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Reconceptualizing States and Welfare in the North of Europe and Beyond

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to explore the "practical" aspects of universalism; why and how they become applicable, and how they shape institutions (and vice versa). Our point of departure is the fact that the in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Scandinavian welfare states may be said to have proven surprisingly robust. Over a substantial period, they continued to expand and became more inclusive, despite the potential undermining effects of a series of global crises which elsewhere stimulated a general tendency of welfare state decay. Possibly due to the widespread assumption that the Scandinavian world is so exceptional, this expansion has not been explained in research. In our discussion, three main points will be highlighted: First, ambitious welfare policies seem to have an extraordinary ability to generate robust mutual commitments, the effects of which feed back to the institutional dynamics that made them possible in the first place. Second, such policies may affect power relationships in ways that, at least sometimes, challenge political and bureaucratic elites' demands for austerity and managerial control – precisely those demands that tend to initiate re-commodification and de-universalization. Finally, we argue that this dynamic is closely linked to individual autonomy. While highly valued in all welfare states, and indeed basic to democracy, individual autonomy is often curtailed, and even undermined, by bonds of dependency emerging from the need to control bureaucracies – their procedures, their employees, and their clients.

Keywords
welfare state, universalism, autonomy, institutions, reciprocity, solidarity, elderly care

Introduction[1]
Some years ago, Francis Fukuyama (2012) coined the term "getting to Denmark" to pinpoint the historical trajectory of Denmark's democratic qualities. In his perspective, the historical emergence of a strong, centralized and in part authoritarian state based on *Rechtstaat*

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principles laid the foundations for the modern welfare state which, in the Danish and more generally, the Scandinavian case, combined considerable state capacity with a relatively high degree of social justice and individual autonomy. Other scholars have drawn attention to types of Scandinavian (an, more generally, Nordic) exceptionalism that may serve as interesting institutional lessons for anyone trying to think systematically about what it would take to escape the current situation of widespread welfare state decay (Sunesson, et.al. 1998, Fukuyama, 2015). For example, Swedish historian Bo Stråth has highlighted the great European dilemma of striking a balance between freedom and equality for citizens in welfare states, and pointed out that in the age of extremes (Hobsbawm, 1994), the Nordic region (except, to some extent, Finland) has been able to avoid polarization and succeeded in identifying a strategy to combine universal welfare and individual autonomy, on the one hand, and pragmatism and romantic utopianism, on the other (Stråth, 1997, 2017).

In comparative welfare state research, the question of "how to get to Denmark" never seems to have caught much attention. Although the Scandinavian case has had an important role to play as a point of reference in moral-political discourses on social justice, its comparative value seems mainly to have been linked to Gøsta Esping-Andersen's (1991) "three worlds" categorization of welfare capitalism, in which the model is seen as "universal", as opposed to the more limited "residual" Anglo-American version and the continental corporatist model. Esping-Andersen's main ambition was to explain the dynamics of class relations and their institutionalization in democratic politics, and the very different paths of policy-making that emerged from patterns of class conflict and compromise. His interests later turned to welfare state performance, involving challenging arguments related to "why we need a new welfare state" (Esping-Andersen, 2002). Esping-Andersen's position is that a comprehensive welfare policy is vital for the social reproduction of capitalist society, and his argument is that the Scandinavian case serves not primarily as a moral ideal, but rather as a practical model for other welfare states that – in the period prior to the financial crisis in 2007 – seemed to converge.

On what grounds, beyond the purely theoretical, is the question of how to get to Denmark relevant? If indeed Fukuyama and Esping-Andersen (and Titmuss, Marshall, and many others before them) are right in pointing out that the factors that made the Scandinavian version of the welfare state possible may not be unique to Scandinavian countries as such, for what purpose may this knowledge be useful? In his ambitious and influential work, *The Politics of Solidarity* (1990), Peter Baldwin addressed this question head on. He states that

> Small, distant, and obscure, the Scandinavian nations have played a role in the development and history of the welfare state far outweighing their geopolitical, economic, or cultural importance. Homogeneous populations, efficient, adaptable economies, and sheltered circumstances combined to propel Scandinavia along a unique course of peaceful social and eventually social democratic development. However much foreign observers may admire this harnessing-together of prosperity, placidity, and progress, other nations are unlikely to replicate the Nordic experience. There are few lessons in this sense here, but much interest in understanding what it is that has made the North one of the social laboratories of the twentieth century, however unrepeatable its experiments. (Baldwin, 1990, p. 55)

Baldwin's analysis elaborates on Esping-Andersen's discussion of class dynamics and the possibility of class compromise, stressing the important point that "the social democratic" Scandinavian (or, more generally, Nordic) model is not really social democratic, but initiated by (non-marginal) agrarian interests in alliance with urban, liberal middle-class

interests – an alliance into which social democrats were later attached, in part dominated, and expanded politically in the post-WWII era. We find this relevant here because it illustrates Baldwin's contradictory statement above, pointing out that the Scandinavian experience is an interesting laboratory but that the experiments going on there are unrepeatable. In the first part of the passage above he seems to present a typical "Scandinavian exceptionalism"-type argument, portraying a distinct otherness, a wholly different culture. Yet at the same time, Baldwin's own analysis is genuinely social and institutional, and demonstrates that institutional patterns and policymaking are not exclusive to specific political cultures. For example, the universalist orientation of Scandinavian welfare states was prefigured in Britain, and at times various other European welfare states have moved towards it. It seems unreasonable to assume that current, widespread welfare state retrenchments are caused by inescapable structural and cultural conditions specific to each nation state. It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of how well-performing institutions work.

For this reason, we argue that it makes much sense to explore the institutionalization of ambitious welfare states/policies in further depth. If, for example, universalism does not emerge from completely exceptional circumstances, we could try to develop Esping-Andersen's and Baldwin's perspective further to get a gasp not only of the question of how and why universalism emerges in the first place, but also how it works and generates unintended consequences. As far as we can see, knowledge of the latter two questions is very limited.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to look at the more "practical" aspects of universalism: why and how these become applicable, and how they shape institutions (and vice versa). Our point of departure is the fact that in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Scandinavian welfare states may be said to have proven surprisingly robust. Over a substantial period, they continued to expand and became more inclusive, despite the potential undermining effects of a series of global crises, which stimulated the general tendency of welfare state decay elsewhere. Possibly due to the widespread assumption that the Scandinavian world is so exceptional, this expansion has not been explained. Indeed, welfare state expansion has generally been seen as a major problem of governance and an illustration of lack of economic discipline, of excessive spending, and so on, not primarily as a fascinating experiment in need of explanation. In our discussion three main points will be highlighted: First, ambitious welfare policies seem to have an extraordinary ability to generate robust mutual commitments, the effects of which feed back to the institutional dynamics that made them possible in the first place. Second, such policies may affect power relationships in ways that, at least sometimes, challenge political and bureaucratic elites' demand for austerity and managerial control – precisely those demands that tend to initiate re-commodification and de-universalization. Third, we further argue that this dynamic is closely linked to individual autonomy. While highly valued in all welfare states, and indeed basic to democracy, individual autonomy is often curtailed, and even undermined by bonds of dependency emerging from the need to control bureaucracies – their procedures, their employees, and their clients.

As indicated, our analytical perspective is inspired by historical sociology, most directly by Charles Tilly's approach to state formation (1990), contention and democracy (2004), and the role of trust networks (2005) in institutional change (see also Papakostas, 2001). More specifically, we find Tilly's discussion of the interconnections between public policy (the extent and way governments respond to popular claims), mechanisms of inequality (whether or not policy reinforces or transcends categorical inequality), and dynamics of

inclusion/exclusion of trust networks (in our case, social movements in particular) highly fruitful (Tilly, 2004, pp. 12–23). As Tilly (2004, p. 23) argues:

> Changes in public politics, inequality, and trust networks clearly interact. Most of the time they interact to block democratization. Under most circumstances, for example, increases in government capacity encourage those who already exercise considerable political power to divert governmental activity on behalf of their own advantage and incite participants in trust networks to reinforce those networks while shielding them more energetically from governmental intervention. Either of those activities, if effective, diminishes or blocks democracy.

Universalism revisited

Far from being an unambiguous concept, universalism nevertheless serves as a main reference in comparative welfare state research, denoting mainly the principle of making services and benefits available to all citizens regardless of income, class, gender, and status distinctions (Baldwin, 1991, p. 51). Furthermore, as universalism involves minimal targeting, means testing is applied only, or mainly, on the basis of general criteria. In addition, universalism tends to be associated with a broad assortment of services and benefits. It seems that in historical terms the "origins" of universalism are, somewhat paradoxically, inseparable from the influence of the interests of the middle classes on welfare policies. In Scandinavia, for example, their involvement contributed heavily to removing welfare services from traditions of charity, stigmatization, dependence, humiliation, and to secure high-quality levels across the board. As many scholars have pointed out, the effects in terms of reinforcing the willingness to share risks and burdens across class divisions were astonishing (Baldwin 1990, p. 52). It seems important to learn more about how this was possible, at least to some extent, and for a while. As will be argued below, this seems to have much to do with the significance of individual autonomy in ambitious welfare states (Trägårdh 1997; Vike, 2018).

The growing literature on the decline of welfare state universalism has shed much light on why universalism is hard to maintain and what threatens it (Sunesson, 1998; Greve, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 2002; Fallov & Blad, 2019; Szebehely & Meager, 2017). The dynamics involved are complex and multi-faceted, but it seems unambiguously clear that political and bureaucratic elites' conceptualization of threatened economic sustainability is a key element. To a significant extent, welfare state retrenchment seems to be generated by fiscal anxiety. In times of economic crisis in particular, welfare expenditures are seen as a great burden, and services and benefits become "too generous". The relevant analytical question, then, is perhaps not why political and bureaucratic elites are very different from each other, but rather to which extent they are challenged by social groups that have vested interests in resisting retrenchment (Vike, 2018). Such a perspective may prove fruitful because it moves beyond descriptive portraits of political alliances, policy designs, and intentions, and instead directs attention to the mechanisms that in fact, in a few cases, are forceful enough to make the expansion of universalism difficult to curtail by elite interests.

Our hypothesis is this: In the Scandinavian welfare states, universalism did become exceptionally important and achieved prominence *both* as a guiding ideological symbol and as a practical devise in service provision (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). Historically and culturally, egalitarianism in Scandinavia is perhaps as much a product of universalism as its source (Knudsen, 2000; Stenius, 2010). We argue that this was possible to pursue quite systematically for a very long time due to a highly decentralized and very uniform institutional system that significantly influenced the central state. This seems to have happened in

two ways. First, some of the forms of solidarities and alliances associated with the welfare "state", had been established locally long before national parliaments were able to utilize them (Aronsson, 1997). Second, welfare "state" policies were to some extent responses to local initiatives that municipal interests, unions, and other collective actors pressed to make national. Thus, in the Scandinavian welfare states, universalism emerges as a product of mobilization from below, transcending boundaries between otherwise isolated or competing class lines or "trust networks" in Tilly's sense (Tilly, 2004). This observation, and its implications, have been underestimated in welfare state research. Although state-initiated welfare reforms have indeed been essential in Scandinavia, the major forces behind these reforms were the popular movements, municipalities, and other well-organized interests with a firm local basis (Aronsson, 1997; Knudsen, 2000; Stenius, 2010; Vike, 2018). The bulk of service provision takes place locally, in institutional contexts that are very different from what we tend to associate with "the state". State coordinated reforms have always depended heavily on municipal expertise regarding the practical world of service provision and are intimately linked to extended municipal autonomy. Given that on the global scene social inequality is dramatically on the rise almost everywhere (Piketty, 2020; Kalb, 2022), it seems valuable to understand what may make the institutions of the welfare state "great levelers" (Scheidel, 2019).

In service and labor-intense systems, many public services are often hard to delineate and standardize. A large part of these services, especially in long-term care, is designed for people who need much assistance and who have complex, shifting, and often unpredictable needs. In Scandinavia, most of these services mirror women's associations in experimenting with collective responsibility for private care tasks, and the role of feminist activism in politicizing and institutionalizing these experiments (Seip, 1992). The Scandinavian welfare states' public care services achieved relatively high status and became a key issue on the political agenda. This has led to the well-known Scandinavian gender dilemma. While radical decommodification has brought more women into the paid labor market than in any other modern type of society, women's almost total dominance in jobs oriented to the pole of social reproduction creates a strongly gender segregated labor market (Borchorst & Siim, 2008; Wagner & Teigen, 2022). Another effect has been much less noted: the predominantly female workforce in primary education and health and welfare services was, during the expansion period from around 1950 to 2000, rather loosely coupled to managerial governance and thus experienced quite unique working conditions in terms of autonomy (Vike et al., 2002). They were subject mainly to indirect forms of governance, as political authorities both locally and nationally gained legitimacy from promising more and better welfare, while observing that the female workforce absorbed responsibility without being much concerned with establishing boundaries (Haukelien, 2013). Partly because of this, and partly because of increasing professionalization, this workforce achieved significant discretionary space and had much influence over the distribution of services, the interpretation of needs, and the prioritization of resources. This "anarchic" institutional adaptation was not limited to the street level bureaucrats in municipal worlds; in Norway in particular, it reflected a deep-seated tradition of municipal autonomy vis-à-vis the state (Stenius, 2010; Vike, 2018).

In the post-WWII era (until the 1990s in Denmark and Sweden, somewhat later in Norway), it may seem that Scandinavian municipalities provided their central states with an offer they could not refuse. Municipalities proved efficient providers of what the population seemed to want more than anything else: better schooling and health and social services, easier access, and the power to influence services and local policymaking. National

governments could draw on a solid bedrock of popular legitimacy, and not until the 1980s did this balance change significantly. State authorities could make promises that, masquerading as an improvement of universalism in the form of stronger emphasis on individual rights, could be delegated to the municipal level, and thus (potentially) both secure the delivery of the goods, the political representation of local populations politically, and state legitimacy. Increasingly, municipalities became servants of the state and gradually too fragmented to play their traditional role as counterweight to the central state (Næss et al., 1987).

Scandinavian municipalities have been exceptionally dependent on a workforce attuned to relational service provision. Thus, the Scandinavian welfare state experiment is not only inseparable from municipal capacity and autonomy, but also from the very large number of female "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 2010) operating in the interface between the formal and the informal, the inside and the outside, the public and the civil/private, and control and autonomy. The female dominated workforce, although beyond direct control, was flexible and optimistic enough to reduce the increasing gap between promises and resources – in much the same way as municipalities were willing to absorb excess responsibility from the central state and for a long time ignore the long-term consequences of states that promised more welfare on their behalf and cashed in electoral support while (indirectly) cutting municipal budgets. However, during the expansion period and a decade or so beyond it, street-level workers and municipalities spearheaded broad popular alliances that promoted a forceful and optimistic, re-distributional welfare policy agenda based on discretional autonomy on the part of those who met users/clients/pupils/patients face to face. Notably, to a significant degree the expansion became needs-driven, and in municipal contexts austerity arguments were largely treated as expressions of elitist reductionism, and so on. Vike's (1991, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2018) fieldwork experience in the 1990s abounds with situations where local politicians, grassroot bureaucrats, middle level administrative leaders, union representatives, and user organization representatives portrayed local elites as promoting the gospel of austerity as "the other": distant, well-educated theorists who had not yet acknowledged that welfare policy is about "real people". Of course, the female dominated service providing professions never ignored their own interests, yet it is striking that they never even seemed to consider adopting the strategy so successfully adopted by medical doctors: defining quality standards and translating responsibility into bounded units, each with a specific price.

Autonomy

If we pause for a moment and take a closer look at the pattern described above, we may realize that insofar as universalism in service provision epitomizes some key features of the Scandinavian welfare model, it may have very little to do with a specific policy regime, a distinct "culture" or a certain system of controlled governance. The institutional system within which universalism emerged could aptly be labeled *ordered anarchy*, characterized not so much by hierarchical governance and control as by a segmentary system of (mainly local) checks and balances. Until about the 1990s municipalities were highly autonomous vis-à-vis the state, but firmly embedded in local networks of representation and socially highly complex patterns of cross-cutting cleavages and alliances. This provided a fertile institutional environment for experimentation, collective learning and practical universalism.

When Fukuyama formulated the idea of "getting to Denmark", he was caught up in the evolutionist idea that "modern" institutions emerge from "old" ones and naturally replace personal dependency with legal rule, representative democracy, and strong legitimacy, to put it crudely. Certainly, such a perspective fits well with the main features of the European

experience of "evolving" from feudalism to democracy. Yet it ignores the broader empirical pattern suggested by the Scandinavian case. For example, the most important elements of the "mature political modernity" characterizing Scandinavian states are older (Næss et al., 1987; Sørensen & Stråth, 1997; Aronsson, 1997; Knudsen, 2000). In Fukuyama's scheme, that would be legal rule, representative government and strong legitimacy allowing for a capable state apparatus. Local institutions responsible for legal and political order were in place in most of Scandinavian countries before industrialization, broad popular movements were institutionalized prior to democratization, literacy was widespread, and the social structure was systematically differentiated and "individualized" (Sørensen & Stråth, 1997). In fact, it seems reasonable to say that the contemporary decay of the Scandinavian welfare model (Sunesson, 1998; Szebehely & Meagher, 2018; Vike, 2018) is intimately linked to a "re-traditionalization", a series of conservative reactions involving an emphasis on hierarchical authority, personal dependency, and a partial breakdown of representation.

A strong case against evolutionary teleological thinking in scholarship on the emergence and transformations of complex political systems has recently been made by Graeber and Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humankind* (2021). Based on a comprehensive review of prehistoric material, Graeber and Wengrow demolish the view that foragers converted to agricultural adaption and lived in small bands under the sway of "tradition". On the contrary, for thousands of years the forms of social organization represented by such groups existed parallel to and in close interaction with agricultural societies. And for the most part they were not band societies at all, or at least only some of the time. Their most salient feature was, according to Graeber and Wengrow, that they shifted seasonally between different types of social organization. One basic element in this was a fundamental desire and a real possibility to keep hierarchy at bay; hierarchy was mainly limited to the season of festivity and plenty. Assuming that egalitarian existence free from personal dependence was so dominant for so long, there are plenty of reasons to ask: Why did humanity get stuck in hierarchical orders where there was no way to escape dependence? A great paradox here is precisely the ease with which we today tend to associate democratic societies with egalitarianism, given the fact that personal autonomy, in the sense of a real ability to escape dependency, the possibility to move away and live completely differently, or to reject following orders, are all utopian alternatives. It may be relevant to note here, in line with Graeber and Wengrow, that in Europe, virtually no one considered "democracy" to be of any relevance whatsoever until the late eighteenth century. Freedom was neither born, nor nurtured, in a European cradle (Goody, 2006).

This reasoning makes it more relevant than ever to revisit and explore the relationship between democracy and autonomy. Why, for example, is it that the overarching values of freedom and equality in contemporary democracies so often turn into questions of governance, even though public and private institutions alike turn more hierarchical and reproduce personal dependence on a large scale? (Fukuyama, 2015). Perhaps this may help explain why scholarly interest in democracy has so rarely raised the question of why "just institutions matter so much", to follow Bo Rothstein (1998).

Lars Trägårdh (1987, 2007, 2013) has pointed out that the idea of "civil society", as developed and celebrated in especially Anglo-American research and policy, was never fully embraced in the Scandinavian region. One main reason, he suggests, may be that here the distinction between "the state" and "society" was never really experienced as very relevant. Historically there were no very clear boundaries between these social domains, and in social terms there hardly existed any strong sense of the public sector as a hierarchical, bureaucratic, instrumental, and elitist contrast to the real thing – civil society – as a haven of

reciprocity, autonomy, authenticity, and solidarity. Much evidence suggests that Trägårdh is correct, and that the relative absence of a dichotomous social reality is related to the role of social movements in Scandinavia (Sørensen & Stråth, 1987). Three aspects are striking, neither of which points to any cultural distinctiveness, but rather to a particular form of social organization. First, social movements were broad and relatively inclusive in terms of social class – both the religious movements, the temperance movement, women's associations, rural organizations, the sports movement, and even the labor movement (Stenius, 2000; Selle, 2013; Myhre, 2017). Second, their organizational pattern was extremely uniform, and well suited for grasping political influence. They were locally based but emphasized relevance at the national arena through umbrella organizations. Third, they were highly efficient in influencing public policy and public institutions (Selle, 2016). To reiterate: the main point is not that these movements were very different from popular movements in other parts of Europe, but rather that their organizational forms became almost hegemonic and able to marginalize mafiosi groups, urban oligarchies, military systems of command, old clientelist bureaucratic elites, predatory owners of capital, and so on (Collins, 2011; Trägårdh, 2013). Importantly, this meant that what we could call *the moral economy of membership* became dominant in the popular movements, not just one subordinated principle of social organization among many, cutely domesticated as a property of "civil society" (Vike, 2018).

This pattern, although in this context spelled out in somewhat superficial terms, may help explain some of the path-dependent trajectories eventually manifesting themselves in the form of the Scandinavian model of the welfare state. The moral economy of membership was to a large extent based on a very rigid system of representation. "Voluntary" associations in Scandinavia were originally not mainly political, but perhaps mainly infrastructures for organizing collective labor, social control, and marshalling power to negotiate terms with state authorities (Stenius, 2010). Attracting "members" was vital long before voluntary associational life exploded in the 19th century, as the main challenge for most of the farming population was shortage of labor – a highly unique situation on a continent where most people elsewhere were largely dependent, or even owned (Sørensen & Stråth, 1987). The gains won by developing efficient forms of labor-sharing was great, and one important organizational outcome was a social pattern which could labeled reciprocal egalitarianism. In preindustrial times, people in the Scandinavian countries were not at all equal (Myhre, 2017; Masdalen, 2020). Yet personal dependency was exceptionally rare, and so the idea of membership (committing to sharing responsibility and accepting collective norms) could potentially overcome status distinctions that limited the potential of cooperation. Given this premise, universalism was not an alien idea. It made a lot of sense to act as though social status was (relatively) irrelevant given that the recruitment of new members presented itself as the most efficient mechanism for increasing the collective good, political influence above all.

Returning to Trägårdh's reasoning, the state came to represent the major agent for setting individuals free. This was possible only because the state was not seen as an extension of old elites and bureaucratic machineries – an alienating Other – but rather as an extension of voluntary associations in which systems of representation secured some degree of membership control.

If the idea of "getting to Denmark" still makes any sense, it could do so as a conceptualization of the institutionalization of popular claims on the state rather than as an evolutionary step in state-building. The key aspect is the renewed emphasis on freedom as individual autonomy as depicted by Trägårdh, and Graeber and Wengrow, as well as by scholars who have discussed "modern" democratic freedom in relation to real egalitarian,

foraging societies (Gibson & Sillander, 2012). In this way, we may be able to grasp the naïve myth of "Europe as the cradle of freedom and democracy" head on, and soberly conceptualize the significance of personal dependence in European history and its continued relevance.

Political culture as institutional, processual practice

In our discussion above, we have zoomed in on one aspect of the Scandinavian welfare state that speaks directly to this: an institutional system that has allowed for an unusual degree of individual autonomy, one which allows for withdrawal and negotiation – for employees, users, backbenchers in local politics, and – at least until relatively recently, middle level leaders in municipal administrations. This observation challenges dominant perspectives of the Scandinavian welfare states as relatively authoritarian and conformist, and as such a more potent threat to individual freedom than what is the case in more liberal states where civil society in the prototypical sense (distinctly non-state) is perhaps more visible (Baldwin, 1991). By "withdrawal" we here mean the opportunity to reject orders (by street-level bureaucrats and mid-level leaders vis-à-vis managers, by local politicians vis-à-vis state authorities, etc.), to resist, reject, and/or sabotage managerial measures, claim negotiations when faced with new responsibilities, to influence service provision, and so on. The parallel to non-state societies may again prove illuminating. In the history of humankind, most societies have experimented with ways of balancing the presence of cross-cutting cleavages with the absence of centralized authority, including individuals who withdraw or threatens to do so (Scott, 1998). Scandinavian institutions have of course never been anarchic, but there is little doubt that cross-cutting cleavages have been utilized much more extensively as an alternative to centralizing authority than what seems to have been acknowledged so far (Vike, 2018). For example, in municipal worlds, managerial authority or the dominance of local political elites have to a very great extent been modified by shifting alliances generated from below that have been able to challenge elitist agendas, and thus allow for "multi-level governance", "co-creation", and so on, at a significant scale.

In our outline above, we have tried to describe an emergent institutional system rather than classifying abstract indications of "democracy", "freedom", "political development", and the like. We have also attempted to go one step beyond this, and conceptualize political culture as a social process characterized by intense negotiation and conflict. From this perspective, it seems to us that categories such as universalism and autonomy articulate and materialize as something concrete enough to correspond to real experience, and which may be described empirically in ways that allow for proper generalization and modelling. We also hope that we have been able to address some more general aspects – or to be more precise: emergent properties – of welfare state universalism. Insofar as the welfare state experiment in Europe and North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan and a few other states has been considered an important step toward democratization, it is of course highly relevant to ask why the development has been so dramatically reversed. Another and perhaps much more fruitful way to approach the question is to seek a deeper understanding of why, in some places, the idea was pursued considerably further and for a significantly longer period – even into the present. One way to do this is to try to discover and acknowledge the factors that drove universalism in the Scandinavian countries and in part made it self-reinforcing. As pointed out above, such an analytical procedure cannot not take as its point of departure that universalism is a legal category, an ideology, or an aspect of leadership, and so on, but must take issue with the power dynamics that shape institutions.

Elderly care in municipal worlds

To sum up the argument so far: Universalism in Scandinavia was primarily driven by shifting policy alliances generated from the ground up, alliances that simply could not be controlled by interests desiring responsibility, austerity, and hierarchical control. In much the same way as the middle classes, in the early phase, chose to buy into working class claims and redefine them as universal citizens' rights, mobilization from below made elites increasingly responsive to popular claims (better schooling, more and better services, easier access, greater inclusion, etc.), as they could draw on sources of legitimacy for governance generated mainly by other actors.

The driving force behind these alliances, and the shared ambition guiding them and gluing them together, was the expansion of universalism and continued inclusion. In Vike's ethnographic work in municipal politics starting in the late 1980s, he documented that this seemingly utopian idealism was in fact a foundational principle in coalition building; it served important ideological purposes; it was easy to handle administratively; it served as a convincing manifestation of the idea that the public sector is in fact an extension of popular will (as opposed to an external agent in need of disciplining it and maintaining a firm boundary); it worked excellently as a marker of identity and a signal of true representation of the popular will; and it marked a useful boundary vis-à-vis local elites – in addition to sewing the whole municipal sector together as a major counterweight to an increasingly centralized state. Inspired by E.N. Anderson's remark that well adapted institutions tend to have accumulated enough experience to "know" how to deal with long-term effects of their own role in their environments, we may also note that over time practical universalism had consequences that no one seemed to anticipate, but which were nevertheless incorporated into the municipal memory (Anderson, 1996). Municipal welfare policy became more popular than anyone could expect. Presumably because bureaucratic rigidity and humiliation was kept at a minimum, the economic effects of individual autonomy (which, for example, integrated people into educational paths and labor market participation) were quite astonishing (Barth et al., 2014, 2015), and the intensity of political alliance-building related to the shared concern for the greater collective good (welfare services to all according to individual needs) reduced the types of social fragmentation associated with commodification, privatization, and unregulated competition.

Elderly care in may serve as an apt illustration. The universalization of elderly care, starting from the 1960s and moving onwards until the early 2000s, followed a logic of assuming full public responsibility for all of the elderly population, regardless of status, wealth, place of residence, and gender – as well as of kin relations (Szebehely & Meagher, 2017). The first phase was highly utopian and an extension of the sense of progress, vitality, and unity that took hold at the end of WWII, but during the following decades the utopian goals that were expressed with increasing political pathos as well as with legal mooring (individual rights) by the central state were interpreted quite literally in municipalities and among the wider public (Vike et al., 2002). As a result, attention was directed to needs that were supported by rights, but far too scarce resources. From the 1980s onward, this gave rise to a sense of permanent scandal; in local as well as national media, stories of elderly people who did not have their needs met by the municipality abounded, stirring up moral outcries and disappointment, as though the experience was shocking, literally speaking. Our point here is that this sense of permanent scandal strongly indicates that large parts of the population actually believed that the political intentions formulated through governments' welfare policies could and should be imagined in literal terms. In the following, third phase, emerging in the 1990s as the central state had achieved firm control over the municipal sector, the utopian

accent took a new twist and became "utopia now", involving a systematic, temporal separation between political ambitions to improve the welfare state further, on the one hand, and the responsibility to provide accordingly, on the other (Vike, 2018). The central state reserved for itself the privilege of monopolizing "utopian time" (the responsibility to realize the goal at some point in the future, if possible), while municipalities and the service providers were delegated the responsibility to secure "utopia now" (the responsibility to secure rights here and now, independently of available resources). This mechanism of "decentralization of responsibility" has served extremely efficiently as seen from the point of view of elites, albeit detrimental to the institutional ecology of the welfare state arrangement.

From reciprocity to governance

In line with the perspective developed here, there is a need to revisit the intimate relationship between democracy, personal autonomy, and egalitarian checks on (elite) trust networks aiming at hierarchical control. We have chosen to focus on the institutionalization of universalism, because it seems to us that this extremely important principle is the key to explaining why welfare states, sometimes, generate self-reinforcing dynamic processes that are forceful enough to leave little room for elites to establish institutional dominance and managerial autonomy (Tilly, 2004, 2005). In this context it is important to emphasize the significance of institutionalization. Welfare states are not ad hoc expressions of spontaneous enthusiasm. In analytical terms what we are aiming at here is reciprocity: forms of decision-making and institutional governance that do not emerge from command, but through negotiations and exchange between actors with diverse interests. Reciprocity depends on autonomy, as only autonomous agents who may want to escape asymmetric social bonds are able to enter a mutual commitment relatively freely (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). It seems that the empirical record contains very few examples of systems of service provision that allowed users/recipients to make strong claims and negotiate or define the terms. However, this, in fact, was the case during the welfare state expansion period in Scandinavia. It is important to note that available evidence suggest that this system, which emerged largely as an unintended effect of institutional "disorder", worked quite well in the sense of securing inclusive well-being, popular political influence, innovation, economic growth, and a relatively strong check on hierarchization and the monopolization of power by elites. Thus, it made welfare goods and services subject to negotiation.

Since the early 2000s, this system of relative symmetrical reciprocity has gradually been replaced by a more hierarchical logic of paternalist charity, and by the severance of bonds of social solidarity implied by privatization measures (Sandvin et al., 2020). This is not necessarily surprising, but the importance of the shift has been largely ignored in research and, in our view, left us quite ignorant of the significance of the experiment. Partly because it has remained unexplained, the return to hierarchical governance may seem unavoidable. Although managerial designs to govern universalism more efficiently seem to represent a contradiction in terms, the belief that it is indeed possible remain dominant both in political and academic discourse ("more for less").

The emergence of reciprocity as a guiding principle of welfare state development is, as we have stressed, interesting in its own right, but the main point here is its institutionalization (Graeber, 2014, Vike, 2018). As outlined above, reciprocity in local communities and social movements may not have been very unique for this region, but its profound influence on public institutions and, ultimately, the state, was indeed uncommon, and had important long-term consequences. The influence went both ways, of course, and is hard to detect. For example, how did the formal infrastructure of municipalities (legal foundations and

electoral dynamics) feed back to voluntary associations, and how did the two institutional forms become so similar? In Scandinavia, universalism is inseparable from the nature of local, representative institutions. One essential property of municipal institutions was that they were generalist in outlook (Næss et al., 1987, Aronsson, 1987, Nagel, 1991, Knudsen, 2000).

It seems likely that this institutional arrangement contributed to reinforcing universalism in interesting ways. From an anthropological point of view, it may seem surprising that extremely complex institutional structures of this kind developed in close integration with tiny local face-to-face communities of neighbors and kin. One important effect of this peculiar form of social complexity was, paradoxically, perhaps, that bureaucratic procedures were kept simple, and remained sensitive to the dynamics of local social relations. Universalism illustrates this, as it makes it possible to ignore social status, means testing and other distinctions that necessarily make bureaucracies bounded, bulky, and potentially alienating. Two related aspects may be highlighted here. First, local universalism is inclusive and has the effect that in situations where whole communities need to mobilize against an external agent, for example the state, the shared identity of membership overrides other status distinctions. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, local universalism is arguably the only policy principle we know that has the potential to prevent public services from becoming increasingly like charities. It is easy to see that the political culture that emerged from municipal life generated a profound ambivalence toward charity, one which was objectified as an ideologically codified "anti-charity egalitarianism" by the labor movement in the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

Let us emphasize here that our aim in this article is to highlight some aspects of welfare state experimentation that we think have passed relatively unnoticed, and which may inspire us to rethink the social and moral grounds of welfare state institutions. The backdrop to our reasoning is the fact that the Scandinavian welfare state was perhaps the most ambitious and innovative, and perhaps among the more successful egalitarian experiments (Bendixen et al., 2017). Perhaps future research will reveal that it was never viable. Yet, based on what we now know, that seems unlikely. After all, it is the only historical experiment we know that managed to combine individual autonomy, democracy, egalitarianism, and the care for collective goods – as well as productivity. Most probably it is the only experiment we know that came even close to eliminating (or, for a limited period, setting aside) the two fundamental European nightmares: personal dependency (feudalism) and autonomous property ownership (the "liberal", or Roman, right to own and dominate without negotiable restrictions) (Thompson, 1991; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). The Scandinavian welfare state generated a social order in which national populations achieved, comparatively speaking, an unprecedented claim on public institutions, their resources, and their potential for extending service provision on a broad basis. The generalization is not intended as a moral judgement, but as a way of emphasizing the analytical value of the Scandinavian experience. It may provide insight into how privatization of collective goods may be brought under some degree of control.

Some of the European roots of the welfare state are authoritarian extensions of the old state to prevent revolution and to achieve control and order. One basic element of this strategy was to introduce various conditions that served the purpose of differentiating the population according to status. Democratic regimes were more reluctant to introduce welfare policies, as property owners were largely unwilling to pay higher taxes (Esping-Andersen,

1990; Baldwin, 1991). Later, the intensification of class conflicts, combined with wartime experiences, made the idea of the welfare state more relevant to deal with the effects of social fragmentation and an unhealthy and unproductive labor force, without necessarily risking dramatic transformations of political power. In countries where social solidarity crossed status distinctions and subcultural divides, broad class alliances brought social democratic parties to power, and made a different form of welfare state possible, where ambitions to achieve universality were seriously pursued. The effects were profound, and seem seriously understudied.

In the Scandinavian region the institutionalization of social solidarity in the form of universal welfare policy and a decentralized institutional structure contributed to partly undermine or curtail re-introduction of personal dependence and competitive citizenship. One important factor here, which may explain some of this rather unique dynamic, was the collectivized experience of personal autonomy, of which universalism appears as a logical extension. Amongst other things, this turned out to be a key reference point for all actors geared toward increasing and improving public benefits and services, and which enjoyed the possibility of exercising direct influence over local institutions, and ultimately parliaments and the central state. Returning to Charles Tilly (2004, p. 23), we may keep in mind that

> Changes in public politics, inequality, and trust networks clearly interact. Most of the time they interact to block democratization. (…) If European experience provides sound guidance, even working democracies remain forever vulnerable to such reversals; rich minorities subvert democratic processes, or vindicative majorities exclude vulnerable minorities.

It may be interesting to note at the very end that the dynamic described here does not imply a strong emphasis on culture as an explanatory factor, although it does include culture as an emergent property of class struggle and its institutionalization. Institutions may prove robust and efficient even in cases where those committing to them do so pragmatically. That would imply that institutional arrangements may adapt to different environments without losing their essential properties, as for instance in securing justice and autonomy. Possibly, this would imply that Peter Baldwin overstated his case when in 1991 he suggested that even the Scandinavian case may be "interesting", it is "unrepeatable".

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