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A Social History of Ideas Pertaining to Childcare in France and in the United States

Childcare institutions have developed within social, cultural, and political contexts. Their historical trajectories are linked with nation-specific societal and political discourses. Thereby, prevailing ideas about childcare and child-rearing are underpinned by theories and beliefs about parenting, the role of women in raising children, and the duties and functions of families and the nation state. Although the developments of institutional childcare and ideas pertaining thereto in France and the United States show remarkable parallels, the two countries differ in respect to their childcare approaches. Today, different rates of enrollment in childcare facilities suggest that historically institutional childcare might have been embedded more deeply in the French than in the American society. Currently, 43 percent of children less than three years old are enrolled in France whereas 31 percent are enrolled in the United States.¹ Moreover, while parents in France cover 27 percent of the costs of institutional childcare for children up to three years, parents in the United States pay 60 percent of these costs on average.² In view of this discrepancy in the use and funding of institutional childcare, it is important to study both the societal conditions within which childcare facilities have developed and the evolution of theoretical concepts underlying childcare in both countries.

This study outlines relationships between societal contexts and major historical developments in two corresponding daycare facilities, the French crèche and the American day nursery, summarizing paramount processes in the evolution of these facilities and accompanying conceptual ideas that substantiated their existence. By enlightening discursive paradigms about childcare since the inception of the first formal daycare facilities, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of current approaches in and societal attitudes toward institutional childcare in France and in the United States.

The analysis draws on a comparative-historical approach.³ It reviews primary sources of founders of childcare institutions, educational theorists, and administrative authorities as well as secondary sources from historical and social science research. The historic-pedagogical investigation thereby contrasts discursive and political frameworks within which French and American childcare institutions have been shaped.

A Brief Comparison of France and the U.S. Today

Today, both France and the U.S. are industrial states with a high gross domestic product per capita in international comparison (\$27,200 and \$36,700, respectively), a relatively comparable fertility rate (1.89 and 2.07, respectively), and a similar labor force participation (63.7% in France, 23.6% of whom are in part-time employment; and 69.8% in the U.S., 18.8% of whom in part-time employment). The labor force participation of women with at least one child under six amounts to 65 percent in France and 58 percent in the U.S. However, the two countries differ in respect to traditions and policies relating to childcare. In France, mothers are entitled to 16 weeks of paid maternity leave for the first child and 26 weeks for subsequent children whereas in the United States no entitlement to paid maternity leave exists.

Furthermore, French parents assume a smaller fraction of the costs of childcare than American parents (27% vs. 60%).⁴ Considering the aforementioned resemblance of both countries, it is worth studying the origins of the latter differences.

The Beginnings of Institutional Childcare

The French crèche

Although there were more ancient childcare facilities,⁵ the first daycare center in the modern history of France arose in the 19th century from a philanthropic and religious concern for neglected children. At that time, in various areas of France, the industrialization brought about far-reaching changes in society which eventually resulted in a deterioration of the socioeconomic situation of a considerable proportion of the laboring classes and the poor.⁶ Industrialization led to the employment of women and children as cheap labor in industry and to accompanying changes in family patterns and child-rearing. Between 1816 and 1844, child abandonment to public welfare was a serious problem, concerning about 18 percent of live births on average in Paris.⁷ Against this background, Jean Baptiste Firmin Marbeau, adjunct to the mayor of the 1st arrondissement of Paris, noticed a lack of infrastructure to aid poor working mothers to care for their children aged less than two years. Marbeau belonged to the Social Catholic movement which aimed to combine Christian charity with the struggle against the exuberance of the economic liberalism that spread at that time to the social and economic detriment of the working classes.⁸ Working-class life gradually emerged as a concern of bourgeois social thinking and action during the early periods of industrialization.⁹ In this context, Marbeau intended to help the poor and their children by establishing a childcare facility. On November 14, 1844, his endeavors led to the creation of the very first crèche in Paris, a daycare center designed to enable indigent mothers behaving morally to work without being compelled to abandon their children. The aid offered to these ‘worthy poor’ originated from traditional charity impulses. On behalf of Christianity and humanity, Marbeau appealed to the obligation of charity to offer help to the children of those overburdened mothers whose misery arose through no fault of their own: “L’humanité, la religion, l’intérêt public demandent qu’on vienne au secours de ces pauvres mères, au secours de ces pauvres enfants. Il importe au bien public que la Société, seconde mère des citoyens, veille sur tous les malheureux.”¹⁰

There was, however, an ulterior motive to the benevolent undertaking. According to Marbeau, out of one million inhabitants in Paris, 65,000 were enlisted in the *bureau de bienfaisance*, a welfare office designed to assist the indigent.¹¹ By fighting pauperism and making the lot of the indigent easier to bear, Marbeau aspired to inculcate bourgeois morality into the lower classes, to instill them respect and recognition of the social order, and to demonstrate that the rich took steps to combat the hardship of the poor. In addition, Marbeau emphasized the importance of the crèche as a site of improving public health and reducing infant mortality to guarantee a strong future manpower for France. He fervently campaigned for the propagation of the crèche, publishing a book entitled *Des Crèches* in 1845 and describing the whole array of practical purposes of the facility: increasing and improving the population; refining the morals of the destitute; encouraging cleanliness and resignation, and giving the poor classes the means to work; instilling recognition of and respect for the country’s institutions and laws; forcing the poor, through good deeds, not to hate the rich; giving the latter an opportunity to efficiently rescue the unfortunate, and inculcating the feeling of pity and charity in their children; reducing misery and infant mortality; and preventing delinquency including infanticide, theft, and other crimes.¹²

The American day nursery

Patterned on the French model of daily group infant care for the children of working mothers, day nurseries became the American counterparts to the French crèches.¹³ They evolved similarly to crèches as part of a philanthropic movement that sought to help poor

mothers to work and thus prevent them from becoming dependent on charity or welfare or turning to prostitution.¹⁴ As in France, the early day nurseries were a result of the ongoing industrialization which called for women's labor in factories. The spread of the industrial labor system triggered rapid growth in city populations, altered societal patterns, and led to increased neglect of children. Many children of working parents were either locked up at home or allowed to wander the streets, left to fend for themselves during the day.¹⁵

However, day nurseries were also a response to extensive immigration: more than five million foreign families migrated to the United States between 1815 and 1860.¹⁶ Day nurseries thus offered protective, custodial care to neglected children mostly of immigrant and working-class mothers to keep children out of orphanages.¹⁷ The first actual descendant of the French crèche was the Nursery for the Children of Poor Women in New York City, which was founded in 1854¹⁸ by a committee of wealthy charitable women under the direction of Mary DuBois who was concerned about mothers who worked as wet nurses and typically had to leave their own infants with siblings, neighbors, or on their own.¹⁹ While the term crèche, a loanword from the French language, had been used at first in the United States and denoted the genealogy of the institution, it was ousted in the course of time by the term day nursery,²⁰ even though the French crèche remained a reference point for certain founders and managers of day nurseries.

Early French influences on day nurseries

Efforts to introduce the French crèche in the United States were made among others by philanthropists such as Hanna Biddle, Maria Maltby Love, and Stephen Humphreys Gurteen who traced their inspiration for the establishment of a day nursery in Philadelphia (1863) and the Fitch Creche in Buffalo (1881) to tours of crèches in France.²¹ The nursery in Philadelphia, founded by Hanna Biddle, a member of an important Philadelphia family, was to become the first permanent day nursery and catered, at the time of its opening, for children of Civil War workers while their mothers cleaned the hospitals and manufactured clothing for soldiers.²² Maria Maltby Love, a humanitarian visionary from an elite Buffalo family and adherent to the Social Gospel movement,²³ assisted Stephen Humphreys Gurteen, one of the most prominent figures in the crèche cause, a pioneer in American social welfare and founder of the first Charity Organization Society in the United States in 1877, in establishing the Fitch Creche in the city of Buffalo under the auspice of Gurteen's Society.²⁴ Gurteen was encouraged to visit a crèche in Paris by reports of its operation. He returned to Buffalo with plans for his newly founded Society, not only praising the French institutions but also devoting a great deal of effort to convincing Benjamin Fitch, a New York City philanthropist, to contribute the property that eventually made possible the Fitch Creche.²⁵

Initial Reception of Institutional Childcare

In France, Marbeau's crèche soon was endorsed widely. Encouraged from the very beginning by the press, by the administrative and religious authorities, and by the *Académie française* which offered Marbeau the Monthyon award for his book *Des Crèches*, the new institution began to propagate both in Paris and in municipalities outside the capital.²⁶ About twenty crèches were built in the capital and the largest towns in France were endowed with crèches before 1848.²⁷

Unlike the crèche in France, the American day nursery provoked many negative reactions at first. One of the most frequent objections was that they harmed children. Opponents criticized the high mortality rates in day nurseries which were mainly due to the lack of biomedical remedies and infectious contagion among infants whose immune system was weakened by what later came to be termed hospitalism under institutional conditions.²⁸ Others simply considered the nurseries' setting as unsatisfactory and generally voiced concern about custodial care. Overall, popular support for day nurseries as a suitable form of childcare continued to be marginal throughout history. Sadie Ginsberg, a leader of the Child Study

Association of America, later expressed this reluctance toward custodial care when she described it as “herding children. Feeding one end and wiping the other [...] No trained staff. Little or no suitable equipment. A garage, a storage place for children.”²⁹ However, a number of proponents advocated day nurseries as fervently as critics opposed them. The divergences of opinion revealed a great deal about the ongoing struggle for childcare, displaying a pattern of views that characterized the dynamics of the childcare movement over time. An account of Julia Ames can be seen as typical of the attitudes of nursery advocates: “The good work rapidly growing in the Old World, was not long in crossing the ocean and finding place in the hearts of America’s philanthropic women, and today the crèches supported by them are [...] veritable oases to the tired working-women and the hitherto uncared for waifs.”³⁰ Ames stressed the need for crèches by referring to the discovery of a missionary employed by the Central Union who visited mothers to comfort and aid the worthy and stated that “in the poorest districts of the city, only one in four of the children of proper age to attend school do so; but, in the school of the street, the rest are learning the lessons which will train them to fill our prisons to overflowing in years to come.”³¹ Until today, child neglect is deemed to be a precursor to delinquency, and the logic of Ames’ argument is still taken up by supporters of early childcare services.³²

The Evolution of Institutional Childcare

Children’s vulnerability, infant mortality, and the public health approach in France

In France, industrialization was coupled both with an increased use of child labor³³ and, subsequently, with legal protection of children through child labor legislation.³⁴ Child labor was increasingly regarded as a social evil in the 1820s and 1830s and it came to be condemned as simply another commodity on a market that is purely subject to the laws of supply and demand rather than to the moral principles of civilization.³⁵ A struggle to enact and enforce factory legislation followed when the first French legislation on child labor in 1841 attempted to put an end to the prevailing laissez-faire ideology in the matter of child labor. Crèches thus arose against the background of a growing understanding of children’s physical and moral vulnerability. Social reformers and physicians raised concerns over the health and wellbeing of babies and young children, becoming mindful of children’s delicate medical condition and the high infant mortality rate.³⁶ An interest in hygiene or, as it was called later, in preventive medicine, arose³⁷ and crèches were increasingly created and run with a distinct focus on public health and the improvement of the living conditions of young children in urban areas.³⁸

Crèches as a response to fear of class conflicts

A motive other than the concern with children’s health instigated the zeal of French philanthropists to combat the deplorable state of neglected children, notably the fear of future riots, class conflicts, or uprisings of the laborers who were seen as dangerous, depraved, and savage classes. These fears were rooted in the French experience of the Revolution, the July Revolution, and the Lyonnais working class insurrections of 1834.³⁹ Thus, benevolent motives were blurred by a desire for social control. Social Catholicism, for instance, embodied the clerical doctrine of alleviating the fate of the poor without disrupting the social, political and economic order.⁴⁰ Insofar, crèches responded to a middle-class belief in the necessity of governing society.

Progress in the development of crèches

After the Revolution of 1848, the report of Thiers reaffirmed the traditional welfare doctrine, contesting any right to public assistance in regard to matters that fell within the scope of a virtue.⁴¹ Thus, few crèches were created. Even though numerous ministerial circular letters urged the prefects to back up local initiatives, the crèches were not accorded any official recognition before 1862 when first regulations were published.⁴² In 1869, a decree officially recognized the *Société des Crèches* – which aimed to establish, support, propagate and improve

crèches – as an establishment of public utility.⁴³ Furthermore, the Roussel law of 1874, the first law of medical and administrative child protection concerning foster children, contributed to an expansion of crèches.⁴⁴ In the last quarter of the 19th century, when public health reformers took an interest in crèches as a means to promote scientific infant care,⁴⁵ crèches propagated to the effect that by 1902, the number of facilities in France amounted to 408. Next to the 66 crèches in Paris, 39 existed in the capital's suburbs and 303 were dispersed in 186 cities and bigger towns throughout the country.⁴⁶

Day nurseries prior to the formation of the National Federation of Day Nurseries

As in France, most day nurseries in the United States were founded originally as independent efforts and funded by private charity. Frequently, new institutions originated in local initiatives of prosperous women in urban areas.⁴⁷ Nursery constitutors and managers, moved by sympathy for the poor and distressed, sought to lend aid to the vulnerable offspring of the poor. In the second half of the 19th century, day nurseries increased in number mostly as a consequence of endeavors to combat the adverse effects of industrialization, expansion of cities, poverty, and the resulting social dislocation experienced by working families on children.⁴⁸ In addition, the Civil War, which drew men out of families' homes and left many women widowed, created a need for daycare and stimulated the spread of day nurseries.⁴⁹ However, as American day nurseries were offered mostly to and used by families whose fathers were unemployed or whose parents were separated, sick, in debt, or deceased – that is, by families considered to be 'pathological' – they widely fell into disrepute as being for distressed families, a last resort for children who were not cared for properly at home. Around the turn of the century, the typical charitable day nursery was "a place to which no middle-class mother would consider sending her children."⁵⁰ Yet criticisms against the new facilities were voiced on both sides of the ocean.

Criticisms of institutional childcare

In France, doubts about the crèches' utility in matters related to the improvement of children's medical conditions were raised when a study carried out in the 66 crèches of Paris in 1902 estimated that more than a fifth of the infants were rachitic.⁵¹ On the whole, the crèche was far from being endorsed by the French society at the turn of the century. The political left and progressive circles raised concerns on the invasion of private life, in particular of the poor, by institutional interference. Some early socialists rejected the crèche due to doubts they had entertained previously about the Jules Ferry laws on primary education, as sustaining and invigorating the capitalist state. Furthermore, anticlerical republicans distrusted charitable institutions tightly related to the church and informed by the tenets of religious orders.⁵² In the course of the 20th century, misgivings about the institution's usefulness as an instrument to promote public health would endure and opponents would continue to insist on the harm caused by crèches. Adversaries from different parts of French society, including mothers, physicians and social scientists, would express criticisms about the assembling of too large a number of infants under one roof, the disruption of the attachment between mother and child, the detachment of the child from its original milieu, the injurious effects on the formation of the character,⁵³ the high infant mortality,⁵⁴ and the transmission of respiratory infections and ear, nose, throat, and digestive pathologies.⁵⁵ However, despite these criticisms, the crèche retained its importance for many families in France, particularly in urban regions.

In the U.S., day nurseries were criticized on the same grounds. In addition, however, criticisms of day nurseries were rooted in an attack on female labor participation, supporting a philosophy of domesticity which defined the mother as the primary agent responsible for the care of children.⁵⁶ The 'moral mother' was identified with the non-economic sphere of society and expected to raise her children in the family. Opponents of the economic system argued that day nurseries affirmed the exploitation of women under capitalism.⁵⁷ But critique also came

from within the movement as some day nursery leaders reproached institutions for indiscriminate admission of children and thus for a lack of investigation of the parents' character.⁵⁸

The day nursery movement during the Progressive era

The formation of the National Federation of Day Nurseries in 1898 marked a new period in the history of philanthropy.⁵⁹ Along with numerous Catholic charities as well as the National Association of Colored Women (which supported the creation of nurseries for African Americans), the National Federation of Day Nurseries contributed to a growth in institutional childcare. The number of day nurseries increased from fewer than 100 in 1892 to 250 in 1902 and to 618 in 1914.⁶⁰ In Chicago, for instance, 31 day nurseries were established between 1891 and 1916, becoming a part of the city's social services.⁶¹ Josephine Jewell Dodge presided over the National Federation. Her conservative, class- and gender-based maternalism, which insisted that mothers care for their children at home, defined the childcare movement while she was in the office, virtually for the next thirty years. To the detriment of day nurseries, the Federation never made efforts to win governmental subsidies for childcare programs or to correct social problems, one of its main principles being that day nurseries remain in the hands of private charities run by upper-class volunteers. In combination with the Federation's reluctance to professionalize, this tenet soon paralyzed the day nursery movement.

As the nursery movement lost ground, the idea of mothers' pensions emerged. The White House Conference on Dependent Children in 1909 was the beginning of the mothers' pension campaign that sought to introduce government payments to mothers who lacked other means of support to remain at home and care for their children. This pension had the potential to break with the stigmatization that had characterized the treatment of needy mothers hitherto. However, funding levels were usually insufficient to cover all applicants. As poor mothers were prioritized, the pension remained a form of charity, albeit state-sponsored. Nevertheless, by the end of the Progressive Era, mothers' pensions were supported by federal, state, and local welfare officials, while day nurseries were left behind in the hands of private charities.⁶²

The development of day nurseries had not only been impeded by the fact that day nurseries remained under the aegis of an outdated federation. A number of other reasons also hampered their progress. At the beginning of the 20th century, only very few states licensed day nurseries as the health standards were unsatisfactory in many instances.⁶³ At the same time, advocates of the early childhood education movement began to professionalize, promoting kindergartens (for children as of five years of age) and nursery schools (for children mostly between three and five years) that followed their own distinct trajectories. As kindergartens were incorporated into the public school system and nursery schools were increasingly used by the American middle- and upper-class families, the day nursery's reputation continued to deteriorate.⁶⁴ Worried about the danger of undernourishment, poor hygiene, spreading infections, and the lack of proper medical inspections, day nursery board members began to regulate medical inspection and supervision in day nurseries.⁶⁵ However, that was not enough to put day nurseries back on the map. After World War I, day nurseries became identified once more with a population with particular deficiencies, that is, with parents in dire economic straits or parents who were a threat to their children.⁶⁶ This was caused, among others, by the increasing influence of the mothers' pension policies, which enticed many working mothers to return home to take charge of their children, and by the professional development of social work which resulted in a more central role of social workers within day nurseries. The nurseries' clientele thus shifted to illegitimate children whose mothers were ineligible for pensions. Mothers could no longer enroll their children in a day nursery simply because they were employed; eventually, the day nurseries' focus changed to offer 'casework' services for particularly deficient families.⁶⁷ Thus in particular during the early post-war period, day

nurseries became marginal institutions for marginal families again, poorly accepted and stigmatized as “necessary evils.”⁶⁸

Institutional Childcare prior to the Great Depression

The introduction of mothers’ pensions in the U.S. coincided with the adoption of two important legal texts in France. On the eve of World War I, two laws were enacted under the influence of Senator Paul Strauss who presided over the League to Combat Infantile Mortality: a law concerning maternity leave and a law concerning government subsidies for poor families with multiple children.⁶⁹ After war had been declared, a bonus was disbursed to nursing mothers, draconian hygienic rules were put in force in crèches, and attempts were made to maintain and extend pre-war legislation on maternity leave. Yet, as opposed to the mothers’ pensions in the United States which devaluated day nurseries, the new laws in France did not hamper the development of crèches.

During World War I, factory and work-place crèches gained attention in France as factories producing war weaponry recruited women workers in large numbers. However, as the demand for employees in munitions factories decreased after the end of the war, women were discarded and factory crèches were closed gradually. But women continued to constitute a considerable share of the French workforce in other sectors. The 1920s thus saw an expansion of existing workplace crèches. In addition, municipal crèche projects were launched and allowances were paid to women civil servants when nursing facilities could not be provided at work.⁷⁰

In the years after the creation of the communist party in 1920, a reorientation of attitudes toward the crèche and childcare on the Soviet pattern might have been expected in France as in Bolshevik theory the key to women’s liberation lay in bringing women into unmitigated participation in economic, social, and political life.⁷¹ Interestingly, however, neither the socialists nor the communists addressed the crèches as a political priority to release women into the sphere of wage work or to substitute collectivist for traditional values. Left-wing councils that established crèches regarded them mainly as a means to improve child health in the working class, rather than as a means to collectivize society or to liberate women. Pronatalists, committed to raising the birthrate, deliberately attempted to prevent mothers from using childcare facilities by campaigning for family allowances and other benefits, opposing the crèche as being a pernicious prompt for mothers to take on paid work. Women’s organizations of the inter-war period did not seek to increase the ratio of women in the labor market. And the groups officially classified as feminist typically consisted of socially conservative middle-class or upper-class women who spoke up for a strengthening of the family rather than for its remake where mothers would be employed in the job market.⁷²

Institutional Childcare during the Depression and World War II

The Great Depression led to a decline in subsidies for crèches in the urban Paris region.⁷³ As the Depression had its repercussions in most areas of the society, no more than 360 crèches existed in the urban regions of France by 1940, providing care to about 12,000 children.⁷⁴

In the U.S., by contrast, the Depression improved the day nursery’s standing as providing daycare was primarily conceived of as a jobs program. An expansion of childcare institutions took place as President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated the National Industrial Recovery Act, a statute to assist the nation’s economic recovery, as well as the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency that established relief measures for the unemployed. Thereby, Roosevelt provided funds for the establishment and propagation of Emergency Nursery Schools and he supplied work for jobless teachers, nurses, cooks, and other professionals. Sources vary, yet by 1937 the federal funds had rendered possible the creation of about 1,900 institutions that cared for approximately 40,000 children.⁷⁵ Until 1942, however, many institutions were forced to close down as teachers increasingly took up better-paying

work in defense plants. But, like previous national crises, World War II increased the demands for childcare in the U.S. as women were mobilized into the defense industry. The Lanham Act, signed into law by President Roosevelt, made federal funds available for childcare to communities impacted by war as of 1942.⁷⁶ However, most facilities closed when the Lanham funds were suspended after World War II. By terminating the Lanham Act, Congress put an end to the only national daycare policy ever enacted in the United States to that point.⁷⁷

In France, on the other hand, World War II did not boost the development of crèches. While women were initially recruited into war work, they were laid off soon after the defeat of 1940 to Germany. Concerns about the falling birth rate were voiced⁷⁸ and politicians adopted measures to counteract the superannuation of the French population⁷⁹ by encouraging women to stay at home instead of taking up employment. At the time, the family was elevated to a national symbol⁸⁰ and crèches were progressively closed down.

Institutional Childcare after World War II

Childcare policies in post-war France

In France, the post-war years saw a flowering of important social measures including social security and family allowances. The generous family benefits which had been set up in the 1930s, increased in the 1940s, and extended after World War II – including benefits for housewives as well as a tax code that gave fiscal advantages to mothers at home – were driven by a concern about the nation's demographic balance and by pronatalist zeal.⁸¹ Against this background, the 1940s and 1950s became the 'golden age of familialism.'⁸² An edict of November 2, 1945, instituted the *Protection Maternelle et Infantile*, a public health agency within the national health ministry designed to combat the demographic decline, and the crèches were brought under its purview. The post-World War II period through the 1970s became a period of expansion of childcare institutions. The implementation of the *Protection Maternelle et Infantile* in 1945 thereby constituted the definite passage from charity to a national responsibility and a turning away from the notion of social assistance to the notion of protection, regardless of the socioeconomic status and nationality of the recipients.⁸³ Between 1961 and 1971, the number of children crèches could serve almost doubled.⁸⁴ By 1971, there were 652 crèches, keeping 29,720 children, about half of which were located in Paris and its suburbs.⁸⁵ As labor shortages arose during the 1970s, politicians across the political spectrum began devoting more resources to public crèches in order to increase the participation of women in the labor force⁸⁶ since the number of women in the labor force had constantly been below its peak of 48 percent in 1911.⁸⁷ At the time, an increasing number of middle-class families began to use crèches for their children while lower-class families increasingly drew on non-official services.⁸⁸

In the 1970s, the family benefits system began to play an additional role in funding and developing public daycare. The National Family Allowance Fund created two types of contracts, the *contrats-crèches* in 1983 and the *contrats-enfance* in 1988, which encouraged municipalities to develop their childcare facilities and to define a policy of universal access on their territories.⁸⁹ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, both conservative and socialist administrations continued to make public daycare more accessible, establishing an increasingly comprehensive state's responsibility for daycare.⁹⁰ The 'childhood contracts' were altered in 1994 to include financial subsidies for investments in crèches and in 1999 to cover 66 percent of the expenses for the operation of crèches.⁹¹

In 2004, about 220,000 children under three years (i.e., 10% of the children in this age bracket) were enrolled in crèches that were licensed and supervised by the *Protection Maternelle et Infantile* and 255,000 two-year-olds (i.e., 34.7%) were enrolled in the *école maternelle*, overseen by the national education inspector. 415,000 children under age three (20%) were cared for by *assistantes maternelles* (i.e., family daycare providers who care for one to three children in the provider's home on a regular basis) and 31,000 children (1.5%)

were cared for by *garde à domicile* (home care giving) which is not subject to any regulations or licensing.⁹² The most recent expansion in formal out-of-home care was initiated in 2009 when a convention was signed with the National Family Allowance Fund to create 200,000 additional childcare spaces by 2012.⁹³

Childcare policies in post-war America

In the United States, major official agencies had competing interests as to the purpose and scope of a new daycare system after World War II. The primary adversaries grappling with daycare policy were the U.S. Children's Bureau, the U.S. Women's Bureau and the Office of Education. The U.S. Children's Bureau – a national agency established in 1912 within the Department of Commerce and Labor designed to investigate and report on the needs of children and youth⁹⁴ – sought to establish a childcare program directed to child welfare needs, whereas the U.S. Women's Bureau – an agency established in 1920 within the United States Department of Labor to promote the welfare of wage-earning women – viewed daycare through the lens of women's employment and aimed to address the needs of women workers. The Federal Office of Education, finally, tended to oppose nation-wide policies and argued for a more locally administered after-school and nursery school care instead. The differing positions of these official bodies undermined the enactment of a comprehensive childcare policy in the United States⁹⁵ and financial support from states and federal funding were thus piecemeal.⁹⁶

From the 1960s until today, most childcare policies have been framed as a targeted poverty issue. Broad policies to support universal childcare have consistently been left off of the national agenda.⁹⁷ In 1967, the Social Security Act was amended to provide money for daycare mainly for women receiving public welfare. Childcare became situated within child welfare services and programmatically aligned with Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).⁹⁸ In the late 1970s and 1980s, public subsidies of childcare were cut repeatedly.⁹⁹ The Reagan administration diminished expenditures for childcare for the benefit of poor families but almost doubled federal funding for childcare for middle- and upper-class families in the 1980s.¹⁰⁰ The Family Support Act of 1988 provided AFDC recipients with an entitlement to vouchers for the care of their children up to age thirteen.¹⁰¹ The Childcare Development Act, passed in 1990, made additional funds available for childcare programming primarily for children in poverty.¹⁰² In 1995, the federally funded community-based Early Head Start program for low-income families with infants and toddlers and pregnant women was established.¹⁰³ Some ten years later, during 2004, Early Head Start served 80,094 children. Thereby, 60,403 slots were funded by the Administration on Children and Families while the remaining slots were funded by other sources.¹⁰⁴ This remained a relatively small provision in view of the almost 20 million children under age five in the United States at that time¹⁰⁵ and given that around the turn of the millennium, almost 80 percent of children under five with employed mothers were cared for in childcare centers, in family childcare homes, by relatives, or by nannies for at least some time each week, many of them even in full-time care of more than 35 hours a week.¹⁰⁶ Since 1996, when the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) was passed, women receiving TANF became eligible for poverty-based childcare for their children. In 2000, however, only about 14 percent of the eligible children benefited from this fund for childcare¹⁰⁷ although federal subsidies had increased since the 1996 changes in welfare.¹⁰⁸ The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 which was intended to create jobs and promote investment and consumer spending during the financial crisis beginning in 2007 made available grants worth \$1.1 billion for Early Head Start expansion, seeking to nearly double the number of Early Head Start participants.¹⁰⁹ However, today, while the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services manages most of the funding for social services including Head Start, policy and provision of child care for children from birth to three years are matters for each State and therefore subject to variation.¹¹⁰

A brief balance of periods of prosperity of institutional childcare

In contrast to the French crèches, the day nurseries' periods of prosperity were more closely related to major national crises, notably the Civil War, the Great Depression, and World War II. In these periods, the debate about the aptness of institutional childcare gave way to the conviction that daycare met national, social, and economic demands. However, in the absence of crisis, the presumed harm it would do to children and families has been "invariably used as justification for withholding support from daycare."¹¹¹ As a consequence, day nurseries in the United States have been framed more distinctly as temporary relief interventions compared to crèches in France. Most recently, this was apparent in 2009 when the latest political measures were taken to advance institutional childcare in the two countries. While the United States made federal grants available for Early Head Start as a response to the financial crisis through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act which was primarily designed to create employment, France expanded institutional childcare without formulating it as a means of overcoming financial difficulties or of creating labor for the unemployed.

Conclusions

Crèches and day nurseries both emerged as of the 1840s. They constituted the beginning of institutional childcare and grew into a branch of private charity in favor of the children of poor working families: both were brought under the auspices of national federations in the 19th century; both had similar, although not identical, agendas; and both were subject to expansion and cutback due to varying local or national policies, changing societal conceptualizations of institutional childcare, and changing views of the role of mothers since their inception. Yet despite these similarities, institutional childcare has not had the same standing in the two societies. The primary historical causes of disparities in the use and funding of crèches and day nurseries identified in this analysis are related to societal perceptions, purposes, funding, and administration of institutional childcare.

Societal perceptions of childcare institutions and their clientele

Originally, the crèche and the day nursery both received children of poor and distressed families, but the social background of children who typically used the facilities changed over time. In the United States, the day nurseries' clientele has been considered as a 'pathological' population in many instances, even though there have been several shifts in the clientele. Notwithstanding that middle- and upper-class families increasingly began to use formal out-of-home childcare more recently,¹¹² institutional childcare could not recover from its reputation and thus largely remained stigmatized as a (transitory) poverty relief measure. In France, a significant shift in the clientele began to take place during and after World War II as women in state employment and other white-collar workers began to see crèches, which were increasingly included within municipal socialism's welfare policies, as a beneficial service and thus started taking advantage of crèches for their children. Children from working-class families were gradually replaced by children from middle-class families in crèches for two main reasons. First, the overall proportion of working-class families in France diminished during the 20th century. Second, social contributions from the Family Allowance Fund might have incited women with low incomes to stay at home.¹¹³ During the last decades, institutional childcare was used more frequently by children from parents with a higher employment status than by children from employees or unemployed parents.¹¹⁴ Thus, institutional childcare was not branded as a pure poverty issue. In the long term, the attitudes toward institutional childcare have been more favorable and using childcare facilities in France, including for infants as of three months, has been considered normal practice.¹¹⁵

Purposes and continuity of childcare institutions

While both crèches and day nurseries intended to aid destitute families in child-rearing and holding a gainful position, the scope of the French crèche exceeded the combat against pauperism and the aid to mothers who worked out of dire economic necessity. In the course of the 19th century, the French bourgeoisie feared riots of the working classes and thus had interest in instilling them bourgeois middle-class morality by supplying social services. Moreover, from the second half of the 19th century until World War I, the small fraction of the population in the active age group along with a high child mortality rate caused concerns to increase the population.¹¹⁶ Crèches thus became sites to improve public health and combat infant mortality through medicalization of crèches and teaching mothers the principles of hygienic infant care.¹¹⁷ American day nurseries, on the other hand, remained largely cut off from social reform at the time.¹¹⁸ Over time, they more consistently supported poor working mothers albeit retaining the primacy of the nuclear family as an agent of childcare and early childhood socialization. To a large extent, institutional childcare thereby constituted an aid for the needy in times of acute crisis rather than on a regular basis. Hence in the long term, crèches in France might have tended to pursue a more varied but nonetheless more stable agenda than American day nurseries.

Funding and administration of institutions

Crèches and day nurseries both originated in private philanthropy. However, while crèches were increasingly subsidized by some structure of the state over time, day nurseries received funding primarily in response to national crises. National associations formed in the 19th century. But in contrast to the *Société des Crèches*, the National Federation of Day Nurseries did not help day nurseries to win public funding and thus preserved their private character. In France, women were likely to be encouraged to care for their children at home and the provision of institutional childcare tended to be disrupted in periods of national hardship. For instance, while the most extensive daycare policy in the United States, the Lanham Act, was implemented in response to wartime requirements during World War II and terminated in 1945, the most substantial progress in federal funding of institutional childcare in France was associated with the *Protection Maternelle et Infantile* which was not instituted until after World War II. Up to now, Americans have used voluntary or philanthropic non-profit organizations for purposes France has frequently assigned to the state. This has produced a liberal welfare state in the U.S. in which private market arrangements deal with childcare while public subsidies are mostly restricted to low-income families or families who have failed on their own even though private and public sectors have cooperated in some instances.¹¹⁹ By contrast, the French considered family matters to a greater degree as a public concern¹²⁰ since children were regarded as both private and public goods.¹²¹ Often, the activities of voluntary organizations in France were subsidized publicly and regulated by the central state's government officials, by individual departments, or by the church. Consequently, state intervention in family affairs was socially more legitimized than in the U.S. where authorities remained ambivalent about the extent to which the state should assist families in childcare.

In sum, examination of the historical trajectories of crèches and day nurseries and of the relationship between ideas and institutions within historical contexts leads to the broad conclusions that discursive consistencies pertaining to childcare can be identified in France and the United States as of the implementation of the first facilities. In both countries, advocates praised the utility of the institutions and called upon societal responsibility for overburdened families while opponents feared the physical or psychological harm to children or intrusion of society into a strictly private domain. However, relative to the French, American traditions stood in a more distinct contrast with institutional interference in matters deemed to be the duty of the nuclear family. Thus historically, Americans have tended to favor the assignment of the

primary responsibility of child-rearing to the mother whereas the French have defined childcare as both a private and a public concern and therefore supported public funding for childcare to a greater extent than Americans.

Limitations of the study

A final remark pertains to the limitations of the analysis. First, it has to be noted that neither crèches nor day nurseries have been very widely disseminated in view of the number of children towards whom they are geared. Other forms of childcare including child minders and relative care have been used frequently. The history of both institutions merely revealed that, on the whole, French approaches and attitudes to childcare have differed in some important respects from American traditions. Second, as a review of the history of institutional childcare and ideas pertaining thereto, the study was inevitably selective. Contradictory information was weighed in selected instances. By drawing, amongst others, on secondary sources, the study relied in part on previous appraisals. Instead of portraying the evolution of specific institutions and discourses in specific regions of each country in minute detail, it put emphasis on the most important milestones since mid-19th century by synthesizing varying sources into more general statements. Yet there were local disparities in childcare provision, use, ideas, and policies. Thus, the analysis did not constitute an exhaustive inquiry into the societal and political discourses, dominant ideas, theories, and beliefs about institutional childcare over time. It did, however, join in debate over the explanations of current structures of childcare in each society, thereby illuminating important causes of national specificities in institutional childcare.

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