

# Welfare Services and Urban Political Culture in Nordic countries

## Call for papers for three workshops in 2023-2024

The aim of these workshops is to analyse urban institutions of welfare and their role for the urban political culture in a long historical perspective. Today, the term welfare is linked to state politics in 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular when it comes to the Nordic states. However, the history of welfare is older; it was since the Middle Ages organized locally, as a part of a social contract or an obligation that social and religious institutions organized. These institutions were mostly situated in urban settlements, creating a specific urban political culture based on the changing interactions between institutions like the municipal government, central government, private profit-oriented agents (merchants, landowners, entrepreneurs) and various actors from social and religious institutions.

The term “welfare” has a history in itself, generally denoting investments and subsidies based on the contemporary understanding of the common good (*bonum commune*). Welfare is, thus, a touch-stone for questions of citizenship and participation rights. Debates on welfare are, consequently, at the core of the urban political culture. By way of negotiations, commercial actors, members of religious, working-class and social institutions engaged in political discussions, influencing both the ways, in which welfare was understood as well as how urban politics were perceived. These negotiations resulted in new notions of citizenship, focusing inclusion, democratization and participation. Ultimately, an exceptionally high level of citizen engagement commonly defines the Nordic countries.

The expansion of welfare was a part of urbanisation process, causing new demands for social and material welfare institutions (infrastructures, sanitation, protection, food supply and social care for those in need). These institutions, in turn, had a profound impact on urban life and space, effectively accelerating the urbanization process. Urbanisation is the result of the implementation of welfare; welfare institutions in their turn were an ever more important part of the urban fabric. The conflict-laden negotiations of welfare resulted in a municipalization process even in rural municipal areas. They were turned into urban settings, in particular since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 20<sup>th</sup> century, welfare cities organize welfare due to an understanding of citizen rights to welfare.

The three workshops focus on different aspects of this urban political culture and the specific role of welfare in a long historical perspective. Welfare in Nordic countries has to be explained as an urban phenomenon, a part of the social contract that might explain a particular kind of urbanity. However, welfare has in the 20<sup>th</sup> century almost exclusively been researched on state level. In consequence, the term “welfare city” is hardly in use. We propose to see welfare as part of an urban agenda, resulting in a distinct role of urban settlements in the Nordic countries. Leading questions:

1. In what ways were cities defined by institutions of welfare?
2. In what ways can the urban political culture be analysed as the result of a cooperation between the magistrates and religious, popular movements, and social institutions?
3. In what ways are these processes coinciding in the Nordic countries, in what ways are they similar to and dependant on other European welfare societies?

4. Finally, is the urban political culture of the Nordic countries specific for these countries, constituting a particular kind of urbanness?

The above sketched background to our interest in welfare cities concerns different aspects of urban life. The lack of interest in a specific urban political culture might be explained with the fact that the role of popular and religious movements for municipalization processes until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is under-studied. This lacuna in the study of welfare societies must be explained with a nation-state paradigm in historical research, which is particularly strong when it comes to matters of welfare.

The three workshops will take place in Helsinki, Stockholm and Copenhagen, inviting scholars from the North or those working on the Nordic Countries.

### **Workshop I – Urban welfare in pre-modern times (Stockholm, November 2023)**

This workshop will investigate the cities' growing engagement in welfare since the Middle Ages. This engagement resulted in a slow municipalization process over the course of centuries. The urban elites engaged in a cooperation with religious and social institutions, thus creating a specific political culture as well as a welfare fabric that centred around charity, services, insurances, and investments, sustained by a variety of actors with different interests.

### **Workshop II – Welfare and local democracy in industrialized cities (Copenhagen April 2024)**

The second workshop is focusing on the transition of the pre-modern welfare cities, during 19<sup>th</sup>-century municipalisation processes. This analysis highlights the magistrates' and other actors' agency. The expansion of infrastructural and social welfare services in this period transformed urban spaces, as well as the social and economic fabrics supporting them. Nordic cities were open for new ideas and eager to learn from both the successes and failures of other Nordic countries, in particular by engaging in international cooperation. They were also utilizing what Alexander Gerschenkorn calls for "advantages of backwardness".

### **Workshop III – The welfare municipality as an urban setting (Helsinki September 2024)**

The third workshop investigates the welfare city as a built environment. Welfare is part of urban settings, it is inherently urban, as urbanness is the result of a spatial construction of welfare units (Castells). This is true for both the centres of welfare cities, the post-war suburban centres as well as the smaller, rural-based urban settlements, which came into existence as an answer to the needs of welfare. On all levels, welfare institutions formed the core of a localized democratic society, based on the understanding of neighbourhoods as a basic form of community. Privatization and the dismantling of state welfare since the 1980s changed the urban settings once again and resulted in a re-definition of welfare cities, with new and old actors engaging in welfare and its public discourse.

If you are interested in the topics of this series of workshops, if you want to participate with an own paper, please send a short (10-20 lines) abstract, a title and your name with affiliation until April 16, 2023, in order to allow us planning the workshops in detail as well as applying for funding.

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