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*Public Pensions: Gender and Civic Service in the States,
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Susan M. Sterett, *Public Pensions: Gender and Civic Service in the States, 1850–1937*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003. \$ 39.95 papercover.

Social policy scholars have long been engaged in an extensive inquiry into the many complex factors that contributed to the significant expansion of state welfare provision in the industrial countries during the 20th century. It is generally agreed that, from the end of the 19th-century, governments began slowly but steadily to expand social programs, and many believe that this process culminated in the mid-20th-century in the creation of what is often referred to as the 'welfare state.' In addition to documenting these trends, a rich body of theory has evolved to interpret and explain state welfare expansion. Theoretical perspectives ranging from functionalism to Marxism have been invoked for this purpose. In addition, comparative research has shown the similarities as well as differences in the welfare trajectories adopted by different countries. Many scholars believe that the United States diverges significantly from the trend of steady government expansion experienced in Europe.

Although it may seem that the issue has now been exhausted, Susan Sterett's interesting and scholarly book provides new insights into the process of government welfare involvement in the United States. Although the author does not deal explicitly with the question of American welfare exceptionalism, or invoke comparative analysis, her account of the way the courts intervened in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to shape the emergence of American social policy provides helpful insights into this question. Sterret shows that efforts to introduce public pension provisions were widely contested in the courts by reluctant taxpayers and corporate interests, and that judicial decisions reflected both constitutional requirements as well as popular attitudes. The constitutional position that states could only provide social benefits to the indigent on the basis of a means test was gradually modified as the courts invoked the doctrine of public purpose which recognized the payments of benefits on the basis of service rendered to the community.

It was on this ground that the courts permitted the payments

of public pensions to the military, firefighters and finally civil servants. In contrast to this occupational-service approach, the courts ruled that the introduction of universal pensions for women with children, blind people and the elderly was unconstitutional, and that these provisions should comply with the indigent Poor law tradition. Consequently, the scope of mother's pensions, pensions for the blind, and old-age pensions, that were introduced by the states, was severely curtailed despite the efforts of social reformers to extend these benefits on a universal rather than selective basis. These decisions affirmed the Poor Law tradition, and curtailed campaigns to introduce universal, European-style social benefits for all. They also reinforced the gendered nature of social provision. This was particularly evident with regard to mother's pensions where the courts affirmed established gender conceptions about the dependence of women and their 'proper' role in society. Despite the constitutional changes introduced during the New Deal, the gendered, dependent approach to social policy has been perpetuated.

Steretts' scholarly book sheds important new light on the struggles that took place in the late 19th century to expand state welfare provision on a universal basis. It is carefully researched and meticulous, and is a welcome addition to literature. Although the book does not make for easy reading, it offers a new perspective that confounds the simplistic view, so often reflected in the literature, that welfare innovations can be readily secured when progressive political parties and popular leaders with the 'right' ideologies commit themselves to addressing pressing social needs. Sterett's account of the role of the judiciary in shaping welfare policy reveals a far more complex process in which struggle rather than consensus characterizes welfare development.

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