

*Conscription, Family and the Modern State: A Comparative Study of France and the United States.* By Dorit Geva. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii+264. \$90.00.

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In our age of voluntary militaries fighting high-tech “new wars,” conscription is history, and has been for a while. On January 28, 1973, the front page of the *New York Times* announced, “Nation Ends Draft, Turns to Volunteers.” Forty-three years later, with about a third of that time at war, American conscription remains a thing of the past. In France, by contrast, mandatory service lasted until 1997 and is still a subject of debate. A poll taken shortly after the terrorist attacks of November 2015 saw 80% support for a return to conscription. But even if enacted, a French or American draft would look very different today than it did in 1973 or even 1997. It would likely include women in combat, as well as gays, lesbians, and transgender personnel serving openly. It would have to take into account the compensatory regime of the neoliberal state. But critically, as always, it would have to consider who will be compelled to leave their families behind and risk their lives in the name of the state.

If conscription is history, it is living history. Dorit Geva’s penetrating new study, *Conscription, Family and the Modern State: A Comparative Study of France and the United States*, makes clear the enduring significance of military conscription for understanding social and political life today. A work of painstaking historical sociology, Geva’s book effectively relates the convoluted regulatory policy of conscription in France and the United States, persuasively arguing that seemingly arcane conscription rules carry profound and long-lasting social and political significance. In her book, historical sociologists, political scientists, and scholars of gender and family alike will find much of value for their own fields of research—and indeed may find fertile new ways to connect across fields.

Geva’s book sets out to explain why France and the United States, from very distant starting points, ultimately converged on a common ground of offering specific sets of exemptions to fathers, husbands, and sons from mandatory military service. Her goal is to explore linkages between the modern family and the modern state through systematic comparisons of familial exemptions, those rules governing such matters as which fathers will be exempted from duty, which sons will serve, which mothers and daughters will be left to manage the home. Critically, Geva discovers that in order to consolidate its own authority, both states found it necessary to legitimate a competitor institution, the family.

Geva splits her analysis into three chapters focused on France from 1790 to 1918, followed by two describing the doglegged trajectories of policy developments in the United States in World War I and World War II. The crux of the French case is the slipperiness of equality. While many policy makers

argued throughout the period that equal conscription meant each individual Frenchman had an equal obligation to serve, others would repeatedly argue that equality should refer first of all to equal obligations of families to contribute to the health of the state. In historicizing this unfamiliar line of reasoning, Geva pays particular attention to one August Isaac, who argued to the effect that "Citizenship, and its obligations, needed to be built on the understanding that men were embedded in family relations where they stood as heads of families, or sons of families" (p. 87). Why should one family risk the death of one son while another risks losing two, or indeed many more?

By contrast, the American case reveals the contingency of state authority. Fearful of provoking insurgency and lacking a robust military force, the American government during World War I offloaded responsibility onto local agencies, which made final determinations about who should serve in their jurisdictions. Despite the success of this ad hoc system, the Roosevelt administration in World War II attempted to brush aside family considerations in the face of total mobilization. This failed, triggering an effective challenge from the legislature that in turn prompted a scaled-down set of provisions.

In comparing France and the United States, Geva is at once contributing to the long tradition of Tocqueville-inspired comparative research and also challenging the tendencies of both countries to proclaim their own exceptionalism. As Geva rightly points out, "both French and U.S. law placed familial authority at the heart of their respective states" (p. 3). Of course, they are hardly alone. Geva repeatedly reminds us of the messiness of the actual policies governing who fights a state's wars, noting "systems of military service by definition entail confronting the reality of how citizens are organizing their family lives, . . . conscription has continuously stood at the frontier between familial and state authority" (p. 223). In deciding who fights, a government inevitably triggers change in how it relates to other institutions of social life, often, most notably, the family.

Lopsided in favor of the French sections, at times Geva loses sight of the larger story in trying to keep up with the ping-pong of French politics. That is a minor quibble, for the story can be clearly discerned and is clearly important. The modern state, at least in the twin cases of France and the United States, critically defined itself in relation to the family, triggering a cascade of effects linking such fundamental human experiences as who fights a war and who is empowered both within the polity and within the home.

Those countries that have turned away from conscription may never go back. Regardless, the large literature detailing the growing gap between military and civilian worlds should underscore the need for sociological research that can reconnect the civilian and military realms. Why? Because for as long as the modern state endures, someone will be forced to decide who should risk his or her life on the battlefield. That decision demands the depth of historical understanding and the moral courage displayed throughout Geva's book.