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Scott Greer


Europe is argued to be built upon its welfare states. Among the different pillars of European welfare states, the health system is arguably the most influential one in creating social cohesion and sense of belonging. However, the mechanisms that motivate reform, its politics and the nature of integration of European health systems are largely under-researched. This book attempts to tackle this by providing the first complete analysis of European health politics that considers both theoretical and empirical developments.

The first and crucial contribution the book contains is that of bridging the gap that heterogeneous institutions and denominations raise in studying European health systems. Indeed, so much is an effective accident of history in the organization of European’s welfare systems that, as Greer argues, even useful categories such as ‘social insurance’ or ‘national health system’ fail to shed light in such a complex policy responsibility such as health care. ‘Secret garden’ is the term that Greer uses to define the traditional health policy of member states, namely a protected welfare responsibility crafted by local politics and surrounded by barriers to entry. However, the influence of the European Union (EU) has been more subtle here than in other areas, as its influence perhaps operated through informally changing values and operating procedures rather than through formal institutions and instruments. The EU brings about new forms of political and social interaction among member states, along with stimulating change around a core set of issues including patient mobility, competition and choice. Altogether, Greer argues that the EU is transforming the ‘garden’ into a ‘park’.

The influence of the European Court of Justice might not lead to health system convergence as some might expect. Instead, this is the result of countries’ resistance, through lobbying, to further integration. This lobbying, Greer shows, seems to reproduce existing local lobbying and accommodate inherited structures to the exigencies of EU health policy. Countries exhibit incremental change which, step by step, challenges health policy autonomy unless defended through lobbying. EU influence on health policy stands as an example of the traditional neo-functional paradigm, where regulatory spillovers from other sectors impact on health. In Greer’s terms ‘health is a perfect case of European integration – negative, deregulating integration – driven by the EU institutions without democratic legitimacy or an obvious justification’.

Scott Greer has done a remarkable job in explaining how the Europeanization of health policy takes place, how institutional legacies exert an influence in lobbying, how harmonization exacerbates path-dependent welfare structures that in turn impede a ‘race to the bottom’, and why the idea of a European social model creates positive external effects, even if it is a only an ad hoc policy construction. This endeavour is carried out empirically through the presentation of detailed case studies from four different countries, along with an extended presentation of the state of the art in the literature. Unlike other studies, this book manages to provide a rather complete vision of the influence of the EU in a rather specialized area such as health policy where the EU influence is driven by regulatory spillover and informal interactions among networks of lobbyists.

Greer recognizes that the construction of European health policy makes use of instruments that both formally and informally influence political action. The rise of health care lobbying is a clear-cut demonstration that the EU exerts an influence in health policy not only through regulations, but mainly by means of network creation. He argues that efficient lobbying takes place through a careful management of relevant information, coordinated action of aligned interests and agents being nimble and active in pursuing their goals. However, not all member states are equally efficient, which as Scott argues might give rise to a ‘northwestern bias’ in health policy making, calling for either a reform in how lobbying works and/or for more transparent mechanisms for health policy interests to be represented in Europe.

The project that this book manages to set out encompasses a huge and intense research effort that includes substantial fieldwork. It is essential reading for those trying to understand what is happening to health policy in Europe.

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Chiara Saraceno (ed.)


Family matters have often been disregarded in studies on social policy. This lack of interest has been reversed in recent times with the publication of an increasing number of studies on the crucial impact that the family and the intergenerational relationships have on social citizenship. Chiara Saraceno is a scholar with a long-standing research record on these and concomitant matters, such as gender inequalities and reconciliation issues; social policies and
poverty; and comparative family patterns in the worlds of welfare capitalism. This volume incorporates a syncretic micro–macro perspective regarding the analysis of intergenerational relations in European families, and its implications for the reproduction of norms and social values legitimising social policy provision. For the Italian sociologist, the relevance of (socially structured) normative values and their different weights in motivating behaviour indicate that intergenerational relationships are not shaped only by individual and family-level factors, but also by social determinants – something which helps to explain gender differences in the provision and receipt of support.

In the first chapter, Hagestad carries out an exploration of similarities and connections between the book-end generations: the young and the old. She argues that because of institutional arrangements and the organisation of the public sphere, they both face multiple barriers to the creation and the maintenance of relationships outside the family realm. In the second chapter, and using data from the SHARE (Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe) project, Kohli and Albertini analyse the impact of life ‘crises’, focussing on two potentially problematic situations where state and market provisions are deficient and family support becomes critical: transition to parenthood and marital break-up through divorce and widowhood.

In the third chapter, and examining access to housing, Poggio illustrates how the intergenerational reproduction of home ownership is a specific pattern of intergenerational interdependence in the Mediterranean welfare states, involving long-term support expectations and exchanges between generations. Steinbach and Johannes present in the fourth chapter the case of intergenerational contacts in Germany under the suggestive title ‘When will I see you again?’ They underline the broad gap between theoretical arguments and empirical procedures, wondering whether associative solidarity or frequency of contact is ‘the’ variable to be explained.

Chapters five, six and seven address the ‘crowding-out–crowding-in’ discussion from different angles. Künemund argues that both the theoretical debate of motives of support and the empirical evidence contradict the hypothesis that public solidarity ‘crowds out’ private altruism. Conversely, the ‘crowding-in’ effect – when the public provision of resources encourages private donations – has more plausibility. In their chapter, Saras and Billingsley examine the interplay between gender, social stratification, social norms and welfare regime in affecting the amount of family care provided by adult children to their frail elderly parents. Also using SHARE data, they conclude that formal care services do not ‘crowd out’ family care. Keck examines whether recourse to forms of publicly provided care affects the relationship between the frail elderly and their adult children when the latter do not provide care. He finds that it is not public care that has ‘crowding out’ effects, but unbalanced/unshared family responsibility. Furthermore, low expectations might indicate an older adult’s wish to take responsibility for one’s own life, and a child’s to have a life on their own.

In the ninth chapter, Albertini and Saraceno explore the intensity of intergenerational contacts and support experienced by those parents who belong to the cohorts that initiated the growth in marital instability in Italy and, consequently, were the first ones to face the task of ‘inventing’ new ways of ‘doing family’. They point to the fact that when a mother is no longer present alongside a father, even in the case of widowhood, fathers and grandfathers risk weakening the intergenerational link.

In the following chapter, van Tilburg and van der Pas analyse the Dutch situation, particularly concentrating on the care potentially available within intergenerational relationships in increasingly diversified family forms. For them, there will be more uncertainty on whether citizens in the Netherlands could rely on children to provide care when it is needed.

In chapter eleven, Björnberg and Ekbrand address the case of the Swedish welfare model, which has reduced the formal economic responsibilities within families as it is a highly individualised model where individuals, regardless of family status, are expected to provide for themselves and are acknowledged as having an individual entitlement to public support. Among other findings, the results of their study show that very few elderly people have received financial support and that pensioners over 65 years less often share their resources in vivo. Attias-Donfut and Wolff examine patterns of intergenerational transfers among immigrants in France. They find that migrants have attitudes and decisions regarding financial transfers that are different from those of the general population. As a consequence, there might be an increasing inequality of life chances for some migrants as well as for their children based upon cultural, economic and institutional factors. In the last chapter of the volume Baykara-Krumme carries out a comparison of intergenerational support patterns among migrant families in Germany. Life chances are restricted when resources of parents are low, a pattern which applies to a large part of the migrant population.

This book is an important work for all those readers interested in deepening their knowledge of the interaction between social policies and the welfare state, on the one hand, and family, intergenerational and gender models, on the other. The understanding of such relationships is a crucial pre-condition to the (re)formulation of normative views on intergenerational equity and on the redistributive role of the welfare state in its not-for-long future to come.

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