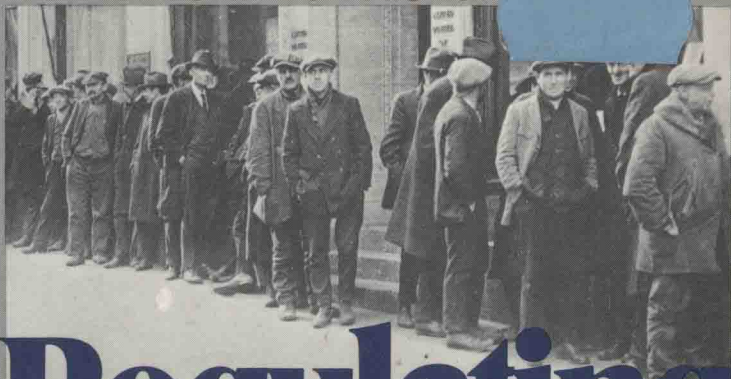
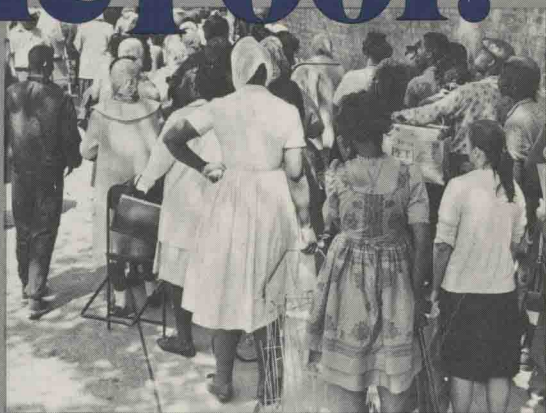


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Frances Fox Piven • Richard A. Cloward



Regulating the Poor:



The Functions of Public Welfare

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FRANCES FOX PIVEN &
RICHARD A. CLOWARD

Regulating the Poor

THE FUNCTIONS OF PUBLIC WELFARE



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Regulating the Poor

THE FUNCTIONS OF PUBLIC WELFARE

DEDICATED

TO

the welfare protest movement that arose in the 1960's;

and to its leader,

George A. Wiley

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about relief-giving and its uses in regulating the political and economic behavior of the poor. Our object is not so much to describe the public welfare system (as relief-giving is known in the United States), for that has been done often enough. Rather, we seek to explain why relief arrangements exist, and why—from time to time—the relief rolls precipitously expand or contract.

The key to an understanding of relief-giving is in the functions it serves for the larger economic and political order, for relief is a secondary and supportive institution. Historical evidence suggests that relief arrangements are initiated or expanded during the occasional outbreaks of civil disorder produced by mass unemployment, and are then abolished or contracted when political stability is restored. We shall argue that expansive relief policies are designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms. In other words, relief policies are cyclical—liberal or restrictive depending on the problems of regulation in the larger society with which government must contend. Since this view clearly belies the popular supposition that government social policies, including relief policies, are becoming progressively more responsible, humane, and generous, a few words about this popular supposition and its applicability to relief are in order.

There is surely no gainsaying that the role of government has expanded in those domestic matters called “social welfare.” One has only to look at the steadily increasing expenditures by local, state, and national governments

for programs in housing, health care, education, and the like. These expenditures have been prompted by the repercussions that result when such matters as housing or health care are left entirely to the untrammelled forces of the marketplace. Decisions that are reasonable to the profit-maker are obviously not necessarily reasonable to the various groups that are affected, and they may demand that government intervene to protect them. Moreover, once governmental action is inaugurated, the groups who benefit become a supporting constituency and press for further gains. But most such social welfare activity has not greatly aided the poor, precisely because the poor ordinarily have little influence on government. Indeed, "social welfare" programs designed for other groups frequently ride roughshod over the poor, as when New Deal agricultural subsidies resulted in the displacement of great numbers of tenant farmers and sharecroppers, or when urban renewal schemes deprived blacks of their urban neighborhoods.

However, some social welfare programs *do* benefit those at the bottom of the economic order. The most important examples are old-age pensions and unemployment insurance. As the industrial market system became dominant in Western countries, it was less necessary that everyone work; some people, such as the aged, gradually became economically obsolete and were permitted to drop out of the labor force. Moreover, the vagaries of the market system made it desirable that governments institute a buffer against temporary unemployment, such as unemployment insurance.

Although old-age pension and unemployment insurance schemes in the West have improved over time, and to that extent confirm the popular view that the policies of "welfare capitalism" are becoming more responsive and responsible, access to these benefits has not been unconditional. Generally speaking, eligibility for pensions or unemployment insurance is established through the occupational role, and can actually be obtained only if the individual is

certified as unneeded in the labor force, whether because of old age or retrenchment. Moreover, some occupations which draw on unskilled and low-wage workers (e.g., many agricultural workers and domestic servants in the United States) have been denied the benefits of these insurance schemes. These workers are left to get what they can from the relief system. In any case, even those certified as unneeded in the labor force have generally been maintained at such low levels of income as to suggest that social insurance programs are not fully free of the taint of being a form of relief.

As for relief programs themselves, the historical pattern is clearly not one of progressive liberalization; it is rather a record of periodically expanding and contracting relief rolls as the system performs its two main functions: maintaining civil order and enforcing work. This general interpretation is elaborated in Chapter 1, with illustrations drawn from other countries and earlier historical periods.

The bulk of the book deals with the contemporary American public welfare system. There have been two major relief explosions in the United States—the first during the Great Depression of the 1930's and the second during the affluent years of the 1960's. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the rise of mass disorder and the launching of the first national relief programs during the Great Depression, as well as on the consequences that giving relief had for the control of disorder. In Chapters 4 and 5, we show how, during the relatively stable years of the 1940's and 1950's, relief arrangements were designed to reinforce work norms. Finally, in Chapters 6 through 10, we take up the economic sources of the civil disorder that broke out and spread during the 1960's and that resulted in a great upsurge in the relief rolls, especially after 1964.

The argument that relief programs are initiated to deal with dislocations in the work system that lead to mass disorder, and are then retained (in an altered form) to enforce work, is not a familiar one. Considering that a not in-

considerable literature has been written on the subject of relief, the unfamiliarity of this idea merits explanation.

Those who write about relief are usually enmeshed in the relief system, either as its ideologues or as its administrators. Understandably enough, they are strained to justify the system, although they may identify flaws in it. (Indeed, administrative critiques—from those of George Nichols, head of the Royal Poor Law Commission in 1934, to those of Daniel Moynihan, Presidential Adviser on welfare matters—constitute the bulk of the relief literature.) Most writers view the system as shaped by morality—by their good intentions, or by the mistaken intentions of others. Consequently, the economic and political functions of relief-giving have not been clearly seen. Indeed, much of the literature on relief—whether the arid moralisms and pieties of nineteenth-century writers or the ostensibly “value-neutral” analyses of twentieth-century professionals and technicians—merely serves to obscure the central role of relief agencies in the regulation of marginal labor and in the maintenance of civil order.

Some insights about the larger functions of the relief system are available from historians who have studied relief systems in the course of explaining a larger train of historical developments. We refer the reader particularly to Polanyi, Trevelyan, the Hammonds, and the Webbs. The advantages of the historian's perspective are obvious. For one, the very scope of events that fall within the range of historical inquiry tends to suggest connections between relief practices and larger social institutions that have generally escaped notice by students of relief. For another, the historian ordinarily has some distance from the institutions of which he writes, and is not strained to justify them. Even so, while some historians have pointed to a particular use or abuse of relief at a particular time and place, none has undertaken to generalize the functions of relief as an institution. It is that task which we set for ourselves.

One disclaimer ought to be entered at the outset. We

have already suggested that relief-giving is partly designed to enforce work. Our argument, however, is not against work. We take it for granted that all societies require productive contributions from most of their members, and that all societies develop mechanisms to ensure that those contributions will be made. In the market economy, the giving of relief is one such mechanism. But much more should be understood of this mechanism than merely that it reinforces work norms. It also goes far toward defining and enforcing the terms on which different classes of men are made to do different kinds of work; relief arrangements, in other words, have a great deal to do with maintaining social and economic inequities. The indignities and cruelties of the dole are no deterrent to indolence among the rich; but for the poor man, the specter of ending up on "the welfare" or in "the poorhouse" makes any job at any wage a preferable alternative. And so the issue is not the relative merit of work itself; it is rather how some men are made to do the harshest work for the least reward.

November 1, 1970

*Frances Fox Piven
Richard A. Cloward*

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Regulating the Poor

THE FUNCTIONS OF PUBLIC WELFARE

CHAPTER

1

Relief, Labor, and Civil Disorder: An Overview

Since the early sixteenth century, many Western governments have come to make provision for the care of the destitute, often known as poor relief. (In the United States, such provisions are now called public assistance or public welfare.) The purpose of this chapter is to suggest why relief arrangements are established, and why they persist.

Relief arrangements are ancillary to economic arrangements. Their chief function is to regulate labor, and they do that in two general ways. First, when mass unemployment leads to outbreaks of turmoil, relief programs are ordinarily initiated or expanded to absorb and control enough of the unemployed to restore order; then, as turbulence subsides, the relief system contracts, expelling those who are needed to populate the labor market. Relief also performs a labor-regulating function in this shrunken state, however. Some of the aged, the disabled, the insane, and others who are of no use as workers are left on the relief rolls, and their treatment is so degrading and punitive as to instill in the laboring masses a fear of the fate that awaits them should they relax into beggary and pauperism. To demean and punish those who do not work is to exalt by