

LINDA GORDON

PITIED But Not Entitled



**SINGLE MOTHERS AND THE
HISTORY OF WELFARE**

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*Single Mothers and the History of Welfare
1890–1935*

LINDA GORDON

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For Allen and Rosie

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Pro-welfare Cartoon, 1916

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What Is “Welfare”?

In two generations the meaning of “welfare” has reversed itself. What once meant well-being now means ill-being. What once meant prosperity, good health, and good spirits now implies poverty, bad health, and fatalism. A word that once evoked images of pastoral contentment now connotes slums, depressed single mothers and neglected children, even crime. Today “welfare” means grudging aid to the poor, when once it referred to a vision of a good life.

This historical transformation in meaning is the theme of this book. Centuries of social and economic change contributed to the transmutation, but the definitive shifts in meaning occurred between 1890 and 1935. In that period the United States evolved a set of programs of public provision that ultimately made “welfare” a pejorative term, although the word itself did not come into common use in its current meaning until the 1960s. Its negative charge rests on a popular definition of government provision that labels only some programs “welfare” and understands others to be in a different category. “Welfare” today refers almost exclusively to a few programs of assistance to the very poor, particularly Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)* and “general relief,” the last-resort program for the destitute

*The original program was named Aid to Dependent Children (ADC); in 1962 it was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). In this book the program is referred to by its historical name when speaking of the past, by its current name only when speaking of the present.

and desperate. “Welfare” could as accurately refer to all of a government’s contributions to its citizens’ well-being. These include paved streets and sidewalks; highways; public transportation systems; schools; parks; tree maintenance; policing; firefighting; public water, sewerage, and sewage treatment; garbage collection; food and drug regulation; pollution regulation; building inspection; and driver testing and licensing. In some countries many of these functions are considered to be part of the welfare state. But even if we label as welfare only those programs that provide cash to citizens, we could include home mortgage tax deductions, business expense deductions, medical expense deductions, farm subsidies, corporate subsidies, government college scholarships and loans, capital gains tax limits, Social Security old-age pensions, and Medicare. In this book the term welfare refers to the entire social service system, and “welfare” to contemporary usage.

AFDC is the best-known public assistance program, and most people who speak of welfare are referring to it, almost always with hostility. The hostility is remarkably democratic, however: “Welfare” is hated by the prosperous and the poor, by the women who receive it and by those who feel they are paying for it. It stigmatizes its recipients, not least because they are so often suspected of cheating, claiming “welfare” when they could be working or paying their own way. It humiliates its recipients by subjecting them to demeaning supervision and invasions of privacy. Yet it does nothing to move poor women and their children out of poverty and often places obstacles in the paths of women’s own attempts to do so.

The modern pejorative meaning of “welfare” results from the debasing conditions of receiving public assistance, but it also causes them. The cultural meanings of the welfare system have been a powerful force in shaping it. Values and ideas about how, how much, when, and by whom the needy should be helped influence our welfare system as much as do the federal budget, eligibility criteria, and unemployment rates. Indeed, these values are in a mutually influencing relation to the federal budget: They influence it directly, while the budget, in setting national priorities, influences popular sensibility about what is important and urgent. Moreover, welfare values and ideas are not timeless or universal. They were created in recent centuries, and they are changeable. Yet the shape they acquired in the first third of this century has been extremely resistant to change. To understand why, one must know that history.

In this book I examine the history of welfare in the twentieth century with more attention to those values—to visions of what welfare should be like—than to administrative arrangements and costs. Many previous historians have discussed these well, and I am able to stand on their shoulders, so to speak.¹ Less has been written about how ideas of charity or government aid expressed fundamental social, political, and ethical values—visions of a good society.

Uncovering those past visions requires examining not only what happened but also what did not. Too often history is written in a determinist way, as if the alternatives chosen had been the only possible ones. History has long been the legitimator of kings, and the stories of losers have often been lost, erased, or distorted. Modern social historians often define their task as the search for the origins of contemporary structures, and that search for evidence is more likely to roll along the well-trod trail of the victors than the overgrown path of the losers.² Defeated alternatives illuminate the choices historical actors made—in this case the choices among welfare designs—and the way their options looked to them then, rather than in hindsight. Losing proposals illuminate victorious ones. Just as one needs to back up to look at most large paintings, so one needs some distance to recognize what is being taken for granted. For example, assumptions that virtually all women would marry, remain domestic, and be supported by their husbands imbued virtually all our welfare programs; yet some welfare advocates knew even in the 1930s that these assumptions were wrong and offered different proposals. Although there was little political possibility that they could have been enacted, they reveal the assumptions embedded in what was.

The Social Security Act of 1935, the central legislation of the U.S. welfare state, was formed through a process of rejecting some alternatives and compromising over others. At the beginning of Franklin Roosevelt's administration in 1933, most welfare advocates expected to get federal health insurance and an integrated, centrally controlled system of public assistance. We can understand the contributions and limitations of the Social Security Act much better by regarding it as a proposal among others, seeing how it was shaped within a field of options, and noticing what and whom it excluded as well as what and whom it included.

Thinking about past alternatives reminds us not only that the particular shape of our welfare state was not inevitable but may expand

our sense of today's range of possibilities. The historical record shows that the choices are not simply more or less welfare spending, but rather that the shape and spirit of public provision matter very much to its impact. The constriction of possibility in this time of conservatism and economic depression blocks our creative vision and chokes off hope.



Although today AFDC is the essence of the so-called welfare system, it was originally regarded as an insignificant small program within the Social Security Act, the 1935 law that is the source of virtually all federal social provision. Social Security was a major achievement in itself and a historic transformation in the role of the federal government. One historian has called the New Deal expansion of the federal government a "third American revolution;"³ another described its shift in economic philosophy as "a general attack upon the doctrines of laissez-faire individualism. . . . No longer were poverty and unemployment to be condoned as the fruits of improvidence."⁴ Reformers fought an arduous and protracted campaign for this legislation and, even during the depression, had to mobilize against substantial conservative opposition to get it through Congress. Millions of Americans were protected from impoverishment through its provisions, and millions more, while they remained in poverty, were at least kept alive. AFDC in particular rendered critical support to women, support that contributed to safety and self-respect for millions.

Social Security is an omnibus act, and rather than choose among the various welfare models available, it incorporated them all. Its eleven titles created nine different programs. The one today called "Social Security" is Old-Age Insurance (OAI), which provides pensions to many but not all workers. This plus unemployment compensation are generically social insurance programs, so-called mainly because they are funded by special earmarked taxes on employees and employers. Titles V and VI of Social Security provided grants to the states for certain public health, today prominently including aid to the disabled. The Social Security public assistance programs, the only ones today called "welfare," are Title I (Old-Age Assistance, OAA, aid to the indigent elderly who cannot get OAI), Title IV (AFDC, the largest Social Security program), and Title X (Aid to the Blind).

The Social Security Act created the contemporary meaning of

“welfare” by setting up a stratified system of provision in which the social insurance programs were superior both in payments and in reputation, while public assistance was inferior—not just comparatively second-rate but deeply stigmatized. Public assistance is what Americans today call “welfare”; recipients of the good programs are never said to be “on welfare.” And while most people hate “welfare,” they pay the utmost respect to Old-Age Insurance.

There were three stages in the stratification of the welfare system. First, in 1935, Social Security excluded the most needy groups from all its programs, even the inferior ones. These exclusions were deliberate and mainly racially motivated, as Congress was then controlled by wealthy southern Democrats who were determined to block the possibility of a welfare system allowing blacks freedom to reject extremely low-wage and exploitive jobs as agricultural laborers and domestic servants. Then some of these groups—minorities, the very poor, out-of-wedlock mothers, for example—won inclusion, by a series of amendments and court cases stretching from 1939 through the 1970s. They were included, however, not in social insurance but mainly in public assistance programs, which by then had become even stingier and more dishonorable than they had been originally. Finally, in 1974, OAA and Aid to the Blind and the Disabled were folded into the social insurance system under the Supplemental Security Income program. This left *only* AFDC as a maligned “welfare” program. Historians seem to share in this perspective: Most studies of Social Security concentrate almost entirely on its old-age and unemployment insurance sections and neglect AFDC.

The stratification within Social Security programs has become so naturalized that many think of it as somehow inevitable. The superior programs, such as Old-Age Insurance, are regarded as contributory because beneficiaries pay taxes earmarked for them. But the “contributions” to old-age and unemployment insurance do not really fund those programs. What people get back is not proportional to what they put in, and the money paid in is used as a part of general revenues. Also, many workers are not allowed to pay these honorable, earmarked taxes. And there are no free rides: Everyone contributes to all social services through taxes, sales and gas and real estate as well as income. When we do not pay these taxes directly, we pay them indirectly, through the higher prices charged by manufacturers and landlords and other businessmen to make up for the taxes they pay.

In general Social Security helped most those who needed help least. And the very same people who got public pensions and unemployment compensation were most likely also to obtain private pensions, sick leave, and health insurance during the ensuing decades. Meanwhile the very poor sank relatively lower. Often able to improve their living conditions and income during good economic times, they rarely attained security and steadily lost ground in relation to those who received more. One can evaluate Social Security as half full or half empty: It helped many working- and middle-class men and their families rise to a more stable and prosperous standard of living; it aggravated the relative poverty and deprivation of many women and agricultural workers, minorities in particular. Certainly it deepened inequality among working people and their families, which in turn worsened the stigmatization and despair of some of the very poor. Those who received "nonwelfare" did well; those who received "welfare" did badly. Today the "welfare" class is what many call the "underclass."

The perverse tendency of our welfare system to deepen inequality has been particularly pronounced in the case of AFDC. The stigmas of "welfare" and of single motherhood intersect; hostility to the poor and hostility to deviant family forms reinforce each other. The resentment undercuts political support for the program, and benefits fall farther and farther behind inflation. The resulting immiseration makes poor single mothers even more needy and less politically attractive. The economic downturn of the last decade has deepened both the poverty and the resentment, and created the impression that we are experiencing a new, unprecedented, and primarily minority social problem.

But single motherhood is not new, although it has grown. Single mothers—by which I mean all mothers alone with children, whether divorced, separated, widowed, or never married—have long been over-represented among the poor. There were always widows, absconding husbands, unmarried mothers. Poverty has long been "feminized," particularly because women alone with children have been exceptionally poor. But in many traditional agricultural societies, single mothers had kinship and community support. Patriarchal communities controlled not only women but men too, and husbands were less likely to get away with desertion, although marriages were more often dissolved by death. Since most families were economic enterprises in which all

members participated, and in which workplace and home were usually the same, women had access to productive labor while they raised children. The loss of a husband might lead to a widow's taking over his work. The modern problem of single motherhood was defined within the last one hundred years, in the context of the decline of this patriarchal family and community system. Instead, as more men earned their living through wage labor, the loss of a husband's income left a wife without support. Wage-laboring men more often worked outside their homes, alienating them from domestic life and attenuating father-child bonds. Large cities and geographical mobility made it easier for fathers to leave their children and wives, boyfriends to refuse to marry, while migration left single mothers more often distant from kinfolk on whom they previously depended. As a result single motherhood has been a central concern for welfare designers since the 1880s.

Worry about single mothers and their children was a major influence on the development of modern welfare policy. Reformers designed programs intended not only to help lone mothers raise their children but also to prevent single motherhood by providing incentives for proper and stable families. The norms used in evaluating families involved, of course, deeply held values regarding appropriate male and female responsibilities. In the last century, the dominant family standard included a breadwinner husband/father and an economically dependent, domestic wife/mother. Although this standard was never an accurate description of most American families, it nevertheless guided most welfare designs. Aid to unemployed men, for example, aimed to preserve the male breadwinner status and to keep wives and children at home. Aid to single mothers aimed to prevent its recipients from being too comfortable on their own.

These family norms contributed to the stratification of welfare and to making programs for women inferior to programs for men. Provisions for men, such as workers' compensation, unemployment compensation, and retirement pensions, were more generous and dignified in design than ADC, the quintessential program for women. One might ask why women didn't get a program like Old-Age Insurance—respectable, reliable, nonstigmatizing, and financially adequate. Many feminists have understandably assumed that women were slotted into inferior programs because of "patriarchy" and men's monopoly on state power. But the fact is that ADC was designed by women and indeed by feminist women, champions of child

welfare. One of the ironies of welfare state development is that in the United States, where women exerted more influence on domestic social policy than in most other countries, female welfare clients (and children) were treated worse than in most other countries.

To explain this apparent paradox we need to consider the legacy of feminism. The feminists who dreamed up and promoted welfare programs in the early twentieth century were neither like contemporary feminists nor identical among themselves. In fact, in labeling them feminists I am making a historical claim with which some disagree. Some would circumscribe the term to refer only to those who struggled primarily for sex equality.⁵ I have been more comfortable with a broader definition: Feminism is a political perspective that considers women unjustly subordinated, finds that oppression to be humanly changeable, and strategizes for women's advancement. This definition takes in, for example, women and men who did not believe in total sex equality, believed women better off in a secondary role in politics and the market, but who agitated for greater respect and power for women in their proper sphere. This definition, in fact, recognizes feminism as a historically and contextually changing impulse with a core of continuity and expects nineteenth-century feminists to think differently than late-twentieth-century ones, urban working-class feminists to think differently than prosperous clubwomen. The breadth of this definition allows us to understand a wide variety of advocacy for women as part of a feminist legacy and heads off unproductive debates about "true" or "real" feminism.⁶ The definition thus includes many who did not call themselves feminists and who may never have heard the term, which was invented only in this century. But this is how language works—we frequently use neologisms to illuminate the past. With a historical understanding of feminism as a living, changing legacy, we will be able to see that the design of AFDC is not so much a paradox as a legacy of historical change and complexity.



Historian Michael Ignatieff has characterized welfare policy in modern states in terms of the "needs of strangers."⁷ This phrase can remind us that aid and mutual aid are harder to organize and justify among strangers than among intimates. Calamities (earthquakes, riots, toxic spills) may stimulate some to offer shelter, food, or even