NordWel workshop, Stockholm

Date: Friday December 4 2009

Time: 10.00–12.00, 13.00–15.00 (at the latest)

Lunch: 12.00-13.00 at Fakultetsklubben, Campus Frescati

Room: D 900 Department of History, Stockholm University, Campus Frescati

*Dear colleague,*

*The workshop is a first take on this topic and the introduction below is intended to raise a few themes, issues and questions that might be interesting for us to discuss. Hopefully, they will provide a fruitful, inspiring and maybe provocative starting point for a brainstorming workshop about the use of history in welfare state research. We ask all invited participants to reflect on the topic but we will not have any long presentations. Instead, we will have a couple of ‘think pieces’ to start up the day and then open for the informal and meandering discussion. If you want to present a 'think piece' (< 10 minutes) please send us an e-mail so that we can make a ‘programme’. This workshop is 'invitation only' and we plan for 10-12 participants.*

*Please feel free to contact us if you have any further questions about the workshop and its theme.*

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**The Use of History in Welfare State Research**

Most welfare state research focuses on present day developments in welfare state arrangements, usually by examining changes in certain social policy areas in relation to institutional settings, political constellations and socio-economic conditions. Most of this research is methodologically 'objectivist', it sees the welfare state as an 'object' that can be studied and analysed on the basis of ‘facts’ such as social expenditure, GDP, unemployment figures, take-up rates of benefits and entitlements and so forth. However, when welfare state research moves to explain the ‘big picture’ of 'why welfare states developed differently', and 'what drives welfare state change’, it becomes inherently historical and interpretative. Surprisingly, the strong relation between social history and welfare state analysis has not received much attention to date.

The historical accounts that are frequently used in welfare state analysis tend to provoke irritation among historians who point to simplifications, inaccuracies and omissions. The apparent disinterest for historical detail in welfare state analysis is understandable and even necessary if the aim is to develop welfare state theory. Generalization necessarily entails a process of hierarchical selection and weighing of historical events and processes, of highlighting important historical conjunctures, of singling out particularly relevant factors and drawing conclusions about causal links at the expense of leaving at the wayside a multitude of developments, events and factors considered less relevant. Simplification of historical processes and events might not be the real problem in the use of history in welfare state research. What could be considered problematic is a lack of attention (or awareness) in most welfare state analysis to the ways historical knowledge is produced, or rather to the construction of the historical narratives that are used and adapted in welfare state analysis. Developing historical accounts is an interpretative process, and many (equally viable) histories can be written about the same period or subject, particularly about such a broad subject as the welfare state. However, when welfare state research incorporates historical narrative into the analysis, the (hi)stories told tend to be treated as ‘facts’ and ‘real’, the same way statistical information is treated as facts.

A tendency in welfare state research is the use of broad historical concepts such as industrialism (post-industrialism), modernity (or post-modernity) or globalization that are presented as unidirectional, inevitable historical processes with clear endings and beginnings (industrialism with its specific conditions and political struggles is over, now we are in an era of post-industrialism with different conditions and conflicts). In these accounts, welfare states tend to be seen to develop as stable, well-organised entities along historical trajectories. Alternatively, welfare states are being described as shaped by the conflicts and compromises of dominant political forces, mostly with a focus on labour and capital. Do these concepts leave space for "unfinished business", for uneven or incomplete processes and internal contradictions of welfare states? For the contestation and instability of underlying power arrangements, and for the unfinished struggles or unsuccessful mobilisations of other, to date less powerful, social groups?

Reflecting on the "use of history" in welfare state research raises thus many questions: whose (hi)story is told and reproduced in welfare state analysis? And whose story is muted or lost? How does our understanding of welfare state(s) - in terms of distributive justice, social rights, cultural recognition, efficiency and so forth - change if we base welfare state analysis on other, "decentred", historical accounts? How can we conceptualise change in welfare states if we assume that there are contradictions, uneven processes and unfinished struggles? And what role could the historisation of welfare state concepts play in such an analysis? To what extent can the interpretative historical element of welfare state analysis be accommodated with its objectivist methodological tradition? In as far can the theoretical challenge be met of incorporating historical complexity and contingency without loosing sight of generalization?