



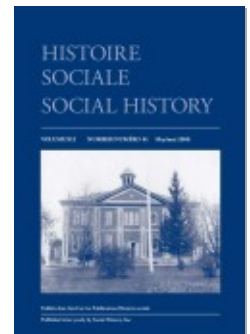
PROJECT MUSE®

---

*The Social Origins of the Welfare State: Québec Families,  
Compulsory Education, and Family Allowances, 1940-1955*  
(review)

Paul Gingrich

Histoire sociale / Social History, Volume 41, Number 81, Mai-May 2008,  
pp. 296-297 (Review)



Published by Les publications Histoire sociale / Social History Inc.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/his.0.0022>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/250938>

MARSHALL, Dominique — *The Social Origins of the Welfare State: Québec Families, Compulsory Education, and Family Allowances, 1940–1955*, translated by Nicola Doone Danby. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006. Pp. 277.

In *The Social Origins of the Welfare State*, Dominique Marshall examines the origins and social effects of two key pieces of social welfare legislation, the 1943 Quebec *Compulsory School Attendance Act* and the 1945 Canadian federal *Family Allowances Act*. Her analysis focuses on children, families, civil servants, church officials, and politicians in Quebec and is set within the context of a province undergoing industrialization, urbanization, and secularization. Marshall overcomes the limited time span, 1940–1955, by examining events leading to “universal” social policies and long-term implications for Quebec and Canada.

Marshall, a history professor at Carleton University, delves into government documents, commissions, inquiries, communications between individuals and government departments, and civil service records. The study demonstrates the importance of connecting historical details regarding the development and administration of social policy with broader social trends and the effects of policy for children and families. Especially interesting is the manner in which school and juvenile labour inspectors, truant and probation officers, school boards, and provincial officers and agents responded to the needs and wishes of families to bend provincial or federal regulations and procedures, thus demonstrating “that the relationships between the State and families need to be addressed in a more flexible manner” (p. xv). This flexibility often resulted in exemptions from school attendance for teenage children in agricultural and poor families, when parents claimed they needed their children to work in the home, on a farm, in a business, or in a paid job. While these agents became professionalized monitors and created a “legitimate means of administration” (p. 69) of children and families, local officers also acted as intermediaries between families and the state.

The study is set in the context of trends that changed Quebec society in the mid-twentieth century — increased wartime demand for labour, rural exodus, and growth of industry, urban population, and employment. While market forces were increasingly felt by all and the Church’s influence over social and political life declined, legislation concerning and governing social life expanded. Marshall examines the changed position and practices of the state in matters of education and family welfare. This created a professional organization of state employees, greater and more “efficient” management of social life, and intervention of the state in the lives of children and families. At the same time, universal programmes allowed for greater individual autonomy, and the state became responsible for ensuring a minimum level of income and security for “the father’s income, the mother’s household duties, and children’s education and standard of living” (p. 117). Particularly interesting is Marshall’s examination of social changes leading to “the slow construction of public institutions” (p. xii). While the establishment of a welfare state was a matter of consensus, the various partners in the consensus — trade unions, workers’ and women’s organizations,

community associations, liberal and professional reformists, the Church — came to it by various routes and with different aims. Differing and changing strengths of federal and provincial governments, along with nationalism and maintenance of Quebec culture, also influenced the outcome. A picture emerges of various forces and influences affecting social policy, leading to new state institutions and new ways for individuals to interact with each other and the state.

Marshall examines the effects of the legislation and welfare state on children and families. In terms of increasing school attendance, she concludes that compulsory legislation was less important than parents' growing recognition of the importance of education in the lives of children. State involvement led to new norms about proper roles for children and proper forms of parenting. The concept of "universal children's rights" (p. 89) justified locating and monitoring the poor. At the same time, family allowances improved family income and the standard of living, and assistance to mothers was important for the welfare and autonomy of women. In spite of the universal aspects of the new legislation and programmes, outcomes differed by social class. In terms of family allowances, poor families' attempts to put aside savings were thwarted by pressing needs for clothing, food, and health. Marshall points to economic need, large families, parental illness or disability, and death of a parent as factors leading to juvenile labour on farms, in businesses, and at home, meaning less than universal school attendance. Marshall judges the welfare state to have been effective for the bulk of the population, but unable to deal with all of the workings of the economy, so that some became "condemned to an even greater marginality" (p. 159).

The book will be especially useful to academics, graduate students, social welfare professionals, and those interested in the development of social policy. For the general reader, or those unfamiliar with Quebec society and politics in the middle of the twentieth century, the book may be difficult to absorb. However, it is worthwhile devoting effort to studying the materials and ideas Marshall presents, since her work sheds light on matters of interest today — federal-provincial relations, poverty, state surveillance, and agency of individuals and professionals. The book contains detailed footnotes, references, and index.

Published in English in the "Studies in Childhood and Family in Canada" series by Wilfrid Laurier Press, the book is a translation of *Aux origines sociales de l'État-providence* (1997). The original version won the 1998–1999 Prix Jean-Charles-Falardeau as the best French-language book in the social sciences. Its publication in English is welcome and important, since Marshall provides a model of how to research and interpret social policy formation, organization, and effects in a social and political context.

Paul Gingrich  
University of Regina