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The Historiography of American Welfare Politics: Race, Gender and Class

Who are the poor? What are the causes of poverty? What should the role of the government be in addressing poverty, if any? Who should and should not receive government assistance? Does welfare create government dependency and disincentivize work? These are some of the central questions that have faced American policymakers in crafting welfare policy. Social and political historians in the United States have identified key themes in welfare politics and public policy that have persisted over the past two centuries: the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor, the “culture of poverty,” the alleged decline of the traditional nuclear family, and the derogatory “welfare queen.” The prevailing narratives about the culture of poverty from Oscar Lewis, the warnings of the matriarchal family from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and the linking of IQ and income from Charles Murray would all together serve to provide the basis for the dominant modern view of poverty in America and shape subsequent debates over welfare policy in the United States. The dots that connect these theories of poverty and approaches to welfare policy are the politics of race and gender: that poor, single African American mothers are the most responsible for their poverty, and the least deserving of our help.

In this paper, I will provide an overview of some of the leading historical debates over welfare politics, drawing on major contributions such as *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty* (1989) by Michael B. Katz, *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935-1996* (2009) by Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt and Marisa Chappel and *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (2007) by Felicia Kornbluh, and *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (2004) by political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock.

Welfare refers to government programs intended to alleviate poverty by providing federal assistance to the poor, the elderly and the disabled. These programs come in various forms, including grants, food stamps, vouchers, health care, and housing assistance. However, welfare in the public discourse has largely become synonymous with specific programs benefiting women, widows, and mothers. The earliest state welfare programs date back to the Progressive Era (1890-1920). The Mothers' Pension Movement — also called widows' pensions, mothers' aid, and mothers' allowances — advocated for cash payments to middle-class white widows with young children to enable them to care for them in the home without working.

The first statewide mothers' pension law was enacted in Illinois in 1911 and 39 states had enacted such laws by 1919. By 1934, a year after the New Deal began, there were mother's pension laws in 46 states and the District of Columbia. In 1909, a White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children advised that “[c]hildren of reasonably efficient and *deserving* mothers who are without the support of the normal breadwinner should, as a rule, be kept with their parents, such aid being given as may be necessary to maintain suitable homes

for the rearing of their children.”¹ One of the earliest federal welfare programs came out of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Created by the Social Security Act of 1935 and administered by the United States Department of Health and Health Human Services (HHS), the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program provided financial assistance to low-income families with children and operated from 1935 to 1996. In 1996, President Bill Clinton, who had promised to “end welfare as we know it,” signed into law the bipartisan Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 to replace AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) which imposed stricter time limits and greater restrictions on eligibility.

The Unworthy and Worthy Poor

In his 1989 book *The Undeserving Poor: America’s Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, historian Michael B. Katz argues that the history of welfare politics in the United States has been characterized by debates over the worthiness of the poor. Katz argues that “for more than two hundred years, one theme has run through [the] American response to poverty: the idea that some poor people are *undeserving* of help because they brought their poverty on themselves.”² The “worthy” poor are believed to be those who suffer from poverty through no fault of their own, who are unable to work, and deserve to receive government assistance, while the “unworthy” poor are believed to be those who are responsible for their poverty, who are able but unwilling to work, and undeserving of government assistance.

In 1821, Josiah Quincy, the future Mayor of Boston, MA and President of Harvard University, published a report on the poor laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and explained that the poor were

¹ Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt, and Marisa Chappell, *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935-1996* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 14.

² Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), x.

divided into “two classes”; first, the “impotent poor; in which denomination are included all who are wholly incapable of work, through old age, infancy, sickness or corporeal debility,” the second was the “able poor . . . all who are capable of work, of some nature, or other; but different in the degree of their capacity, and in the kind of work, of which they are capable.”³ Katz notes that “the identity of the undeserving poor has shifted with time and context, but the category has endured.”⁴

Most elderly people, workers disabled in accidents, and the unemployed, veterans, could claim help as a right through social insurance. Others, notably single mothers, remained dependent on public assistance [and] morally tarred by their association with relief as well as their allegedly promiscuous sexuality [and] their race. . . Seen as lazy, immoral “welfare queens” happily soaking up public money while transmitting a culture of dependence, they stood out in public rhetoric as the quintessential undeserving poor.⁵

*The Culture of Poverty and Decline of the
Nuclear Family*

Katz argues that the dominant view of poverty in America has been that poverty is caused and reinforced by the poor moral character and behaviors of the people experiencing poverty. He cites the ‘culture of poverty’ theory that was prevalent in the 1960s as one of the sources and justifications of this view of poverty. In 1959, anthropologist Oscar Lewis coined the term ‘subculture of poverty’ in his ethnography *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1959). Lewis argued that among his subjects, “poverty had become a way of life, passed from generation to generation, through the cultural transmission of a series of traits: the lack of a work ethic, resignation, dependence, lack of impulse, and the inability to delay gratification.”⁶

³ Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*, 5.

⁴ Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*, x.

⁵ Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*, 8.

⁶ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 44.

In line with the culture of poverty, poverty was seen as a consequence of the decline of the traditional nuclear family, and specifically the breakdown of the African American family. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist serving as Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson, published a report titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which later became better known as the infamous Moynihan Report. Moynihan's central argument is that "the gap between the Negro and most other groups in American society is widening" and "the fundamental problem. . . is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling."⁷ He cited startling statistics: "nearly a quarter of urban Negro marriages are dissolved"; "nearly one-quarter of Negro births are now illegitimate" and "almost one-fourth of Negro families are headed by females."⁸ Moynihan argued that centuries of slavery, segregation, and discrimination prevented African Americans from providing for their wives and children, leaving women to raise children on their own without a male breadwinner. He claimed this consequential matriarchal family structure created a 'tangle of pathology' marked by juvenile delinquency, drug use and social disorder in urban cities. He called for "[a] new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure."⁹

Intelligence and Income

Katz also argues that this view of poverty and the undeserving poor is often attributed to the belief that poor people are somehow inherently less intelligent than middle class and rich people. In the 1990s, political scientist Charles Murray and psychologist Richard Herrnstein published a controversial book, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1996)

⁷ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

that argued exactly that: that economic and social inequality in the United States could largely be explained as a result of inherent IQ differences between the poor, the middle class and the rich.

They argued that the welfare policies providing assistance to low income mothers, who they claimed had on average lower intelligence, were contributing to an overall decline of intelligence among the general American population. Their policy recommendations were as follows:

We can imagine no recommendation for using the government to manipulate fertility that does not have dangers. But this highlights the problem: the United States already has policies that inadvertently social engineer who has babies, and it is encouraging the *wrong* women. "If the United States did as much to encourage high-IQ women to have babies as it now does to encourage low-IQ women, it would rightly be described as engaging in aggressive manipulation of fertility." The technically precise description of America's fertility policy is that it subsidizes births among poor women, who are also disproportionately at the low end of the intelligence distribution. We urge generally that these policies, represented by the extensive network of cash and services for low-income women who have babies, be ended.¹⁰

Welfare and the Politics of Race and Gender

In their 2009 book *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents: 1935-1996*, historians Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt and Marisa Chappell argue that the history of welfare politics in the United States has been shaped specifically by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and the politics of race and gender.¹¹ Nadasen et. al make the argument that "the politics of race and gender not only shaped the development of the AFDC, but also produced a cultural logic that kept it stigmatized and miserly, almost from its origins."¹² The authors argue that "because of the deep suspicion about the worthiness of impoverished Americans, . . . [welfare programs] were contingent on monitoring and correcting the behavior of

¹⁰ Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 548.

¹¹ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 1.

¹² Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 6.

recipients, particularly parenting and sexual activity.”¹³ The authors note that candidates for mothers’ pensions had to meet “the ideals of white middle class reformers and social workers who investigated every aspect of the applicants’ lives.”¹⁴ In order to meet these rigid standards, mothers “had to abstain from sexual activity outside of marriage, avoid even the suggestion of impropriety, obey social workers, and exhibit thrift, cleanliness, and full-time domesticity.”¹⁵ Even eligible widows had to “prove their moral character” by “showing intelligence, willingness to learn English, if foreign, piety, celibacy and full-time child-centered domesticity.”¹⁶ According to the Children’s Bureau in 1933, 80 percent of the recipients of mothers’ pensions were white widows. Only 3 percent of recipients were African American mothers, which was far less than the percentage of the population and their needs, and in large part because of their failure to conform to white middle class social norms.¹⁷

In the 1950s and 1960s, the number of single mothers of all races rose primarily because of the liberalization of divorce laws and subsequent increased divorce rates. Women were seeking economic independence from men in higher numbers. In 1940, 2.5 million households were headed by women. By 1960, there were 4.4 million female-headed households. During this time, more single mothers who were divorced, separated, deserted, or never married, began to access the benefits of the AFDC program which had been primarily conceived of as a widows’ benefit. These shifts in the traditional nuclear family structure worried politicians that there was a “welfare crisis.” Nearly half of all states passed so-called “suitable home” and “man in the house” rules to exclude single mothers from the AFDC program. Mothers seeking aid often had to sign affidavits like this one:

¹³ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

I do hereby promise and agree that until such time as the following agreement is rescinded, I will not have any male callers coming to my home nor meeting elsewhere under improper conditions. I also agree to raise my children to the best of my ability and will not knowingly contribute or be a contributing factor to their being shamed by my conduct. I understand that, should I violate this agreement, the children will be taken from me.

While these laws and rules were racially neutral on their face, they were often motivated by racist stereotypes of African American single mothers. In 1960, the Governor of Louisiana Jimmie Davis denigrated AFDC clients as “a bunch of prostitutes” and signed a sweeping suitable home law that purged 6,000 mothers caring for 23,000 children — 95 percent of them African American — from the rolls. To enforce these laws, caseworkers raided women's homes to interrogate them of any male visitors.¹⁸ The authors identify the consequences of equating AFDC with all welfare and its impact on public support for welfare policies:

The equation of welfare with AFDC, a program that has unduly suffered severe stigmatization, has led many Americans to consider most kinds of welfare assistance to the poor suspect. . . Americans have come to believe that government is inefficient and wasteful, and that social problems like poverty and unemployment are best addressed by the private sector, aided by government policies such as corporate tax breaks and economic growth policies. Americans have also blamed welfare programs targeted to poor people for urban decline, the rise in single parenthood, failing schools, and increased crimes.¹⁹

Welfare and the Rights Revolution

In her book, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (2007), Felicia Kornbluh argues that the welfare rights movement “changed the national conversation about public benefits and thus about the heart and soul of government.”²⁰

¹⁸ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 29.

¹⁹ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 4

Kornbluh identifies their approach as a “vision of citizenship” in which “the rights for mothers that had been written into public policies should apply to all low-income parents and not just to the respectable white women who had been their primary beneficiaries.”²¹ Frances Fox Piven, welfare rights activist and scholar, wrote:

By 1963 a version of civil rights had come to the northern slums and ghettos, a sort of version of rights talk, rights feeling, rights passion, but it was very much economic rights. Nobody dared say welfare rights out loud before there was a welfare rights movement. But still, these women were affected by that spirit.²²

The welfare rights movement adopted the community organizing model and liberal legal rights strategies of the civil rights movement and other social movements of the 1960s to call for the recognition of access to public benefits a right rather than a privilege. Low-income women of all races — including African American women, white women, Puerto Rican women and Mexican women — occupied welfare office buildings across the country to protest cuts to welfare programs and denials of public benefits. At the same time, these women also mounted a legal strategy to challenge regulations that undermined access to welfare. The most important legal victory for the welfare rights movement was *King v. Smith*, 392 U.S. 309 (1968) in which the Supreme Court struck down an Alabama ‘substitute father’ law that denied benefits to mothers with dependent children if their mother cohabitated with a man other the father. The Court held “[C]ongress has made at least this one determination: that destitute children who are legally fatherless cannot be flatly denied federally funded assistance on the transparent fiction that they have a substitute father.”²³

²⁰ Felicia Ann Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 2.

²¹ Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 10.

²² Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 14.

Ronald Reagan, the Politics of Disgust, and the Welfare Queen

In her book *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (2004), political scientist and African American studies scholar Ange-Marie Hancock argues that the ‘politics of disgust’ played a critical role in the history of welfare politics in the United States. Hancock defines the ‘politics of disgust’ as “an emotion-laden response to long-standing beliefs about single, poor African American mothers that has spread, epidemiologically, to all recipients of welfare programs for what citizens previously considered ‘the deserving poor.’”²⁴ She argues:

[T]he “welfare queen” has distinct political and policy ramifications. She is judged at all levels to be shirking her duty to carry her part of the load as a citizen. She usurps the taxpayers’ money, produces children who will do the same, and emasculates the titular head of her household, the Black male. . . [S]he avoids contributing her fair share to the national well-being, either as a “bearer of American values” or as a contributor to the U.S. political economy.²⁵

Stories of welfare fraud trace back to the early 1960s. *Reader’s Digest* and *Look* magazine published sensational stories about mothers “gaming the system.” However, welfare fraud became a front-and-center national issue by Governor of California Ronald Reagan in his campaign for the Republican nomination for President in 1976. Reagan made welfare reform a central issue of his platform and employed the trope of the ‘welfare queen’ to rally support for his policy proposals. Specifically, he used the sensationalized case of Linda Taylor, an

²³ *King v. Smith*, 392 U.S. 309 (1968).

²⁴ Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust and the Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 9.

²⁵ Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*, 60.

African American woman who had committed welfare fraud among other crimes. In a speech before the New Hampshire primary, he told the audience:

There's a woman in Chicago. She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veterans' benefits on four nonexistent deceased husbands. And she's collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000.²⁶

After he was elected president in 1980, Reagan fulfilled his campaign promises to provide tax breaks for corporations and wealthy Americans and reduce federal spending on welfare programs for the poor. In 1981, Reagan's Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act was passed by a Democratic-controlled Congress, slashing federal funding for AFDC and other programs for low-income Americans, including Medicaid, food stamps, disability, unemployment insurance, social services, and child nutrition programs. The various restrictions initially cut an estimated 500,000 individuals off the rolls in the first year and reduced the amount of benefits for even more.²⁷ In 1988, the Family Support Act was passed with strong bipartisan support. The FSA focused on getting mothers on AFDC back into the labor market by requiring states to enroll recipients with children as young as three into programs for job training. States could also use federal money to help women transitioning from welfare to work with temporary childcare subsidies. The FSA also increased federal child support enforcement as an effort to ensure that men were providing support for their children.²⁸

Bill Clinton and the End of Welfare as We Know It

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 67.

²⁸ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 77.

While Ronald Reagan and the conservative wing of the Republican Party had launched and led the attack against welfare programs, Democrats helped make welfare a bipartisan issue. The Democratic Leadership Council, founded in 1985, was a successful attempt to infuse Democratic politics with economic conservatism and move the party to the right on issues of taxes, business regulation and welfare. Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton was a long-time member of the conservative Democratic Leadership Council who believed that welfare should provide “a second chance, not a way of life.” During his campaign for president in 1992, Clinton pledged to “end welfare as we know it.”²⁹ In 1994, when the Republican Revolution led Republicans to regain control of Congress, House Speaker Newt Gingrich made welfare reform a part of their “Contract with America.”³⁰ Clinton twice vetoed Republican welfare reforms he viewed were too harmful, but eventually came to sign into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) replacing the AFDC with the Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) in 1996 and imposing new restrictions, including mandatory work requirements, a maximum of two years of continuous assistance, and a five-year lifetime cap on benefits.³¹ The PRWORA sought to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” by providing federal funding to states for marriage counseling and abstinence-only education programs, offering an “illegitimacy bonus” to states who successfully reduced the percentage of nonmarital pregnancies, and even allowed states to implement a “family cap” to deny benefits to children born to mothers on welfare. Twenty-one states adopted the family cap.³²

²⁹ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 78.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 79.

³² Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 80.

61 years has passed since the original Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, and low-income mothers, especially low-income African American single mothers, continue to be targeted with new restrictions, based on long-held but inaccurate beliefs that welfare programs create dependency, disincentivize work, and encourage divorce and out-of-wedlock births. These beliefs have been enforced by the dominant view that poverty is a personal moral failure and that some people are to blame for their poverty and are therefore undeserving of government assistance. The worthiness and deservingness of the poor is largely shaped by the politics of race, gender, and class, with white middle class widows seen as the least at fault and the most deserving of government assistance, while poor African American single mothers are the most at fault and the least deserving of our help. We still live with these inaccurate, racist, sexist and classist views of poverty and the legacies of these welfare debates today.

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