

The Brown Papers

a monthly essay of
reflection and
analysis from the
Women's Theological
Center

Vol. I No. 10
Aug./Sept. 1995

Why We Need a New Abolitionist Movement Ann Withorn

My charge for this talk¹ was to go beyond reaction and to be positive about what we need to do and how we need to think about economic rights. It is extremely hard to be positive now, given today's level of regression, aggression and attack. These days I go to a lot of meetings where we review the latest assaults on poor people, and plan our latest reaction. We need these meetings. It is important to know all that is happening, both federally and in the state. And, in Massachusetts and around the country there is a lot of activity going on. It's not that people aren't doing anything or that people are surprised by what is happening. We've even managed to slow down, or redirect the juggernaut in a few cases. But, now more than ever, I am convinced that while such discussions are necessary they are not a sufficient way to provide us with any real energy.

I want to be positive by talking about what we need to know and do that will make a BIG difference — by trying to explain some of the reasons our fight is larger and more profoundly important than just defeating the Contract with America, or pushing the state [of Massachusetts] back two degrees from its own cruel and unusual welfare "reform" plan.

Activists have known since Clinton was running for President that we would have problems with his welfare policies, that there were problems especially in this area because of his brand of "middle class populism." When he said during his campaign that we have to "reward the people who play by the rules," the obvious conclusion was that we have to punish the people who, by his definition, don't. It was scary and we knew that if his proposals were the *Democrats* starting point, we were really in trouble. So, the people who have been doing poverty politics knew there would be tough times coming. Indeed, since 1992, welfare activists have been doing everything on the list of what good organizers can do.

Unfortunately, since last November, the scope of Republican Congressional victories and the wresting of public attention toward only Rightwing ways of thinking has been masterfully orchestrated by Gingrich, *et. al.*, into an overwhelming, comprehensive onslaught, undermining the rights of anyone who is poor to claim *anything* from government. The effects, scope and depth of the combined one-two punch of abdication of federal responsibility for economic redress combined with punitive policies for all poor people are deeply unsettling and frightening to comprehend.

I grew up in the fifties watching news of the Civil Rights movement on TV, and hearing my Southern white reactionary relatives talk about how that movement, which was so obviously about basic justice, was so dangerous and so threatening to their world. Their fury, but ultimate defeat, emblazoned in me the idea that the only way serious change comes is through organizing and bravery and vision.

Since then, whenever I think about serious change — about BIG change — I think about our need for a big, broad radical movement, one that's *out there* for justice, for economic and social justice. We need to see our efforts as not just about lobbying against *this* Contract with America or *that* Personal Responsibility Act, despicable as those may be, but about tackling the big forces that define our lives. My best model for that kind of movement in American history is the predecessor to the Civil Rights Movement, the Abolitionist Movement of the 19th Century.

Remembering and Learning from the Abolitionist Movement

I love the Abolitionist Movement because it was big and brave and accomplished a lot. For probably the widest range of people in the history of this country there was a period of time (from a little before the 1830s through much of the 1860s) when, if you felt "radical" — whatever that word meant to you — there was a movement to connect to. There were people who defined their radicalism by helping with the Underground Railroad and the people like John Brown who literally made a war on injustice and there were thousands of people who did very brave, militant things. But there were also radical women sitting in their kitchens making clothes for babies in enslaved families. There were people teaching runaways; Black and white people who repaired books and devised lesson plans. There were people who opened their houses to abolitionist speakers. If you were a white woman getting into Abolitionist work, you could begin to connect its concern with the meaning of justice to your own life. Working people started getting connected to it around the metaphor of freedom from "wage slavery."

These themes and activities stressing slavery and freedom were important in mobilizing people because there was always something to do. One thing we definitely must create again now is a sense that there is still something active to do, something that will not destroy whatever hard-won equilibrium we still have in our lives. Today, when I hear somebody say, "I have to mobilize more," I think, "God, when? At 3 am? What about my kids?" We are all so busy and yet we still need to feel part of something. Looking at Abolitionists gives us some ideas.

A major source of the Abolitionist Movement's effectiveness at mobilizing people in myriad ways was the movement's definition of justice. Justice meant stopping slavery's expansion, ending slavery's power over the economy and culture, ending slavery and supporting those who had been enslaved in their quest for justice and equality. The vision was broad and didn't always divide itself too rigidly around the correct line, or the correct strategy and tactics. Most people who thought of themselves as Abolitionists simply knew there was a big job to be done, one which had to be done, about which anyone who cherished

justice had to speak out and act somehow. This is what welfare mothers, immigrants, all the current designated victims of the Right need today: a broad set of allies who simply *must* organize and speak out for their economic rights because they see them as connected to everyone's ability to achieve justice from this government, from this society.

Of course, there were many things wrong with the Abolitionist Movement; I don't want to romanticize it. It was still influenced by all the things that are wrong in American society: racism, class oppression, sexism. The men, especially, still squabbled over "leadership." But as movements go, it was really pretty impressive. And we can learn from what mobilized *them*, because to fight the assault on poor people, white women, people of color, immigrants and others today we need to build the same kind of broad-based movement for basic justice, a movement that sees the fate of all of us tied up with the fates of those who suffer most in society.

There are lots of things we have to understand and do if we are going to build such a broad-based movement to abolish the power of the Right and replace it with a more truly dependable, just and free society. One thing we need is our own expansive and shared sense of what justice means in our day: then, it meant education and land for those who had been enslaved and respect for all free labor's right to organize; today, it may mean jobs, income, health care and child care. We still have some thinking to do to define what justice and rights mean for us today, and at what level we can trust government to provide those. But another equally important lesson we can learn from the Abolitionists is that, in order to organize, to motivate ourselves and to devise winning strategies, we must understand that the enemies of justice have a broad focus also.

One of the things that strengthened the Abolitionists and allowed them to come together across a lot of differences was their sense of uniting against a big, shared enemy. They knew the enemy was a system, not just individual slave owners. They called it "the Slave Power" and "King Cotton" and they knew a lot about it. They educated themselves not only about how to fight it but also about who specifically the enemy was and how dangerous its ideas and actions were. By educating themselves in this way, the Abolitionists came to understand much more deeply their own goals and challenges.

If you read a lot of the Abolitionist tracts — everything from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the even more rhetorical pamphlets — or you read the stories told by people who had been enslaved, you see a consistent theme of trying to explain and know the enemy. The stories were about what it was like to live as a human being under the condition of slavery: how the slave owners treated enslaved and free people. People learned about how slavery was justified and structured, the international economics and the "ethical" arguments used to maintain and advance Slave Power. They found out about how expansionism was viewed as essential to the maintenance of slavery, and how women were made especially degraded by its premises.

As I read those stories, I understand that part of telling them over and over was to keep people understanding *both* the need for justice *and* the existence and nature of evil. Now I don't know if *evil* is quite the right word. I am actually a person who shies away from language like that. But I think people act more clearly when they know the stakes, and when they can see the tremendous costs of losing the battle. That's part of how the abolitionists inspired people to keep

going, because more and more people began to realize that the whole nation, not only those enslaved in it, was doomed if Slave Power were left unchallenged.

Knowing our Enemy

Today, we can stop what is happening to urban youth, to welfare mothers, to immigrants, to the most vulnerable people only if we find the wherewithal to build the kind of movement the Abolitionists had. If we lose, everyone who is not now vulnerable becomes at risk. Just as slavery needed to expand to survive, so the fuel that drives the power of the Right is the existence of people whose very needs and ways of living can be viewed as weakening the "good" society. Particularly, it is not enough just to formulate our own alternative visions of justice, although this is critical. We must also know what motivates the enemy we are facing, what kinds of anti-visions it has and how dangerous it is, and what will happen if the enemy wins. We can only find the incredible energy we will need to win if we truly understand how serious the enemy really is. This is why I *do* think it's useful to talk about what's coming down, even if it is depressing and seems too awful to listen to.

Just as it was hard for some white Northerners to comprehend that there really could be people who would take babies from their mothers and sell them, or to hear how common rape was on the plantations, it is hard for many people today to believe how dangerous is the radical Right that has now gained and is consolidating power. And, just like the Abolitionists, we must keep educating ourselves about the fact that there really is another view of the world out there. There are lots of folks with another set of standards for acting than many of us want to accept. There *are* people who pour mustard on people sitting in at lunch counters, who smile and eat their picnics at lynchings, who would make slave auction day a holiday. Just as there were journalists and "scholars" who wrote extensively in defense of the superior Southern culture and the institution of slavery, so today there are Rightwing "scholars," funded by Rightwing think tanks, who are attacking welfare recipients, government bureaucrats, teen mothers and poor people as undermining the moral fabric of the society. That morality is personified in the unfettered capitalist economy, the patriarchal family and the existing racial hierarchies.

To build our movement, we too must better understand the interweaving threads of the arguments that so triumph today if are going to abolish this scary and dangerous World Order. In fact, I would argue, today's Rightwing anti-vision is not so new, and not so different from the old order that grew out of a Slave Power that only lost its particular *means* of oppression — slavery — when it lost the war. Its legitimization of class, race and gender hierarchies never died — but that's another story. We are going to have to put some new ideas into people's heads — ideas that make more sense in explaining the world than those that "naturally" come to mind.

Most of us just try to live our lives. We get our kids up, we try to find somebody we can love, we try to figure out who we are in the world, what's going on. And, we try to find explanations when things go wrong, explanations that give us some place to go, some direction about how to understand who or

what is causing our problems and what to do next. In times like these, most of us look first to what is closest to us — what we learned in our families, our homes, and if we went to churches, what we learned there. We look to the places where we have always heard explanations of what's the matter and what's right.

What is happening right now in this country is that the changing economic and social world order has left a lot of people more insecure and scared than they remember being. The world economy has shifted and even people in the US have lost 20% of their earning power over the past forty years. The minimum wage is 60% of what it was in real buying power. The average young person can expect a minimum of five jobs in their lives, without a pension or a secure career. *Family* means something different.

More people are scared for themselves, for the future facing their children and for their security than they used to be — poll after poll shows this. Many white people who thought they were "middle class" or somewhat secure are in pain; they are less secure and they are looking for some explanations. Those who turn to the Right are not all Rightwingers, but they are scared, and being good white Christian Americans they are culturally over-determined to look outside themselves, not within, for explanations. When this happens all over this country, people look to old comfortable, familiar traditions.

And American culture has long contained a set of differing explanations for what is wrong in America that has always been Rightwing and dangerous — explanations that have usually been heard at different times both from discordant voices which have usually drowned each other out and from more hopeful voices. Now, however, the radical Right has finally created a powerful, profoundly frightening fusion of traditional arguments into a unified overarching explanation of what is wrong and what needs to be done. For differing reasons, this set of fused arguments appeal to differing groups in the society, and are sponsored by some very powerful interests, to create a "common sense" that inexorably drowns out other voices and labels these liberal, alien, anti-family, undisciplined, soft and wrong. It is still possible to object to their methods, but it is becoming ever more difficult to find ways to counter the overall explanations for what is wrong. The insidious logic goes like this, with variations for different groups: "So you don't like this piece of welfare reform [or immigration, or prison] policy? Well, maybe we can change it, so long as we all agree that welfare is bad, has failed and poor women don't have rights to money for their families, because that has undermined basic values." So you can't even argue unless you accept the false premises first.

I want to summarize briefly the main ideas of the five streams of Rightwing explanations that have all erupted from their underground Rightwing aquifers, thanks to fortuitous timing and some very selective drilling and expensive channeling of the messages, into a unified chorus singing all the verses of all the songs that represent all the worst of the traditions of this country.

The first, very schematically, are the explanations of Radical Capitalists. Radical Capitalists argue that our country's problems come from too many fetters on rich people. The logic is that, since rich people are indisputably successful at marshaling the world's resources, then those people who are richest

are the best, know best and must be free to risk, invest and lead America. And whatever is best for them is the best for everybody else, and whenever times are bad it must be because the rich have been thwarted in exerting their natural leadership.

Usually, Radical Capitalism's is a very unpopular explanation unless you're very rich. So it gets framed instead as "valuing freedom", the economic freedom to become rich, even though in the 1980's we almost stepped over the edge into just admiring wealth for its own sake with no apologies. The argument also falls into blaming anyone who is not rich for their fate.

Now just the ethics and arguments of capitalism in general assume some of this logic, but radical capitalism is radical because it is basically anti-state as well as pro-capitalist. It says that, by definition, the only legitimate use of government is to help capital when capital wants help. But the rest of the time, whenever popular forces expand governments, government is inevitably bad. And even when government thinks it's going to help, it's really going to hurt, because people should be free to make all the money they can, and to do what they need to make their money. Progressive taxes are bad; income redistribution in any form is worse; helping the rich to get richer is best. This is the "genius of capitalism." Freedom itself gets thwarted whenever we have buffers against capitalism, like those erected in what Bob Dole calls our "60 year detour" experiment with a welfare state.

So Radical Capitalism is one theme that's been there for all of US history as a way to explain problems, and, incidentally, to justify taking all the spoils from the "losers" of history: Native people, the landless, poor people. "We have problems because we haven't let the capitalists have enough freedom and the rest of us can't have our freedom to be entrepreneurs" is the mantra. Bill Weld, [Republican Governor of Massachusetts] subscribes to such Radical Capitalist arguments pretty absolutely, as do many old line Republicans. But by itself, especially since the 1930s, Radical Capitalism has had a hard time gaining a following in hard times. People aren't stupid.

Second, there's another long-standing tradition of Nationalism/Nativism that has been here to explain what is wrong with America. This is the "this is the greatest country in the world if it weren't being weakened by outsiders and unpatriotic Americans" school. This tradition focuses, not necessarily on the economy, but on strengthening the government's foreign role and blames bad times on our lack of national strength and pride. In the 19th century it argued for our Manifest Destiny to go and kill anybody who was in our way. The other side of this coin is that the "Americanism" of newcomers to this country can always be questioned. There was anti-Irish sentiment in the 1840s, and anti-European Catholics and Jews in the late 19th century, along with anti-Chinese activism. Of course, there was always the possibility to get "good" quickly — if you were white, and you acted exactly like the people who made the rules and you didn't make any claims.

Nativist/Nationalists are not as anti-government as the Radical Capitalists because they've always wanted to do something to the immigrants: control them, keep them out, make rules for them. This takes police, and courts, and even schools and social workers. Obviously they've also wanted a military as a part of our patriotic (read, imperialist) duty around the world.

Third, there's the Radical Fundamentalist-Christian strand of the Right, which

is not even all fundamentalist Christians. Historically, this tradition was deeply Protestant and anti-Roman Catholic, but another fusion recently has been the forging of alliances of fundamentalist Christianity across that great divide. These groups have always had arguments that see our country's problems as resulting from godlessness, from a breakdown in moral order, and see society today as threatened by the facts of divorce, "illegitimacy," teen pregnancy, homosexuality and even more so by the secular values that do not judge such behavior.

All of this is particularly tied to a defense of the traditional family hierarchy: God, father, mother, child. These folks have historically been torn by two conflicting impulses: the need to keep from being corrupted by the world in order to stay pure so they can get into heaven vs. the need to stand up for God's law and order, to oppose evil in the world and to right wrongs.

This struggle of Radical Fundamentalist Christians has had a major impact on many aspects of American history. It has been torn by its view of government because part of this tradition has viewed getting involved in the state and the secular world as especially corrupting: you don't get into heaven if you get into politics. At other times Radical Fundamentalists have wanted government to stop abortions, for example, to forbid certain things from being taught, or to criminalize people who are homosexual for existing or for being public. So they *want* a state, but they don't *trust* it, and they have been back and forth about this in their religious debates over the century.

At most points in history what has saved us from Radical Fundamentalists has been their pattern of getting involved in the public world and then suddenly thinking they were getting corrupted or dirtied by it and so they would pull back and go back into their churches — as when they fought Darwinism in the schools. They have always had a complicated tradition in regard to poverty also. For these folks, poverty isn't necessarily bad as it's understood to be part of God's order. But asking for anything from government because you are poor is bad because you really should be asking God or other Christians to help you.

For all these reasons, Radical Fundamentalist Christians are a more complicated, basically fragile part of the current fusion, but they are vital to its popular appeal. Their approach towards poor people, and economic rights contains more contradictions. They do want to control people and they do have a set of beliefs about charity — and faith and hope — that can lead to government programs. Charity makes you a good Christian if you practice it, so there must be somebody to give it to and maybe even fair structures for giving it. But here is exactly where today's Radical Capitalists have been successful. Essentially, they keep trying to ease radical Christian fundamentalists' doubts about abandoning the poor by saying that "government can't help anyway. Organized charity really hurts. Only voluntary, or at least contracted services without standards, can help. So we are not abandoning our commitment to the poor by cutting programs, we are doing it for their own good (and incidentally helping the rich by reducing their tax burden). Besides, the real role for government is at the local level in controlling what happens to our children in schools and what they can view in the media." Read Ralph Reed's arguments for the Christian Coalition. He is truly masterful at giving Radical Capitalist arguments to help Fundamentalist Christians out of any doubts about their political activism.

Fourth, there is the overt racist strand of explanations for what is wrong,

which has a deep tradition among white people. It is connected to the Nativist strand but is much more clear that people of color, particularly those of African heritage, are lesser. In fact, the current Far Right, in tracts such as *The Turner Diaries*, calls people of color "mud people"; while in *The Bell Curve*, Charles Murray is much more social-scientifically polite about their "deficiencies." For the racists (Officer Furman is a good example, in case you doubt their existence in "normal" society), dark people are inferior genetically and, at least need to stay on their own. They will corrupt, dirty and besmudge all that is strong, good and pure in this society.

Repugnant as this tradition is, even to other radical conservatives, these racists have journals, they write magazines, they are closely tied to some of the Survivalists and directly to the Christian Identity Movement, a group that is also blatantly anti-Semitic. There may not be millions of these far-out racists, but they find friends when they cry "freedom" and when they worry about the reduced prospects for white men. Importantly, it is a tradition, and when it gets passed to the second and third generation its overt racism gets less virulent, but not disconnected from its roots. From my experience growing up in a white lower middle class extended family in the South, my relatives are no longer overtly against Black people; "but they just want too much, and they push too far and they create all these problems for us white people, who have problems too." And somehow or another it is still Black people's fault that Sherman burnt Atlanta and the South had it so hard for all those years; it's the *presence* of Black people — not slavery, or discrimination — that causes problems. And almost always, overt racists are against the idea of a national government getting involved in any "private" affair like race relations. "States' Rights Forever" has not been a Lost Cause; it's back in the Contract with America, as Strom Thurmond's dying revenge.

The logic of the racist strand of Rightwing thought connects directly back to the Abolitionists' unfinished struggle for real equality. If Black people didn't have a Civil Rights Movement, or Affirmative Action, we wouldn't have had to change things around; we white people would feel safe. All our problems can be traced somehow, ultimately to the very presence of Black people. The way that the racist strain plays out today is that "it is really racism to talk about racism," because it stirs up racial animosities (which, of course, white people inevitably possess). So even though the evidence is less out in the open, to understand the power of today's Rightwing agenda we must understand how overt racism is another part of the interwoven set of explanations that are given when white people try to answer certain questions in an attempt to figure out what's the matter. They heard it when they were kids, so they think maybe it really isn't so wrong after all, especially now that they hear its echoes on the talk shows and in the newspapers every day.

Finally, there is a fifth strand of Right wing explanations that is more akin to European-Conservatism than to what has been most dominant in America, but it has been present among some intellectuals. This strand says that what is wrong is not that capitalism is being fettered, it's that the proper order in society is being challenged by too much democracy of the ignorant and too many outside ideas. In Europe this has meant that the aristocracy should rule — not the capitalists, but the people who have "family, heritage and order." In this country what that way of thinking has evolved into is an intellectualist, elitist

tradition that got tied up with nationalist anti-Communism in this century. This strain of thought argues that socialism, and even an overly-populist democracy, is a foreign ideology that, until its defeat in the last decade was bad because it was both anti-capitalist and disorderly and because it gave people a sense of too many rights. For these folks, socialism or "collectivism" in any form, upsets the balance of social relations and suggests that people on the bottom can wrongly claim equality with and resources from those on the top. They start expecting too much, and creating all sorts of programs that disrupt the natural hierarchies.

But, for years, opposing Communism was basically the job of the Nationalists and the Radical Capitalists, who (from these "real" conservatives' point of view) crudely opposed communism because it was identified with another country or would challenge the free market. Old line anti-socialists' voices couldn't be heard in these arguments. But, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory of capitalism, they can find more support for their arguments: that socialism, unionism, any organizing to take away authority and give it to the bottom is destabilizing, and is "domestic socialism", whether it is a welfare state, a capital gains tax, a mandatory citizen review process, or, indeed any strongly democratic social movement. After a while these arguments tend to blame participation and politics themselves for our problem and to seek that the "better sort" take their rightful place in government again. It's no surprise to me that in these times, you almost have to be a millionaire to run for office, and a quack like Perot can be taken seriously, simply because if he can make a billion dollars he must be qualified to be President.

What's Happening Now

It would be historically untrue to say that these strains of the Right know that they belong together. That there has not been a self-consciously united Right in this country, has, in fact, been what has saved us from even worse fates at earlier points in US history. Radical Capitalists have wanted immigrants as cheap labor; Nativists have wanted strong government; the Fundamentalist Christians have feared the secular style of other conservatives; some have wanted peace, others war. The traditional pattern has been that the Right has been fragmented, divided off from each other, even distrustful of each other. The Depression sent the Radical Capitalists aground. The presence of the Soviet Union, flawed as it was, was another counter to the anti-communist folks; in a Cold War it might make us look bad to have a government that allowed too much economic inequality. Immigration was limited and pretty controlled after the 1920's. In general, there was an unwillingness to sully themselves with compromise that kept Far Right groups like the John Birch Society and the Christian Identity Movement from entering mainstream politics in coalitions with others.

This is not to say that the Right has been as historically marginalized as some would have us believe. It has always had more power to explain reality to lots of people than liberals have wanted to admit. And at the local levels and in state legislatures, there have always been strong arguments, if not organized forces, to represent radically conservative ideas. If you read Congressional debates of any year you will hear voices just like those of Newt Gingrich or other Far

Right conservatives. But educated liberals, and even social-justice oriented radicals, all too often just thought of these people as "stupid" or "backward" and figured out how to maneuver among them, or compromise with them on separate issues, and just kept denying how widespread these explanations are, and how much resonance they have. When Rightwing forces did reach the national arena — as in the Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrat campaign in 1948, or the Goldwater and Wallace campaigns in the 1960's — liberal, Left thinking people would get up in arms but did not want to face the overall implications for the right's ability to define the direction of "progress" or to provide most people with winning explanations when times got hard.

Another reason the right's explanations were somewhat "underground" — in their churches and the speeches of politicians but not in their books — has been that Rightwing conservatism until the last thirty years had neither an intellectual "public face" nor a voice to combine all the strains into one telling explanation for what is wrong. The Right has always opposed social programs and debates on welfare have always been full of speeches like those we hear today. In the past, however, the Right hadn't figured out how to bring its arguments against government programs together as the base for a whole popular social movement.

Today the various strains of the Right are coming together even more than the Right quite realizes. You hear old arguments — such as those seeking to ban even legal immigrants from any services — in newly respectable places. You see overt, unapologetic racism and homophobia. Last winter, it felt as if all other competing explanations for what was wrong with America were swept away in the *blitzkrieg* of media attention on Newt Gingrich, the Contract with America, and the assault on poor people. And welfare recipients have become fair game for any abusive rhetoric: "brood mares" and "parasites" are only the most common insults.

The point of all this discussion is not to digress into a general political review, but to remind ourselves that any movement for economic rights today must understand the analyses and the power of the Rightwing explanations. We must face how scary it is that this set of Rightwing explanations has become woven together and strategize about the implications if they win more, because their arguments offer a false, but deeply appealing, vision to many people — not only white people — in this country. As long as these are the dominant explanations for what is wrong, any hope for a more inclusive, liberatory vision of economic rights is dim.

Why have these explanations become so well fused, and what do we do about it? One reason these Rightwing groups are coming together is that, since at least 1973, if not 1964, as Kevin Phillips and others have pointed out, some conservatives have directly organized to unite the Right and to package and market its ideas as the winning explanation for what ails America. Now that a set of historical events has occurred to generate a great unease in the land, the Right is there to explain what is wrong, to propose remedies, to comfort the people with arguments that hearken back to the falsely remembered but comforting past, and to frighten them away from alternative arguments that might mean real change for most people, and might offer real improvement.

There are several reasons all the rightist strains can come together with

contradictions buried, for now. First, the Soviet Union's collapse has given credence to Radical Capitalist's arguments that capitalism is triumphant, and that the US system is the best we can ever expect. For now, they need take no prisoners, nor make any compromises to buffer the effects of the economic "realities" of capitalism. Since there are few comprehensive opposing visions, then it is possible to argue that, since this is the best of all worlds here, any problems must result from those places where socialism has crept in, and from the people who have become dependent on its "benefits." So, if privatization makes sense in a country like Russia where every corner store used to be a state enterprise, here also we should use it to dismantle the welfare state, and the set of social expectations it inevitably creates. Thus the Radical Capitalists and those who want order in society come together in a new, less crude form of anti-communism.

Now we can have anti-communism without having to prove that anyone had a party membership card. Now all we have to say is that anybody who wants a responsive, dependable government, or a redistributive tax system is a collectivist, a "domestic socialist." No matter how democratic we are, we can be dismissed because we are part of the old style, discredited socialism that wants government to displace individual and family initiative. It's a vision that has failed, so we've failed and we should shut up and accept our irrelevance. When I teach younger students now I see this. They just cannot imagine what kind of society there can be besides capitalism, with all its attendant inequalities, and lack of economic rights.

Second, the increase in immigration over the past fifteen years is dramatic and has triggered the revival of Nativism, along with a fusing of Radical Capitalist and Nativist sentiments. Journals like the Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review* are clear now: immigrants are still the problem, not because they are here, but because they claim economic and social protections. We can still let them in, but only if they don't bring family and if they expect nothing except the chance to work at any wage, under any conditions. While for some of the most paranoid and racist Nativists the very presence of immigrants is a problem, for most the issue is getting immigrants back into subservient positions, speaking English Only and asking for nothing. So, there are still more reasons for the right's assault on the welfare state to find resonance, among people who have little and fear that "outsiders" will take what they have.

Third, and for me an especially critical part of the whole mess we are in, has to do with the challenges that feminism has made on the established order, challenges that must be overcome or the whole house of cards comes down. Due in large part to the organized efforts of women, it is possible for women to be more "in the world" than they were thirty years ago. The Radical Capitalists, and even the Fundamentalist Christians have accommodated to this. They not longer deny women's rights to jobs with wages and hours that support childcare necessities though they fight to keep a glass ceiling at the top, of course. The failure of the family is not being blamed on a woman's right to be in the world, unless she takes her work too seriously. And divorce itself is even tolerated — probably because easy divorce frees men more than women.

Instead, it is women's ability to live without men, and feminists' celebration of that situation as a right, that has become the unifying point between the Religious Right and the Radical Capitalists. For thirty years women have been

opening up the secrets of the patriarchal family: the violence, the abuse, the incest. This work has been more radical and threatening than we have often understood, but the Right has seen the implications clearly. They see that talk about such things cracks the whole culture of dominance of men over women. Since they can't say overtly that they committed incest, battering and rape to subjugate and control women, they are in a pickle. They *can*, however, say that single families are bad, harm children and take children away from the "love and discipline" and legitimacy that only a father can bring. And obviously, any economic rights given without punishment that allow women to support themselves and their children outside the authority of either a husband or a boss are especially suspect. So again the Right has an argument when people are afraid for their families that says the problem is that women without men have too many rights and don't suffer enough. Women on welfare then become the symbol for all women who are asserting their right to live without men. Unless they present themselves as total victims (and then only if they stop any claims to victimhood after two years), they find little support from a set of Rightwing arguments that sees their very existence as an alternative to the male-headed family and to every citizen's "obligation" to accept any employment under any conditions.

Additionally, the success of African American radicalism has also been twisted into another way of linking varied strands of the Right, most importantly with rejuvenating the racist Right. Today, most claims by people of color are seen by many white people as excessive and divisive. Importantly, all the arguments that people of color have demanded enough and received too much come back to yet another attack on government as a provider and protector of economic or social rights. It is true that white people now have to confront their own racial attitudes and hierarchies more than they used to and that makes them uncomfortable. And the place they have to do this the most is in government encounters, which is the one area of hiring where something like Affirmative Action has begun to work because of where rules could be enforced. As a white person, your tax officer or the person who fills out your driver's license application may be Black and may have authority over your life in ways you are not used to. For many white people whose prospects are receding, it's just too much. They react, hooked into anger and fantasies about Affirmative Action, people of color and government all in collusion against them.

Then, if a white person has grown up with "that's how those people are — they aren't really as hard working as you," it has resonance. And then if they read in the newspaper about "The Bell Curve," written by professors, suddenly it can come together and they are supporting very Rightwing movements, people, and ideas.

The fusion of Rightwing explanations has kept growing and growing. Now there are neo-conservative, or neo-liberal intellectuals (some of whom are Black or Jewish) who will call for a new nationalism. There are new "communitarians" who stress obligations, not rights; unity of "basic values," not a valuing of diversity. Today it is possible to hear resonance with old conservative traditions calling for renewed order, a unified community based on shared values of work, faith and family. We even hear arguments from such quarters that only white men can be unity candidates since, by definition, persons of color and white women are divisive and have to prove they can rally

white men to their cause.

It keeps coming together. Even the developments of modern technology are on the right's side, as Newt Gingrich especially understands. The Right, except among some Fundamentalist Christians, has never been great at grassroots organizing. You have to be more loving and "real" to succeed at organizing mass movements. The Left could always do that better. But now, with media and computers, it is much easier to "organize." People feel that they have met and know Rightwing leaders, even when they don't. They just saw them on TV, acting on air time that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars a minute. The Right can create what seems like a broad public campaign but is really only the illusion of a grass roots movement. Nobody has ever met anybody else in the Rightwing movement until they are indoctrinated enough to travel to well organized conventions. The end result is that people and movements become easier to manipulate.

All this means that there really is now a widespread, well-organized hard Right force in America that has gained and consolidated power because it has arguments with historical resonance. And it is winning big and has the capacity, the ruthless will and the possibility to achieve Total Victory.

Scary as it seems, we can only organize effectively if we see the similarities to what happened in Germany in the 1930s, before Hitler launched his genocidal wars. Then, in addition to Jews, Gypsies, Communists and Socialists who were outside the National Community, by definition, the regime labeled and targeted those Aryans who were "useless eaters" — those at the bottom of the welfare hierarchy who received little or no public resources. The most useless, the disabled, mentally defective, etc. were killed if they were under the "care" of the state. Others who lived with family simply had little or no claim for rations or service. On the other hand, the "work-shy" had to be forced to work at any job, under militaristic discipline. *Arbeit Macht Frei*, work makes freedom, was the logo under which all the concentration camps operated. Work for the national community was the only legitimate way to be a citizen, unless of course one was a soldier, and that work came with no right to question, organize or affect the conditions of one's labor.

I am not saying this because I think Newt Gingrich is reading Nazi social policy and trying to carry it out. That's absurd. He has many homegrown right-wing examples right here that he can draw on. But the traditions he draws on were created by people who were once somewhat sympathetic to fascism, before they saw what became of Nazi Germany. Before the 1930s, for example, the US Right led the world in developing arguments for euthanasia practices and policies — in writings that were cited in their own defense by Nazi "geneticists" after the war.

What's important in drawing these parallels is the same value that the Abolitionists found in facing what slavery was really like. For me, to know that folks in a western country, not so different from us, not so long ago could put these kinds of policies out and act on them, in six years, is significant. Six years is a very short time for people to lose their way with fatal results. A very short time. But it happened in Germany. By passing some rules, setting some precedents and weaving a web of long-extant arguments about who was really valuable, and what "work" really mattered, scared people whose prospects seemed dim went along.

I have to say that I see the kinds of proposals that are in the Contract with America as approaching this country's version of the Nuremberg Laws. If we can pass laws that make legal immigrants unable to receive basic social security protections and can tell mothers that they can be cut off from any economic support for their children after a designated time, or, at best, be forced to work for basic maintenance without any guarantees of childcare or healthcare, just because they have broken our overt and covert rules about women's place, then who is next? We have already seen rules that give no benefits to a child unlucky enough to be born to a mother on welfare — doesn't that child become a "useless eater"? The Contract already starts to deny disability rights to those who might be "using" a mental or addiction problem to avoid work — who are they but the "work-shy"? And if Affirmative Action goes next, there will be fewer and fewer people of color in positions of any authority to make whites uncomfortable or to see what is happening. With "three strikes you're out" facing some criminals, while others confront mandatory capital punishment, with no benefits available to pregnant teens and family caps facing welfare mothers, there is no buffer to the "realities" of life in America. The motto of New Hampshire becomes nationalized, not as "live free or die" but "live free or we kill you."

Depressing as it may sound, I find in all of this a reason we have no choice but to organize the broadest movement possible for economic rights. The Right is going to win more before they lose, because our opposition is weak and confused. We can only back off from the abyss of social suicide to which the Right has brought us, if we understand what is happening and join with all the people who are literally fighting for our lives. Just like in Abolitionist times, some of us will be called to preach, some to teach, some to help women and children hide. We may have to storm some barricades and plot some underground escape paths. Our new vision of rights as economic and social justice will have to be broad enough not only to include all diversities, but to accept leadership from all, starting with accepting and championing the valor with which a woman on welfare shows us the way:

By claiming her rights to ask the public to assist her in raising her child, she affirms that a dependable society distributes its resources so that women and children can claim food, shelter and dignity when they ask for it;

By claiming her rights to satisfy her own sense of obligation to her children before she must fulfill obligations to any employer, she embodies the principle that employment is not the root of our connection to society; meeting our obligations to those we love and who depend upon us is that root;

By claiming her rights to create a legitimate family for her children without a man when men have failed her or are not available or are not satisfying of her more intimate needs, she demonstrates that women in themselves are equal, worthy members of society;

By claiming her rights to support her children while she charts a path to a better future that is hers alone to envision, despite all the hard luck and hard knocks that have been her lot, she affirms the capacity for dignity and self

determination that is within us all.

All facets of the Right would not only take these rights away from women on welfare now, but most importantly, would make them unavailable as potential rights for all women. To know and abolish the explanations and the actions of the Right are absolute necessities for any new resisting movement. And creating a movement as broad, visionary and forgiving as the best of that one forged by our spiritual ancestors a century and a half ago is our task. We cannot refuse, we can only try to figure our place in the effort.

¹ This article was originally given as a talk at a Brown Paper Bag Discussion entitled "Economic Rights for Women: safety nets, workfare, or real justice?" at the Women's Theological Center in February of 1995. It has been edited for readability and has been somewhat expanded from that original talk.

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ISSN: 1078-1854

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