

What is Welfare Policy?

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Responses to poverty are designed to perform a number of social purposes. We tend to focus on the practical, social control, regulatory interests of the state – maintain industrial discipline, relieve misery, or, when necessary, quell disorder. But welfare programs perform other functions as well. They define values and confirm status; they are expressive and symbolic. The distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor is a moral issue; it affirms the values of the dominant society by stigmatizing the outcasts.² Poverty is a social problem. Conditions become social problems, they enter political language not because they suddenly materialize or change in character; usually they have always been present. Rather, conditions become social problems for ideological purposes. Social problems are constructed. They serve the interests of those who define the social problem. “They signify who are virtuous and useful and who are dangerous or inadequate, which actions will be rewarded and which penalized.”³ The ascribed meaning to events is thus reciprocal; observers construct themselves by constructing Others.⁴ The definition of problems creates authority and status; it allocates resources and rewards. Explanations rationalize particular actions and justify authority in people who

claim competence in dealing with particular causes; explanations will endure if they comport with dominant ideologies. We construct problems and symbols to further our interests; interests, in turn, may be both symbolic and tangible.

Welfare policy is the interaction of two systems: (1) the institutionalized production of *symbols* whose primary purpose is to affirm the dominant social values of work, family and gender roles, and social status and (2) *regulation* reflecting the structural demands of the political economy, federalism, and bureaucracy. Both systems are ambiguous and contradictory internally and as they interact with each other over the construction and implementation of poverty policy.

I. The Institutionalized Production of Symbols

What are the interests served by poverty policy? Why does society care about poverty?

Industrial Discipline

The "problem of poverty" has been, and is today, defined primarily in terms of the moral values of work. The most consistent, animating part of welfare policy is the desire to preserve the supply of labor at the bottom. This is the principle of "less eligible": the conditions of relief have to be made less desirable than the conditions of the lowest paid work.⁵ The idea was to make sure that those who could work would not choose welfare. Those who fail to support themselves or their families through work are morally deviant. Stigmatizing those who fail to conform affirms the moral worth of those who do.

The failure to support oneself and one's family through paid labor is constructed in terms of two basic principles. Productive work is an *individual* responsibility. With rare exceptions (for example, the 1930s Depression), blame for the failure to find an adequate job is placed on the individual. Moreover, this failure is considered to be a *moral* failure. Those who fail to work, without a socially-approved excuse in socially-approved jobs, are condemned.

The very categorization of the poor reflects these moral attitudes. In the nineteenth century, when states created institutions for the blind and the deaf, they rejected means tests on the grounds that they were “certificates of pauperism.”⁶ Veterans pensions were administered by separate agencies to distinguish these worthy beneficiaries from the paupers. The poorhouses created many offenses against the poor – the separation of families, forced labor, terrible living conditions – but one of the most salient offenses was the deprivation of liberty; this was the ultimate denial of citizenship, and a great rallying cry for the poorhouse foes.⁷ Forced menial labor for relief recipients is not cost effective; it is justified on deterrence grounds. One of the major issues in the New Deal work programs was the means test. The reformers wanted to avoid the stigma of relief; capitalists insisted that the test be used. Humiliation is a conscious creation of relief policy.

Conversely, when work is not at issue, the symbols of welfare are deliberately designed to avoid the relief stigma. The most common symbol is the absence of a means test, or a simplified, non-intrusive one. Instead, support is granted on some form of social contract theory. Thus, the proponents of an expanded Old-Age Assistance program for the dependent aged tried to abolish the means test, or scale it back, and establish a flat-grant system called a “pension.” The paradigm program, of course, is Social Security (OASI). Despite the fact that its insurance features are attenuated, there is no means test at all, and the program has always been sold on the basis of “insurance” and “contributions.” The deliberate attempt has always been to distinguish Social Security beneficiaries from the dependent poor.

Throughout the long history of welfare policy, it has proved to be difficult to administer relief that would relieve misery but not undermine the moral value of work. Relief would be given *only* to those who would not thereby be encouraged to become permanently dependent. This decision involved not only a determination as to the *reasons* for poverty, but also a prediction as to the likely effects of relieving poverty. The campaign to abolish outdoor relief in favor of the poorhouse was justified on the ground that the difficulty in deciding between the deserving and undeserving applicant at the local level was contributing to the spread of pauperism. The poorhouse was a simplified means test; because conditions were so awful, the act of relief, itself, became the test of necessity.⁸

The example of the poorhouse illustrates a third part of the ideological construction on labor discipline. In addition to individual, moral responsibility, administration was through the use of *hostages*.⁹ Despite the fact that throughout most of welfare history, only the truly desperate received help – the aged, the disabled, widows, and small children – the conditions of their relief were deliberately miserable to deter the able-bodied from seeking relief. The poorhouse, the stone pile, and the wood yard were “pauper” labor, as distinguished from market labor, to stigmatize the former. The truly desperate served as symbolic supports for the liberal capitalist order.

Categorization – whether “deserving” or “undeserving” – can be either conclusive or presumptive. Workers in covered employment for a specified period who reach age 65 are legislatively declared to be deserving.¹⁰ Conversely, the able-bodied are presumptively in the labor market and they are not to be given relief for the asking. The category is presumptively “undeserving” or “unworthy” of public relief. This is not to say that *all* persons within the class are to be denied – as we shall see, the relief of misery is also a goal of welfare policy – but welfare administrators have to pick and choose carefully as to who would be helped, how much, and under what conditions. The selection process itself is the production of symbols. Dominant values are affirmed by those included as well as those excluded. In the pre-New Deal period, the dependent aged who were helped, affirmed the values of work, thrift, family responsibility, and racial superiority. In the Mothers Pension programs, despite the breadth of the early statutes, only white widows were admitted; excluded were blacks, and mothers who were divorced, deserted, and never married.¹¹

The structure of specific social welfare programs reflect moral attitudes towards the category of poor to be served. Deserving poor programs are *inclusive*; they reach out and try to bring in members of the category.¹² Social control programs are *exclusive*; they try to enforce social control either by the conditions of relief or by denying entry altogether. In analyzing particular welfare programs, it is important to look at the *category* of potential clientele and to determine who is excluded as well as who is included. We note the difference between General Relief, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and Unemployment Insurance (UI), on the one hand, and OASI and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) on the other. General

Relief is exclusive; it is considered the major line of defense, the principal enforcer of industrial discipline when confronted by its category of potential applicants – historically, the able-bodied male; today, the stereotype is the black, urban male. UI is also selective. Benefits are quite limited as to both amount and duration, and the majority of the unemployed, for a variety of reasons, are excluded. AFDC, until the 1960s, was also very exclusive. Since the 1960s, AFDC has largely lost the power to exclude; but, as I shall argue shortly, this does not mean that AFDC has become a deserving poor program. Instead, the program is adopting more social control characteristics to reflect the influx of deviant clients.

Who is *excluded* from particular programs, and why, tell us a great deal about social attitudes towards various categories of the poor.¹³ Failure to focus on the category (the excluded as well as the included) has led to a major misinterpretation of what our social attitudes toward the female-headed household in poverty have been and are today. The Mothers Pension program did not represent a major change in policy towards the poor single mother since the vast majority of them were excluded. The Mothers Pension program was a gesture only; it salved the conscience of some reformers, but, in practice, affirmed dominant attitudes towards this class of the poor. White widows were defined in terms of the Other – the excluded single mothers; the latter were still part of the paid labor force.

Family and Gender Roles

Central to the analysis of welfare policy is the position of women in the paid labor force and the implications of that position for the ideologies of family policy and child rearing. Three major themes interact. There is, first, the overarching policy of industrial discipline. Second, there is the role of women – singles, wives, and mothers – in the industrial order in light of the “domestic code.” And, third, there is the theme of child-rearing. Labor discipline forced poor mothers to work by restricting relief. Patriarchy and the domestic code condemned them for working. Child-protection declared them socially deviant and threatened to take away their children.

The family is pivotal in regulating sexual relations and procreation, in socializing children to adult roles, and in defining adult gender roles especially in relation to the labor market. Welfare

policy is family policy because it defines what is a "deviant" family; it sanctions "inappropriate" adult gender and work roles; it penalizes "undesirable" sexual relations, and it regulates the family's responsibilities to its children. By constructing welfare recipients as "deviant" families, the state symbolically institutionalizes the image of the "good" family to the non-poor and the poor alike.

The domestic code – the ideological construction of "proper" gender roles – sharpened class, gender, race, and ethnic lines. In practical terms, the domestic code applied only to the middle and upper classes. It complemented capitalism and was seen as a symbol, a desired end and reward to those who worked hard and played by the rules. The symbolism of the domestic code was "shored up" precisely because lower-class women, women of color, and immigrants had to work. Wage-working women became the negative symbol, selfish and neglectful of their families. Of course, those in extreme poverty had to work – free blacks, immigrants, and widows; the domestic code considered them all but outcasts.¹⁴

Thus, poor mothers were caught in a central contradiction. Capitalists, largely indifferent to the ideology of the domestic code as far as the lower social orders were concerned, considered poor women to be part of the paid labor force. The interests of capitalists were to maintain industrial discipline and low taxes. At the same time, poor mothers were declared deviant because they violated the domestic code. They were stigmatized because they had to work and because of the kind of work that they had to do.

The central contradictions facing poor women were always manifest in the rhetoric of the aid to dependent children program. When ADC was first proposed, both the proponents and opponents evoked the image of the traditional, patriarchal family. The proponents argued that men and women belonged in separate spheres; motherhood and the home were privileged, and should not be compromised by paid labor. Mothers' Pensions (the popular term), they said, removed the necessity for paid labor and would thereby reinforce patriarchy and domesticity. The opposition believed that pensions would weaken traditional family ties, the husband's responsibility, and encourage single motherhood. That both sides thought that their respective positions privileged patriarchy should not be surprising. Political events and ideologies like the domestic code are always ambiguous. Each side constructed its own explanation of the social problem and argued for its own solutions. In

addition, it is no accident that most professional social workers, and particularly those involved in child protection would, at least initially, oppose a program that threatened their ideologies.

The deep ambivalence in social attitudes towards motherhood was resolved in familiar terms. In practice, at the field level, the programs were restricted. The “worthy” widows, those who in their race and behavior, affirmed the domestic code would be brought back into majoritarian society. They would still be single, but their home would reflect the separate sphere. They would devote themselves to home management and child rearing. They would be morally excused from work. The value of both the non-working middle-class mother and the worthy widow would be affirmed by those who were denied entry; the unworthy mothers were cast out; they had to rely on degrading labor and male breadwinners. Both morality and local taxpayer costs would be saved.

The Mothers Pension Movement served important symbolic purposes. To whom were the arguments of both the reformers and the opponents addressed, and for what purposes? The importance of women and children in the paid labor force at this time was far from trivial. Brenner and Ramas argue that we should not confuse middle-class reformers with the actual representation of the capitalist class. The latter have always resisted expanding state responsibility for dependents. Enough benefits would be provided to maintain legitimacy and order, but not enough to undercut work incentives.¹⁵ As far as the dominant business interests were concerned, work incentives (restricted eligibility and low benefits) were more important than patriarchy in the lower social classes.¹⁶

The reformers and their opponents were addressing themselves – Protestant, white middle-class – and Others. For themselves, they were defining the norm, the acceptable standards of behavior; and in so doing, they were separating themselves from the Others, those families where the mothers *had* to engage in paid labor, the lower social classes, the deviants. The vast majority of poor mothers and their children remained the socially constructed enemy to be dealt with in the local communities where the contradictions and ambiguities of labor discipline, gender, class, race, and ethnicity had to be sorted out. The Mothers’ Pension Movement was symbolic and expressive; an exercise in status politics. For the vast majority of female-headed households in poverty, nothing had changed.

Similar symbolic gestures periodically occur throughout the history of AFDC. For most of its history – until the 1960s – the

Mothers Pension pattern prevailed; the “degraded to begin with” were excluded and kept in the labor market. When blacks, divorced, separated, and unmarrieds began to enter the program, deviant behavior social controls began to be enforced – “man-in-the-house” rules, “fit and proper homes,” and so forth. In addition to local political campaigns, there were real victims – cases were terminated¹⁷ – but these victims also served larger important symbolic roles. They reminded majoritarian society who welfare recipients were; as black unmarried women came into the program, they had to be re-stigmatized into welfare abusers, spawning generational dependency. Overall, most welfare recipients were not affected by the social control rules – after all, it takes time, energy, and money, commodities always in short supply in welfare administration, to enforce regulatory rules. Those who were victimized fulfilled the hostage role.

A similar analysis applies to the AFDC work programs, including the recently enacted Family Support Act of 1988. They are enacted out of controversy and compromise. The conservatives want to assert labor discipline on those who were formerly considered part of the labor market; the liberals are able to extract promises of education, training, and support services. Each side constructs its view of “the problem” and its solutions. Both positions are gestures. The lack of funding insures that the vast bulk of the welfare population will neither be hurt nor helped by the programs. The language games continue to be played with the Family Support Act and the state workfare programs. California has its GAIN program (Greater Avenues for Independence); Illinois has Project Chance, and so forth.¹⁸ There are provisions for services, training, education and child care; there are also requirements for job search, and, if necessary, work-relief. But early indications suggest that past patterns will re-assert themselves. There will be an initial burst of enrollments and sanctions, and some placements; but, soon funding will be inadequate, recipient employability will be less than thought, and labor market conditions will not be as favorable as anticipated. Most eligible recipients will be placed “on hold”; costs will continue; eventually appropriations will be reduced.

Nevertheless, the new wave of reform will serve important symbolic functions. The presence of these programs, with their attendant publicity of both opportunities and obligations, will serve to remind the public of what is now expected of welfare recipients. Some will

succeed; they will progress with education and training, obtain work, and leave welfare (whether as a result of the program is another matter), but most will fail. As with the worthy widow of the Mothers Pensions days, those who succeed will validate the dominant ideology and condemn the failures. The great bulk of welfare recipients will still be the Other.

Race, Ethnicity, and Class

Throughout our social history, racial discrimination and nativism have served to affirm dominant values, status, and power by defining people of color and immigrants as deviant and degraded. Women of color and immigrants were disproportionately unable to conform to the domestic code. Not only did they have to work, they also had to work in the lowest, most "unfeminine" jobs. They were important economically;¹⁹ but *because* they had to work for wages, they were further victimized.

Race has always had an independent effect on welfare policy. As we have seen, this was particularly true in the South, where, until the post World War II period, most black Americans lived. In the South, blacks were excluded from the polity, from the patriarchal construction of the family, and from welfare. To include blacks in welfare was considered a threat to white Southern hegemony. When programs were enacted in the South, they were deliberately discriminatory.²⁰ Although less obvious and direct, race also has had similar effects on welfare policy outside of the South. As Southern blacks were recruited, often as strike breakers, their fate became inextricably linked to the economies of those industries, and welfare served its regulatory functions.

As part of the dominant social and economic order, welfare policy has served the societal values of racial hostility, discrimination, subordination, and exclusion. For most of welfare history, blacks, regardless of their circumstances and need, were simply excluded from welfare; they were considered the most undeserving poor. Since the 1960s, black single mothers have entered welfare in large numbers; the entry of this undeserving class is producing the increased social control features in the program.

The new racial stigmatization is the term "the underclass."²¹ Loosely defined, it is an umbrella label for a great many of the assorted tragedies of the urban ghettos: crime, drugs, unemploy-

ment, poverty, wretched housing, failed schooling, poor health, and, of course, out-of-wedlock births. Despite the fact that only a very small proportion of blacks live in high-concentration, ghetto neighborhoods and could be considered part of the underclass, however, defined,²² the contemporary stereotype welfare recipient – the young black unmarried mother – is considered to be a major part of “the problem.”²³

The young mother with a very young child is officially targeted as the potential long-term welfare recipient, and state workfare programs are required to give priority to this group. This is a laudable objective; work and training programs are potentially far more efficient with those recipients least likely to get off of welfare on their own.²⁴ There is no doubt that much help is needed – the prospects for independence for these mothers and their children is indeed dim.²⁵ But it is also true that this group is the most difficult to work with; they lack education, skills, and work experience; it is hard to motivate teenagers; and, because of the very young children, programs for teenagers are the most expensive. If past experience is any guide, field-level agencies will find ways of deferring this group. The young black welfare mother will continue to be the hostage.

Threats to the Social Order: Collective Protest

Throughout history, the poor have posed threats to the social order. Threats can be violent or insidious, real or imagined. Food riots, crop burnings, rent strikes, rural and urban riots and rebellions occur periodically; while there has been no satisfactory theory predicting violent collective behavior by the poor,²⁶ there is little doubt about their frequency and their impact on organized society. Responses to mass disorder varies; sometimes the poor are brutally repressed; at other times, demands are met, at least in part. Overt, collective protest by the poor produces public responses; but whether liberal or repressive is not predictable by the fact of protest alone. The most that can be said is that from time to time, poverty policy does respond to quell social disorder.²⁷

Threats to the social order need not, of course, be overt, public, massive, collective acts. Indeed, much of poverty policy, is driven by the beliefs that the poor pose silent, insidious threats to dominant ideologies and social order. The poor have always been considered a

major threat to the economic order, even when they are truly powerless. Today, it is the underclass.

Charity

Running counter to the efforts to frighten and punish the poor, is, of course, the charitable impulse, the moral injunction to help the poor and the stranger. This tradition remains a powerful force under liberal capitalism if for no other reason than relief of the poor serves to legitimize the state. At various times, the charitable impulse seems to become overwhelmed by other forces, but it is never completely silent. During periods of our most stringent, harsh, regulatory, social control policies, the full rigor of the state would often be blunted by the desire of local people to help their unfortunate neighbors.

I tend to think that the liberal or charitable interpretation of welfare history is exaggerated; but I don't mean to make the opposite mistake. The charitable impulse is enduring. At times, it predominates, and liberal, generous programs are enacted, at least for some of the poor. But even when the liberal impulse seems to be overwhelmed, quite often there is enough strength to create bargains or compromise either at the policy level or at the local level.²⁸

Nevertheless, while specific acts of charity provide real benefits to some, charity is, by and large, a gesture. It does little to relieve poverty; at the same time, it confirms the status of the donor and the recipient.

II. The System of Social Regulation

The production of symbols is one thing; the actual separation of the worthy from the unworthy poor is quite another matter. Welfare policy deals with the lives of people in concrete settings, and it is in concrete settings that competing and contradictory policies get sorted out.

Welfare is a system of social regulation embedded in three larger systems: the political economy; federalism; and bureaucracy. Each of these systems shapes welfare and each other. The symbolic ambiguities become resolved and unresolved in each of the systems.

The Political Economy

The general level of the economy, both nationally and in the states, affects welfare allocations. In general, wealthier states have more generous programs than poorer states despite greater need in the latter. With rare exceptions, tough times lead to tough welfare policies. There are, of course, differences in public support for social welfare expenditures depending on the "deservingness" of the client population and the form of the social benefit. Income maintenance for the undeserving poor is peculiarly vulnerable to the economic health of the states and the Federal Government.

At the micro-level, welfare policy is driven by the economics of labor and gender, specifically those policies and institutions that determine the demand and supply of low wage labor among men and women, the division of labor among men and women, and the distribution of income along race and gender lines. The changing structure of low wage industries alters the demand for cheap labor among men and women, their employability, and the distribution of income among them.

As we have seen, there have been significant changes in female labor force participation, but between the 1830s until the 1960s, women were actively discouraged from paid labor. In the South, the economy was based on the subordination and impoverishment of rural blacks through the tenant farm system. As discussed, Southern race discrimination and economic subordination had an enormous impact on restricting the development of the American social welfare state at the national level during the Depression and the immediate post World War II period.²⁹

In the North, persistent patterns of discrimination condemned blacks to low-wage jobs and poverty. The role of welfare was to reinforce race and gender prejudice and the segmented labor force. Industrial discipline and the subordination of blacks and women was reinforced through a restrictive AFDC program, the exclusion of agricultural and most service workers, most women and their children, and most of the able-bodied.

The political economy changed significantly starting in the 1960s. Civil rights, Southern politics, and industrialization radically changed Southern society. Blacks voted, the South lost its veto power in Congress, and poor Southern blacks now became a poverty problem in the urbanizing South. Southern political and business leaders became much more receptive to the expansion of welfare. In

the North, civil rights, legal rights, and urban riots and other forms of mass protest led to a significant expansion of welfare.³⁰ Massive numbers of women, including mothers of young children, entered the paid labor force; today, a majority of women work for wages. At the same time, there was also been a dramatic increase in the percentage of the poor living in female-headed households. For a variety of reasons, primarily the deteriorating labor market conditions for both men and women, women and children now comprise the largest number of poor in the United States.³¹ Among whites, the entry of women in the labor force as many industries have become more "female" is associated with marital dissolution and the rise in female-headed households. Yet, because of wage discrimination and structural limitations on full-time employment by women, they are more likely to be poor, even if employed, or dependent on welfare. Blacks, even more than whites, are experiencing the rise of the female-headed household; they are even more dependent on welfare because of the added factor of race.

These contradictory directions in the economy are reflected in the contradictory paths of welfare development. As previously discussed, a series of moves reflected generosity. Programs for the aged and the disabled expanded significantly. In AFDC, rolls expanded and benefits rose. The welfare poor, along with many other deprived groups, benefited from the legal rights movement. Other, later moves, were restrictive. AFDC benefits levels were frozen, and, as a result of inflation, real benefits declined. Stricter accountability rules and increased bureaucratization were imposed, resulting in greater sanctions against recipients. Work requirements were strengthened in all the means-tested programs: disability, AFDC, Food Stamps, and General Relief. In sum, as poverty increased, the programs reflected greater efforts at industrial discipline and social control.

Federalism and State Discretion

The allocation of jurisdictional responsibility has always figured prominently in welfare history. In the earliest days, in medieval England, relief of the poor was a local responsibility. Local authorities decided who were "strangers," who was deserving, how much support, and under what conditions; settlement and removal were part of the system of labor regulation.

In the United States, the allocation of authority between governments continues to serve important regulatory functions. In general, when issues of industrial discipline and social control are present, programs tend to be more locally administered. Conversely, when consensus forms on deserving poor status, programs tend to be federally administered. An expanded federal Social Security system and Old-Age Assistance program developed when agreement was reached on a retirement age.

When programs are ambiguous and contradictory, local administrative officials respond to the needs and exigencies of the local economy and the community's definition of morality. State and local political economies vary considerably from each other; some are highly industrialized and unionized resulting in more progressive welfare policies; others are more dependent on agriculture or single industries and suffer more from economic swings than diversified economies. Welfare programs reflect these economic differences. General Relief is different in West Virginia than New York.

State economies also influence patterns of migration and immigration which bear on the supply of low wage labor. Historically, welfare policies have been used to regulate this flow through residency requirements, benefit levels, and work requirements either to discourage the in-flow of low wage and potentially dependent populations or to attract industry on the basis of the availability of cheap labor and low taxes. Residency requirements are now illegal, but welfare benefits, work requirements, and low taxes remain important instruments of policy.³²

As stated, industrial discipline is never an unambiguous policy. In day-to-day operations, difficult judgments have to be made in individual cases. There are conflicting demands of generosity. Communities differ on the moral assessment of the poor and in their attitudes towards race and gender. Economic and political pluralism allows these conflicts to be fought out at the local level. This is an effective strategy for sharply contested issues. Local elites want to retain control over their labor supply; communities want to retain control over their social victims. At the same time, national leaders find it in their interests to delegate conflicts to low-visibility state and local decisionmakers. Delegation and diffusion of hot issues serves both levels of government; it is an effective strategy to manage federalism.

While states want autonomy in administering welfare, they also want to shift the burden of welfare costs to the federal government.

Hence, in shaping welfare policy, states and local governments act as important interest groups. States with high welfare expenditures push to shift the burden to the federal government, while states with low welfare expenditures resist federal efforts to impose uniform standards. Because of the categorization of programs, cutbacks at higher-level programs (e.g., disability, Medicare) will result in increased state expenditures; cutbacks in state-funded programs (e.g., Medicaid, AFDC) will increase local expenditures. Thus, federalism creates governmental pressure groups resisting cutbacks.

The Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy of welfare plays an active role in shaping the operational characteristics of welfare policy. It determines which recipients will be admitted to the programs, under what conditions, and who will be sanctioned.³³ The contradictions of the symbolic and regulatory systems, for the most part, are delegated to the bureaucracy; it is the field-level staff that confronts the vague, ambiguous, and contradictory commands in the law, in competing systems, and the local political culture. Clients have to be processed, money allocated, and real and symbolic demands reconciled.

The welfare bureaucracy, as is true of all public bureaucracies, seeks to manage its environment to enhance its self-maintenance, conserve its resources, and maintain legitimacy. The bureaucracy does this by developing structures and processes which conform to the prevailing symbols of welfare, while partially decoupling the actual administration. Welfare recipients are processed through a strategy that manages bureaucratic relations with the political and economic environment.³⁴ A prime example of this strategy is the experience of the work programs; through creaming and deferring, the agency decouples administration from political demands and maintains legitimacy. Welfare bureaucracies, national, state, and local, represent important interest groups that influence the formulation and reformulation of welfare policies. By imposing a test of what is "do-able" from their perspective (i.e., what will enhance their own interests), they advocate certain welfare policies. Especially, they strive to increase their autonomy and discretion in administering welfare.

III. Contradiction, Resolution, and Ambiguity

The major symbolic and regulatory systems interact in contradiction and ambiguity. The relief of misery is contradicted by the need to maintain industrial discipline. Individual, moral responsibility for work confronts the opposing attribution of blamelessness. The patriarchal domestic code is compromised by the need for capitalists for cheap labor and the need of poor wives, mothers, and children to earn income. Racial and ethnic discrimination, and its special form of industrial discipline, conflict with the charitable impulse and the domestic code.

Throughout welfare history, the symbolic contradictions and ambiguities reach different, but temporary, resolutions. The most persistent attempt at resolution is the effort to distinguish the "deserving" from the "undeserving" poor. The deserving poor possess attributes which could readily justify public protection and care without challenging dominant cultural, economic, and political norms. The undeserving poor are those whose behavior and attributes challenge such norms. Much of the history of public relief and welfare can be seen as cyclical attempts to draw boundaries between the "worthy" poor and the pauper. These boundaries are re-drawn as the social conditions producing poverty, and the number and characteristics of the poor change. Yet, there is a paramount need to maintain the deserving/undeserving distinction in order to preserve labor markets, punish fault, but show compassion for the blameless.

Thus, the evolution of welfare policy has been, in large part, the process of creating and revising the moral classifications of the poor. Twentieth century United States has evolved a complex classification of the poor ranging from the disabled, blind, and elderly, who are deserving in that they are morally excused from work, to female heads of household, who, if their children are over the age of five, are considered able-bodied and are required to work.³⁵ Non-working singles, mostly males, mostly black, are the "true paupers"; if they can get relief, it is usually only for a short term and they must work. Most often, they are simply excluded.

There are two symbolic themes running throughout the deserving/undeserving poor distinction. Those who are deserving are morally excused from work; for this group, moral ambiguity has been resolved; generosity is not constrained by the need for

industrial discipline, patriarchy, and child rearing. However, until recently, generosity, even for this group, was severely constrained by race discrimination. While overt racism has been largely eliminated in the actual administration of the programs that serve these groups, the effects of *societal* racism are still present – for example, blacks are disproportionately underrepresented in the Social Security system.

The undeserving are not morally excused from work, and it is with this diverse group, that the contradictions and ambiguities are manifest. Here, one finds the clash between the symbols of work, responsibility, proper family and personal behavior, and generosity. The classic approach is deterrence. By making the conditions of relief sufficiently onerous for the “truly” needy, the able-bodied will be deterred from choosing welfare over work. The destitute poor become the hostages. Stiff work requirements for outdoor relief – the stone pile or the wood yard in a prior age, trash collection in our age – serve this purpose.

While enforcing the work ethic is central, social control over family relations is also enforced. The nineteenth century child protectors claimed that “poverty alone” never led to the breakup of a family, but poverty was never alone.³⁶ “Bad” child-rearing, sexual relations, and divorce justified state intervention. Welfare policies enforced these codes. Blacks and immigrants suffered from dominant society stereotypes.

Yet, the symbolic resolutions always proved temporary. There was the demand for low-wage labor. Capitalists didn’t care about patriarchy or the domestic code or proper child-rearing and necessity drove women, mothers, and children into the labor market. Blacks, other minorities, and women remained in poverty. The presence of large masses of unemployed (the Depression) conflicted with the ideology of fault and moral responsibility. Social control theories also changed. The removal of children from “bad” homes gave way to supporting children in “proper” homes. Value positions on marriage, divorce, and gender roles have changed. The civil rights movement has changed patterns of discrimination. In short, the larger ideological, symbolic order is complex, ambiguous, and in flux. Welfare policy is part of this order. It reflects the symbols of the larger order and, in turn, constructs its own subset of contradictory symbols.

While policies, as interpreted and applied, are often diverse, contradictory, and ambiguous, the *name*, as Murray Edelman tells

us, is something different. The name allows us to ignore the inconsistencies and ambiguities; the name reassures us that there is agreement on the dominant ideology and that change has come about; the name masks hesitations and contradictory actions that minimize or cancel accomplishment.³⁷ This was true with the name "Mothers Pension." Despite the fact that more than four-fifths of the state statutes never used that term, and instead, reflecting the child protection basis of the reform, referred to the programs as "aid to dependent children" or "aid to mothers of dependent children,"³⁸ the name of the reform effort was "mothers' pensions." The name signified accomplishment for the reformers and their allies. But the nationwide campaign had been won for them alone; local administrators made sure that the vast bulk of single mothers in poverty were not to be removed from the labor force. So, too, with workmen's "insurance" and Unemployment Insurance both of which were hardly insurance then or now. So, too, today with the Family Support Act of 1988, and the various names given to the required work programs. These, too, are gestures, designed to affirm the modern, contemporary, middle-class employed mother by insuring the failure and moral condemnation of the welfare mother.

Notes

- 1 This article is part of a larger work, "Constructing the Political Spectacle": The Interpretation of Entitlements, Legalization, and Obligations in Social Welfare History", to be published in the *Brooklyn Law Review* (1990).
- 2 Edelman, Murray, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Univ. Chicago Press, 1988).
- 3 Edelman, *supra*, p.12.
- 4 "In an important sense, language constructs the people who use it rather than the commonsensical assumption that people construct the language they use." Edelman, *supra*, p.112.
- 5 Katz, Michael, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (Basic Books, 1986), p.333.
- 6 State Board of Control, *A History of the State Board of Wisconsin and the State Institutions 1849-1939*, at 77 (1939). See Joel Handler, & Ellen Jane Hollingsworth, *The "Deserving Poor": A Study of Welfare Administration* (Academic Press 1971), p.18.
- 7 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (Random House, 1983).
- 8 Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, *supra*.
- 9 Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, *supra*.
- 10 Social Security is not an absolute right, *Fleming v. Nestor*, 363 U.S. 603 (1960), but, for our purposes, it is about as close as one can get in the United States.

- 11 The original statutes included almost all single mothers (only some included unmarrieds) and left it to the local administrators (for the most part, juvenile court judges) to decide who among the *potential* category was worthy. Irwin Garfinkel & Sara McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children* (Urban Institute, 1986), p. 99; Joel Handler & Yeheskel Hasenfeld, *The Impoverishment of Welfare Reform* (forthcoming).
- 12 For example, there has always been a problem of take-up rate in Supplemental Security Income for the dependent aged. The fact that this is recognized as a "problem" and efforts have been made to do something about it demonstrates the character of the program.
- 13 Almost two-thirds of households in poverty receive no cash assistance at all; over 40 percent do not receive any means-tested benefits.
- 14 Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (1982), pp.70-71.
- 15 Brenner, Johanna & Ramos, "Rethinking Women's Oppression", 144 *New Left Rev.* 67 (1984); Jill Quadagno, *The Transformation of Old Age Security: Class and Politics in the American Welfare State* (Univ.Chicago Press, 1988).
- 16 Piven & Cloward, "Welfare Doesn't Shore Up Traditional Family Roles: A Reply to Linda Gordon", 55 *Social Research* 631, 639 1988.
- 17 Governor Jimmy Davis of Louisiana campaigned on terminating AFDC benefits for all mothers who conceived while on the program. He was elected and carried out the campaign promise; over 20,000 cases were closed. Winifred Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children* (Colum.U.Press, 1965).
- 18 For a description of GAIN and Project Chance, see Joel Handler, "The Transformation of Aid to Families with Dependent Children: The Family Support Act in Historical Context", 16 *N.Y.U.Rev. of Law & Social Change* (1987-88), pp.494-99; 518-19.
- 19 Kessler-Harris, *supra*
- 20 Old-age benefits for blacks were lower than for whites. Quadagno, *supra*. In aid to dependent children programs, blacks were subject to far more social control rules, including forced agricultural work. Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (1988); Bell, *supra*.
- 21 Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (Pantheon, 1989), c.5.
- 22 David Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (Harvard, 1988).
- 23 Consider, for example, the Bill Moyers' CBS documentary, *The Vanishing Family*.
- 24 Isabel Sawhill, "Poverty in the U.S.: Why Is It So Persistent?", 26 *J. of Economic Literature* 1073 (1988).
- 25 Garfinkel & McLanahan, *supra*
- 26 Frances Piven & Richard Cloward, *Normalizing Collective Protest* (ms, 1989)
- 27 Piven & Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (Pantheon 1977)
- 28 A contemporary example is the liberal bargain to include child care, education, training, and health benefits in the current welfare reform. An historical example was the mitigation of the harsh poorhouse reforms at the local level. Himmelfarb, *supra*.
- 29 Quadagno, *supra*
- 30 Piven & Cloward, *Poor People's Movements, supra*.
- 31 Bane, Mary Jo, "Household Composition and Poverty," in Danziger, Sheldon & Daniel Weinberg, *Fighting Poverty* (Harvard U. Press 1986)

- 32 Peterson, Paul & Mark Rom, "American Federalism, Welfare Policy, and Residential Choices", 83 *Am.Pol.Sci.Rev.*711 (1989)
- 33 Yeheskel Hasenfeld, *Human Services Organizations* (Prentice-Hall, 1983); Michael Lipsky, "Bureaucratic Disentitlement in Social Welfare Programs", 58 *Soc.Serv.Rev.* 3 (1984).
- 34 Hasenfeld, *supra*
- 35 Roughly half the states acknowledge needy two-parent families as deserving, but one of the parents, typically the father, is required to register for work.
- 36 Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives* (1988).
- 37 Edelman, *supra*, p.16
- 38 The statutes are listed in U.S.Department of Labor, Children's Bureau (1934), Chart No.3