided what seems to me a nice way out of the boundary dilemma. She argues that rather than trying to locate a boundary between public and private spheres, or tracing a shifting line between them over time, it makes more sense to think of both realms as fractal in structure, with bits of the public in the private and vice versa. Neither sphere is therefore pure of aspects of the other. Thus, it is entirely understandable that civic or public forms of social provision might also protect the private interests of only certain kinds of individuals or families, as was the case with Amsterdam's citizens or Turin's fading elite.[30]

We find this intermixing of elements of private and public, and of an overlapping of civil society and the sphere of the state, in the way social provisioning figured in the plans of French revolutionaries in the years 1789-1794 for founding a new national community. As is well known, the National Constituent Assembly's Committee on Mendicity laid out the blueprint for a revolutionary system of social provision in the early period of the revolution. Their goal, as I argued in my book, was to found a national community based on what was essentially a rehabilitated urban civic model of assistance to the poor, one that had declined in vitality over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[31] The difference from earlier forms of civic community was that the nation and not

the individual town or city was now the putative seat of obligation for the community's (read nation's) poor.

Although the Committee on Mendicity critiqued major Old Regime forms of poor relief based on the alliance of monarchical state and post-Tridentine church, they welcomed the revival of civic charitable efforts typical of the waning years of the Old Regime, organizations such as the Philanthropic Society or the Society for Maternal Charity.[32] This was hardly surprising since the leadership of the committee and a number of its members and its many supporters were the same men and women who had only lately provided leaders for these voluntary organizations. The associations had proclaimed their civic character in several ways, for example, by preferring outdoor relief to indoor relief, and by assisting those groups that had historically numbered among the respectable poor. These included legitimately married mothers with their infants, women who were citizens or long-term residents of the various cities where these organizations flourished, those who enjoyed high moral reputation.

As Catherine Duprat noted, once the revolutionary movement began in spring of 1789 there was an almost seamless transition as leaders of these voluntary associations brought their ideas and organizations from the world of civil society to the world of state affairs within the National Constituent Assembly.[33] Key institutional models and values for setting up France's national state system of social provision were forged in such associations on the basis of a centuries-old model of civic community-building that was now to be extended to citizens of the nation as a whole.

As the revolution radicalized, however, and leadership passed to a different sort of men, the state-civil society relationship changed and with it the role of such philanthropic associations. Jacobin suspicion of allowing what were now identified as "private" poor relief efforts intensified. What had begun in the early days of the revolution as a partnership between state and civil society organizations, including state subsidies for such groups as the Society for Maternal Charity, degenerated to the point where the associations either voluntarily disbanded or did so under state duress. As in so many other areas of revolutionary life, the Jacobin leadership sought to dismantle formally organized groups within civil society, demanding a monopoly of authority in furnishing assistance to meritorious categories of citizens, from soldiers and their dependents to unwed mothers (whose reputation they rehabilitated). The difficulties of setting up a national-level civic system of social provisioning on the basis of a local urban model proved insurmountable, however, a failure that proved disastrous for France's poor.[34]

Past Experiences and Implications for the Present

Can the medieval and early modern history of community-building and social provision contribute to an understanding of civil society activities and their relation to modern welfare state formation? It is clear that at some point in their histories the nations of Europe underwent a series of transitions in which local systems of social provision based on confessional and/or civic models were reworked into modern systems of entitlements typical of citizens of welfare states. This process required the democratization of citizenship rights, to be sure,

but it was neither simple nor linear. Nor is the current balance between religious and citizenship-based forms of social provision exactly the same in all welfare states.[35] France's experience provided the first and arguably the most dramatic example of an early failed transition. Although there was no one path from local systems of entitlement to national ones, I believe that there was a more generalizable kind of path dependency between older social formations within civil society and the later emergence of welfare states in Europe. Trying to expose the close links between the two has been part of the goal of this paper, a main reason behind my desire to expand our view of public life.

As the large number of studies of welfare states has shown, vast parts of the story of their formation lay outside the narrow limits of political life and rather within the boundaries of civil society.[36] Here, voluntary associations of women and men including labor groups, religious groups, business interests, groups of professionals seeking to legitimize their authority and identities, worked – sometimes in their own narrow interests, sometimes with the broader public interest in mind – to create effective models of social provisions. In time, these same sorts of groups would bring pressure to bear on central states to demonstrate their status as the seat of now-national community entitlements. It is no accident that welfare states were constructed within the same cultures and societies that had been shaped by centuries of civil society efforts to construct practical organizations for social provisioning. Without the prior development of these organizational efforts, there never would have been any welfare states, which while finally realized in the public sphere of politics and the state, were modeled by women and men for centuries outside this realm.

I have tried to show in my larger work that understanding some of the long-term continuities between early modern and modern systems of social provision is particularly important for understanding the public history of women in western society. A new generation of studies carried out in the last fifteen years or so has exposed the critical importance of women's participation in civil society organizations for improving the lives of the poor. These associations served as important institutional launching grounds from which women joined political battles for state-sponsored social provision. Values of "maternalism," or "social motherhood" passed from what some have viewed as private associational life to the public political sphere in order to justify and explain women's expanding roles there. In fact, however, the origins of women's public lives in the world of civil society lie in the far distant past – in the migration streams that brought millions of them to work in the cities, in the workplaces that employed them, in the membership of confraternal groups, and, for those of the middling ranks, in the maternalist values that informed scores of religiously-based organizations for the relief of poor women that preceded groups like the Society for Maternal Charity.

Of course, there are important differences to be examined between early modern and modern programs for social provisioning. Historians looking back from their positions as citizens of welfare states have, in the last generation, clearly documented patterns of inequality or class domination that characterized systems of poor relief in the early modern period. However, because inequalities of treatment and entitlement existed does not mean that voluntary associations for social provisioning or limited forms of citizenship entitlements are to be

discounted from the story. This would be like saying that because the British Parliament or the French Estates-General did not enfranchise all inhabitants equally from the Middle Ages onward, these institutions had no positive impact on the eventual triumph of universal citizenship rights. The enfranchisement of some; the appropriation or construction of entitlements for limited groups is, in my judgment, better than their absence – even though the entitlement of some doubtless contributed to creating *greater* inequality between wealthy and the poor in many settings. Yet, if we take seriously what we know of the world view of the poor (whether respectable or not) in the early modern world, what they seem to have wanted was not the absolutely equal entitlements that have become so critical in the democratic and post-modern world west but rather a small semblance of *security* in their time of need, which they sought to provide for themselves from their direct associations with others, and from appeals based on different foundations of entitlement and hope.

On this score, perhaps a bit of perspective is in order when modern observers critique early modern systems of social provision for protecting only limited, or private interests. Thinking comparatively and self-critically, it is clear that the level of inequality that distinguished entitlements of urban citizens from those of the "unworthy poor" in early modern society pales in comparison to the one that now distinguishes citizens of welfare states of the "north" and people of the global "south." Thinking back to de Swaan's spatial model, I note that a majority of the earth's population still lives outside the boundaries of (mainly European) nations whose centuries-long histories of community-building within

civil society created models of social protection that were later appropriated into the architecture of the modern welfare state.

Indeed, we might say that citizens of the north now stand in relation to inhabitants of the south as wealthy citizens of early modern cities did to the marginalized "floating" populations of the poor who had few entitlements to assistance from civic community coffers. Like those from the south today, they dwelt within the spatial and social limits of civic communities only temporarily and at the pleasure of community leaders and a favorable economic situation that encouraged some toleration of their presence. Like earlier forms of confessional or civic community, modern welfare states, too, have boundaries of entitlement that exclude as well as they include.

Notes

[1] Katherine A. Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities in Europe, 1200-1800: The Urban Foundations of Western Society* (Cambridge, 2003.)

[2] Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, Poverty *and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1979), Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1994).

[3] The classic text remains Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation*, ed. and trans. H.C. Erik Middlefort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Philadelphia, 1972). On confraternities' relation to civic religion, see Nicholas Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna* (Cambridge, 1995) and the same author's, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna* (Baltimore, 2005).

[4] For discussions of the poor's multiple "strategies" for survival see Martin Dinges, "Self-Help and Reciprocity in Parish Assistance: Bordeaux in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in The *Locus of Care: Families, Communities, Institutions, and the Provision of Welfare since Antiquity*, eds. Peregrine Hordern and Richard Smith (London and New York, 1998), 111-125; Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance*, 83-99; and the citations in Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, "Logic of Charity: Poor Relief in Preindustrial Europe," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, 4 (Spring, 1994): 589-613.

[5] Abram de Swaan, *In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (New York, 1988), especially 1-51.

[6] See, for example, Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (London, 1768).

[7] Lynch, *Individuals*, 18-19; Marx's critique is developed in "On the Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York, 1972), 33-36.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

[9] Habermas uses the term "town" in a metaphorical as well as a literal sense, but identifies the bourgeois public sphere's development as occurring in cities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the role of urban culture in the development of the bourgeois public sphere, see also Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 291.

[10] For a discussion of how Habermas's notion of private individuals differed from classical models, see Keith Michael Baker, "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 182, 187.

[11] Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory* 31, 1 (1992): 6-7, notes the fact that Habermas considers civil society as "the public face of the private realm." Many of the activities that helped constitute Habermas's bourgeois public sphere occurred in quite public places such as cafés or theatres. See Margaret C. Jacob, ""The Enlightenment Redefined: The Formation of Modern Civil Society," *Social Research* 58, 2 (Summer, 1991): 478.

[12] Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge,, 1983), 83-156.

[13] Lynch, *Individuals*, 68-102.

[14] Michael Anderson, *Family Life in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971), 136-161.

[15] Peter Laslett, "Family, Kinship and Collectivity as Systems of Support in Pre-Industrial Europe: A Consideration of the 'Nuclear-Hardship' Hypothesis," *Continuity and Change* 3, 2 (1988): 153-175.

[16] Anne E. McCants, *Civic Charity in a Golden Age: Orphan Care in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Urbana, 1997), 147-50.

[17] McCants, *Civic Charity*, 33. The author suggests that in earlier times, extended families may have been more willing to take in dependent children.

[18] McCants, *Civic Charity*, 19.

[19] McCants, *Civic Charity*, 25-6, notes also that by 1634 these fees totaled approximately 10 guilders for the Burgerweeshuis. Later in the century, the growth of a dependent population of children required the establishment of another less restrictive institution for the poor. New citizens routinely paid 22 guilders to it.

[20] John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Oxford and New York, 1994), 257-271.

[21] Lynch, *Individuals*, 123-131.

[22] Sandra Cavallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy: Benefactors and Their Motives in Turin, 1541-1789* (Cambridge and New York, 1995).

[23]Cavallo, *Charity*, 85.

[24] Cavallo, *Charity*, 221 notes: "Now...richer relations, or those without direct descendants increasingly felt the need to provide for the poorer branches of their families, creating permanent trusts for a whole variety of purposes."

[25] Cavallo, *Charity*, 223-4.

[26] Cavallo, *Charity*, 241, shows how well the architecture and placement of the eighteenth-century workhouse signaled the poor's isolation from the urban community. Whereas recipients of indoor relief for the shamefaced poor were lodged in Baroque palazzi, newer institutions for the vagrant poor, consisting of drab workhouses, were now located outside the city's walls.

[27] Jason Kaufman, *For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity* (Oxford,, 2002), *passim*.

[28] For a synthesis of the main elements of the "social control" approach, see van Leeuwen, "Logic."

[29] Marx's famous comments on this are to be found in "The German Ideology"; and those of Marx and Engels in "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 161, 475.

[30] Susan Gal, "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction," in *Going Public: Feminism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Private Sphere*, eds. Joan W. Scott and Debra Kates (Urbana and Champaign, 2004), 261-277. The problem of the inequities built into current French welfare state entitlements is explored in Timothy B. Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality , and Globalization since 1980* (Cambridge, 2004), especially chs. 5-7. See also Katherine A. Lynch, "The Family and the History of Public Life," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, 4 (Spring 1994): 665-684.

[31] Lynch, *Individuals*, 181-182.

[32] See, most recently, Christine Adams, "Constructing Mothers and Families: The Social for Maternal Charity of Bordeaux, 1805-1860," *French Historical Studies* 22, 1 (1999): 65-86.

[33] Catherine Duprat, *"Pour l'Amour de l'Humanité"; Le temps des philanthropes: La philanthropie parisienne des Lumières à la monarchie de Juillet* (Paris, 1993), 127, 145

[34] The classic work here is Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (New York, 1981).

[35] On this issue, see most recently, Kimberly Morgan, *Working Mothers and the Welfare State: Religion and the Politics of Work-Family Policies in Western Europe and the United States* (Stanford, 2006).

[36] The bibliography here is immense. Some titles of note include: Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Origins of Welfare States* (New York, 1993); Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1814-1945* (Cambridge, 1993); George Steinmetz, *Regulating the Social: The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 1993); and Yannick Marec, *Bienfaisance communale et protection sociale à Rouen, 1796-1927: Expériences locales et liaisons nationales*, 2 vols. (Paris, 2002).