

Correspondence

To the Editor:

I am grateful for the kind things Theda Skocpol said in her review of my *Poverty and Society*. My disagreements with her critical remarks are the standard ones of authors with reviewers: I did say some of the things she says I did not say; she misconstrues my purpose, etc., etc. This is not why I write.

It is in Skocpol's positive statements about what she thinks *did* happen in the development of welfare states that she is more significantly misleading. She writes that "tiny minorities of reformist elites were able to push through social insurance from above in European nations." Tiny minorities? Is she talking about Great Britain, the European country she has worked on most? She must know that the Trades Union Congress passed pro-pension resolutions regularly. She must know about the National Pension Committee with chapters all over the country and about the endorsement of Friendly Societies with hundreds of thousands of members, about the Labour Party's delegation to Germany. (They are all in the book!) Lloyd George was not part of a tiny minority of "reformist elites" but was in fact mobilizing an existing sentiment in a relatively new mass democracy. Skocpol's formulation could possibly be argued for Germany, unless one looked a little more deeply at the German situation. Her formulation can, by no stretch of the imagination, be applied to Denmark.

Also, the whole question of "from below" and "from above" is not so simple.

Many interpretations can plausibly be argued about the development of welfare states in Europe, but "tiny minorities of reformist elites" pushing social insurance from above is not one of them.

Sincerely yours,

Daniel Levine
Professor of History
Bowdoin College

Professor Skocpol responds:

To the Editor:

Daniel Levine takes me to task for arguing that tiny minorities of reformist elites in European nations promoted social insurance “from above.” He cites evidence that popular groups in Britain enthusiastically supported old-age pensions. I do not at all disagree with such evidence, but we need to distinguish between *contributory* schemes for social insurance, which depend in part on taxes collected from wage earners and businesses, and *noncontributory* old-age pensions, which were funded out of general tax revenues. In many countries around the turn of the century, noncontributory pensions for the elderly were very popular. This apparently was true in the United States, too, given that a 1915 referendum in Massachusetts revealed a four-to-one margin of support for old-age pensions. But while noncontributory pensions were popular, business associations and trade unions in Britain and Germany, as well as the United States, were very wary of contributory insurance schemes that would require their members to pay taxes. Standard histories all say that reformers at the British Board of Trade devised the plans for contributory health and unemployment insurance, and then persuaded business, labor, medical doctors, and Liberal politicians to accept them. These contributory social insurance programs were not popular initiatives “from below” in Britain.

The larger issue between myself and Dan Levine is this: His “national values” approach leads him to look for popular outlooks that are consistently different among nations, whereas my analytical comparative approach allows me to notice variations within nations, and similarities as well as differences across nations.

Sincerely yours,

Theda Skocpol
Professor of Sociology
Harvard University