American Ways of Welfare
After Welfare: The Culture of Postindustrial Social Policy by Sanford Schram; Ending Welfare as We Know It by R. Kent Weaver; Fighting Poverty with Virtue: Moral Reform and America’s Urban Poor, 1825-2000 by Joel Schwartz; From Warfare State to Welfare State: World War I, Compensatory State Building, and the Limits of the Modern Order by Marc Allen Eisner; The Shadow Welfare State: Labor, Business and the Politics of Heal ...
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American Ways of Welfare

By James A. Morone


Every afternoon after work, a group of men gather at the old gas station in rural East Lempster, New Hampshire. They sit around the hydraulic lifts, smoking and talking. Their discussions regularly turn to the lazy welfare cheats living in trailers around town. “How are children going to grow up,” they ask one another, “if they’ve never seen their parents go to work?” Contempt for the welfare class often mixes with complaints about the wealthy. The men believe that “flattlanders” in the cities earn easy money; hard-working rural folks do not get the same chances. The conversations swing, back and forth, between welfare bashing and a kind of yeoman populism. In many ways the seven books listed above—in fact, the endless American welfare debates—speak directly to the ball sessions in the East Lempster garage.

Few issues agitate American politics quite like welfare. Like the men in the garage, policy analysts begin with images of poor people: Who are they? Why are they poor? Different answers—they are lazy cheaters, they are welfare queens, they are good neighbors who fell on hard times—point toward completely different kinds of welfare states.

The spinning images rest on deeper questions about who gets what. Is the political economy fair? Do talent and hard work yield the American dream? Or is the system somehow rigged? Henry Ward Beecher, a celebrated nineteenth-century American preacher, offered one classic answer: “No man in this land suffers from poverty unless it be more than his fault—unless it be his sin. If men have not enough it is from want of provident care, and foresight, and industry and frugality.” From this perspective, American bounty offers riches for anyone with a strong back and bit of pluck. Poverty means laziness or lack of talent. Beecher’s unflinching standard appears to foretell American neoliberalism: relentless market capitalism, a hesitant welfare state, and more inequality than any other industrial nation. Here is a regime with enormous per capita income (only Luxembourge’s and Brunei’s are slightly higher) where almost one in five children lives in poverty—two in five among black children. However, Beecher’s heirs make no apologies. An elaborate moral iconography holds tightfisted welfare policies in place: poor people still suffer from sloth, extravagance, even sin. Joel Schwartz offers a deft contemporary summary of this view in Fighting Poverty with Virtue—the title summarizes the argument. Proponents of this view proudly call themselves new Victorians and challenge poor people to save themselves.
On the other end of the political continuum, progressives shift the blame from the poor to the powerful. The system and those who profit from it are responsible for poverty. “The practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men,” declared Franklin Roosevelt in his first inaugural presidential address. Our “deepest destiny,” he said, lay in “minister[ing] . . . to our fellow man.” This perspective emphasizes communal responsibility. If poor people misbehave, it is because poverty, hunger, racism, sexism, tough times, or bad luck pushes good people into hard corners—into crime, broken marriages, or addiction. Rather than redeem the individual, argue those in this camp, we should reform the political economy. What the poor need is more help and a better chance. Benjamin Page and James Simmons forcefully articulate the progressive position in What Government Can Do. The same view animates the books by Sanford Schram and Joe Soss. This perspective, like the Victorians, once had religious roots and took a strong moral tone. While that remains true in the black community, most progressive analysis has turned distinctly secular in the past 30 years.

The clashing cultural arguments—with their contrasting pictures of poverty—have framed the social welfare debate for more than a century. Today, however, a growing literature examines how political institutions silently shape the raucous arguments and contested policies. The institutional analyses show how past decisions define current choices, how organizational interests drive policy coalitions. The books by Marie Gottschalk and Marc Eissner each draw bold conclusions about the rise of the welfare state, the biases that got organized into it, and the limits that those biases impose on policy makers.

The analysis of shadowy institutional dynamics may seem to share little in common with strident cultural arguments about poor people. Yet both approaches end with the same conclusion about American politics. Every book on this list offers a different explanation for why American politics privileges the market winners. They all show us just how Americans make it difficult to overrule the market—even in the name of equality and social justice. The books differ radically, however, on why this is so and what should be done about it.

Two events loom over contemporary welfare discourse: the victory of welfare reform (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) and the failure of health care reform (in 1993–1994). To most observers, the former was politically astonishing, the latter perfectly predictable; that’s because the entire system seems deeply biased against big changes. When Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (a 25-year veteran of the welfare wars) greeted David Ellwood (a chairman of President Bill Clinton’s welfare task force), the senator cracked, “So, you’ve come to do welfare reform. . . . I’ll look forward to reading your book about why it failed this time.” Of course, it did not fail this time. Congressional Republicans and the Clinton administration collaborated to raze a pillar of the New Deal.

Still, a close reading of American welfare policy suggests something subtler than endless stalemate punctuated by startling changes. The books reviewed here stretch from World War I to the end of the Clinton administration. There is not a decade in that span that did not witness important and controversial developments in the politics of rich and poor. Change—often subtle, occasionally dramatic—is far less unusual than Senator Moynihan lets on.

What does not change is the pyrotechnic politics. These debates go a lot deeper than efficient income distributions. They are about virtue and vice, about deserving and undeserving people. Every argument for redistribution starts with images of community, shared interest, and mutual obligation. Every Victorian tough-love rejoinder conjures up a very different American us-versus-them. A protoan nation, founded with a vivid race line and formed from endless generations of immigrants, constantly redefines the good community. The consequences for welfare politics are enormous—we share among us, we control and discipline them.

Culture Wars

Americans connected wealth and virtue right from the start. The Puritans read prosperity and poverty as divine hints about salvation and perdition. Abraham Lincoln celebrated a free labor system that permitted “industrious and sober and honest” men to rise and prosper; his colleagues drew the harsher implications when they told the poor they had only themselves to blame. And Ted Turner spoke for the most recent generation of go-getters with his infamous quip: “Money is how we keep score in life.”

Joel Schwartz summarizes the contemporary variations on the theme. Poverty is not so much an economic condition as a moral problem. Poor people’s troubles, he argues, come from drug abuse, crime, broken families, and a weak work ethic. These are all problems of self-control or, quoting James Q. Wilson, “defects in character-formation” (218). From this neo-Victorian perspective, the old medicine is best. Moral reform, argues Schwartz, is the great American antipoverty prescription. We can “make the...
poor less poor by making them more virtuous” (xv). Even the poorest people might enjoy middle-class prosperity if they learn the middle-class virtues—diligence, sobriety, thrift, and family responsibility. Those virtues should be our first answers to poverty, welfare, and crime.

Schwartz approvingly describes recent developments in welfare policy. Shelters for the homeless require their residents to swear off violence, cursing, substance abuse, sex, and dirt (they must bathe daily and keep a neat appearance); welfare programs compel recipients to work for their benefits. Public policy ought to promote virtue, sums up Schwartz, either by standing paternalistically over the poor (as Lawrence Mead argues) or by reshaping the incentives before them (as a long line of conservatives suggests).

*Fighting Poverty with Virtue* is a deft synthesis of the formidable Victorian revival in welfare policy. Schwartz draws together the literature and presents it softly, hushing the angrier jeremiads. He sees the other side—poverty has both moral and structural roots. He acknowledges limits to virtue policies.5

Schwartz places the contemporary conservatives in historical context (his major original contribution). He sums up American welfare history as a three-act play: “In Act One, we practiced moral reform; in Act Two we stopped doing so; in Act Three...we are returning to that once-rejected practice” (xiv). What happened during that second act? Schwartz describes a great false turn in American social thought. At the end of the nineteenth century, an alternative view of wealth and poverty gained currency. Promoted by theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch and activists like Jane Addams, the social gospel attacked the economics of self-interest. Social reformers stopped blaming poor people and began condemning the wealthy; they called on the powerful to answer for the suffering of the poor and powerless.

Schwartz joins a long conservative tradition when he attacks Rauschenbusch and the social gospel. They spawned a “universalistic and unconditional charity without challenge,” writes Schwartz (quoting Marvin Olasky); “they made no moral demands upon the poor” (103).

Schwartz has written an outstanding, well-balanced statement of a popular perspective. But both he and contemporary conservatives overstate their claim to the moral high ground. Americans did not “stop” practicing moral politics. Rather, policy makers partially adopted the competing moral paradigm.

As Schwartz notes, Rauschenbusch wrote the seminal statement of that alternative morality in 1907: “During the great industrial crisis of the 1890s, I could hear virtue cracking and crumbling all around.” Don’t blame the poor for our social problems, insisted Rauschenbusch; instead, blame “the competitive system” and “the industrial machine.” As for the Victorians’ bourgeois virtues, Rauschenbusch insisted that the Old Testament prophets focused their wrath on “injustice and oppression,” not little vices like sex or drinking. Addams told the same story through the eyes of poor women struggling to support their families on miserable wages. Hard circumstances, cold neighbors and cruel employers pushed them to drink or to prostitute themselves. The social gospel saw poor people’s sins as ways to cope. Real virtue lay in lending them a hand and constructing a just social order.6

A more careful history of twentieth-century welfare reform would picture something more complicated than a simple three-act drama. Rather, competing moral visions struggled for control of social welfare policy. The social gospel developed, gathered support, and often dominated American social welfare policy in the middle third of the twentieth century. Roosevelt often drew on it. On the campaign trail in 1932, he preached a “Sunday sermon” (as he called it) attacking the “jungle law of competition” and the “unbrotherly...distribution of wealth.” He declared “the causes of poverty...beyond the control of any individual” and spun poor people into hardworking neighbors who had fallen on hard times. Others would echo and expand (as well as deny and refute) Roosevelt’s rhetoric about wealth and poverty.7

Still, Joel Schwartz is right about the contemporary discourse. “Act Three” pushes aside collective ideas and restores the traditional virtues. Today, policy makers show no patience for blaming “the system.” Sex? Drinking? Drugs? Stop whining about underprivilege or exploitation, and just say no! Restoring the Victorian moral assumptions sponsored a deep revision in public policies toward the poor; the results include, among other things, the welfare reforms of 1996 (which Schwartz describes) and a ferocious crime war (beginning in the mid-1980s).

Although virtue arguments have become the reigning orthodoxy, the counterarguments are alive and well. The most vehemence, refute, among these books, comes from Sanford Schram’s collection of essays *After Welfare*. Schram charges conservatives with seizing on narratives of virtue and metaphors of irresponsibility (“welfare queens”) to resist reality. The paternalists enlist welfare policy to deny a changing social order marked by persistent poverty, growing inequality, the collapse of the manual labor market, the dissolution of the two-parent family, and the redefinition of gender relations.

The paternalist welfare project, continues Schram, is “part of a postindustrial social policy that denies that economic change is making it increasingly difficult for low-wage workers to support their families” (87–8). Some poor people are irresponsible, he concedes. However, many others have been dealt a hard hand by “abandoned partners, poor job prospects and impoverished neighborhoods.” These are “heroes of their own lives,” trying hard to keep themselves and their families together. Puffed up claims about personal responsibility run roughshod over the “coping practices of people in the real world” (57).

Moreover, writes Schram, conservative reformers press a distinctly male version of personal responsibility on poor people. The right dismisses important roles usually played by women, such as care-giving, raising families, and building communities; rather, conservative reformers (Schram would say ideologues) measure everything against a single standard: breadwinning. And that makes life especially difficult for low-skilled single mothers who must care for their children, develop skills, and find (and hold) a job. Worse, these demands are pushed in the harsh context of an unyielding new economy. “Personal responsibility means little more than participating in the rapidly emerging global sweatshop economy” (47). From this perspective, anodyne promises of moral uplift mask old-fashioned economic repression.

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The problem, as Schram sees it, goes far beyond economics. Gender equality subverts traditional marriage by giving women options. Moreover, the postmodern family is now deeply embedded in the culture; divorce, single mothers (without stigma), and gay couples (exchange vows and raising children) are all features of contemporary society. In Schram’s view, the Defense of Marriage Act (which restricted the states’ ability to authorize same-sex marriages) pursued precisely the same cultural goals as the welfare reform passed during the same congressional session. Each of these efforts “desperately” worked to shore up the crumbling foundations of obsolete family values.

Progressives will find Schram’s essays a bracing response to the assumptions embedded in the assault on the welfare state. However, he does not offer poor people much relief. After Welfare powerfully excavates contemporary political culture, but it does not point to any escape from the neo-Victorian policy hegemony that it so vividly challenges.

Joel Schwartz’s call for individual virtue faces off against Sanford Schram’s defense of diversity and communal obligations. The arguments stand in a long American cultural debate between Victorian morality and the progressive social gospel. In this set of books, Soss, as well as Page and Simmons, line up alongside Schram. Consider how the two perspectives treat three crucial social-welfare issues.

First, the most basic question, why are people poor? Schwartz quotes Lawrence Mead’s direct answer: They won’t work. “Poverty is very uncommon among adults who work usual hours at any legal wage. The working poor are considerably outnumbered by the non-working poor” (149). Page and Simmons also respond to the question: “Millions of Americans—including many full-time workers—were unable to obtain decent food, shelter, clothing or medical care” (2). Page and Simmons do the arithmetic. Working the federal minimum wage ($5.15 at the end of the 1990s) for 50 weeks a year nets $10,300—nowhere near the federal poverty line for a family of four ($16,600). “Some 5.6 million children live in poverty despite having at least one parent who worked fifty or more weeks that year,” they write; nor do broken families explain the hard times since half those poor children lived with both parents (25).

Soss backs up the data with vivid portraits of the working poor. “Nancy worked herself to exhaustion trying to raise two kids in an abandoned house with no utilities, supporting them by holding down the minimum-wage graveyard shift at a convenience store where she was robbed on numerous occasions” (187). Page and Simmons draw on Barbara Ehrenreich’s powerful portrait of life in low-wage work. Ehrenreich describes exhausting work and harsh conditions—no talking, no bathroom breaks, long hours on one’s feet, and the endless struggle to get by on inadequate pay. A coworker badly sprains an ankle but refuses to go to the hospital; she has no health insurance and cannot afford the time away from work. Page and Simmons speak for all the authors in this debate when they muse that “such working conditions are totally foreign to those of us who spend hours under our own control in a clean room, tapping on a keyboard”(24).

Soss’s Unwanted Claims is the only book on this list to describe and quote welfare recipients. Reading the vivid interview transcripts (which he places throughout the text) introduces voices missing in most of the literature. Readers rarely get a sense of the welfare recipients themselves. We do not learn about poor people’s lives, their opinions, their fears, or their aspirations.

Yet pictures of poor people are the basic currency of the debates. The welfare discourse—in the media, in Congress, at the East Lempster garage, and (implicitly) in all these books—turns on images of the poor. Are they too lazy or dysfunctional to get a job? Or are they brave people struggling to get by? At any historical moment, the most persuasive image defines our welfare policies.

A second disagreement lies in the clashing ideas about discipline. Schwartz describes the conservatives’ call for the guiding hand of a “new paternalism” to steady the irresponsible poor. Schram tags the efforts “a dystopian nightmare of behavior modification” (88). In part, the difference taps a longstanding conflict between left and right about how many moral strings the state ought to attach to poor support. The famous image of social workers searching for men under the bed before certifying a mother for aid reflected the same debate 40 years ago. Today, however, poor Americans face more formidable controls. While the disciplinary urge animates contemporary welfare policy, it is most vivid in the related policy domain of crime control.

The booming prison population may be the most telling public-policy metric in poor neighborhoods. The number of Americans in prison or jail passed the two-million mark in 2000, despite 10 years of falling crime (the murder rate had plunged below its level in 1915). The American incarceration rate is the highest in the world, roughly five times the rate of most industrial democracies. The prison population tripled between 1985 and 1997. Add those on probation and parole, and the total rises to 6.3 million. Turn the focus to black people, and the criminal-justice system claims almost one in 10. Do they all really belong there?10

While Americans lap the industrial world in homicides (Finland comes in a distant second, at half our rate), we rank relatively low on most other offenses. Americans are far less likely to be touched by crime than are citizens in England, Holland, Switzerland, Scotland, Canada, or France. In fact, most American prisoners are doing time for nonviolent crimes. (Perpetrators of violent crimes account for 48 percent of state inmates and just 13 percent of those in the federal penitentiaries.)11

No matter how you read the crime tables, a powerful conclusion leaps out of the record. Running up those kinds of numbers—literally clearing our cities of young black men—requires a very low tolerance for mischief and a formidable sense of us-versus-them. The books reviewed here all focus on poverty and welfare. But precisely the same arguments animate the debate on crime. The two policy domains ought to be read together. They dominate American public policy toward poor and liminal populations.

One final issue, the nature of the family, goes to the heart of the contemporary culture war. Progressives and conservatives generally operate with different values and assumptions, but the gap between them is widest on the subject of sexuality.
For those fighting poverty with virtue, writes Schwartz, the major concern is "family decomposition." This may be the most important theme for conservative social-welfare policy analysts. "What welfare reform is really about," writes William Tucker, is "marriage and family formation." "What difference does it make," adds Charles Murray, "if single mothers go to work?" None. In fact it is probably bad for the children. Tucker, Murray, Schwartz, and many other conservative analysts cheerfully agree with critics like Schram. Welfare reform will not transform single mothers into "a viable economic unit." What the virtue reformers are after is something more fundamental: forcing "underclass men and women [to] start forming families again." Stop writing welfare checks, they argue, and low-income women will need husbands, mothers might stick with fathers, and perhaps the twoparent family will re-emerge as the societal standard. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act puts the point explicitly: "Marriage is the foundation of a successful society." For many conservatives, restoring marriage is the ultimate goal—of welfare reform, of poverty programs, of social policy itself.12

Many progressives reject the entire premise. Schram scoffs at the desperate "eleventh-hour attempt to enforce the traditional values of work and family" (1). Exposing that effort is the major theme running through After Welfare. As Schram sees it, conservatives dream of restoring an "industrial family wage system," in which the male breadwinner supports the wife, homemaker, and mother. Schram is right to argue that the conservative social idyll draws on a somewhat fanciful historical reconstruction. Even in the nuclear family's postwar heyday, one in three American women worked; and popular newsweeklies like Life regularly ran special issues exploring why "in America, the family is in special trouble"—the theme of a special issue in 1956.13

In short, conservatives see a terrible crisis in the decline of the nuclear family. Broken families exacerbate all our social problems—the most ardent Jeremias see a danger to the American way of life.14 On the other side, progressives see diversity rather than decline, rising tolerance rather than growing trouble. The real threat, from their perspective, lies in the new global economy, in harsh social policies, and in the urge to revive old stigmas and pin them on the poor.

The State

Far from the uproar about poverty and culture, social scientists interrogate the welfare state itself. Hot arguments about personal responsibility give way to the careful excavation of political regimes—constructed across decades, shaped by often obscure legal rules, and always constrained by yesterday's bureaucratic decisions. The state-building analyses speak directly to the culture warriors by analyzing the institutional frameworks—the regimes—that shape and limit reforms.

State-building studies have quite dramatically revised the way we see the American welfare state. In the traditional view, the United States is a welfare laggard, marked by stingy social policies far inferior to those enjoyed by the rest of the industrial world. The United States is, for example, the only industrial nation without some form of national health insurance. Every time reformers reach for the prize, they get crushed. Why? Because, in this familiar view, Americans don't like government, they have no strong party on the left, and their labor movement is weak and fading fast.

Marie Gottschalk's Shadow Welfare State is one of the outstanding books challenging that old orthodoxy. Americans do not have such a weak social-welfare system, argues Gottschalk. Rather, they look for it in the wrong place. American social-welfare policy is not a purely public enterprise but a complicated public-private arrangement. Benefits are not tied to citizenship and ministered by the state. They are tied to jobs, administered by employers, and supported by public policies.

The shadow welfare state—the phrase comes from an essay by Cathie Jo Martin—is an intricate web of private and public benefits. Private employers offer pensions, health insurance, and disability benefits. Roughly a third of American social benefits get negotiated through labor contracts, reports Gottschalk; in contrast, the figure in Sweden is roughly 4 percent (21). However, behind the scenes, an active state promulgates rules, writes regulations, and offers incentives that organize and maintain the private-sector safety net. From this perspective, all kinds of public policies—from the minimum wage to tax breaks for health insurance—can be seen as an elaborate collaboration between state and business.15

The public pieces of the welfare state—Social Security, Medicare, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—fill in the gaps that the private partners do not or cannot fill. The notoriously high costs of retiree health insurance, for example, get largely handed off to Medicare.

Gottschalk focuses on the complicated policy path that led to the public-private health care system. Three institutions were crucial. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 organized employer health and pension plans and got both labor and business invested in building them up. The insurance industry's postwar rate-setting practices further encouraged the company plans. Finally, government pension standards (passed in 1974) inadvertently spurred large employers to design their own health insurance plans rather than buy health insurance from insurance companies. In short, a series of policies—legislation, regulations, and insurance industry practices—built the employer health insurance regime.

Why did the American labor movement drop its support for a Canadian-style national health insurance? Not out of weakness, argues Gottschalk. On the contrary, she writes, labor remains a formidable political presence, bigger and stronger than most other private interests. Rather, the existing system shaped labor's interests. The unions turned away from a public health care system because that would disrupt the employer health care system that labor had helped negotiate. What might fit into that system? Why, a convoluted public-private patchwork. Just like the Clinton (or Jimmy Carter or Richard Nixon) administration proposal.

Gottschalk's account arrives with a major irony. The whole basis for the shadow welfare system is eroding even as we discover how it works. The public-private partnership developed around the stable, industrial workplace. This American regime was not designed for a postindustrial workforce of contingent

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workers, frequently switching jobs between companies relentlessly driven to pare costs in order to meet the quarterly expectations set by global capital markets.

Gottschalk's argument leads in both new and traditional directions. It pushes the welfare-laggard story aside and presents instead a nation that developed its own distinctive social-welfare policy. She shows how institutions, in turn, reshape the constellation of interests debating health care policy. But in a deeper sense, Gottschalk refashions an American classic: a nation that has honored work since the Puritans conflated success and salvation and built its social-welfare institutions not around citizenship rights, but as the fruits of employment. In the end, the institutions reflect (hard-core institutionalists will say they explain) the political culture.

A second institutional analysis also focuses on the public-private framework of the American welfare state. Marc Allen Eisner begins From Welfare State to Welfare State by debunking a familiar legend. Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats swept into power, thrust aside Herbert Hoover's shopworn laissez-faire, and launched a bold new era of activist government. To be sure, concedes Eisner, the industrial crisis incapacitated business and gave the Democrats unprecedented elbowroom. However, the New Dealers could not legislate away their historical inheritance: a weak administrative infrastructure. They were constrained by "the existing policy tools, models of administration, and patterns of state-economy relations" (3). The administration had no choice but to employ the policy tools at hand. Those tools, argues Eisner, had originally been forged during World War I.

The war had exposed a great American disjunction. A managerial revolution had rendered business far more efficient; in contrast, the state remained "woefully underdeveloped." The Progressive reforms, argues Eisner, barely dented the operation of the public sector. (In fact, as many other authors have suggested, Progressive reforms might have made things worse by inadvertently producing a fragmented and uncoordinated chaos. ) Suddenly the war crisis forced an ambitious mobilization on the rickety political establishment. The Woodrow Wilson administration responded with what Eisner terms "compensatory state-building" (12). Lacking strong institutions of its own, the state "append[ed] the capacities" of private corporations. In the end, concludes Eisner, American government paid a high price for its reliance on the private sector. The government never developed its own authority or autonomy; it grew dependent on the private corporations that continued to perform vital tasks—after they had extracted a payoff.

When the Franklin Roosevelt administration came to office, it seized on "the agencies and the state-economy relations that originated in World War I mobilization and evolved throughout the 1920s" (12). Put bluntly, it leaned on the private sector. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) is only the most striking example—essentially delegating public policy to the industries themselves.

Eisner does a masterful job of unearthing the continuities in public administration running from World War I through the 1920s and into the New Deal. However, From Welfare State to Welfare State sometimes understates the change. For example, the Democrats did manage to toss a political bomb into the NIRA by vaguely recognizing organized labor—and setting off a national rush of union organizing. Co-optation sometimes proved a double-edged sword. Still, Eisner carefully documents how program after New Deal program went the same administrative route—delegation to private interests. Ultimately, this is a different version of an increasingly familiar story. Rather than a strong, independent state, the United States developed a public-private partnership. Corporate interests grabbed the political agenda and controlled much of the political action. The legacy, writes Eisner, would be chaotic administration, unaccountable private hands on the levers of state power, endless cycles of deregulation, and a state ill-equipped for independent action. In the end, the whole New Deal looks "touchingly Hooverian." (15).

Gottschalk and Eisner tell stories that jibe neatly. The American welfare state is poised between public policy and private interest. The state relies on public-sector interests (as Eisner shows)—and vice versa (as Gottschalk demonstrates). Both books come to the same conclusion: the complicated symbiosis at the heart of American government privileges the privileged. Those with better education, higher skills, or more union muscle negotiate better benefits from the shadow welfare state. Traditional welfare-state logic called on public programs to counter market biases. In contrast, American welfare-state programs exacerbate the gulf between market winners and losers.

Perhaps what these books have found is simply the irony of path dependence. The last generation of reform (and its institutional legacy) profoundly shapes the next generation of reformers. The Roosevelt administration built what looked like a revolution using the state the Hoover administration left behind. That limited the possibilities; it did not, of course, completely defeat them. The health reform debates turned on structural imperatives and interests that stretch back to the Taft-Hartley Act.

The Republican rebels of the 1990s got a taste of the same institutional limitations. When they set out to reform the American family, they got the most traction from established institutions: the despised welfare state (built up during the long social-gospel era) and the criminal justice system (built up by labor strife, racial tensions, and Cold War fears). These are institutions geared mainly to poor Americans. The United States had once addressed family matters more broadly with restrictions on contraceptives, abortion, obscenity, and even hidden public supports for the Catholic Legion of Decency. However, the courts dismantled that public-private morality regime (between the early 1930s and the mid-1970s). The institutional changes organized by the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Supreme Court redefined the institutional levers at the disposal of this new generation of conservative reformers. As a result, the urge to restore family values relied largely on welfare-state institutions and focused mainly on poor people.

Change

Both cultural and institutional analyses emphasize stability, almost a tyranny of past choices and recurring arguments. Still,
change is constant, often dramatic. Three books on this list focus on the changing politics of wealth and poverty.

Soss's *Unwanted Claim* injects poor people themselves into the discussion. "Poverty is debilitating and isolating," writes Soss; it strips people of "self respect and social dignity" (187). The men and women he interviewed have little in common with the sassy welfare queens or lazy people in the trailer park. Rather, they are exhausted, isolated, sometimes hungry, often abused, and usually frightened. These people work, they struggle to survive, and they fight ferociously for their children. Soss describes the battle for bread and butter as political negotiations over communal resources. The welfare system offers a forum for citizens, a locus of political participation equivalent to voting or serving on juries. For many people, argues Soss, claiming welfare is the dominant form of political participation. (Recall Harold Laswell's celebrated definition of politics: "who gets what, when and how.")

Soss's approach turns welfare recipients into active agents, negotiating with bureaucratic officials who also spring to life and make fateful decisions. Participation in the welfare system invests poor people with "the minimal prerequisites of full citizenship: autonomy, self respect, social dignity [and] the ability to fulfill duties to others" (187).

Predictably, the welfare programs shape the negotiations. Every welfare agency structures a different kind of political experience. Soss finds that welfare recipients claiming Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—now TANF—faced stigma, shaming, and discipline. Caseworkers made intrusive demands and asked hostile questions. Most recipients acquiesced most of the time. One put it bluntly: "You kiss ass all day. Point Blank. You kiss ass, whatever they say, whatever they want, however . . . they talk to you" (136). Why? Because they can delay or cut your benefits at any time. Despite the hostile setting, about one-third of Soss's AFDC respondents occasionally pushed back. They all reported doing so for the same reason. They stood up and argued with caseworkers when they thought their children's welfare demanded it.

In contrast, other programs organize a less hostile environment. Soss contrasts political participation in AFDC with participation in Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). The latter offered recipients more autonomy and a less intrusive process. (When the Ronald Reagan administration took a harder line—in a sense, treating disabled workers like welfare mothers—the political backlash forced the administration to back down.) The difference between the programs begins with different images of the beneficiaries; disabled people on SSDI are more respectable than poor mothers who have qualified for AFDC via a means test. The difference permeates every aspect of the programs' procedures.

A third program scrambles some of the generalizations. Head Start often serves the same population as AFDC. Yet, reports Soss, the parents in this program enjoy far more autonomy and power than clients of either AFDC or SSDI. Parents meet, deliberate, and shape policy. This poverty program often operates as a vital participatory democracy. Why? Soss never answers this question directly. Perhaps the educational mission of the program infuses it with a more participatory spirit. Or possibly the key lies in the image of virtuous beneficiaries: parents who care about their children's education. Or perhaps the institutional framework explains the difference. The war on poverty organized Head Start when the social gospel was at its high tide; participation (perhaps even respect) was structured into the program from the beginning.

In any case, the differences across programs—even the differences among individuals in the same program—remind us that welfare policy is constantly in motion, constantly contested. The negotiations shape individual lives and sum to the kinds of communities we live in. Defining welfare as political action raises the radical notion of vital citizen participation throughout the welfare system. Head Start illustrates the possibilities of that lost 1960s ideal. Of course, reorganizing welfare programs around democratic wishes returns us to the angry cultural pictures of the recipients themselves. New Victorian images leave no room for poor people's participation—they dismiss the notion as absurd. A social-gospel vision, however, would demand it as the path to a vital American democracy, exactly as American civil-rights movements have always done.

Welfare may be constantly contested, but the 1990s saw a kind of big bang that ended one era and began another. Republicans conspired with Bill Clinton and conservative Democrats to "end welfare as we know it." R. Kent Weaver describes how they managed it. His *Ending Welfare as We Know It* is a fine analysis that tracks welfare reform from multiple perspectives—history, culture, institutions—all filtered through Weaver's main focus: endless rounds of Beltway dickering.

At the heart of the battle lay the long fight to spin the welfare recipients. Who were the real clients of the program, mothers or children? Every conservative broadside about irresponsible welfare mothers faced a liberal rejoinder about innocent children. Candidate Bill Clinton and his New Democrats helped spring what Weaver calls the "dual client trap" by attacking AFDC and promising to rethink it. Clinton acquiesced to an effective conservative image: welfare wrecked the lives it touched by trapping endless generations in dependence. It was a tragedy for both mother and child.

Liberals thought they had plenty of good responses to the argument about "endless generations of dependence." However, the extraordinary 1994 midterm elections swept away their institutional veto points. In that election, of course, the Republicans took control of both the House and Senate in Washington, captured both houses of the state legislature in 11 new states, and managed 15 new governors (the last, between 1993 and 1996, gave the party control of the executive office in 32 states). Suddenly a rising Republican majority was negotiating welfare reform with an apparently wounded administration that had already promised fundamental change.

Weaver describes the Republican voices coming up from the states cheerfully accepting federal spending limits on welfare (through fixed block grants) in exchange for greater state autonomy. A new generation of Republican governors shared the congressional Republicans' interest in reducing government spending. Congress buried the details in a massive budget reconciliation bill (a move that Senate Democrats had piously spurned when President Clinton tried it for his health care reform). Weaver does an extraordinary job of walking readers through the
elaborate negotiations that got the deal through both Congress and the administration.

There is just one political turn that he does not fully explore. Republicans aimed to devote both AFDC and Medicaid to the states. As Weaver points out, both were means-tested programs administered on the state level with national rules and matching funds. However, there was a great difference between the programs: Medicaid spending ran more than six times higher than AFDC spending (in 1995). Welfare got all the press but Medicaid was the budget blockbuster. Moreover, President Clinton shrewdly understood that Medicaid had evolved—more than a third of Medicaid funds were going to people over 65. What had originally looked like welfare medicine now seemed increasingly like a Medicare supplement. Out on the campaign trail, Clinton began calling Medicaid “our parents’ program.” He spun an image of recipients as middle class, deserving, needy, old, and (implicitly) white. People qualified for Medicaid because of ill health and fixed retirement incomes; the program paid for nursing homes, prescription drugs, and Medicare premiums. Clinton insisted he would maintain Medicaid and reform only AFDC. Republicans—eager for a victory to take out on the hustings in 1996—hemmed and blustered and finally accepted the deal.22

With great fanfare, the political establishment “ended welfare as we knew it.” Despite the Republicans’ broad aspirations, the reform focused tightly on the poor recipients outside the mainstream political economy. Much larger programs—like Medicaid—escaped reform, thanks, in part, to the way Democrats like Clinton spun the beneficiaries. The political outcomes turn on the same slippery matter as every other welfare debate: just whom are we talking about?

Welfare reform reminds political scientists—so often fixed on the formidable power of the status quo—how dramatic changes can break through and win. That possibility animates Page and Simmons’ fierce, elegant, ambitious, carefully documented call to arms. What Government Can Do represents an increasingly important focus in the American social-welfare debates. Rather than focus at the very bottom—the “underclass” that helped define welfare reform—they speak to a larger population by addressing American inequality.

Despite extraordinary national wealth, write Page and Simmons, one in eight Americans (some 34 million people) lives in poverty. Many more people scramble to get by just above the poverty line; one out of three citizens slip into poverty at some point in their lives. The United States tolerates—Page and Simmons would say fosters—far more inequality than any other industrial nation. And they believe the problem is growing. By 1998 the top 20 percent of U.S. households earned 49.2 percent of all the cash income reported by the Census Bureau; the bottom fifth made 3.6 percent (27).

Page and Simmons blame a changing economy for the rush toward inequality. A “skills premium” rewards computer-literate, well-educated men and women. Cheap imports, the flow of American capital to other nations, and the immigration of low-wage workers all depress wages for the less skilled (27). Wealth and poverty has more to do with the global economy, sum up Page and Simmons, than personal virtues like hard work or intact families.

Other scholars detail the consequences of the inequality: the United States does terribly on almost every international scale that measures well-being. Take, for example, the standard comparative metric for population health. The United States ranks 24th in life expectancy at birth.22 A large poor (and near-poor) population drags the American numbers down. Of course, new Victorians trace the gloomy results to bad behavior; they argue that the needle and the gun are what lower life expectancy in poor and minority communities. However, accumulating data suggest something quite different. For example, The New England Journal of Medicine reported in 1996 that the leading causes of death in poor, black neighborhoods were “unrelenting stress,” “cardiovascular disease,” “cancer,” and “untreated medical conditions.” Real people with hard lives and many needs (remember national health insurance?) get buried in cartoons about good and bad behavior.23

What is the solution? Page and Simmons would mobilize the government against poverty and inequality. They set down a long and ambitious agenda designed to advance equal opportunity, ensure good jobs at good wages, provide social insurance, and redistribute income (293). What inspires their book is the American affinity for government bashing. What Government Can Do is a primer on successful programs. The authors challenge sophisticated economic arguments in language aimed at a general audience. Their book is not, ultimately, about data or details (although the authors deftly handle both). Rather, it is a fervent plea, a moral cry. To Page and Simmons, American inequality is wrong. Americans can and should do something about it.

Which returns us to the larger social paradigms. Page and Simmons (like both Soss and Schram) condemn America’s high level of inequality. blame the system, call for social action, and summon the state to organize broad-based relief. In short, they make a classic social-gospel argument. However, in a neo-Victorian era, even sympathetic readers will likely find the proposals ambitious, even a bit radical.

Reformers like Page and Simmons always face the same stubborn questions: Just why are Americans so tolerant of inequality? Why do they resist redistribution? The United States may not be quite the welfare laggard we once thought, but proposals to help the poor meet stiff resistance—from Capitol Hill to the garage in East Lempster. Why? Page and Simmons trace the answer to raw self-interest. An establishment biased toward corporations (and campaign contributions) yields a politics tilted toward the have. Institutionalists like Eisner and Gottschalk bolster the point by demonstrating just how those interests are organized into the machinery of the public-private regime. A weak government, routinely ceding public power to private groups, produces a welfare state dominated by organized interests. That state protects the employed middle class—not least against the demands of the poor and near-poor.

Moral conservatives like Schwartz offer a very different explanation for the American reluctance to redistribute. What they see is America’s deepest values at work. The American dream is built on hard work, virtue, and talent. Conservatives invoke American
values to explain why it is (and ought to be) difficult to redistribute wealth from the successful to the failures.

Finally, there is another explanation for American inequality running quietly through all these books: race. Every author reviewed here notes that the welfare debates constantly turn on racial images. Race haunts the national discourse on the full range of poor people’s programs: drug wars, crime wars, prison construction debates, and the death penalty.

However, despite its significance, race remains largely implicit across these pages—only occasionally breaking to the surface of the texts. Weaver makes the point directly. The long welfare-reform negotiations rarely focused explicitly on the race line—there is no chapter or section on the subject in Ending Welfare as We Know It. But at regular intervals, Weaver reminds the reader of the important “contextual factor”: “the racialized image of the AFDC program” and the “overwhelming public hostility” the program faced (383). Race gets tangled up in perceptions of welfare beneficiaries (as Weaver notes); it dominates popular images of poverty. “Black” now connotes “economic danger,” writes Schram (42). But perhaps the most explosive racial question lies buried in the new Victorian effort to fight poverty with virtue.

Calling for virtue sounds unexceptional. Why, asks Schwartz, would anyone oppose more rectitude? Progressives answer by criticizing the essential assumption in the Victorian campaign: the idea that bad behavior lies at the root of poverty. Acquiesce to that idea, and poverty becomes stigmatized as a result of vice. America’s troubled racial history makes that association easy—and dangerous. “Poor,” “black,” and “bad” easily blur into one another.

Across the generations, white Americans justified racial oppression by imagining that they needed to control black immorality. The justification for slavery, lynching, and segregation all turned on a vicious narrative about the African American lack of self-control.24 The new Victorians see virtue, simply, as the most reliable anti-poverty program; progressives fear that the moral rhetoric blames poor people for their poverty and sanctions a new generation of oppressive policies that range from slashing welfare benefits to filling the jails.

The racial issue returns us to the question at the heart of every welfare debate—the definition of American community. Who are we? And more to the point, how do we distinguish “us” from “them”? Perhaps it is not surprising that a nation built out of such diverse tribes and races would be notoriously slow to redistribute its income to poor people.

Of course, the welfare system remains a constant work in progress. Taking a long historic view reminds us how each generation, each decade, rewrites the relations between rich and poor. If these books are any indication, a formidable analytic argument is now rising up to challenge the reigning neo-Victorian paradigm. Reformers looking for social and economic justice will find that they have a long American legacy to draw from.

References


Notes

1 Beecher quoted in Morone 2003, introduction, emphasis in original. On the “new Victorians,” see Himmelfarb 1994, 3. Himmelfarb begins the book by quoting Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s enthusiastic response when a reporter sarcastically asked her if her values weren’t “Victorian.” “Oh, exactly. Very much so. Those were the values when our country became great.”

2 Roosevelt 1938, 11–6.

3 Ellwood 1996, 22. R. Kent Weaver repeats part of the quote (2).

4 On Lincoln, see Basler 1953, volume 2, 364; volume 3, 468, 479. For the other quotations, see Morone 2003, epilogue.

5 For a sampling of the large virtue literature, see Wilson 1993; Himmelfarb 1994; Mead 1997; Bennett 1998; Bork 1996; Carter 1993.

6 Rauschenbusch 1907; Addams 1912.

7 Roosevelt 1938, volume 1, 771–80. Although intellectual historians generally reserve the term social gospel to refer to a group of intellectuals writing at the turn of the century, I argue that the essential social-gospel arguments powerfully influenced American politics through the 1960s—Martin Luther King, Jr., was the most eloquent of the social-gospel preachers. For the rise and fall of the social gospel in the twentieth century, see Morone 2003, part 4.

8 A large literature makes the case for alternative ways to see the family. See Stack 1974; Collins 1990; Ladd-Taylor and Unmansky 1998; Stacey 1996; Coontz 1997.


10 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2000, 484 (Table 6.1) and 497 (Table 6.20); Butterfield 2000, A21.

11 Morone 2003, chapter 15.

12 Tucker 1996, 21–5; Murray 1999; see, more generally, the testimony delivered during the hearings before the Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate, 104th Congress, 9 March 1996.


14 See, for example, Bennett 2001.

15 For first-rate analyses in the shadow-welfare-state tradition, see Howard 1997 and Gitterman 1999. For the origins of the phrase itself, see Martin 1998.


17 On the progressive administration, the classic remains Skowronek 1982.

18 On the Wagner Act, see Morone 1998, chapter 6.

19 See, for example, Mead 2001.

20 The argument about broader participation rests inevitably on a reading of recent history. Were the 1960s programs the “maximum feasible misunderstandings” Moynihan described? Or an important way to mobilize excluded citizens? For a discussion (tilted toward the latter view), see Morone 1998, chapter 7.


22 On health inequality, see Kawachi (forthcoming).

23 Geronimus et al. 1996; see also Geronimus 2000.

24 The point is documented in Morone 2003, chapters 4–7, 10, 15; see also Du Bois 1992.