The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen by Ange-Marie Hancock

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The dirty little secret of the historic welfare reform law of 1996 is that its proponents were by no means reluctant to push the available buttons of race and sex to get their plans for welfare retrenchment adopted. Working at the intersections of race and gender, they hammered away at the stereotype of the black welfare queen who would rather raise her children in poverty than lose “her” welfare and forego her life of idleness and promiscuity. Then, the racialized and sexualized references to welfare queens were rarely criticized in the mass media; now, serious scholarship is showing that the mass media unreflectively reinforced this discourse of disgust. The implications for creating a public discourse for rational deliberation regarding issues of poverty were nothing less than devastating. It will be some time before we recover and can talk seriously about the poverty that forces women, of all colors, to rely on public assistance.

So says Ange-Marie Hancock. And she says it so well, in compelling, even eloquent terms. And better yet, she says it with empirical evidence to buttress her deconstructions of welfare discourse. We can only hope policy makers will listen. If they do not, we cannot blame her for trying to produce serious scholarship that has political relevance. Instead, we should continue to hold her book up as a model for how academic research can be politically pertinent.

The Politics of Disgust is a very thoughtful, theoretically sophisticated, empirically rich analysis of the discourse of welfare reform. It has several distinctive features that merit highlighting.

First, this is a book that refreshingly integrates the study of the politics of welfare policy making with democratic theory. It asks not only why welfare reform was passed when it was and in the form it was, but goes further, to situate that question in the larger context of what the implications are for how welfare reform was framed and narrated for democratic discourse. Hancock’s argument is that the repeated reliance on the image of the welfare queen in legislative deliberations and mass media reporting represents a figurative polluting of public discourse that seriously poisons people’s ability to think constructively about why low-income families rely on public assistance. This not only undermines collective efforts to introduce greater compassion, equity, and fairness into our social policies, but it also weakens our collective ability to act democratically through rational deliberation. Both the poor and democracy are done a serious disservice, and we should not lose sight of this double disadvantage.

Second, the book is a striking example of mixed methods of research that combine content analysis of policy debates, as reported in the Congressional Record, and mass media coverage, as indicated by newspaper stories, with in-depth interviewing of recipients regarding how they internalize the dispiriting
public discourse of disgust about who they supposedly are. Hancock finds that policy elites and the media who covered them provided extensive indications that the stereotype of the welfare queen was prevalent in and constitutive of the discourse on welfare reform. Her in-depth interviews indicate that welfare recipients were quite vulnerable to internalizing the disgust that was expressed about them. Yet, she also self-consciously provides an opportunity for welfare recipients to speak back to the policy elites as an explicit move to counteract the extent to which welfare reform was so often discussed by elites in terms of stereotypes and without hearing from the women recipients themselves. What we find are women who want what everyone else in our society wants—a chance to succeed in becoming self-sufficient through access to decent educational opportunities and jobs.

Hancock concludes by underscoring the profound character of what she calls the "dual threat" that the politics of disgust poses, not just for our already-inadequate system of social welfare but also for the possibilities for democratic deliberation. She calls for reinventing the idea of an independent press, and she insists on the need for a policy discourse that includes the voices of the poor and oppressed. The wise would listen; the idea of democratic citizenship, as well as more-constructive social welfare policies, depends on it.

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In this book, Robert Harrison makes a significant addition to the American Political Development (APD) branch of American political science. The APD school emerged in the early 1980s in direct response to the growth of the rational-choice perspective of the previous decade. Emphasizing macro-level phenomena, rather than the micro-level phenomena pursued by students of rational choice, APD scholars endeavored to "bring the state back in" to the study of American politics. In doing so, they examined the context, timing, and sequence associated with broad institutional and policy changes in the American political system, with particular emphases on the governmental structures that emerged and/or evolved to deal with the increasing complexities of American political-economic life.

Harrison's major independent contribution to the APD enterprise is his explicit concentration on Congress. Over the last two decades, APD analyses have focused mainly on interactions among the president, political parties, and the courts, often as they relate to the growing policy- and decision-making role played by administrative agencies since the late nineteenth century. Yet, as Harrison notes, administrative capacity and bureaucratic implementation presume an initial delegation of responsibility and discretion that only Congress