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Welfare Reform: Causes and Contradictions

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The U.S. welfare system has been under attack from a variety of different directions. It certainly appears that the hostility to welfare runs very deep and in many sectors of American society. Is it that welfare reform poses different questions for different people? Is the United States unique in the assault on welfare or is it part of a broader set of phenomena?

This paper argues that welfare has become a flashpoint for a number of concerns, some of which are particularistic to the United States and some of which are not. It raises issues about race and problems—rightly or wrongly—that have been associated with race, such as poverty and crime in the inner city. Welfare raises issues about "family values," female-headed households, and the role of women as workers and providers of home care for children. It is in the center of ideological debates about social obligations to work about the role of government in American society. Further, debates about welfare occur in a context of fear and uncertainty; a result of dramatic economic changes, social fragmentation, and political alienation. For those who argue that welfare is about women or about race and ethnicity or about the role of government or about the American work ethic or "family values" or economic change or a loss of community, the answer is "all of the above. Similarly, the impetus to welfare reform has many causes, often resulting in contradictory goals and motivations.

Race and Welfare

Many feel that racial climate in the United States has had a profound effect on the current welfare reform debate. Certainly,
there is considerable historical evidence that race played a role in the evolution of the current social welfare system (Quadagno, 1994; Piven and Cloward, 1971). When the Social Security Act of 1935 was passed, domestics and agricultural workers—jobs in which most blacks could be found at the time—were excluded from social security coverage to insure the support of Southern states, fearful that cash grants to blacks would undermine control over their labor.¹ States were also given considerable independence in administration of Aid to Dependent Children part of the social security act that authorized aid to single-mother families. Many states in both the North and South applied welfare unequally, overtly discriminating against black recipients or potential recipients.

In the 1960’s as a result of the efforts of welfare rights advocates, federal law abolished many of these discriminatory practices, resulting in a dramatic increase in the black welfare caseload. The increase did not represent a sudden propensity for welfare on the part of blacks, however, but a pent up need for welfare on the part of those who had been denied access to welfare in the past. Nevertheless, by the late 1960’s blacks were 45 percent of the total AFDC caseload, a percentage which has fallen to 39 percent in the 1990’s. Hispanics are 17 percent of caseload, the white percentage is similar to black’s at 38 percent, with Native Americans and Asians comprising most of the remainder (U.S. House of Representatives, 1993).

¹ These occupations were eventually added some years later
While blacks are disproportionately represented on the welfare caseload, they have never been a majority of welfare recipients and their percentages have declined. Nevertheless, in the minds of many, welfare is associated with blacks and some argue that association has been detrimental to the formation of coherent social policies in the U.S. Kamerman and Kahn (1988) in their cross-national study of welfare systems, suggest that the inability of the U.S. to develop progressive social welfare programs comparable to those in Western Europe has arisen from this country’s unresolved racial history.

Further, there are still considerable differences in states offer, both in terms of benefits and in their welfare-employment programs. Those states in which black recipients are concentrated spend less, on average, on benefits and employment and training, although this may reflect the fiscal problems of these states (Burbridge, 1995).

Many feel the current attack on welfare is a continuation of this racial history. It has occurred at the same time that there are strong sentiments against affirmative action and immigration, causing some to see as part of a package of actions being taken against people of color.\(^2\) The emphasis on returning many responsibilities back to the states (in terms of finance and decisionmaking) is also disquieting to many African Americans, since the idea of "states rights" has a bloody racial history.

\(^2\) Proposals to deny welfare benefits to legal immigrants directly links the issue of immigration and welfare.
as noted earlier, it took federal action to end many of the states’ abuses in the welfare system that were directed towards blacks.

It has also been noted (Glazer, 1994; Burbridge, 1994) that in the minds of some, welfare is associated with many of the problems of the inner city: teenage pregnancy, crime, high school dropouts. While there is no doubt that welfare dependency is associated with many of these phenomena, many assume causality between welfare and these other problems. If welfare causes these problems, then it is only logical to assume that if welfare is removed or drastically changed, they will diminish. While this is an unlikely scenario—at least in the absence of other policies to increase access to jobs—fear of the poor, black or Hispanic urban dweller may be fuelling a reactive response to welfare.

Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize, that many blacks also support some form of welfare reform. In recent Congressional hearings on welfare reform, Kweisi Mfume—chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus—said that policies “to end welfare by providing meaningful jobs is...more wholeheartedly supported by the African American poor that is oftentimes reported” (U.S House of Representatives, 1994, p. 783) Some blacks also feel that welfare has been responsible for the rise in female-headed households and see it as a detriment to the black family. Groups like the Black Muslims that rail against white racism can be just as conservative as the most conservative whites in condemning welfare for destroying the "traditional family."
Women, Welfare and the Traditional Family

Some have argued that attacks on welfare are in misogynistic attacks on women, particularly single mothers who have failed to live up to social expectations by not having a man in house (Albelda, 1993). While being accused of misogyny may cause them to bridle, there are those who contend that the rise in female-headed households is because of welfare; that welfare reduced the incentive for men to care for their families increased the incentive for women to go it alone; that the rise in female-headed households is the cause of many of the problems in the inner city; and that the solution is to eliminate or severely limit the ability of women to obtain welfare (e.g. Murray, 1984). Thus women, particularly those who are single parents, responsible for social pathology in the ghetto and need to be cut off from government support.

In spite of a great number of studies that have shown little relation between welfare and increases in female-headed households (Wilson, 1987), it is still widely believed that the former causes the latter. Perhaps the great acceptance of this viewpoint, in spite of evidence to the contrary, is its logic. If in the past men have been the primary breadwinners for families and women have entered into marriage--at least in part--to obtain financial support, one would expect that they would be less willing to enter into this kind of arrangement if they now have more financial

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3. For example, this was a frequently held viewpoint in the Congressional hearings cited above.
options. The flaw in the logic is that welfare benefits have declined in real terms in the U.S. at the same time that the proportion of female-headed households has increased, making it difficult to find a statistical relationship between the two. Nevertheless, a review of cross-national research by Blumberg (1993) suggests that increases in women’s financial opportunities is associated with increases in female-headed households. Since many women on welfare also work part of the time, the combination of work and welfare may have had an effect on female headship.

The difference between Blumberg and others focusing on this issue is her argument that the rise in female headship has been beneficial in some respects. She cites research suggesting that women who control family resources are more likely to allocate these resources to the children, while men are more likely to use family resources for personal consumption; in other words, poor children are not necessarily impoverished by living in a single-parent household.

Further, feminist economist Elaine McCrate (1987) argues that greater financial resources for women does not necessarily have to result in decreased marriage if the terms of the marriage contract can be changed. If women are choosing not to marry because of their greater financial independence, it is not because they do not wish to marry but because men will not agree to new terms, particularly with respect to sharing in household work.
For African Americans, bargaining over the marriage contract has a further complication, the shortage of marriageable black men. While the black woman has experienced an increase in work opportunities relative to the black man, strengthening her bargaining power, the shortage of black men strengthens his bargaining power. The result has been a stalemate, resulting in a precipitous drop in marriage among African Americans (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

Most of those decrying the loss of the "traditional family" are not interested in these kinds of arguments. While there is considerable evidence that the patriarchal family model--consisting of a nuclear family with the father as primary breadwinner and a mother who is primarily a homemaker--never dominated the American family landscape for a significant period of time (Hernandez, 1993; Coontz, 1992), many feel a great loss with the movement away from this family type. As noted earlier, many associate female-headed families with social pathology in the inner city. But others note the rise in single-parent households as a general phenomena affecting all classes and races throughout West and see it as a problem for children and families everywhere (Council on Families in America, 1995). The issue of welfare has become enmeshed in this sense of loss. Some people may hope that a drastic change in welfare could revive the traditional family.

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4. "Marriageable men" being those who are living, not in prison, and with a stable job.
The ultimate irony is that welfare reform that forces women to work more will not change this picture. It is not clear how women working more will necessarily give them an incentive to marry if being in control of one’s own financial resources often reduces the chances of marriage. It can only be an incentive if poor women have access to men who have sufficient earnings to make maximizing their joint income worthwhile. And given that most women work two jobs, at work and at home, there may still be little incentive to marry if the man is not willing to help out at home or if they are not making enough money between the two of them to purchase the services needed to help her with her responsibilities at home.

One of the contradictions in the welfare debate is that some of the same conservatives who argue that women on welfare should work are highly critical of careerism among middle-class women and are often the most ardent supporters of the "traditional" family with the man as primary earner. People on the left may be no less contradictory, however, in advocating that women on welfare stay at home, while being ardent supporters of more work opportunities for highly educated women.

The proverbial bottom line is that women working in the formal labor market does not mesh well with the idea of the "traditional family" as it has been mythologized. This is not to say that women not always worked. Taking care of a family is a job; and throughout most of history and in most cultures women have worked outside of the home as well, either in the informal economy or in the formal labor market. But the push for "welfare reform" that
means more work for women, in addition to what they may already be doing, will not a priori make them eager for marriage.

The Work Ethic

Not everyone falls into the trap of linking welfare reform to family reform. Perhaps the most popular argument is that welfare discourages people from working and runs counter to the American work ethic. This is ironic since welfare was originally designed to keep women at home to raise their children. While there are some welfare advocates who continue to assert that a woman’s primary job is stay at home and raise children, few people accept this given that most women with children work at least part-time.

Changing attitudes about welfare may in fact reflect the changing economic position of women overall. In 1990 women were 46 percent of the labor force, compared to 28 percent in (Burbridge, 1994). While black women have traditionally had high labor force participation to begin with, they have also experienced significant increases in participation and, in addition, remarkable occupational shifts out of domestic and agricultural work into many white and pink-collar jobs (Burbridge, 1994). These changes have been the result of a variety of factors: the increasing desire on the part of women to find personal satisfaction in work outside of the home, the post-World War II expansion of a services sector draws heavily on female labor, and wage declines among men required more women to work to maintain family income (Burbridge, 1994; Mishel and Bernstein, 1995).
As it became more acceptable for women to work, however, non-work for women became less acceptable, particularly for those were being supported by the state rather than by a husband should women on welfare not be working, when other women working? Three responses have been given to this. First, studies have shown that many women on welfare are working, but not making enough to get off welfare or to stay off welfare (e.g. Spalter-Roth et al., 1995). Since women on welfare may underreport the they are doing for fear of losing their benefits, the incidence of combining work with welfare may be higher than existing studies suggest. (The study by Spalter-Roth, et al., suggests that at least 40 percent of women on welfare combine work and welfare.

The second response focuses on differential opportunities poor women relative to middle-class women. While educated women have experienced dramatic gains in wages and work opportunities, the wages and opportunities of less educated women have stagnated or deteriorated (Blank, 1994). The great advances for women have been very uneven and thus it is inappropriate to indict one group of women on the basis on the gains of another group of women

In spite of these differential gains, however, there are still many women who work in low-paying jobs who are not on welfare. Many of these women are also in two-earner households, however. third argument focuses on women on welfare as single earners; while many women make low wages, without a second income these wages are not sufficient to adequately support a family (Spalter-Roth, et
al., 1995). Thus, the issue is not work but a combination of wages and the absence of a second income.

President Clinton’s original welfare plan "to make work pay" by increasing the earned income tax credit (EITC) and providing health insurance and child care was originally intended to address this issue. A source of intense debate was whether jobs were available for welfare recipients if they were required to work, however, and whether the government should create jobs if there were none to be had. While the current Republican majority has expressed much less interest in making work pay or in job creation, the availability of jobs for welfare recipients remains a pivotal issue.

Many conservatives argue that jobs are available to low-income women on welfare. For example, Lawrence Mead (1992) points to many jobs that are being provided to immigrants because U.S. citizens refuse to take them. The poor quality of these jobs is no excuse for not taking them since, according to Mead, everyone has a social obligation to work and has no right to make demands on the government to help them unless he or she is working. Liberals point to high unemployment rates as evidence of job shortages. Some also note that federal reserve policies are designed to keep unemployment high, in order to keep inflation low. Images of rejoicing on Wall Street every time the unemployment rate goes up does not reassure them that the system is really designed to employ everyone who wants a job.
According to neo-classical economic theory, everyone will work when the wage is low enough. Some economists have argued, for example, that the minimum wage has prevented many from finding jobs, especially young black men who have experienced the greatest labor market difficulties (Freeman and Wise, 1982). Unions have expressed concerns that forcing women on welfare into the labor market may take jobs from union workers and put downward pressure on the wages of all workers in the low-wage labor market. Thus, the jobs question goes beyond welfare recipients but possible effects on other workers and on the wage structure.

This is not a trivial issue. Kamerman and Kahn (1988) in their cross-national study of welfare programs, found that labor market issues and the protection of jobs for men resulted in welfare programs designed to keep women at home in other countries. The desire to expand the labor force through population growth also affected policies in Western Europe; pro-natalists helped design policies that would encourage larger families. This seems odd in the U.S. where welfare policies are designed to discourage large families and increase the number of women in the labor force. Again, current welfare policies not only reflect attitudes toward women on welfare but also encompass some general assumptions about the labor market and about the role of government in trying to affect the labor market.
The Role of Government

Welfare policy and labor market policies can be closely linked. As suggested earlier, government can create jobs for welfare recipients who are unable to find jobs or government can discourage welfare recipients from finding jobs to protect the jobs of others or to keep wages from falling. The idea of government intervening in the labor market to the same extent as is done in Western Europe is an anathema in this country. Public job creation was tried in the 1960’s and 1970’s, was abolished during the Reagan presidency and receives little currency today. Beyond the minimum wage, the EITC, and a few training programs, the U.S. government does relatively little to help the working poor.

U.S. labor market policies are laissez-faire compared to the rest of the industrialized West (Kuttner, 1984), indicating a deep aversion to an activist government. While this has been generally true for the United States, a pro-free market and anti-government philosophy has recently gained in currency for two reasons. First, those espousing a libertarian, free market philosophy have become more influential and articulate over the past two decades (Lowi, 1995; Katz, 1989). The fall of the socialist states in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has only added to their credibility. They have argued against the state on both moral and efficiency grounds, persuading many that the free market leads to just and efficient outcomes.

Most Americans do not read these treatise’s, however The second factor leading to a strong anti-government stance in recent
years is a popular discontent with the government. The existence of high federal deficits, the inability or unwillingness of government to deal with a stagnant economy, and a litany of corruption case after another has resulted tremendous popular antipathy to government. While many Republicans are not anti-statist either in word or deed, there can be no doubt that they have been able to capitalize on this popular unrest. Many Democrats are also describing themselves as anti-government.

There is a certain amount of irony in this point of view, however. There are some who argue that it has been the free market that has driven some of the changes in families that have occurred (e.g. Wolfe, 1989). The decline in male wages and resulting increase in female labor force participation that has contributed to strains in the family, has been driven by market competition. More and more teenagers have come into the labor market as well, drawn by the demand for cheap labor and encouraged by a materialistic “youth culture.” Some argue that high rates of teenage employment has undermined parental control and may be psychologically damaging to young people (Greenberger Steinberg, 1986). There is nothing inherently pro-family about the free market, yet those who advance the cause of the free market are often advocates of “family values” as well.

A further irony is that those who appear anti-government often support large investments in the military. Not only does the U.S military consume billions of tax dollars, is very important to the economy, providing billions in contracts and employing thousands of
workers--either directly or indirectly by way of these contracts. Thus, government policy, by way of the military, intervenes directly in the economy. Further, the U.S. military is actually an important component of the social welfare system. It provides the best-financed and most successful employment and training program primarily for young men. It has been a very important for black men and women in particular. Over 300,000 black men and 64,000 black women over the age of 20 are in the military (Day, 1993). Veteran mortgage and college benefit programs has made it possible for many low-income people to enter the middle class. And veteran's hospitals, with all their drawbacks, provides medical care for many who would not be able to obtain it otherwise.

Nevertheless, anti-government feeling is very real and welfare is very vulnerable to this change in mood. It is not a popular program to begin with and does not boast a powerful constituency. Even without the issues of race, female-headed households, and work ethic its chances of remaining intact in the current environment are slim. This is not to suggest that these other variables do not interact with people's feelings about government. Some of the resentment toward government comes from whites who feel that government has done too much in protecting the civil rights of minorities and other groups. As noted earlier, some feel the government is responsible for the rise in female-headed households or is discouraging people from working. But the discontent appears to go much deeper than even this.
Fear and Uncertainty

In recent decades Americans have experienced dramatic changes: economic, social, political and demographic. As noted earlier there has been a secular decline in wages, particularly for males, as economic competition from abroad has led to a decline in manufacturing that was exacerbated by rising oil prices. Black men have been particularly hard hit by these economic changes in terms of jobs and wages, causing a concomitant decline in marriage rates among African Americans (e.g. Wilson, 1987; Darity and Myers, 1995). Not everyone suffered, however, as college-educated workers benefited somewhat from the demand for the more highly skilled, at least until the "white-collar recession" of the early 1990's (Mishel and Bernstein, 1994). Those with investments in capital who faced the prospect of declining profits as a result of structural changes were rewarded with enormous tax cuts in the early 1980's, while middle and low-income families faced higher tax burdens. Meanwhile, the collapse of the real estate market undermined the value of the main asset of the middle class, their houses. Thus, after declines through the 1950's and 1960's, measures of inequality are the highest they have ever been. The top 1 percent of families control a third of total household wealth (Mishel and Bernstein, 1994).

As families began to scramble to keep up their cost of living, more women entered the labor market, a continuation of a trend that began earlier. Nevertheless, young families (headed by those under
are told that they cannot expect the same opportunities as those before them.

On the positive side, the black freedom movement that began in 1940's introduced the concept of civil rights through demonstrations and litigation, and exposed these ideas to a broad public through the emerging television media. Soon other groups insisted on civil rights: women, Hispanics, immigrants, gays and lesbians. Challenges to the existing social order were common and some real gains were made through legislation, the courts, and social action. Others have found these changes threatening, especially white males, who were facing increased competition from women and people of color for jobs and social status.

In addition, demographic changes are leading to predictions of "colorization" of America. Larger families for people of color continuing immigration from the Southern hemisphere has led some to suggest that whites will cease to be the majority by the middle of the next century (Steinberg, 1989). Already some states approaching "majority-minority" status.

Finally, families and the communities that supported them are fragmenting. The population is highly mobile, not only from town to town, but from city to suburb, leaving in its wake ruined ethnic communities that once provided a measure of security to their inhabitants.

Only 40 percent of marriages last and many are choosing not to marry at all or to postpone marriage until much later (Council on Families in America, 1995). Women do have more economic power and
have higher expectations for marriage, expectations that some men
trying to address but that others find confusing or unreasonable. Meanwhile, some women and gays and lesbians are
promoting "alternative lifestyles," encompassing everything from
well-off, "Murphy Brown-style", single mothers to gay marriages and adoption.

Finally, the two main political parties are so fragmented that
it is difficult to determine what either of them stand for. The
Republican Party includes pragmatic patricians and the zealous
religious right (Lowi, 1995). The left and the right of the
Democratic Party is further apart than "mainstream" Democrats are
to "mainstream" Republicans, (although what constitutes
"mainstream" in either party fluctuates with the polls)

All this has happened in the past 40 years. While not all of
these changes are negative, not everyone adapts to change at the
same pace. For some, uncertainty in life breeds fear. It is very
difficult to make arguments about social and economic justice to
fearful people. Fearful people tend to be preoccupied with their
predicament, whether real or imagined. Welfare faces an
uncertain future in this context.

International Context

Is the United States unique in this respect, however? Many
other countries are facing these same forces. Some of the
differences between the United States and other Western European
countries have already received some attention in this paper and in
other studies (Kamerman and Kahn, 1988; Kuttner, 1984; Smeeding, Palmer and Torrey, 1988; Smeeding, O’Higgins and Rainwater, 1990). But it may prove useful to highlight similarities and differences in order show the much greater vulnerability welfare programs have in the United States.

**Similarities.** The rise in female-headed households is common throughout the industrialized world (Kamerman and Kahn, 1988) and much of the developing world as well (Mencher and Okongwu, 1993) the same concerns are being shared about them: what they represent in terms of changing morality, the role of the father in the household, and the greater poverty of these households.

It does not appear that the greater generosity of social welfare programs in Europe comes from a greater concern for women se. As noted earlier, managing the labor force or increasing the native population entered into many of the decisions made. Thus, all countries are grappling with the issue of the role of women in society in general and single motherhood in particular.

Sweden perhaps has gone further than most countries in incorporating concerns for gender equity in their social welfare policies (Kamerman and Kahn, 1988). Women are expected to work, as men are, with a sizeable government investment in public job creation. Income supplements are provided to single mothers to

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5. The term "Western European countries" includes Canada and Australia. Obviously, there are differences between these countries which cannot be discussed in great detail in this paper.

6. Although it should be noted that rates of female headship and teen pregnancy are generally much higher in the U.S.
insure that no family is impoverished if her earnings are low. In addition, single mothers have access to subsidized housing, child care and health care. In consideration of family needs, women who have children can take up to 18 months of unpaid pregnancy leave. Women with young children are permitted a shorter work day, parents can take up to 60 days a year of paid sick leave to care for a sick child. The combination of earnings and transfers available to a single mother allows her an income almost equal to that of a single male parent. Thus, she is not hampered by sex differences in earnings.

Another similarity between European countries and the United States is the ascendancy of free market ideology. Many European countries currently have conservative governments in power, although they vary greatly in the extent to which conservatives have dominated politics over the past twenty-five years. In addition, these governments are also facing mounting budget deficits and are cutting back on social programs.

European countries face many of the same contextual issues. Their economies have been affected by increased competition resulting in historically high unemployment rates. Nonwhites are an increasing proportion of the population as immigrants from former colonies have come to stay. Access of immigrants nonwhite citizens to scarce jobs and financially-strapped welfare programs have become part of the political debate as in the U.S. Further, European countries have had their share of government
corruption scandals causing disillusionment and anger among voting public, Italy being the most egregious example.

Differences. Although countries throughout the industrial West are becoming more "colorized," race was not a central factor in the development of their social welfare systems as was the case in the United States. Most of the systems were developed when populations were still fairly homogeneous. The connection between race and welfare has not permeated the consciousness of Europeans to the same extent and for as long as in the U.S. Further, since many of the social welfare programs in these countries universal (Smeeding, Palmer and Torrey, 1988), it is more difficult to identify the programs with one group of poor people, as is the case with means-tested programs that are used more in the United States.

Second, as noted earlier, the labor movement is stronger in Europe. In some ways this can be detrimental to welfare recipients if the thrust of the labor movement is to protect jobs for native men. Women on welfare in countries where their work opportunities are limited often become deeply isolated and emotionally drained because they cannot get out of the house (Kamerman and Kahn, 1988). But to the extent that a stronger labor movement represents a stronger class consciousness, there is greater support for social programs that help the poor and near poor.

Third, as noted earlier, there is greater acceptance of activist government in general. Europeans pay much higher rates and receive much more in terms of government benefits
Social programs in Europe do much more to reduce poverty, by large (Smeeding, O’Higgins and Rainwater, 1990). Nor do federal governments face the same conflicts with respect to states rights, although the European Community may come to look more like the U.S in this respect

Finally, the one area in which the U.S. invests considerably more resources than most other Western countries is in military. Defense comprises about 20 percent of total federal outlays (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1993). Given relatively low taxes and high military expenditures, resources for social welfare are squeezed out. But it is not just an issue of money, it is time and thought that goes into supporting and using the military that detracts attention from social welfare issues.

While the military, as suggested earlier, provides its own share of social benefits, access to these benefits is conditional on military service. The benefits also insure continued support for military spending on the part of its recipients, which in turn may effect access to resources for those without a military background (many of whom are women).

Conclusion

There are many variables that go into the attack on welfare. It involves an extremely complicated interaction of racial attitudes, gender and family concerns, class identification or the lack thereof, ideology, and social unrest. Many of these same issues are affecting social policy in other industrialized, Western
countries as well. There are still important differences that make the crisis of social welfare in the United States much greater however. A long and tortuous racial history, pervasive anti-government biases, a weak labor movement, and a strong military are important variables that differentiate the United States from other Western nations.
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