Transformational Moments in Social Welfare
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Preface

This book is the outcome of a research collaboration between historians and social scientists together with partner organisations. We seek to examine how debates around voluntary action compare in different historical moments of economic and social transformation. It is the product of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study called Discourses of Voluntary Action carried out between 2017 and 2020. The thinking behind the study, however, goes back well before this into the early 2010s just as the UK Conservative-led Coalition government’s austerity programme was in full swing. The focus of the eventual research project and this book is on debates that took place during the 1940s and 2010s, which we refer to as transformational moments in the development of the welfare state in England.

Informally, we referred to these decades as the bookends of the welfare state, comparing the establishment of the comprehensive social democratic welfare state in the 1940s with the significant retrenchment and restructuring underway in the Coalition’s programme in the 2010s. Was this the end of the welfare state? And what role would voluntary action be expected and willing to play beyond this? We opted eventually for a more open-ended description, of transformational moments, conceptualising the 2010s as a yet unresolved process of rethinking the welfare state. We concluded the study with the idea that a more thoroughgoing and explicit conversation is
urgently needed about the future of welfare, the role of the state, and the contribution of voluntary action.

Of course, since our study ended, and as this book was being written, the world turned upside down with the emergence and rapid spread of COVID-19. Existing assumptions about the role and scope of the state were cast aside in the urgency of introducing public health restrictions, economic support schemes and wider social welfare support. There seemed to be a new appreciation of the role of voluntary action in its multiple guises – volunteer mobilisation, mutual aid support groups, formal charities and community groups. In the ongoing devastation, new forms of social change seemed possible.

Reflecting on the astonishing period since early spring 2020, and knowing that the implications ahead of the ‘Covid decade’ (British Academy, 2021) will be far reaching, open and unknown, it seems that the transformational moment of the 2010s, in terms of the welfare state and voluntary action, will extend well into the 2020s. We offer this book, then, in the hope that it may help inform ongoing and future debates about the role, position and contribution of voluntary action in social welfare. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that newly exposed human vulnerabilities and exacerbated social inequalities demand an intense and soul-searching deliberation on the way we seek to address needs and rebuild a genuinely social security.

We would like to emphasise that this book has been a collaborative venture, in two senses. First, it has involved joint work among the five of us as researchers and authors, each bringing our own subject and methodological experience and knowledge in a shared spirit of enquiry. The book is the outcome of multidisciplinary work covering history, geography, sociology and social policy.

Second, it has involved the partnership and highly valued expertise and reflections of others, whom we would like to acknowledge, while absolving them of any responsibility for the outcome. We are extremely grateful for the support and
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