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Review by: Andrew J. Cherlin

Contemporary Sociology, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Mar., 2008), pp. 101-104

Published by: [American Sociological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20444077>

Accessed: 06/11/2013 08:38

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Can the Left Learn the Lessons of Welfare Reform?

ANDREW J. CHERLIN
 Johns Hopkins University
 cherlin@jhu.edu

In August, 1996, with the fall election looming, President Bill Clinton signed the most important welfare bill in decades. Named as if by a market-research firm the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA), but mostly known as “welfare reform,” it limited the number of years a family could receive welfare payments to five and required that most recipients work. Representative Charles B. Rangel of New York called the legislation a “cruel monstrosity” that constitutes “the most radical and mean-spirited attack against the poor that I have witnessed during my service in government” (Gray 1996). Peter Edelman, who quit his post in the Clinton Administration, wrote of welfare reform: “It does not promote work effectively, and it will hurt millions of poor children by the time it is fully implemented” (1997).

Academics veered between this position and the prediction that nothing would change because none of the previous welfare reform efforts had changed anything. Historian Michael B. Katz took the former position, calling the bill “draconian” and noting, “An authoritative analysis of the bill concluded that it would push more than 1 million children into poverty” (Katz 2001: 323). Legal and social policy scholar Joel F. Handler took the latter position in a 1995 book, deriding the “simplistic concept of time-limited welfare” (p. 137) as “an old cheap remedy” (p.146). Handler declared PRWORA to be an “impossible, palpably unworkable welfare-to-work scheme . . . Jobs will not be available, certainly in the required numbers” (pp. 137–38). Moreover, PRWORA, Handler predicted, would be as unsuccessful in changing the culture of the welfare office as other attempts to change welfare had been. He concluded:

Basically, then, we can expect the same results. As under prior work programs, some recipients will get jobs and some will be sanctioned, but the vast majority will somehow be deferred and life will go on. (P. 146)

Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality, by **Joel F. Handler** and **Yehekel Hasenfeld**. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 401pp. \$29.99 paper. ISBN: 9780521690454.

The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century, edited by **Keith M. Kilty** and **Elizabeth A. Segal**. New York, NY: The Haworth Press, 2006. \$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9780789029225.

When Welfare Disappears: The Case for Economic Human Rights, by **Kenneth J. Neubeck**. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006. 207pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780415947800.

Welfare Discipline: Discourse, Governance, and Globalization, by **Sanford F. Schram**. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005. 184pp. \$22.95 paper. ISBN: 9781592133024.

But this little-will-change scenario proved to be wrong, as did the prediction of mass suffering. By 2000, the welfare rolls had been cut in half, the percentage of single mothers working for pay had increased sharply, and yet the percentage of children in poverty had declined. To be sure, the welfare reformers had the good fortune of starting their program during the hot economy of the late 1990s. Yet the consensus among economists, liberal and conservative, is that the economic boom was not the sole reason for the drop in the welfare rolls and the increase in employment among single mothers. Rather, they argue, welfare policy also played a role (Blank and Schmidt 2001). If the hot economy were the only reason for the drop in the rolls, then one would have expected the rolls to increase again after the boom ended. So far, however, that has not happened. Between 2001 and 2004, the number of Tem-

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porary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients fell by another 6 percent, even though the economy had cooled and unemployment had risen. The percentage of children in poverty increased but was still below the level of 1996 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2006). In addition, the culture of the welfare office appears to have changed, contrary to Handler's prediction. Four long-time welfare agency observers wrote, "Yet the rapidity and breadth of change has been stunning. State and local human service systems may now be one of the most quickly changing components of American governmental institutions" (Gais et al. 2001: 37).

You might expect liberal scholars from social work and sociology to reflect on why their predictions were so wrong. But Handler and his long-time collaborator, Yeheskel Hasenfeld, are not among them, as their new book on poverty and welfare in America shows. Nor does the postmodern social policy scholar Sanford F. Schram, who also published a book just before PRWORA that gave no indication of what would soon happen (Schram 1995), try to explain the events in his new book. Nor is an explanation offered by the contributors to the volume edited by Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal or by sociologist Kenneth Neubeck. All of these writers continue to expand upon their pre-PRWORA arguments as if there were no need to reexamine their previous assumptions. Frances Fox Piven, the doyenne of the left-wing school of welfare analysis, writes dismissively in a foreword to the Kilty and Segal volume, "In fact, it takes little in the way of policy innovation to drive the welfare rolls down and to coerce women into low-wage work" (p. *xix*), as if everyone on the left had expected a 50 percent decline in TANF recipients coupled with a reduction in childhood poverty.

Handler and Hasenfeld acknowledge, of course, that the rolls dropped precipitously, but they never examine why. Apparently, this impossible, palpably unworkable scheme just happened to work, and no further discussion is needed. They note the many changes in welfare offices—the emphasis on immediate job search, the banners in the waiting areas proclaiming "Your clock is ticking" or "Welcome job seekers!", the new job titles such as "self-sufficiency coach" or "family indepen-

dence specialist," the creation in some jurisdictions of separate career-development units—but nevertheless, they conclude, against their own evidence, that the culture of most welfare agencies did not really change.

Handler and Hasenfeld reserve their harshest critique for the low-wage labor market: "For many people, the labor market has failed and shows little sign of improvement" (p. 67). Because of the sharp increase in single mothers' labor force participation has undermined their previous argument that jobs simply are not there in the required numbers, they focus on wages and benefits. Here, they rightly raise several important issues such as the low level of the minimum wage, the part-time and unstable nature of many low-wage jobs, the difficulty of finding reliable child care, and the frequent absence of health insurance coverage. These problems belie the conservatives' simplistic conclusion that welfare reform has been a success merely because it cut the rolls without engendering mass hardship. Yet Handler and Hasenfeld's interpretation of the evidence is one-sided here, as elsewhere, in the book. For instance, they review several studies that find "considerable mobility" (p. 243) among low-wage workers, particularly those who change jobs and then stay with their new employers; however, they then conclude, "employment mobility is also a myth" (p. 251). Their overall recommendation is that the government should abolish TANF, allow mothers to stay home, and, through a combination of employment and cash transfers, ensure that all families have a minimum income of about \$35,000 for a family of four.

Schram also acknowledges the caseload drop, but runs right by it. His main point, as in his previous book, is that a perverse discourse about poverty and welfare, one that shifts the blame from the labor market to the motivations of the poor, shapes American social policy. This is the discourse of "dependency," which narrows the acceptable focus of discussion so that statistical studies of who goes on and off the rolls crowd out broader examinations of the great changes in the world economy and their implications for the organization of work. In his new book, Schram enlarges his scope to include the "globalization discourse" not only in the United States, but also in Europe. The dominant

way of talking and thinking about globalization, he argues, implies that social welfare policies that support low-wage workers must be weakened to keep Western economies competitive in the world economy. In this discourse, the retrenchment of the welfare state becomes the unfortunate but necessary consequence of the movement of production overseas. This is not the only way to conceive of globalization, Schram maintains. Instead of accepting this discourse, “[o]ur job . . . is to exploit its incompleteness so as to highlight how it is still possible to choose the welfare state as an act of social justice” (p. 41).

Schram embraces the perspective of a “new poverty research” (p. 74) that looks beneath the statistics, places welfare reform in a social and historical context, and draws unconventional conclusions. For instance, he argues that the focus on African Americans in the discourse on welfare both reflects and maintains the idea of racial differences. He also discusses the rise of the “care work movement,” whose advocates argue that the caring work of mothers is undervalued and inadequately supported. He praises a Norwegian model of welfare policy in which work requirements are coupled with far greater subsidies to all caregivers of young children. His ideas are thought-provoking and insightful, if not always convincing. One might argue, for instance, that the consensus position on globalization is based not just on discursive practice, but also on realities such as the movement of jobs overseas. In any case, his book, like Handler and Hasenfeld’s, is incomplete without an analysis on why the huge decline in the caseload, which he failed to predict, happened.

Michael Reisch, in his chapter in the Kilty and Segal volume, comes the closest to offering a retrospective analysis. He acknowledges, “Measured solely in its own terms, welfare reform has been a considerable success” (p. 73) because of the caseload decline. He then argues that it has also created its own problems, such as overloading private-sector service organizations who must deal with those who have not made a successful transition. Sandra Morgan and her co-authors describe in their chapter the multiple sources of the caseload drop, but then correctly observe that women who left welfare often found low-wage jobs that did not raise them

above the poverty line. Most of the other contributors to the Kilty and Segal volume focus solely on a stinging critique of welfare reform. Their objective, in the words of the editors (who also edit the *Journal of Poverty*), is “to challenge the rhetoric that led to welfare reform and to restore some sense of reality to the claims of those who run our government” (p. 2). Susan T. Gooden and Nakeina E. Douglas, for example, probe the sources of racial disparities in welfare policy.

Reisch argues further that the failure of social work (and, I would add, sociology) to offer a reasonable alternative to PRWORA marginalized social workers (and, I would add again, sociologists) in the policy debates of the 1990s. Unfortunately, Neubeck, in a chapter in the Kilty and Segal volume and in his book, recommends political action that would, I am sure, guarantee continued marginalization: a movement to condemn the United States government for human rights violation because of its low level of support for the poor. The United States, argues Neubeck more fully in the book, needs to be taken to task for refusing to ratify treaties such as the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which guarantees, among other things, “the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family” (p. 7). It is indeed shameful that the United States is one of the few countries not to sign. Neubeck describes the activities of a human rights network whose goals are to get the United States to sign the treaties and, more important, to provide enough government assistance to end poverty. Yet you don’t have to be a postmodernist to sense that the discourse of international human rights, while it may resonate in European social policy circles and certain segments of the American left, is unlikely to influence policy debates, or even get a hearing, in the United States.

I, too, thought PRWORA would create a disaster, and I have tried to figure out why it didn’t. What surprised me most, as I have studied low-income families under PRWORA, is how Americans seem to derive a sense of dignity and self-worth from paid work, even when the pay is low. The latent desire for that dignity is one reason, I think, that the new rules led large numbers of current or would-be recipients to seek and take jobs. I don’t think this sense of self-worth through

work is merely the product of a pernicious welfare discourse or the false-consciousness of the proletariat. Studies show that welfare recipients were eager to trade welfare for work and that many who made the transition spoke positively of increased self-esteem, decreased depressive symptoms, and greater independence. In fact, Handler and Hasenfeld cite three such studies, even as they conclude, side-stepping their evidence once again, that low-wage work has no benefits at all.

Over the past decade, more jobs also were available than we on the liberal side thought, although many of those jobs did not pay adequately and did not provide the other benefits—health insurance, child care—that workers need. The lesson I draw from welfare reform is not that we should advocate for the right of all low-income mothers to stay home—which is emerging as the left's favorite position—but rather that welfare and poverty policy be conditioned on supported work—a job supplemented with greater cash and in-kind government assistance. Appropriate exemptions should be made for the presence of very young children, disability, domestic violence, and other mitigating factors. That does not mean giving up the fight for livable wages, universal health insurance, and better child care options.

Many observers on the left would disagree with my interpretation of the first post-PRWORA decade. My point is not to impose an interpretation of the unexpected events that occurred, but rather to argue that we must begin to have one. We need to admit that our liberal model of the world of welfare and work failed to predict the course of welfare reform, and we must seek to learn from that failure. Unless we reflect on this turn of

events and modify our thinking appropriately, we will have no credibility in the welfare debate except among those who already agree with us. The lack of reflection in these four books undermines the many valid points—about low wages, job instability, working conditions, health insurance, and child care—that the authors make.

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