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Critical Summary and Concluding Remarks

Carina Schmitt and Herbert Obinger

Introduction[1]

This volume examines the spread of different social policies around the world. It analyzes at the macro-level the importance of cultural, colonial, and trade networks for the global diffusion of health care systems, education, work injury, antidiscrimination, and family policies as well

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as labor regulations. All chapters have applied a uniform methodological approach that enables a comparison of social policy dynamics and an evaluation of the importance of different networks over time as well as across different social policy fields.

The Diffusion of Social Policies Around the World

Figure 10.1 illustrates the spread of the ten social policies analyzed in the previous chapters. While the x-axis shows the year of program adoption, the y-axis depicts the cumulative number of countries on a global scale that has introduced the respective social policy. For many programs, the spread of social policies follows an S-curve which is indicative of policy diffusion. It is striking, however, that the diffusion processes differ greatly

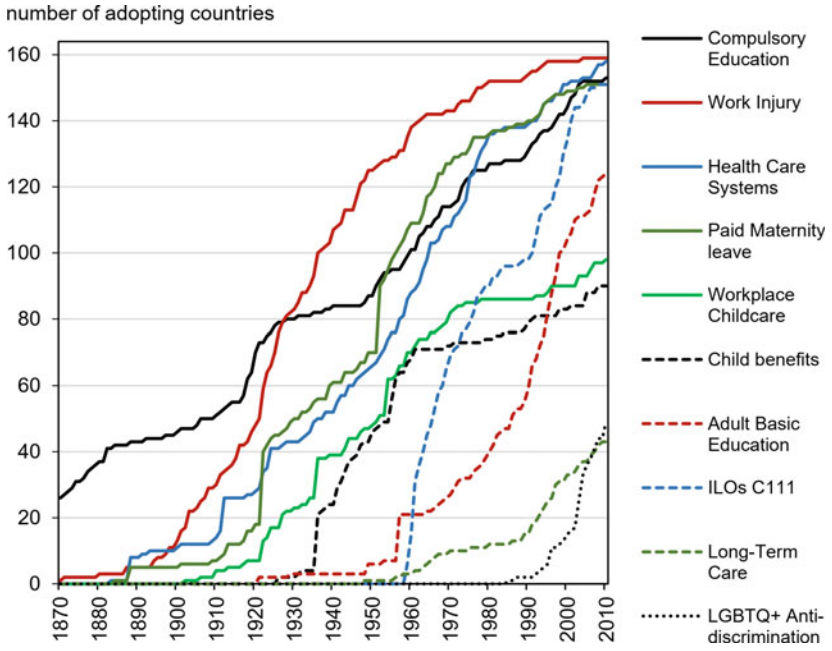


Fig. 10.1 The introduction of ten social policies around the world

between the individual programs in terms of timing, adoption rate, and speed. For example, while the introduction of compulsory education and work injury schemes started relatively early, the diffusion of family policies began at a much later stage. Moreover, there is a remarkable variation in the number of countries that have adopted the respective policy. Today, almost all countries worldwide have established health care systems, compulsory education, work injury programs as well as paid maternity leave, and antidiscrimination regulations regarding employment and occupation. By contrast, long-term care, child benefits, and workplace childcare as well as adult basic education and LGBTQ+ policies are far less common. With regard to the speed of introduction, work injury schemes, health care systems, and paid maternity leave spread much more rapidly than compulsory education. In the case of the more recent social policies, the figure suggests that labor-related programs such as the ratification of the ILO antidiscrimination convention or adult basic education spread faster than family and long-term care policies.

Table 10.1 supports this pattern. For example, the average adoption year for workers' compensation schemes is 1932, compared to 1991

Table 10.1 The spread of social policies around the globe

Social policy field	n	Adoption rate	Min	Mean	Median	Sd
Work injury	159	0.97	1854	1932	1928	26.1
ILO Convention	156	0.95	1959	1979	1975	17.0
Health care system	161	0.98	1883	1953	1958	31.9
Long-term care	48	0.29	1948	1991	1995	17.6
Compulsory education	154	0.94	1739	1927	1925	56.5
Adult basic education	130	0.79	1921	1986	1991	19.4
Antidiscrimation LGBTQ+	66	0.40	1985	2005	2005	7.6
Paid maternity leave	153	0.93	1884	1948	1952	26.7
Child benefits	90	0.55	1926	1956	1950	21.8
Workplace Childcare	98	0.60	1902	1951	1952	25.5

Notes n = Number of countries with the respective program in place; adoption rate = n/ 164; min= first year of introduction, sd = standard deviation

for long-term care. The adoption rate, i.e., the proportion of countries with the respective social policy in place in relation to all countries, also reflects significant differences across various programs. While the adoption rate for work injury, health care systems, the ratification of the ILO's antidiscrimination directive, and maternity protection is over 0.9, the values for long-term care and child benefits are significantly lower. Interestingly, the standard deviation of the year of introduction of compulsory education is high compared to all other policies, indicating that here the diffusion process lasted much longer than with all other programs.

Figure 10.2 shows the timing of the inaugural legislation of four major social security programs, namely, work injury schemes, health care systems, compulsory education, and paid maternity leave.

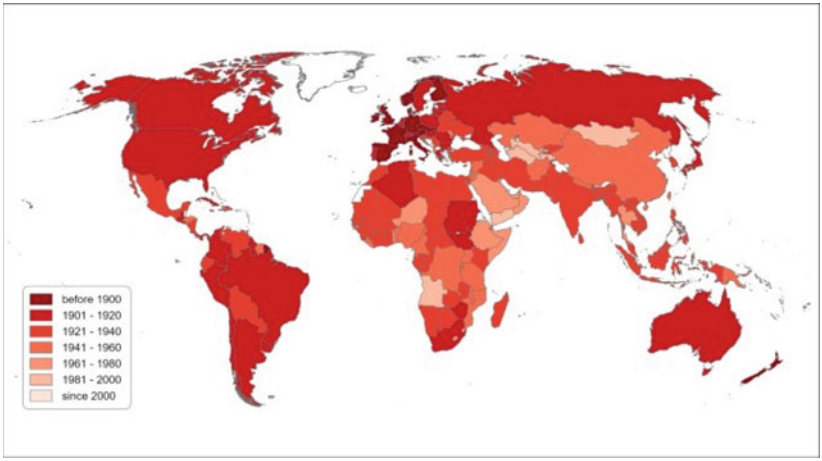
Figure 10.2 illustrates marked cross-regional and program-related differences. While European countries, Russia (Soviet Union), and Latin American countries introduced all four policies relatively early, the vast majority of African states adopted social policy programs comparably late or not at all yet. The countries in North America, notably the United States, clearly deviate from the overall pattern in the Global north.

The Influence of Networks on the Diffusion of Social Policies

All chapters in this volume have analyzed the influence of the same set of networks for explaining the diffusion of different social policies. Specifically, the importance of cultural, colonial, and trade relations is tested and contrasted with the effects of a network capturing geographical proximity. The overall findings reveal that the importance of international linkages captured by different network types is not homogeneous across the social policies examined. For example, Chapter 2 has shown that the network of spatial proximity is significant for understanding the introduction of work injury schemes. In the case of compulsory education (see Chapter 3), cultural linkages seem to have some effect on policy diffusion (at least when spatial proximity is not controlled for).

Interestingly, neither colonial ties nor trade relations have been identified in these chapters as important explanatory factors. By contrast,

(a) Work Injury Systems



(b) Health Care Systems

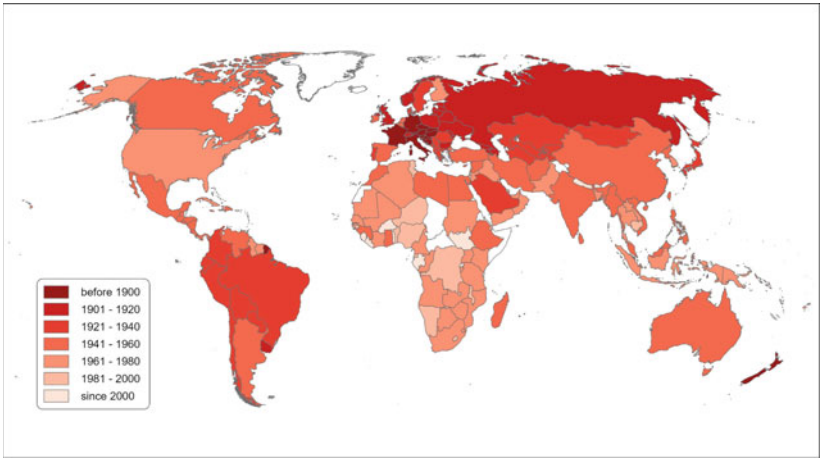
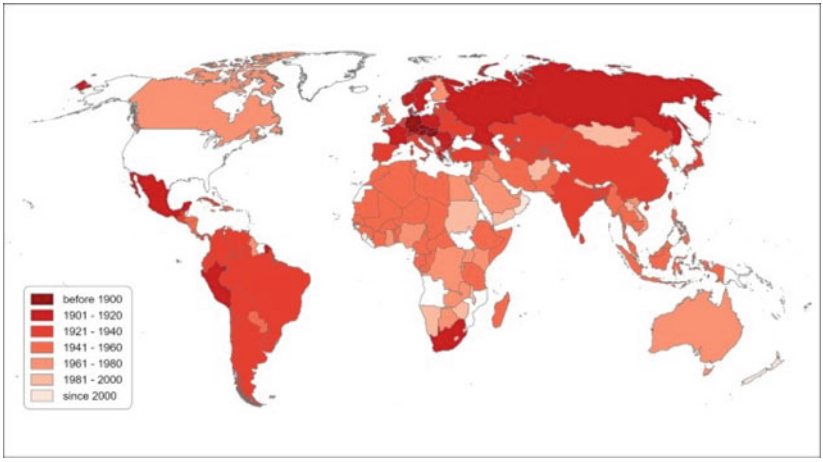


Fig. 10.2 The introduction of four basic social policies by regions. **a** Work Injury Systems. **b** Health Care Systems. **c** Paid Maternity Leave. **d** Compulsory Education

c) Paid Maternity Leave



d) Compulsory Education

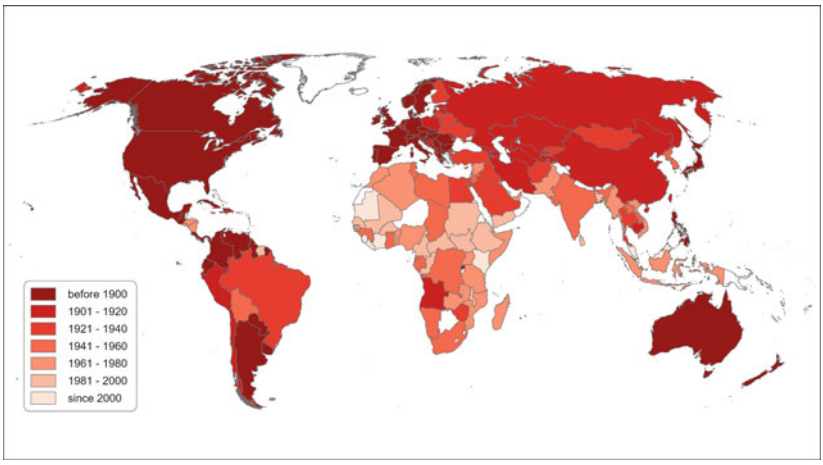


Fig. 10.2 (continued)

Chapter 4 on adult basic education, regulating access to training in basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills for those who did not have the chance to learn it in formal education, does find some evidence that colonial ties matter. It is argued in that chapter that the importance of

colonial linkages can be attributed to coercive diffusion, as the USSR imposed this policy on its satellite states. In the case of health care systems (see Chapter 5), the authors conclude that health care systems are more likely to have been introduced in earlier periods in affluent countries connected by close trade relations. Later on, other factors like nation-building processes in former colonies gained importance. While also geographical proximity was important, colonial ties did not seem to play a role for legislative activities in this field. With regard to long-term care (see Chapter 6), geographical proximity turned out to be the most relevant network driving the international proliferation of this program. In the case of paid maternity leave (see Chapter 7), program adoption is influenced by continuous advocacy as well as technical assistance provided by the ILO.

By contrast, workplace childcare facilities are shaped by colonial ties. More specifically, workplace childcare regulations were particularly widespread in former French colonies. Chapter 8, which analyzes the ratification of ILO's antidiscrimination convention from 1958, only finds evidence for the relevance of geographical proximity. All other networks play a minor role in the diffusion process. With regard to LGBTQ+ policies, diffusion seems to be driven to some extent by trade relations with other countries. Interestingly, the effect of cultural spheres has even been identified as negative (see Chapter 9).

Apart from the various international linkages that swayed the spread of social policies, domestic factors also have to be examined. Democratization processes have been identified as a key driving factor for the introduction of work injury programs, long-term care, and the adoption of LGBTQ+ antidiscrimination policies. In the case of the latter the state of gender equality at the domestic level increased the probability of a country enacting antidiscrimination policies. In addition, state formation is crucial for the adoption of work injury programs, while family allowances are spurred by low fertility levels. The introduction of long-term care has mostly been a reaction to population aging and strong political and social participation of women in the respective countries, while economic prosperity was important for the early introduction of health care systems. Lastly, the ratification of the ILO's discrimination convention is highly influenced by the legal origin of a country, particularly the French legal tradition.

To summarize, this book contributes to the literature in the following respects. Firstly, several social policies and different types of networks were considered simultaneously. This allows us to study and compare program-related policy diffusion and to evaluate the importance of different types of international and transnational relations for social protection legislation. The findings suggest that spatial proximity is the most relevant network in this regard. Geographical proximity implies strong international linkages in many respects such as cross-border migration, cultural ties, and trade relations. Moreover, all these linkages are indicative of intensive cross-border communication, which is widely seen as a main prerequisite for policy diffusion.

Secondly, all individual chapters show that it is the interplay between international interdependencies and national factors that explains the adoption and spread of social policies. In terms of domestic determinants, the results presented in the book chapters suggest that democratization processes are of central importance. Interestingly, the results for economic variables such as economic prosperity are very heterogeneous, indicating that the diffusion of social policies does not follow the linear logic emphasized by modernization theory (Wilensky 1975). Rather, in line with the findings by Collier and Messick (1975), it seems that economic development is only relevant in the early stages of program adoption, while at later stages international factors such as international organizations or horizontal diffusion between states become increasingly important.

Lastly, the book analyzes the diffusion of social policies for a global sample and thus overcomes the bias towards OECD countries that is typical for the vast majority of the pertinent literature. Existing research not only focuses on the spread of policies within the OECD world, but often also restricts the analysis of international interdependencies to relationships between Western countries. However, policymaking in OECD countries as well as elsewhere is shaped by global economic relations, cultural and colonial ties linking countries across regions and continents (Schmitt et al. 2015; Schmitt 2020). It is necessary to take all interdependencies into account that have relevance to a specific national policymaking process.

Critical Outlook

While some key challenges in the diffusion literature have been addressed in this volume, the approach suggested here also has its limits. Addressing them opens up promising avenues for further research.

To begin with, several chapters have shown that geographical proximity is the most relevant network for understanding welfare legislation. However, the advantage, mentioned above, that spatial proximity is a strong indication for the relevance of international relationships, is also its disadvantage, as it subsumes many different types of interdependencies. Spatial proximity is a catch-all indicator comprising cultural ties, close communication or important trade relations between neighboring countries. Disentangling these overlapping linkages that are altogether reflected by spatial proximity is a major challenge for further studies.

Moreover, actors have not been considered in this volume. This is problematic as neither communication nor the transmission and processing of information is possible without agency. A promising next step towards a more comprehensive understanding of diffusion processes would be to directly measure cross-border communication or information exchange between actors, rather than extrapolating the intensity of cross-border communication from cultural, spatial, and economic relationships between states.

In this volume, the relevance of four different networks, i.e., cultural, colonial, economic relations as well as geographical proximity between countries was tested. However, countries are connected with each other via more than these four networks. Important networks not considered here are, for example, constituted by migration or communication flows. However, as the chapters cover a long time span stretching from the late nineteenth century to the present, the possibility of integrating these networks is limited, because bilateral and dyadic information for the formative period of the welfare state is scarce. Collecting further network information from earlier periods would be a promising avenue to come towards a more comprehensive understanding of long-term social policy diffusion.

A further problem refers to data quality, which is likely to vary greatly across the long time periods considered in this book. It is plausible that

the quality of data for the formative period of social policy in the late nineteenth century is much lower compared to that of contemporary data.

In the diffusion literature, several mechanisms underlying diffusion processes such as learning, imitation, coercion, and competition are discussed (Simmons et al. 2008; Simmons and Elkins 2004). However, it is very difficult—if not impossible, especially for macro-quantitative studies—to identify which diffusion mechanism ultimately gave rise to policy diffusion, as many of these mechanisms clearly overlap. For example, learning and emulation are closely connected and hard to separate from each other. Do governments really get a better understanding of the causal mechanisms between policies and outcomes from experiences made by other countries, or do they simply comply with the policies adopted in a particular peer group for symbolic reasons? To answer this question we need theoretical clarifications as well as alternative methodological tools that allow us to distinguish between the different mechanisms underlying policy diffusion (Obinger et al. 2013).

Moreover, the analysis of the impact of international interdependencies and networks on domestic social policy dynamics is restricted to the adoption of similar policies. However, it is also possible that governments deliberately refrain from adopting a policy because they have learned from the failure of similar policies implemented abroad (Marsh and Sharman 2009; Shipan and Volden 2012). This type of learning cannot be captured by contemporary statistical techniques. In a similar vein, governments might implement alternative policies because they cannot or do not want to pursue the same policy strategy as competing countries. One way of dealing with this problem is to study policy diffusion not only by analyzing policies that have already been implemented, but also by examining the policy formulation process, or what Gilardi et al. (2021) call the issue definition stage.

Diffusion processes are also dependent on the characteristics of a particular policy. Diffusion should vary with the complexity and observability of specific reforms. Complexity is "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as relatively difficult to understand and use" (Rogers 2004, p. 242). Technically complex policies are not easy to translate into legislation. The policy effects are not clearly observable or

ambiguous, whereas the necessity of technical and scientific expertise to link solutions to policy problems is typically high (Makse and Volden 2011, p. 111; Nicholson-Crotty and Carley 2016).

Furthermore, the fit between policies adopted abroad and national circumstances might be a crucial factor when examining why some countries adopt specific policies and not others. A policy is more likely to spread among those countries in which it is compatible with the existing national institutional setting (Pacheco 2012). Compatibility is "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters" (Rogers 2004, p. 224). If a policy of a foreign state can easily be combined with another country's existing policies, it is more likely to be adopted (Boushey 2010; Shipan and Volden 2012). To test whether the institutional fit or policy compatibility between countries influences the diffusion process, indicators that describe the institutional structure and the existing (social) policy portfolio of each country could be used to generate time-varying similarity matrices, e.g., by using two-mode networks.

Overall, the methodological approach applied in this volume has its strengths and provides interesting insights. However, it also has weaknesses. Many aspects, such as the direct transfer of a particular policy from one country to another, can only be addressed with qualitative, in-depth studies. Recent scholarly work in the social sciences has shown promising ways as to how this can be done (Kuhlmann et al. 2020; Starke 2013). Diffusion research must also consider the approaches and methods of transnational historical research and global history (Kettunen and Petersen 2011; Rodgers 2014). In short, interdisciplinary collaboration and the consistent application of mixed methods designs are needed more than ever in order to better understand both the contextuality and the patterns of global social policy diffusion.

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