

"WHY DO THEY HATE ME SO MUCH?" A History of Welfare and Its Abandonment in the United States

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Acceptance of the need for government-sponsored welfare programs has declined radically in the past 15 years. The history of welfare initiatives is traced, from their inception as a buffer to the inherent inequities of a capitalist economy to their recent demonizing as corruptive influences on recipients of benefits. The political shifts that have permitted this change, along with its effects on the lives of poor people, particularly women, are discussed.

I don't understand why they should hate me so much, just for getting welfare. I'm just trying to take care of my child as best as I know how right now. Sure, I made mistakes, but I didn't break any laws. And now I am trying to get myself together and give me and my daughter a future. Welfare is not so much that it is going to break down the government to help us. And if I don't do it, foster care or orphanages cost more and will hurt her more. So why don't they just give us this little bit of nothing and stop acting like we are criminals or something?—*Sandra Johnson, Boston student and welfare recipient.* *

For women on welfare, everyday life is a series of small Sophie's Choices, a painful, bitter, humiliating juggling act. To be poor in the United States today is to be confronted, day in, day out, with impossible choices. Pay the gas bill and they'll shut off the phone. Do the laundry and the carfare for the dentist is gone. Buy the baby's diapers, then tell your older daughter she

will have to skip her class trip because you can't give her bus money. Tell your caseworker you are afraid of losing your life to the drugs that have already claimed your man—and they take your children away.

Society's reaction to welfare mothers often compounds the dilemmas. Women who stand in unemployment lines or widows in social security offices may be poor, but their experience of the systems that have been set up to help them is different. Unemployment may make you feel sad and despairing, social security survivors' benefits may confuse you, but you will not be faced—as are women on welfare—with questions about your sex life, with being fingerprinted to prevent fraud, and with the need, now, to make new plans because your benefits will soon be transitional, even though your needs are not; nor, if you turn on the radio, are you likely to hear yourself insulted or discover yet another policy proposal that will profoundly undercut your efforts to help your family.

None of this is surprising. Since its be-

*This and other quotations from welfare recipients (whom I consider experts) were collected but not used for an anthology, *For Crying Out Loud: Women's Poverty in the United States*, that I co-edited with Diane Dujon (South End Press, 1996). The women are named unless they requested anonymity.

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ginnings in 1935, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) has been a step-child program, never proclaimed as a social advancement, as were other parts of the broad Social Security Act that housed it (Gordon 1994; Katz, 1986). Despite the efforts of activists to use AFDC as the basis for expanding welfare rights, over time critics gained a wider audience by arguing, like Governor Weld of Massachusetts, that welfare was a "social blasphemy" that undermined family, faith, and the work ethic (Weld, 1995). Now, a Republican Congress, in collaboration with a Democratic President who promised to "end welfare as we know it," has eliminated AFDC altogether.

To respond effectively to the problems facing poor women today, we must understand the intimate connection between their fate and the volatile currents of public opinion and policy change surrounding AFDC and, by extension, any programs supported by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996. More than 14 million women and children are currently on AFDC. They struggle with random violence, battering, substance abuse, and now with the probable loss of their primary source of economic stability.

Before social scientists, advocates, service providers, and other citizens can address with sensitivity the individual concerns of women on the margins, we must understand the nature of welfare, who uses it, and what effects the current changes at state and national levels will have on social expectations and economic security, not only for women on welfare, but for all of us. This article attempts to provide a broader context for understanding what poor women call "the system" and the problems created by its role as an ideological and political lightning rod. In doing so, the article highlights the structural, intellectual, and political parameters within which poor women who are trying to change their lives, along with the activists, professionals, and advocates hoping to help them, must operate.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Although 15% of people in the U.S. are poor, a majority of poor adults and 40% of poor children do not receive AFDC benefits to help reduce the effects of poverty (Albelda, Folbre *et al.*, 1996). Research consistently shows that families apply for AFDC only after backup systems of jobs and extended family have failed or been exhausted (Tufts University Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy [Tufts University], 1995). When they turn to the state for assistance, they receive benefits that average about 60% of the amount needed to bring their income above poverty level (not including the value of Medicaid). Partly because many states severely limit the eligibility for welfare of two-parent families, only 6% of adults receiving AFDC benefits are men. The average family on welfare consists of a mother and two children, and 1% of these mothers are teenagers. Of women on welfare, 55% do not have a high school diploma, but most have been employed before requesting AFDC; 68% use it only for help through an immediate crisis, and for less than two years, although about 50% find it necessary to return when jobs end or prove impossible to keep in the face of pressures of daily life (Albelda, Folbre *et al.*). The total time on AFDC per recipient averages about six years. Many studies (Bane & Ellwood, 1994; Jencks, 1992; Schein, 1995; Tufts University) have shown that if health benefits and child care were available and secure for any working mother, the welfare rolls would be reduced significantly, although personal circumstances would at any time leave a number of single mothers unable to combine parenting with employment (Abramovitz, 1996).

Mainstream social scientists and welfare advocates alike (Abramovitz, 1996; Bane & Ellwood 1994; Tufts University, 1995) have come to understand that the reasons for women to stay on welfare are complex. As yet, no one has found a simple explanation as to why the "poverty as we know it"

that leads women to require public assistance cannot be easily ended. But, most are aware that all other industrialized nations have accepted that modern society creates a subset of the citizenry to whom government assistance must be given if the spillover effects of poverty are to be prevented from creating broader harm in the society at large. For this reason, if not to help the families out of poverty, most Western nations have instituted systems of income, health, and education benefits that maintain this population at a minimal subsistence level. Throughout the history of the U.S., however, the acceptance of such a social obligation has been consistently and passionately disputed (Katz, 1983, 1986).

HISTORY OF WELFARE

As a nation, we have yet to produce a set of programs acceptable by the public as politically and morally desirable for alleviating the poverty of families with children (Ellwood, 1988; Katz, 1983; Schram, 1995). Nevertheless, despite the lack of ideological consensus, federal programs have emerged over the past 60 years which, however demeaning and compromised, have allowed a small measure of economic security for families stranded by the labor market or paternal behavior. The American public, deeply grounded in the work ethic, might not like welfare, but it has in the past accepted it as necessary for basic social security. Now, with lightening speed, these limited programs are being dismantled—or at least fragmented—with bipartisan support.

The 1935 Social Security Act launched the U.S. version of the modern welfare state by shifting social welfare responsibilities from the states to the federal government (Abramovitz, 1988; Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1983). The system, unfortunately, perpetuated the class distinctions it was supposed to diminish. Those middle- and

lower-income people who were employed, formed two-parent families, and otherwise played by the rules were rewarded with access to more generous, less stigmatized social insurance programs such as old age pensions (Social Security), unemployment insurance, and worker's compensation. The system's less adequate, more unpopular, and means-tested program, AFDC, was for the "undeserving" poor; namely, women who had borne children they could not support without government help because they were unmarried, abandoned, or partners of men who could not provide adequate financial support (Abramovitz, 1988; Gordon, 1991; Skocpol, 1992).*

AFDC was the product of various compromises and assumptions by reformers to create state responsibility for the basic well-being of children and their single parents. Flawed though it was, AFDC evolved into something like a third option for single mothers (the other two being attachment to a male worker who could support a family, and holding a job, usually low-paid, while trying to meet her own and her children's needs). Though it entailed social stigma and personal humiliation, welfare offered the possibility of caring for children at home, even if payments kept women at an income below poverty level. They might have to combat both the work ethic (according to which wage labor was the only source of social legitimacy) and what Abramovitz (1988) called the "family ethic" (that women without husbands are a threat to moral society), but they and their children could survive.

Welfare Rights

AFDC, whatever its limitations for recipients, served as a base from which welfare rights movements that followed its inception could launch campaigns for a guaranteed income (Gordon, 1994). These movements brought many women to understand

*Some of the description here is from an article on the politics of welfare reform that Mimi Abramovitz and I wrote in 1993 for a never-published anthology. By now it is impossible to sort out who wrote what, but clearly some of the terms and concepts can be found in Abramovitz's (1996) work, as well as in my own.

that AFDC could help them out of poverty and sustain them when employment was not available or did not allow them to meet their children's needs.

Congress and the state legislatures have consistently tried to undermine the possibility that AFDC might lead to expanded claims for rights (until 1950, it included funds only for children and none for their mothers). Many states implemented AFDC only reluctantly. In the 1930s and 1940s some refused aid to black women to keep them working as field and domestic help. In the 1950s and 1960s they denied aid to many single mothers and women of color, using "suitable home," "man in the house," and "midnight raid" policies that equated unwed with unfit motherhood. The almost explicit goal was to make "the Welfare" a program hated by recipients and observers alike, rather than a springboard for better policies.

Work Programs

In the 1960s, mandatory work programs such as the Work Incentive Program were proclaimed on the grounds that poor women (incidentally the most highly employed sector of women in the society) would work only if forced to do so. These work programs—forerunners of today's "workfare"—intensified in the 1970s but never met their own goals, thanks to child-care shortages, labor-market barriers, and lack of funds to implement needed employment training and social services. But their coerciveness sent the message that not only would income support be below poverty level, but women would have to meet essentially unattainable goals in order to make political points.

In the 1980s, the first welfare cuts occurred; they did not help women become employed, but they served to eliminate backup welfare assistance for many of the "working poor." By assuring that few low-wage workers would turn to welfare for help, even though their situations were increasingly precarious, the cuts isolated

AFDC recipients (*Abramovitz, 1996; Katz, 1989*).

The centerpiece of the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA), the Job Opportunity and Basic Security (JOBS) program, required women on welfare to go to work, enroll in school, or enter work-training programs, and expected states to provide support services and enforce stricter collection of child-support payments. Those welfare mothers who, though not exempt, refused to participate, faced reduction or loss of benefits; states, however, were not penalized for failure to provide adequate services (*Abramovitz, 1996*).

In the economic downturn of the following period, the JOBS program predictably failed to reduce use of welfare, and today's more punitive measures are the result. Though variations in state-designed welfare-to-work programs are great, evaluators consistently report only modest, if any, income and employment gains or reduction in the welfare rolls. The emotional costs of additional threats, pressures, and paperwork have gone unrecorded.

WELFARE REFORM

Proponents of current welfare "reform," as embodied in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, have presented their initiatives as new; essentially, however, they are an extension of the logic initiated in the prior decade by the FSA, with the added twist that all welfare programs now take the form of a block grant to each state, with no federal protection or entitlement attached. Like the FSA, the new reform is a result of a bipartisan initiative that, in effect, allows government dollars to dictate the behavior of poor women vis-à-vis work, childbearing, and parenting, with little pretense of cushioning the effects of poverty (or even of cutting spending). AFDC has been transformed from a program that allowed women to stay at home with their children (though the pressure for employment was increasing) into, first, a federal mandatory work program,

and now a state block-grant opportunity that assumes time limits and work requirements.

With this change, the false hope that mothers only need a brief respite from unemployment or a bad relationship before they can return to employment has been institutionalized. Gone is the idea of public policy as a means for women to provide for their families when "affordable employment"—jobs that provide adequate wages, benefits, and time for family care—is unavailable. The older idea of a right to welfare in times of economic need is now denied. Education and training are suspect because their results are not cheap, guaranteed, or quick. The present replacement for welfare is to be offered only as the worst option, justifiable as a transitional benefit. Until the last fight in 1996, when the final plug was pulled and many brave Democrats finally rose to the occasion, an aura of bipartisan support prevailed in Congress; opposition was limited to debate about how much to cut, how thoroughly to punish, and how tightly to curtail eligibility. This mirrored the pattern in state legislatures throughout the 1990s, as Republicans and Democrats competed to create model programs for initiation by the states of a "devolved" welfare system (Abramovitz, 1996).

Welfare reform is also embodied in state initiatives to control the marital, childbearing, and parenting behavior of women on welfare. New Jersey was the first to introduce the now popular idea of a family cap, denying benefits to children born after their mothers had become welfare recipients. Other states have proposed cash rewards for recipients who marry or accept an implanted contraceptive. Such measures reflect a host of pernicious assumptions: that use of welfare is a sign of a character-threatening dependency and causes family break-up; that women have babies to increase their welfare benefits; that husbandless women are promiscuous and sexually irresponsible; and that marriage is an effective

antipoverty strategy for women. Despite the fact that 20 years of research have failed to find links between welfare use and a woman's marital or childbearing decisions, these assumptions are taking on the force of law (Abramovitz, 1996; Albelda, Folbre et al., 1996; Tufts University, 1995). Whether or not states, in their new post-AFDC-era freedom, fully implement such provisions, the proposals and surrounding debates can only raise the level of fear for poor women, who must, nevertheless, turn to the state for help in the last resort.

Now that AFDC has been turned into a block-grant program, federal approval for untested initiatives is no longer necessary. Aid is limited to five years for citizens; all direct aid to immigrants, even legal ones, has been removed. Strong opposition from activists and some Democrats notwithstanding, the passage of federal welfare reform embodied one of the most successful mergers of recent neoliberal ideas with the conservative proscriptions for poor women. Indeed, during one phase of the debate, President Clinton himself scolded Democrats for being "too partisan" in opposition. The *Boston Globe* of April 2, 1995, reported him as saying that, after all, "we all agree that welfare has failed and we need reform."

To understand what is happening to vulnerable women today, it is not enough to know the specifics of the new welfare rules; we must also grasp the development of ideas that has so minimized the differences between a Democratic and a Republican presidential candidate and made the current changes in the law so dangerous to poor women.

The Liberal Shift to Welfare Opposition

I've got lots of problems. I've got no money and my housing is bad, my older boy is acting up, the schools are failing, and it's not safe in my neighborhood. The rest of my family has big troubles, too. Sure I want to work, but I need time to cope and more education before I can get a decent-paying job. So don't just immediately start talking about child care and employment. Right now they are way down on the list of

the things I need to take care of my family.—*Speaker at Boston welfare speak-out, 1993*

In earlier decades, strong opposition to the idea of welfare was a right-wing Republican stance; today, it has been adopted by many Democrats, who justify their change of heart by arguments based on problematical evidence that welfare has failed because it increases the budget deficit, undermines the work ethic, causes family breakup, promotes illegitimacy, induces dependence, and encourages irresponsible behavior.

During the two-decades-long downslide from the ideal of a government with positive social responsibility, mainstream social science has played a crucial ideological role in blunting the ability of professionals and politicians to respond to overt right-wing assaults. In 1962, social scientists helped justify government social spending with the theme, "having the power, we have the duty" (*U.S. Health, Education and Welfare Department, 1962*), defining welfare programs as social utilities that are vital to achieving universal security (*Kahn, 1967*). By the 1990s, having articulated and popularized a rationale for social protections for the middle class at the expense of the poor, many "liberal" social scientists provided support for the abandonment of poor women. They did so by justifying two faces of government, one helpful and rewarding for the deserving, the other punitive and controlling for those whose behavior seemed to threaten the assumptions, values, and life-styles of the middle class. A scientific veneer was provided to rhetoric that rewards work but disregards women's domestic labor and the structural lack of jobs, that focuses on individual but not social responsibility, and that puts the emphasis on "playing by the rules" (*Schram, 1995*).

This dynamic first emerged in the discourse on poverty during the 1980s that endorsed the theory of an underclass, promoted the belief that welfare contradicts core American values, accepted the argu-

ment that AFDC cannot win political support, and maintained the illusion of a two-tiered welfare state capable of helping the poor via trickle-down hope. The justificatory arguments contained in this research resonated well with the traditionally conservative American culture. They also signaled the end of commitment to the ideals of a liberal welfare state, however limited and unequal it may have been. Left unchallenged, these arguments permitted opposition to AFDC to become a "wedge issue" by which a triumphant right wing could garner mainstream legitimacy for ideas that had been dismissed as extreme for 50 years.

Urban underclass. The theory of the underclass emerged in the early 1980s with a surprisingly wide spectrum of liberal support—the first sign of changing times. Liberal commentators joined conservatives in supporting welfare reforms as a way to address the problem of the underclass, defined as people living in neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, crime, drug dealing, hustling, school dropouts, and joblessness; and also by high rates of female-headed households, teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, and use of welfare (*Jencks & Peterson, 1991, Reed, 1990; Wilson, 1987*). Unlike the ordinary poor, the underclass was depicted as a rootless population that functioned outside mainstream values and institutions, whose dependence and antisocial behavior was transmitted generationally (in homes headed by women), and which was stubbornly resistant to change.

Conservatives, of course, were being consistent with their traditions in blaming the existence of such a class on unproductive values and behavioral traits, the absence of "normal" male-headed families, and the expanded welfare state (*Mead, 1986; Murray, 1984*). Liberals explained the behavior as a series of pragmatic, if irresponsible and destructive, adaptations to isolation, discrimination, blocked opportunities, and the problems inherent in single-

parent families (*Jencks, 1992; Kaus, 1992; McLanahan & Garfinkle, 1989; Wilson, 1985, 1989*). By the late 1980s, however, many had come to agree that the underclass was not merely poor, disorganized, and marginal, but also deficient and deviant. In addition, liberals joined conservatives in defining use of AFDC as welfare dependence, and socially harmful exactly because it provided financial support for the underclass. Both groups used the analogy of drug dependence. While liberals claimed more sympathy for poor people, the poor nevertheless agreed that they were often irresponsible, unwilling to play by the rules, and otherwise unable to abide by the social contract.

In addition, through the process of the discourse it became clear the underclass had been feminized; the generational transmission was by women (of color) who, heading families without a male at the helm, kept their households mired in poverty and dependent on the state. *Jencks (1989)* posited a "reproductive underclass" of women whose inability to make responsible reproductive decisions was underwritten by an AFDC subculture that separated them from normal society. Scholars and "experts," like *Ellwood (1988)* and *Moy-nihan (1986)*, agreed that AFDC helped to create the increasingly feminized underclass and must be limited, if not eliminated, if women were to make progress. Welfare mothers were discussed in the same breath as drug users, criminals, and other antisocial groups. Such thinking, in turn, supported the view that the existing welfare programs—meager and class-biased though they might be—were not sufficiently punitive; it denied credence to older arguments that increased benefits would provide much-needed stability to families in crisis, (*Gordon, 1991; Lefkowitz & Withorn, 1986; Sidel, 1985*).

This new consensus among liberals and conservatives dismissed the traditional liberal view that economic insecurity is inherent in the capitalist economy, and that loss

of income because of old age, illness, single parenthood, disability, and unemployment is a normal risk meriting government protection (*Kahn, 1967; Wilensky & Le-beaux, 1965*). Radical arguments linking the problems of deepening poverty to the contradictions of capitalism, in particular to the international, profit-driven need for low wages and regular unemployment, were pushed out of the discourse. Long-standing feminist arguments that women need practical options other than dependence on men in traditional marriage have also receded before the liberal call to value families, if not promote family values (*Gordon, 1994*). Yet the massive entry of women into the workforce—spurred by feminist demands and the expansion of low-paid service-sector jobs—was turned into an attack on single mothers who chose welfare over low-paid work so that they could directly supervise their children, assure their medical care, pursue educational goals, and preserve some degree of control over their lives.

Finally, by arguing that class more than race dynamics led to the rise of the underclass, *Wilson (1980)* paved the way for many other social scientists to downplay the role of racism in deepening poverty. By dismissing the significance of race, social science made the theory of the underclass, and the politics of welfare reform, more credible.

Core American values. In addition to positing an undeserving, largely criminal and black underclass sustained by female-headed households, some liberal intellectuals also created support for coercive reforms by arguing that welfare runs counter to core American values, despite the fact that income-relief programs of some kind have existed for over 100 years (*Edsall, 1991; Ellwood, 1988*). *Ellwood*, a professor of social policy at Harvard University, and at one time President Clinton's Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation for Health and Human Services, was influential in advocating this perspective. He

was, he said, sympathetic to AFDC recipients but, followed by communitarians like Etzioni (1995), he argued that income support, especially AFDC and general assistance programs, conflict with universal core values, which he identified as individual autonomy, the virtue of work, the primacy of the family, and the desire for community. Rather than expanding income support programs by creating some kind of guaranteed income, Ellwood (1988) argued that social policy must "come far closer to the American ideal...of a guarantee that people who strive and who meet reasonable social responsibilities [as expounded by Ellwood] will be able to achieve at least a modest level of dignity and security" (p. 44).

By claiming universality for these values, Ellwood underplayed the variability of their interpretation with race, class, gender, and ethnicity, thus obscuring their ideological roots and hegemony in the dominant culture. This approach also ignored the powerful interference of sexism, racism, and classism with their attainment. Finally, by suggesting that policy makers are the primary arbiters of core values and responsible for setting levels of dignity and security, it denied the historical role of political struggle in changing social policies and values.

Political feasibility. The belief that welfare contradicts core American values also underpinned arguments about the political feasibility of continued support for welfare. Since programs contravening these values could be assumed to have no appeal to the majority of paid workers, "rational" strategists such as Edsall (1991) and Kaus (1992) saw no sense in overhauling AFDC or in converting the welfare system into a guaranteed family wage—directions long urged by welfare-rights advocates and suggested by European examples. The imperative was to build a lowest-common-denominator coalition that would secure white middle-class support and subsume the needs of poor women. The implication that

any job is better than welfare, that it is better to be working-poor than welfare-poor, denied that the stress and invisible poverty accompanying low-paid employment may actually worsen the plight of single mothers and their children. Making the consummate political feasibility argument, Jencks (1992) stated that if all single mothers were eligible for welfare, regardless of employment status, costs would increase from the current \$24 billion to \$35 billion. He concluded that, "Despite the advantages [of liberalizing welfare eligibility] it would be politically impossible because single mothers are a relatively small, unorganized and unpopular group." Therefore "a program aimed at them will never be generous." Jencks went on to argue that a social policy focused on making low-wage work economically attractive could "win broad political support" (pp. 233–234).

Trickle-down hope. Skocpol (1991), a Harvard sociologist whose historical writings have been sensitive to the problems faced by single mothers, offered the essential justification of the strategy for serving the middle class at the expense of the poor. After describing a reasonable set of proposals for the middle class—indeed, reforms far stronger than the Clinton agenda—Skocpol asked:

But can the American poor really be helped by the program I have outlined? Wouldn't this set of policies help principally the middle and working classes, along with the most privileged and least troubled of the poor, leaving behind many of the extremely disadvantaged, disproportionately people of color, who require intensive services to break out of cycles of social pathology and despair? Initially, this might happen. Yet, an ever-deepening course of hope and improvement might soon unfold among the poor. Once genuinely new and non-stigmatizing incentives, social supports and ways of providing job opportunities were in place, the example of a few go-getters who took advantage of new policies and forged better lives for themselves might well propagate among relatives, friends and neighbors. After the word really got out that work really does lead to rewards, a certain amount of social despair that now pervades the very poor might well begin to dissipate. In a way this could be the greatest gift the new universalistic family security policies could give to the

most disadvantaged among American poor, for it would facilitate their moral reintegration into the mainstream of national life. (pp. 433-434)

Such an argument is basically flawed. No one can live on hope, nor does it usually trickle down. It soon became evident that Democratic plans to give state assistance back to middle-class people through managed health care, college loans, family leave, and other employment-based investments in human capital were unlikely to be expansive enough ever to reach poor people—for whom few, if any, well-paid jobs exist. In a time when deficits could be used as an inviolate rationale for overall budget cutting, such programs emerged as direct competition to existing programs for the poor. Skocpol (1991) and others proposed to adapt the original Social Security compromise to make income maintenance benefits conditional on employment rather than protect them as a right based on need.

Yet the assumption that paid employment is at all times a practical means for individuals to meet personal and societal obligations is as questionable now as it was in 1935. Given the constant downsizing of major corporations and the rise of a "service economy," in which low-paid, part-time jobs fail to lift workers above the poverty line, it is both cruel and absurd to abandon women's meager protection in a job market unable to provide family wages. At least, that role should be left to its historic players—conservative Republicans and racist Democrats. As it turns out, by defining employment as the basis for benefits and holding it up as the only secure option for welfare mothers, liberals have themselves delivered the ultimate rationale for ending welfare altogether. According to Jencks (1992):

If a mother does not have a God given right to stay home with her children, if paying her to do so does not make economic sense, and if it does her children more harm than good, the case for welfare collapses ...the moral case for helping welfare mothers rather than working mothers rests on a factual mistake.

In annoying employment as the only legitimate source of economic security, so-

cial theorists and politicians have implied that women on welfare without jobs are irresponsible and have devalued all other forms of labor, including women's unpaid work and caretaking in the home. Such thinking not only legitimizes punitive workfare policies that force poor women into the lowest rungs of the labor market, it also suggests that employment is always in a woman's best interest, regardless of her family circumstances. Poor women are told that welfare cannot be defended because so many other women are employed, even if their jobs are dead-end, low-paid, dangerous, or carrying few benefits. No hearing has been given to the arguments of welfare activists (see, for example, the welfare-rights newspaper, *Survival News*), that given jobs such as these as the option, it makes more sense for vulnerable women to stay home with their children and help them navigate the drug- and crime-plagued environment to which deindustrialization and its attendant poverty have contributed.

Opposition to Welfare:

Right-Wing Consolidation

Welfare has not been just poor policy—that's much too mild. It has been a form of social blasphemy. The truth is, for the last 30 years, our social welfare policies have trumped the accumulated wisdom of human civilization—and overturned rules set in stone ever since men and women first grew their own groceries 10,000 years ago...

In some communities, government has stomped out all that was once vibrant: church, family, and neighbors—and replaced them with nothing but a small, steady, alluring and demeaning little check. The results certainly haven't been as neutral as the checks. We've shaken together a cocktail of fatherlessness and immature motherhood that turned out to be combustible. It has exploded into guns and drugs and boys who kill before they start shaving—William Weld, Governor of Massachusetts (Weld, 1995)

While liberals were finding arguments to justify abandoning women on welfare, the resurgent Right asserted leadership by creating a fantasy of the dangers of welfare that incorporated many long-standing themes of right-wing ideas. Strong conservatives of various stripes had, of course, opposed

welfare since its inception, arguing that it promotes laziness and dependence, is too costly, and undermines the work ethic. Indeed, it was white Southern lawmakers who forced the most punitive and exclusionary structural aspects into the program until, eventually, opposition to AFDC became a popular way for all conservatives to prove their toughness (Gordon, 1994; Sullivan, 1995).

In the past, right-wing opposition to AFDC was based primarily on racial and economic disdain for the people who needed it (Himmelstein, 1990). Now, it has expanded into a populist argument, addressed to middle Americans, that the pain of ordinary people is caused by women without men who have too many rights, do not discipline their children, and fail to accept their suffering gracefully. Women on welfare have thereby become symbolic of all women who assert their right to live without men. Unless women present themselves as total victims (for a limited time only, of course), they find little support from a set of coalescing arguments that posit their very existence as a terrifying alternative to the male-headed family and to every woman and man's obligation to accept any employment under any conditions.

Moreover, the limited but real success of African-American social activism was used to unify varied strands of the Right around a shared anti-welfare agenda, and to rejuvenate racism. As Quadagno (1995) pointed out, there was real opposition to the Great Society, with much of the popular backlash expressed as intertwined anti-welfare and anti-minority rhetoric. Today, old racist arguments that people of color demand and receive too much have re-emerged in the attacks on government as provider and protector of economic and social rights, with welfare as a prime example of what many white people see as excessive and divisive claims by people of color. To understand the power of today's right-wing agenda we must understand the ways

in which overt racism plays into the emerging fear that "we have given it all away" (Hacker, 1992).

A massive organizing effort by conservative politicians and strategists, under way since the mid-1970s, has coalesced right-wing ideas into a conscious ideology and unified vision for the future. Writers supported by conservative foundations have sanitized hard-line right-wing ideas for consumption by more mainstream audiences (Berlet, 1995). In 1960, when the city manager of Newburgh, New York, tried to force welfare recipients to work off their benefits and pick up their payments at the police station, his plan was halted, he was widely criticized, and few conservatives sought national attention by defending him (Ritz, 1966). When Barry Goldwater talked about "welfarism" during his Republican presidential campaign of 1964, he was cheered by right-wing audiences, but he received only 38% of the electoral vote and was regarded by most citizens as atavistic and extremist.

Since then, Milton Friedman has gradually developed a following for his anti-government economic theory (Friedman & Friedman, 1980). Conservative economists and critics, writing about the costs and bureaucratic problems of the welfare state, received enough mainstream attention to accustom the public to the questioning of welfare (Anderson, 1978). Gilder (1981) was treated as a crank when he first declaimed the need to wean recipients from the evils of welfare as an initial step in righting the moral and behavioral wrongs of America. After the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980, however, Gilder's ideas began to gain credence.

During the Reagan era, a new generation of conservative "think tanks" sent forth speakers, writers, and studies to reinterpret the Great Society and AFDC, depicting these programs as the source of domestic socialism and dependency, and giving increasing emphasis to the dangers of welfare for families. Right-wing commenta-

tors, joined by less conservative writers, moved beyond the old fear of a costly, ineffective governmental bureaucracy. Now, the very poorest people were characterized as an underclass created not by the pressures of poverty, but largely by their own behavior—their drug abuse, crime, illegitimacy—which thus became associated with “long term welfare dependence” (Katz, 1993).

The basis for the current attack on welfare was completed by Murray (1984) and Mead (1986), who presented full-blown arguments that social-welfare policy was itself the source of antisocial behavior among recipients of benefits, and that welfare programs must be abolished or rendered punitive and work-oriented for the good of the poor. This final crafting of a cohesive right-wing argument was presented as the “new consensus” that welfare had failed, at a time when few “credible” liberals remained who were willing to defend either welfare or the women who received it.

By the 1990s, the new argument had penetrated far enough into the mainstream of both political parties to shift policy discussion (not political rhetoric) away from condemnation (except in select circles) of the poor as bad. The Right could now present itself as the political force with the true sympathy for those who had endured the system that created their poverty, and who only needed help to break the habit of welfare, find freedom from bureaucracy, and participate in a rejuvenated economy and revived moral order (although Mead [1994], like the nativists and racists of old, argued for government-imposed work programs and policies forcing acceptance of employment on any terms). Since references to welfare, especially “long term welfare dependence of the underclass,” had become code terms for people of color, “welfare reform” became an acceptable way do something about black people without being explicit; however, Murray (1984) and, especially, Mead (1986) were clear about

blacks being the group whose behavior most needed improvement. Right-wing writers and politicians claimed to be the true protectors of families and women, in that they would get them off welfare and offer them no temptation to opt out of the work and family ethic. Given its tradition of charity, a key step in this progression was convincing the Christian Right to join the assault on welfare. Here, Newt Gingrich was pivotal; the current Speaker of the House had made it his explicit goal, years earlier, to “capture the moral high ground” by showing that “no one has been more harmed by the Great Society than the poor” (Brock, 1995, p. 75).

As the global economy shifted, the Cold War ended, immigration accelerated, and churches revived in opposition to moral decline, AFDC became the undefended symbol of all that was wrong with the economy and the society. It was said to hurt the economy by creating bloated bureaucracies and by artificially raising wages and giving poor people options other than the “hard labor” that had built America. It broke down families by taking fathers out of the house, by allowing mothers to run the household without male partners or jobs, and by not caring whether parents were married. It supported a dark-skinned underclass already averse to work, it corrupted the work ethic of new immigrants, and it destroyed the American ethic of personal responsibility. Clearly, society could renew itself only if it gave up its commitment to “false compassion” and returned to individualism and the basic values of work, faith, and family. As Olasky (1993) argued:

The perspective from 1990 shows that the social revolution of the 1960s has not helped the poor. More women and children are abandoned and impoverished. The poor generally, and the homeless particularly are treated like zoo animals at feeding time. ...Let's transport an able-to-work, homeless person back from the present to 1890 and ask the question, “Are you better off now than you were then?” Then he would have been asked to take some responsibility for his own life, and to help others as well, by chopping wood or cleaning up trash. Then he would have

had to contact other people, whether relatives or other colleagues. Now he is free to be a "naked nomad" shuffling from meal to meal.

And what of the children? Let's transport an abandoned child from the present to 1890 and compare treatment now—shuttling from foster home to foster home, or growing up without a daddy—to treatment then, when adoption into two-parent families was a priority preached about in churches and facilitated by a lack of bureaucracy. (pp. 222–223)

In short, welfare, the welfare state, and specifically AFDC are now the designated enemy of the ideal anti-welfare society that would provide no federal floor under poverty and be so suspicious of social spending that it would never again see it as a sign of social progress. Defenders of welfare are now the enemies of the chance to "re-invent" an America that will allow people to function as responsible citizens.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE POOR AND THE NOT-SO-POOR

When you are on public assistance, it's like you are going to pick up someone else's money that you didn't work for. You didn't make it yourself. When I got my first welfare check it felt odd, because I could compare it to receiving my work check. I knew what it was like to have both. I used to hear people say, "Well you are taking money from people that work and you are not working." It felt funny to be on the other side this time. This is my first experience with welfare. Nobody in my household has ever been on public assistance but me. My mother worked for the government and so did my grandmother. I was the first person that ever needed welfare...

In seven years I see me in my own place, in my own job and my children in school. I hope to marry my boyfriend when I finish school. He is very nice—I lucked out with this one. He is a security guard. I'd like to finally be one big family, working and taking care of myself and my children.—Joy, 29-year-old former waitress (Schein, 1995, pp. 107, 119)

If Joy and Sandra and other mothers are to keep their hopes alive (with a little help from their friends) an antidote must be discovered quickly to the poisonous logic of welfare reform that has withered hard-won public promises and isolated women who ask for assistance. The energy to do this may arise when we realize that the chilling implications of the new arrangements extend to all of us.

First, blaming welfare for the nation's continuing economic ills deflects attention from the failure of the market economy to provide enough work at livable wages for everyone. In 1992, the 70 billion dollars in welfare spending (AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid) was 5% of the federal budget and less than a quarter of the \$300 billion interest paid on the federal debt (Albelda, Folbre et al., 1996). Political and intellectual "leaders," however, would rather link the deficit and the falling standard of living to welfare than to failed business and government policies. If we lose the economic security and other supports provided by welfare programs (especially Medicaid), employers have more power to threaten unemployment so as to depress wages and keep workers in line. Social benefits allow those lucky enough to be employed to fight for better pay and working conditions, and enable jobless workers to hold out for better-paying work. Without welfare as a backup to unemployment, we are all more vulnerable.

Second, if employment is defined as the sole basis for benefits and presented as the only secure option for mothers, every woman must find a place in the job market—an unachievable fantasy. If employment is the only legitimate source of economic security, women without jobs must view themselves as irresponsible adults whose unpaid work and caretaking in the home have no value. The essential permission that we all need to put family matters first, at least sometimes, is gone.

Third, under the rubric and rhetoric of welfare reform, we are now creating a newly authoritarian state. It condemns to poverty, punishment, and isolation anyone found guilty of not playing by the rules, from legal immigrants who find that their American Dream has collapsed; to people with disabilities, nowadays suspected of shirking; to those of us who can't find it in ourselves to look and act "normal" enough to stay employed. From under the hoopla of controversy about welfare reform has

emerged a dangerous, shared conceptualization of the state. It is a state in which public programs are available only to those who accept the dictates of appropriate behavior, who are uncomplaining about the hand dealt them by the economy, and who make no demands for assistance in anticipation of tough times ahead; all others who seek to exercise their "rights" can expect only punitive treatment. Thus, we will be asked to forget that we all need some security, some basic trust instilled by a reliable backup institution, if we are to do our best and cope with the inevitable ups and downs of life.

Possibilities for Progress

There is, nevertheless, some room for optimism. A new generation of researchers (some of whom are represented elsewhere in this issue) are documenting the human costs of dismantling the state and re-forming welfare by punishing women. They may help to revive the liberal conscience that has already been pricked by the actual abandonment of federal income maintenance commitments as a result, in part, of liberal arguments.

Women on welfare are organizing and actively seeking allies in a fight for a more expansive, inclusive, and just state. Coalitions have formed in many parts of the country to oppose welfare reform and argue again, as Roosevelt's administration did, for social and economic security as a necessary building block for democracy.

The realities of welfare reform may even shock some politicians into the realization that the current treatment of poor women foreshadows the treatment of all women, and probably of all people. Thus, it may awaken in them an understanding of the need to seek expansive alternatives.

Finally, single mothers will remain in jeopardy until women stop fearing dependence and feel able to accept dependable government support as their right when employment or economic support by male partners fail them. Welfare is not, and

should not be regarded as, the worst thing that can happen to a poor woman. Life with an abusive partner, a job without adequate health benefits, insecure child-care arrangements, lack of income, and humiliating bureaucratic harassment are all worse. Indeed, progress will be made when welfare comes to be seen as a valued right and, however neglected and mismanaged, an essential element for a secure society.

The survival of welfare and the women who need it entails the reclamation of the moral high ground. We must re-open the argument about what constitutes healthy families and must stop the widespread denial of how real people in most families actually behave. Most of us, not just welfare recipients, have gays and lesbians among our relatives, are divorced and have affairs, can name a relative with a drinking or drug problem, are related to a teenager or two who has been in trouble or lost their way. There are more "funny uncles" and stepfathers to stay away from than we like to admit. If we acknowledge the normality of such "dysfunctional" family members and events, then perhaps we can change the social climate sufficiently to start the identification across classes and identities that is our only hope for change.

As Trudy Condio, a University of Massachusetts student, observed at a 1995 Boston speakout:

I don't know who to trust anymore. Even though I worked for years, my family and the people on the talk shows hate me for being on welfare and for not being married. But even my social worker and my teachers seem to think there is something wrong with me for not trying to find a job tomorrow. But I've got a lot to do, taking care of my daughter, trying to go to school, thinking about the future. Why doesn't anybody recognize that, too? Why can't they see that we all need help sometimes and by taking care of me and my daughter now they are keeping the door open so that they can get help in the future, too?

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