

From whence cometh this Welfare consensus? US welfare policy discourse as class warfare in the 1980s and 1990s

US welfare
policy
discourse as
class warfare

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the ideological narratives which came to comprise a new welfare consensus in the USA and subsequently a welfare state which was more fiscally austere, demeaning, and coercive. It also explores the role of the political and financial restructuring which facilitated the implementation of retrogressive reforms.

Design/methodology/approach – Macro-level historical forces are investigated through various texts such as policy statements, journal articles, press releases, political addresses, congressional transcripts and testimony, archived papers, newspaper articles, and occasional sound bites and popular culture references pertaining to welfare and which have come to construct the common understanding of it.

Findings – The formation of this consensus was due in part to three factors: first, the growth of and increased influence of an elite policy planning network; second, welfare program administration and financing had been decentralized which allowed greater autonomy of state and local governments to implement their own retrogressive reforms; and third, there emerged an overarching discourse and paradigm for structuring policy and explaining the causes of poverty which emphasized individual behavior.

Originality/value – This paper focusses on the materialization of the contemporary welfare consensus during the 1980s and 1990s in terms of its ideological and political history and on its persistence which has affected the ensuing policy culture and which continues to constrain anti-poverty policy discourse as well as what can be accomplished legislatively. The paper is of value for for readers, fields, courses with work that encompasses an examination of political and social theory, ideology, social policy, power/hegemony, poverty, inequality, families, gender, race, and meaning making institutions.

Keywords Power, Politics, Ideology, Welfare state, Social stratification

Paper type Research paper

We have to replace the welfare state with an opportunity society. It is impossible to take the Great Society structure of bureaucracy, the redistributionist model of how wealth is acquired and the counterculture value system that now permeates the way we deal with the poor, and have any hope of fixing them. They are a disaster. They ruin the poor, they create a culture of poverty and a culture of violence which is destructive of this civilization, and they have to be replaced thoroughly from the ground up (Newt Gingrich's Closing Remarks in the *Contract with America*) (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 189).



Introduction

The above quotation captures almost perfectly the fusion of disparate conservative philosophies which informs the “neoconservative persuasion,” as Irving Kristol (2003, p. 2) once called it, on the issue of welfare. It simultaneously reinforces the *laissez-faire* fetish of opportunity, evokes the neocon disparagement of the leftist counterculture, and conjures

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up the traditional conservative emphasis of civilization being in crisis and the behavioral/cultural otherness of the poor by evoking the culture of poverty. It encapsulates quite succinctly the contemporary welfare consensus. The USA, unlike most advanced capitalist societies, has not maintained an extensive social safety net. There are many explanations for this fact of American exceptionalism. For many, it is safe to take it for granted as part of the culture and legacy of rugged individuals who bravely pulled themselves up from nothing to carve out their existence along and beyond the untamed frontier. For others, it represents a superior arrangement – more lean than the comparably massive European-style welfare states – with an emphasis on self-sufficiency, productivity, and hard work. The findings of this project will contribute to demythologizing such ideology. Rather than uncritically accepting such narratives, a fundamental premise here is that the prevailing ideologies about welfare have been developed in a rather complex and particular context. It is not simply a product of the frontier ethic, that Americans intrinsically appreciate hard work, or that everyone knows welfare produces idleness and malaise.

This consensus is steeped in ideology and is the product of a particular historical confluence of economic, political, and social currents. Understanding how intellectuals and various interest groups shaped the discourse around the economic role of the state, welfare, work, family, and personal responsibility, in the 1980s and 1990s is crucial if we want to comprehend the narrow parameters which constrain official political discourse around these issues today. These decades represent the period leading up to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 but also a period in which an emergent social policy narrative was calcified as orthodoxy in the public consciousness and within formal policy circles. The period chosen is also significant given that by the 1960s, capital's strategy of placating labor since the postwar period and its tacit acceptance of an expanding social welfare system since the enactment of the New Deal would begin to show signs of fray. The political activation and engagement of capital around these matters would be in full-swing by the early 1970s, as is reflected in the solidification of the network of conservative, pro-capital policy planning organizations during this period. That there was a corresponding shift in opinion accompanied by an increase in the frequency of press coverage which often sensationalized the challenges associated with welfare is well documented (Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, 1959-1980; New York Times Index, 1959-1980; Vanderbilt Television News Archive, 1968-1980). Generally, such narratives, instead of taking shape as reasoned discussion about conditions related to the economy, residential displacement, demographic changes, and the transforming American family structure, were being framed in terms of individual behavior and work ethic, ethnic and racial identity, declining sexual morality and loss of tradition, and family disorganization (Abramovitz, 1996; Gilens, 1999).

Newt Gingrich, in his concluding remarks in the *Contract with America* wrote, "What is ultimately at stake in our current environment is literally the future of American civilization" (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 182). He emphasized that civilization is not possible "with twelve-year-olds having babies" (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 182). This is a peculiar observation to be made, because the thought of there being a welter of 12-year-olds giving birth is truly disconcerting. However, based on National Vital Statistics Reports, such births are a tiny proportion of total births in a given year, and even a very small portion of births to teen mothers (Menacker *et al.*, 2004). This is not so much the point, however. The point is to illustrate that the drive toward reform and the tide of opinion, for both elites and non-elites, were developing in a discursive environment designed to

scare the populace and were informed by half-baked analysis and compelling but unsubstantiated narratives about “destructive social behavior” and the “disaster” of the welfare system (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, pp. 65, 189).

The causes of poverty, living standard of the poor, and levels of relief dispersed through government channels were presented in a manner which was conceptually flawed and misleading. While divisive and inaccurate, these ideas came to constitute a new American welfare consensus, and subsequently, welfare state, which was more fiscally austere, demeaning, and coercive. While this paper addresses primarily the ideological narratives which came to comprise this new consensus and the political and financial restructuring (in the form of devolution) which facilitated the implementation of retrogressive reforms, neither the narratives would have become compelling nor the process of devolution feasible if it were not for the economic decline which destabilized the social and economic well-being of the middle and working class. This deteriorated socio-economic stability is significant for this account, but is not addressed in detail here. Rather, three crucial, though attendant, factors are addressed. First, this period saw the growth and increased influence of an elite policy planning network – those intellectuals and interest groups who helped shape policy discourse and affect legislative outcomes. Second, welfare program administration and financing had been decentralized which allowed greater autonomy of state and local governments to implement their own reforms. This often included state-level policy “innovations” which were more austere and harsh than could be legally done on the federal level. Finally, there emerged an overarching paradigm for explaining the causes of poverty and structuring policy which emphasized individual behavior. This paradigm is referred to here as a paternalistic problem solving approach which identifies the origins of poverty as rooted in behavioral deficiencies and the best policy strategies as those which set out to discipline target populations either through the market or direct administrative sanctions.

These three factors are crucially interconnected. The policy planning network helped shape public attitudes about both the worthiness of the poor as well as about devolution as a viable strategy. Moreover, devolution became a way to justify austerity as well as to experiment with more dehumanizing and draconian ways of framing and managing the problem. This was impacted by and in turn helped reinforce the paternalistic framework which placed emphasis on the supposedly pathological behavior of the needy which further stigmatized the American welfare poor and justified the measures mentioned above and discussed below.

While these issues have been covered before, this paper focusses on the materialization of the contemporary welfare consensus during the 1980s and 1990s in terms of its ideological and political history and on its persistence which has affected the ensuing policy culture and which continues to constrain anti-poverty policy discourse as well as what can be accomplished legislatively. While the period studied here more or less wraps up with the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill in the USA, the contemporary situation is briefly considered in the conclusion of the paper. Offered here is a contribution to the larger policy studies discussion, one which attempts to clarify the systemic necessity and content of ideological practice in order to shed light on the logic, meaning, and objectives of contemporary welfare state discourse in relation to the ethos and requirements of late capitalism. This paper is a detailed story about a particular dimension of power and the means by which it has reproduced itself in the USA – specifically, in light of the emergence of the contemporary welfare consensus. It details that process in terms of the imperative and internal logic of late capitalism’s

survival and through unfolding the meaning and tensions bound up in the relevant texts and rationale of the corresponding political institutions and corresponding conditions which contributed to dispersing those ideas and which gradually helped restructure the American political culture to one which is hostile toward welfare.

A note on methodology

The emergence of this new consensus and corresponding process of political and financial devolution are explored by articulating macro-level systems and transformations with a micro-analytical critique of ideology to understanding the shifting fields of opinion related to welfare state discourse and how they function to reproduce structures of power in contemporary society. These macro-level processes are clarified through an analysis of various types of texts such as policy statements, journal articles, political addresses, books of influence, primary and secondary source interviews, congressional transcripts and testimony, legislation, and newspaper and magazine articles pertaining to what we call welfare and which have contributed to producing our common understanding of it. That is, the particularities of the texts studied are located within their larger contexts to help clarify the formation of the new welfare consensus. This is not at all to assume that there is a seamless unification between macro- and micro-level phenomena (here, larger attitude structures and particular ideological productions, respectively). Rather, the contradictory, yet mutually determinative relation between these two realms of sociality reflects the nature of the social world itself. Instead, apparently unified realities are interrogated so that their constituent and contradictory particularities may be better understood, unpacked, and contextualized. In other words, the new welfare consensus is not immanently validated (i.e. taken for granted).

There are some concepts and procedures presented in this paper which may require some clarification. The term ideology denotes an idea structure which naturalizes and de-historicizes social patterns and processes. Of particular interest here is how ideology grips the “minds of the masses” becoming a “material force,” as Stuart Hall (1986/2005, p. 27) has described. Ideology is therefore not identified as something simply derived from material economic forces but simultaneously constitutive and derivative of them. It is seen as possessing a material basis in reality but a reality already impregnated by ideology. Discourse, relatedly, refers to social practices, such as speech acts and media representations, which reproduce ideological structures. The intellectuals, ideas, and organizations studied were selected based on a review of work which identified people and institutions which were instrumental in unifying the conservative movement and advancing its ideals (e.g. that of George H. Nash, Irving Kristol, and Murray Rothbard). Such work includes memoir passages, articles, a posthumously made available monograph, intellectual history, etc. Such observers, themselves influential conservative thinkers, have provided their own accounts of who it was that influenced their perspectives on these issues and shaped the opinions and strategies the larger movement would employ going forward.

Not “Some Kind of PhD Committee”

Conservative and pro-capital think tanks played an essential role in the formation of the new welfare consensus. They were important producers of ideas, but also of a workforce of intellectuals and an infrastructure in which they could seize a larger share of power within the economy of ideas. By the late 1970s, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) was quickly expanding its influence, and between 1978 and 1981 it

began to compete with the moderately conservative Brookings Institution for the distinction of being DC's most influential think tank. It became a revolving door for those who had concrete experience in government and others who had specialized in academic research. Gerald Ford, after losing the 1976 election to Jimmy Carter, had become the AEI's "Distinguished Fellow" (American Enterprise Institute, 2009, p. 5; Smith, 1991, p. 179). Ford had brought with him many colleagues who would situate themselves within the growing network of conservative research institutes (Peschek, 1987; Smith, 1991). Among those who would reenter government were Arthur Berns, Antonin Scalia, Laurence Silberman, Robert Bork, and Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute, 2009; Peschek 1987; Smith 1991). In fact, over 30 AEI recruits had served as officials in senior government posts during Reagan's presidency (Peschek, 1987; Smith, 1991). Irving Kristol had made the AEI his Washington center of operations and was acting as a broker between conservative funders and the expanding pro-capital, conservative policy planning network (Smith, 1991; Kristol, 1995). Kristol, along with General Electric's chairman, Reginald Jones, and the former chairman of General Motors, Thomas Murphy, oversaw the fundraising for the AEI, having raised nearly \$60 million and establishing a board of directors, which counted among its membership executives from Chase Manhattan, Standard Oil, Hewlett-Packard, and Citicorp (Peschek, 1987; Post 1996; Smith, 1991). The AEI's ability to coordinate and financially mobilize American capitalists was evident in both its governing structure and funding sources (Post, 1996). In the years leading up to PRWORA, backing from corporate sources composed a majority of the institution's total funding. In 1993, corporate contributions made up 39 percent and corporate foundations 38 percent of its annual revenue (Post, 1996). In 1994, the AEI received 41 percent of its annual revenue from corporate donors while another 41 percent came from corporate foundations (Post, 1996). The great majority of the AEI's trustees (28 out of 30) were corporate executives from the Fortune 1000, including executives from ALCOA, AT&T, Motorola, and Dow Chemical (Post, 1996). Charles Murray, infamous co-author of *The Bell Curve*, was then a resident fellow at the AEI, and he and Douglas Besharov would emerge as the organization's leading thinkers in the area of poverty and welfare (American Enterprise Institute, 2009).

A major vehicle of the research organizations for making ideas viral, so to speak, was the release and exhaustive promotion of books. Books have played an important informative and organizational role in bestowing political and scientific credibility to the researchers and institutions working to shape the discourse on poverty and welfare. As Smith (1991, p. 193) has pointed out, "A book endows its author with credibility to speak on a particular subject and perhaps supplies the visibility that will one day lead to a political appointment." So whether or not policy makers and elected officials have time to read the myriad books and reports produced, the argument put forth in a book is more likely to enter the field of welfare ideology, since books tend to be reviewed, covered in editorials and broadcast interviews, and addressed in op-ed pieces and magazine articles (Smith, 1991). Books receive consideration in briefings and lectures, and policy analyst-authors often provide legislative testimony and are cited in newspaper articles when "expert" opinions are sought by reporters (Smith, 1991). Even in today's digitized world, Charles Murray's latest book release, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, was preceded by a lengthy editorial in the Wall Street Journal by Murray himself as well as an appearance on the leftish, tongue-in-cheek, political commentary program, *The Colbert Report*, where he promoted the work and defended his past, controversial books. The authors of books gain

credibility and therefore access. Limited but much hyped excerpts from the Heritage Foundation's (HF's) forthcoming *Mandate for Leadership* were "leaked" to the press with reporters competing over them (Smith, 1991, p. 196). The strategy was effective, and when the wire-service articles appeared, the HF was "inundated with requests" from other press outlets (Smith, 1991, p. 196). The vital role of books was demonstrated perhaps most unabashedly with the *Mandate*, which was produced exclusively to steer the policy agenda of the incoming Reagan presidency and because of the notoriety of the organization, was given enthusiastic reception. Another illustration of this was the close partnership between Gingrich *et al.* and the HF in the production of the *Contract with America*, the Republican policy manifesto which was a decisive text in driving the legislative welfare reform agenda in the mid-1990s.

As Nash (1998, p. 337) had observed, it was not so much academic works, *per se*, that helped the right gain a foothold in the burgeoning economy of ideas in the 1980s and 1990s but instead an "applied conservatism" which had transformed the American political culture and intellectual landscape. While the AEI was becoming increasingly academic and hanging back from overtly affecting policy, the HF had taken a more aggressive and strategic position. Though specific conservative ideas were quite relevant in this effort, a vice president of the HF had recalled that so too was the intensity of the effort to reach out to policy makers "with arguments to bolster our side; [...] we're not troubled over this" (Easterbrook, 1986, p. 39). He explained that the HF had taken the role of advocacy seriously, "We're not here to be some kind of Ph.D. committee giving equal time" (Easterbrook, 1986, p. 39). By the late 1980s, conservative research institutions and publications were numerous, with 288 conservative public policy organizations accounted for in the HF's first *Directory of Public Policy Organizations* (Nash, 1998; Peschek, 1987; Smith, 1991). Therefore, empowering the transition from disseminated ideas to decisive gains in the pursuit of political and cultural influence was the more aggressive "collaboration between conservative intellectuals and like minded politicians" (Smith, 1991; Nash, 1998, p. 335). Understanding how to appeal to a wider audience and more easily utilize media to generate attention and controversy around particular issues and events was vital (Smith, 1991; Nash, 1998). Pine informed Smith (1991, p. 206) that, "The staff uses its expertise to mobilize arguments. They are advocates. [...] We make it clear to them that they are not joining an academic organization but one committed to certain beliefs. We tell them that they will write papers with a format that is not for a professional peer group."

The HF, while its resident scholars had written numerous books, had other ways to participate in the public dialogue. These "shock troops [...] of conservative policymaking" were producing frequent small pieces under the titles "special report," "executive memorandum," "lecture," "backgrounder," or "issue bulletin" (Smith, 1991, p. 206; Heritage Foundation). The lectures were the transcriptions of speeches delivered by various conservative luminaries, with Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, Russell Kirk, Newt Gingrich, and Ronald Reagan being included among the esteemed lecturers through the 1980s. HF founder, Edwin Feulner was among those delivering frequent talks, often on the subject of shaping the political culture and opinion, with one lecture titled, "Waging and Winning the War of Ideas" (Feulner, 1986). Several of these small "papers" were on the topic of welfare reform, as were articles in the HF journal, *Policy Review*. Any innovation on the federal level, shy of scaling back or eliminating programs, was seen as contributing to a logic of big government, with the welfare system as part of that logic. One of the principal planners of Reagan's California welfare reform strategy was Charles D. Hobbs (1978a),

who served as his Chief Deputy Director of Social Welfare from 1970-1972. In a 1978 *Policy Review* article, he criticized Carter's reform plan as "another welfare industry plan, designed to meet industry goals" (Hobbs, 1978b, p. 69). Hobbs (1978b, p. 69) saw the four goals of "the welfare industry" as growth in expenditures at a faster rate than the national economy; centralization of administration and control over the welfare system in the federal government; greater complexity of the organization and operation of government programs; and "ever-expanding" the workforce of welfare industry workers. According to Hobbs' (1978b) account, the objective of any sufficient welfare reform plan should be to undo the welfare industry's goals, which puts the reforms implemented in California under Reagan in an important context.

The Reagan devolution

The strategy of decentralizing welfare program administration and financing, i.e. increasing the autonomy of state and local governments to implement their own reforms and fund them, was as much a political strategy as it was financial. This process functioned as an essential mechanism for testing and implementing reforms articulated through the policy planning network. It squeezed state and local government funds and fostered resentment toward welfare populations. This further validated behavioral explanations for poverty which blames victims for their socio-economic circumstances, which is a constituent aspect of the new welfare consensus. It took ideas, implemented them within state and local contexts, and ultimately influenced provisions in federal legislation, including the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 and PRWORA. The encouragement of waivers from federal requirements in the administration of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was a driving force behind the eventual elimination of AFDC as an entitlement (Law, 1983; Rector, 1987; Wiseman, 1993). In California, under Reagan's gubernatorial administration, the Spring of 1971 saw major changes in that state's welfare programs which would resurface in the 1981 Social Security Act amendments and the FSA. According to Hobbs (1975/2005, p. 102), Reagan had "cleaned up" California's "federally created welfare mess" by identifying a group of deserving poor or "truly needy" and restricting benefits for that target population while requiring those who were "undeserving" of a social wage to either get a paying job or work for their benefits. In five years, there were approximately 400,000 fewer welfare recipients in California (Hobbs, 1975/2005). Similarly, the main goal of the 1981 amendments to the Social Security Act was to force those on welfare into the labor market (Law, 1983). With the gradual decline in the federal government's role in financing AFDC and the increasing responsibility of state and local financing of the program, there were unavoidable pressures to keep benefits low (Law, 1983). Looking back in 1973 on his accomplishments as governor, Reagan (1973/2005, p. 63) saw welfare reform as possibly his "greatest success." A major attribute of this "success" was the shift in the financial burden for health and welfare services from the state to the counties (Law, 1983). As pressures from their new responsibility to administer and fund welfare programs were escalating, municipalities were cutting benefits and services and raising taxes (Law, 1983). This contributed to California's growing anti-tax environment and inflamed frustrations about welfare and poverty. The property tax revolt realized through the now infamous 1978 California Proposition 13 which placed a cap on property taxes, was in part generated by these pressures (Law, 1983). Similar pressures would evoke reactionary consequences across the states as attitudes were changing to reflect a proliferating reactionary individualism.

Between July 1987 and October 1988, the Interagency Low-Income Opportunity Advisory Board was active in promoting the submission of proposals by states for welfare reform and demonstration projects (Fishman and Weinberg, 1993). The purpose of the initiative was to address the problems cited in Reagan's 1986 State of the Union Address, which addressed poverty and the "breakdown of the family" taking place within the "welfare culture" (quoted in Fishman and Weinberg, 1993, p. 115). Expressing full support of the Reagan program of decentralizing the administration and financing of welfare programs, an HF "policy document" declared that states were "the cutting edge of welfare policy," and that their further exploration of new strategies was being restricted by the federal government (Butler *et al.*, 1988, pp. vii-viii, 224). Consistent with Hobbs' prescriptions for combating the "welfare industry," Issues '88 called for decentralizing welfare decision making by allowing states to request waivers from current rules so that they could alter, combine, or enhance existing programs (Butler, *et al.* 1988).

Reagan signed the FSA into law in October of 1988. In his remarks, he celebrated that the word "family" figured "prominently in the title" of the legislation (Reagan, 1988, p. 2). Explicitly crediting his 1971 "workfare" initiative in California, Reagan (1988, p. 4) emphasized that the primary challenge for which "individuals in the welfare system" must accept "responsibility" is a "new emphasis on the importance of work." There was debate and failed legislation prior to the final passage of the FSA. While the FSA would incorporate work requirements and training, the HF was highly critical of the act in that it did not cut benefits or go far enough in its behavioral enforcement. Robert Rector (1987, p. 2) of the HF said of the proposals by Moynihan prior to the final FSA that it replicated "virtually every mistake in welfare policy of the past two decades." While Moynihan, had incorporated "popular conservative rhetoric," Rector (1987, p. 2) complained that "eligibility was actually expanded, benefits had been raised, work requirements were "effectively barred," new services and programs were added, and expensive training programs, which he argued had not worked in the past, were wrongly proposed to end dependence. Rector's assertions were overstated, and in the case of "barred" work requirements, untrue.

The debates in the House of Representatives leading up to the bill were revealing in terms of how the political culture and discourse had come to reject structural understandings of poverty and widely embrace explanations which directly implicated individual behavior in punitive and hostile language. Proposed legislative provisions leading up to the passing of the FSA were in fact replicating much of what conservatives had been praising in the state demonstrations, especially work and training requirements. Moynihan, the FSA's sponsor, had denounced that an earlier version of the bill called the Family Welfare Reform Act had fallen "before a coalition of those who thought the benefits were too great and those who thought them too little" (US Congress Senate, 1988, p. 52). With minor equivocation, Moynihan had praised President Reagan's assessment of "family policy" in his January 1988 State of the Union Address, and quoted him, saying that welfare "created a poverty trap" that had wreaked "havoc on the very support system" needed most by the poor "to lift themselves out of poverty – the family" (US Congress Senate, 1988, p. 4). He had an especially enthusiastic response to the importance Reagan had placed on the state demonstration programs revolving around work and child support enforcement (US Congress Senate, 1988, p. 6). Among the state governors who had proposed reform to the Finance Committee in the previous year was then Chairman of the National Governors Association (NGA) and Arkansas Governor, Bill Clinton (US Congress Senate, 1988). The NGA had made welfare reform its number one issue in 1987

(US Congress Senate, 1988). Praise for the earlier, proposed version targeted the need for reform and the focus on requiring work. Despite some faint concerns about lack of jobs and insufficient funding for childcare, opposition to the proposed legislation expressed that it did not go far enough, limited state “flexibility in designing work programs,” or was not “true structural reform” (US Congress Senate, 1988, p. 174, 427).

Representative Marge Roukema of New Jersey captured the political mood regarding welfare restructuring in her language and opposition to the proposed bill. She asserted that because of a lack of punitive consequences to poverty, the bill would count among its “perverse effects” making welfare and staying on it “attractive” (US Congress House of Representatives, 1987, p. 63). To explain, she argued that the provision in the bill permitting a poor mother with a child aged three or younger to not work or take training was unreasonable since in reality, most mothers with young children work and are forced to find childcare” (US Congress House of Representatives, 1987). She continued to explain her concerns, pointing out that welfare mothers could just “continue to have a child every 2 years and never have to work at all” (US Congress House of Representatives, 1987, p. 63). Roukema also considered the work waiver for welfare mothers enrolled in college full-time as unfair, using the same litmus test as her other plaint: “[...] The reason this provision is egregious is that hundreds of thousands of people are currently working their way through school” (US Congress House of Representatives, 1987, p. 71). She forcefully charged, “How much longer do you think the two-worker couple will tolerate the welfare state and its costs to them in taxes to support that welfare mother?” This discursive confluence of extolling the harsh discipline of the market and calling for the greater moral fortitude of the poor had solidly become part of an overarching policy paradigm. Its logic assumes that maximizing the common level of hardship in the society serves as a mechanism for encouraging virtue. Using such logic to determine how much the state should intervene to alleviate poverty is based on the premise that if most of the non-affluent are struggling, then conditions should not be improved beyond that level for the very destitute. Legitimizing injurious consequences of capitalism in economic and political discourse by fostering intra-class resentment on moral grounds is observably nothing new. Marx noted this dynamic in his 1,844 manuscripts when he referred to political economy as “the most moral of all the sciences” (Marx, 1927/1978, p. 95). Others like Representative Steve Gunderson from Wisconsin and Bill Emerson of Missouri echoed similar concerns to Roukema. Capturing the opposition to the earlier version of the bill, they criticized that work requirements were not strong enough and that the bill lacked real reform and would perpetuate dependency (US Congress House of Representatives, 1987).

The FSA sustained the purpose and structure of Title IV of the Social Security Act, which authorized federal grants to states to provide AFDC benefits as per the conditions necessitating their distribution (Fishman and Weinberg, 1993; Social Security Administration, 2009). Among other things, the Act established the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program which required able-bodied welfare recipients with children age three or over (age one or over at the discretion of the state) to go to school, receive job training, or work (Fishman and Weinberg, 1993). While not to the extent desired by the administration, it authorized numerous studies and state demonstration projects which later informed the rationale and provisions of the 1996 welfare reform legislation (Fishman and Weinberg, 1993). The springboard for this series of policy changes and the increasingly explicit focus on behavior, mainly dependency, family breakup, and employment, was the promotion of state experiments in workfare and job training through the 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (Wiseman, 1996).

No proposals were received after 1988, that is until George H.W. Bush's renewed push for state demonstrations in Fall 1991 (Fishman and Weinberg, 1993; Wiseman, 1993; Wiseman, 1996). A 1989 Backgrounder by the HF had called for President Bush to expand the authorization of waivers. The FSA had contained features similar to some of the state experiments, but not surprisingly the HF's Director of Domestic Policy Studies, Stuart Butler (1989), charged that the Act was insufficient. The Bush demonstrations focussed on several areas, but welfare-to-work was a key theme (Fishman and Weinberg, 1993). The explicit objectives of the Interagency Low-Income Opportunity Advisory Board were to reduce what had been framed as welfare dependency by getting people off welfare and into the labor market. A fundamental strategy in doing so was to decentralize the role of the federal government, or in the language of the board, "to create the proper climate for innovation giving states the broadest latitude to design and implement experiments in welfare policy" (Wiseman, 1996, p. 520). With the relentless, persistent, and reactionary attack on the social safety net (this included political figures in both major parties), the parameters framing acceptable discourse on welfare state policy were shifting rightward. "Moderate" or "centrist" analysis, therefore, had shifted to the right as well, giving rise to the "problem solving" paradigm (Wiseman, 1996, p. 521; Mead, 2009). This perspective took for granted the problematized status of the social wage as a right or entitlement. Given this, while the Democratic and Republican proposals seemed significantly distinct, they were constituted by two complementary attributes, both of which were necessary for the ultimate revocation of AFDC as an entitlement. One, that of the NGA proposals which eventually produced the FSA and ultimately the Clinton welfare proposals of 1994, was a conciliatory negation of the principles of the New Deal and was an effort by moderate Democrats to maintain political legitimacy in a decisively more conservative political culture. The other, the "avalanche of state welfare reform initiatives" which was ultimately followed by the Republican proposals outlined in the *Contract with America*, was a positive and explicit attack on those same principles (Wiseman, 1996, p. 521; Mead, 2009). This dynamic compelled so called progressives to implement a reform plan which, as David Ellwood has described, was less punitive but at the same time was "real" reform and "not rejected by most of the public" (Ellwood and Piven, 1996, p. 4). The steering of the debate by conservative policy analysts and organizations and the climate of opinion for both the populace and political elites ensured that both camps were merely two channels at a fork of the same socio-political current, bound to converge as they did in the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill.

The HF and a revitalized AEI understood that state demonstrations would facilitate the drive behind nationwide welfare reform. One of the AEI's leading welfare scholars in the 1990s likened devolution to grassroots reform (Besharov, 1996a). It constituted a "bottom-up revolution" where authority is devolved from the federal government to state governments, and responsibility is devolved "from local government to individuals, families, churches, and voluntary associations" (Besharov, 1996a, p. 1). The burden of mitigating social hardship had been increasingly transferred to state and local governments with mixed results. For example, heralded as a success of such a strategy was the moving of 113 of 165 shelter residents in Bell, California from joblessness into work in 1993, which was accomplished "by prohibiting sex, alcohol, and even provocative clothing" (Besharov, 1996a, p. 4). Truly illustrated here is the danger involved with decentralizing essential services. Not only may it encourage local and tailor-made "innovations" to accommodate particular issues, the stated purpose of such measures, but also it may spur the application of methods reflective of local or

institutional parochialism and practices which could create repressive circumstances for the target population.

Many of the innovations which were under way in 1991 included granting waivers for states with regard to eligibility requirements (Wiseman, 1993). The desired outcome was more strict eligibility in localized contexts as a testing ground for potentially larger-scale legislation. Many welfare recipients who had previously qualified for benefits under state law, were no longer eligible (Wiseman, 1993). Several states were implementing work requirements for welfare recipients, and the FSA would ultimately require all recipients who met the legislation's criteria to work. Bush had warned in his State of the Union Address of that year that welfare "must not become a narcotic and a subtle destroyer of the spirit. Welfare was never meant to be a lifestyle. It was never meant to be a habit. It was never supposed to be passed from generation to generation like a legacy" (Bush, 1992, p. A17). President Bush, by the end of his presidency, would follow the lead of Butler, Hobbs, and others who were advocating decentralization and the expansion of granting state waivers to curb "dependency." They generally consisted of more stringent welfare-to-work initiatives, but also included restricting or eliminating AFDC benefits for non-compliant recipients, time limits, and marriage incentives (Wiseman, 1993).

Enforcing good behavior ... for the poor

Moynihan, the FSA's sponsor continued to frame the issue of poverty in terms of behavior and the breakdown of the male-headed, two-parent family, in essence, never departing from the "tangle of pathology" rationale from his infamous 1965 report on the black family. During an address on the FSA in the Senate, he asserted that the "problems [of poor children] do not reside in nature, nor yet are they fundamentally economic. Our problems derive from behavior" (quoted in Fineman 1991/1997, p. 90). Reflecting on funding trends for AFDC after the FSA, Moynihan noted that the program had been reduced from 1967-1992 by 40 percent in real dollars (US Congress Senate, 1992). He attributed the reduction to the increased "focus [...] on behavior modification" (US Congress Senate, 1992, p. 96). He continued, "This concept was central to welfare reform, whose main objective, after all, is to modify recipient behavior so as to encourage self-sufficiency" (US Congress Senate, 1992, p. 96). In a March 1992 speech at the HF, Dr Louis Sullivan, President Bush's Secretary of Health and Human Services, directly cited Moynihan's comments from his 1990 remarks on the FSA in the Senate and connected child poverty with behavioral origins – single motherhood and welfare dependency (Sullivan, 1992). This paternalistic problem solving approach, the two-prong approach of enforcing "good behavior" by reducing program participation and explicitly requiring behavioral compliance in return for benefits, was instrumental in reinforcing the notion that poverty is caused by individual behavioral pathology and in weakening and ultimately ending the consensus that welfare should be a public entitlement. This rationale assumed that programs should be cut where specific behaviors considered desirable by policy elites could be enforced simply through the discipline of the market, and where the state could directly modify the behavior of the poor through program administration, such programs should be spared or even expanded.

An underlying theme in much of the research and commentary the years leading up to the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill, one which was by no means new, is that unfavorable attitudes toward entitlement programs are squarely entrenched in the unwavering American tradition of individualism, belief in personal responsibility, and hard work (Coughlin, 1980; Gilens, 1999). The flipside of this theme, is the premise that the

individual freedom and privilege conferred by economic security should not be extended to the welfare poor, as there is a set of expectations of the general public for “good behavior” among the destitute (Mead, 2009).

Murray’s (1984/1994, p. 146) framework certainly presumed a firm and fixed “popular wisdom” with “three core premises,” that people respond to incentives and disincentives, that they require such incentives to work hard and be moral, and that people must be held responsible for their individual actions. Similarly, Lawrence Mead (1986/2001, p. 3) has argued that there was “substantial agreement” with regard to the government’s role in helping the poor and its solution. The problem was that a “class of Americans, heavily poor and nonwhite, exists apart from the social mainstream [...] especially in schools, the workplace, and politics” (Mead, 1986/2001, p. 3). This problem manifested itself also in terms of reduced work and productivity, and not only among the underclass (Mead, 1986/2001, p. 3). The solution to this “social problem” was “integration” which was best achieved through attaching benefits with “serious work and other obligations,” achieving for the poor the same “balance of support and expectation that other Americans feel *outside* the welfare state” (Mead, 1986/2001, pp. 3-4; author’s italics). The poor will thus be integrated since dependency will be less likely to undercut either “social discipline” or “claims to equality” for underprivileged groups (Mead, 1986/2001, pp. 41-43). In a 1986 *New Republic* article, Mickey Kaus (now fairly well known for his blog, the “Kausfiles”) argued that “no one” who has been paying attention “can doubt that there is a culture of poverty out there” or think that a guaranteed social wage “can end the pathology.” Only through individual hard work, through a program “that expects women to work even if they have young children” would there be a “real chance of undermining the underclass” (Kaus, 1986, p. 10). Echoing Murray and others, the HF’s Robert Rector (1992, pp. 7-8) argued that there was an “emerging consensus” that the “incentive structure” for welfare needed to be reformed. He argued that the basic tools available for reforming welfare were reducing benefits for unemployed single mothers, requiring “able-bodied welfare recipients to work or perform community service,” and increasing financial incentives for “low-income working families” (Rector, 1992, pp. 7-8). Such revisions would reduce incentives for not working or becoming a single parent and would increase rewards for “marriage and work” (Rector, 1992, p. 7).

The focus on behavior was now ideology and not simply the domain of conservative analysts. Some of the leading policy intellectuals who had worked with the Clinton Administration, and who had even dissented with the administration on the direction the legislation was taking, also accepted, more or less, these basic principles of behavior and incentives and presumed their legitimacy based on a perceived public and political consensus supporting them. In *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family*, David Ellwood asserted, “The American public hates welfare” (Ellwood, 1988, p. 4). To illustrate this abrupt point, he explained that, “In 1984, according to a survey of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), some 41 percent of Americans thought we were spending too much on welfare” (Ellwood, 1988, p. 3). He continued later in that same chapter, “I believe the disdain for welfare reflects something much more fundamental than a lack of compassion or misinformation” (Ellwood, 1988, p. 4). Bane (1994/1996, p. 124) has argued that, “America’s aspirations for its welfare system have always included eliminating it.” Identifying the goals of welfare reform in the 1990s, she asserted that “a bold alternative to the current system” would be one which encourages work and makes welfare transitional (Bane, 1994/1996, p. 124). However, she presented a familiar caveat as Moynihan had 30 years before, that significant

reforms are difficult to implement. Thus, she conceded that features of the 1994 system – training programs, food stamps, and “short- and long-term assistance” – would have to remain (Bane, 1994/1996, p. 124). She argued that the difficulty in creating means-tested programs “truly compatible with the values of hard work and family responsibility” have led researchers and analysts “to advocate nonwelfare strategies as a long-run strategy” (Bane, 1994/1996, p. 125). The entitlement and means-tested programs which would inevitably be transformed forever, rather than presented as part of an important mechanism of maintaining a minimum living standard, were framed uncritically as a problem which needed to be solved with the right planning, evaluation, economic restructuring, and management. She therefore argued that rather than eliminating entitlements, “The welfare system could be made much more supportive of the goals of self-sufficiency and work” (Bane, 1994/1996, p. 125).

Blank (1997, p. 15) has rightly observed that analysis of “behavioral problems” of the poor has become prevalent. “Behavioral images particularly emphasize the ‘otherness’ of the poor, making it easy for middle America to feel little sympathy or connections with them” (Blank, 1997, p. 15). This emphasis on behavior reinforces the distinction of the worthy and unworthy poor, which has been an effective ideological impediment of the materialization of real, structural solutions to poverty and inequality in the USA. In his well-known book, *The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy*, Herbert Gans explored the consequences of the constructed otherness of the poor. He argued that the basic problem in helping the poor is the categorization of some individuals into the “undeserving” category (Gans, 1995, p. 74). American socio-economic distinctions make the situation worse by creating an environment where the poor are easily made into a class of threatening others to be feared and disdained by the public. This is why, he rightly argued, anti-welfare warriors have been able to score “symbolic triumphs” by “taking on welfare” [...]. Like any war, inhabitants of the combatant country have to become undeserving to become enemies” (Gans, 1995, p. 75).

The HF had remained active in contributing to the public policy discourse, with Robert Rector becoming its most prominent expert on welfare reform. He appeared frequently in media and numerous times before congressional committees. Like Murray, Mead, and others, he framed poverty in terms of individual behavior. However, he incorporated an additional dimension to his analysis of the poor, that they were not really as poor as Americans thought (Rector, 1990). In a 1990 HF report, he pointed out that the census data for 1989 will no doubt lead the press to focus on those who had been “left behind” as opposed to those whose conditions improved during the 1980s “economic recovery” (Rector, 1990, p. 283). Census data, he argued, had a tendency to understate the quality of life for the poor and overstate their “poverty,” which along with “poor” was a word he liked to put in quotes (Rector, 1990, p. 283). Replicating the errs of Murray’s widely cited overestimation of per capita public assistance, Rector (1990, p. 284) had incorporated in-kind benefits, like Medicaid, food stamps, and public housing into his judgment of how poor America’s “poor” really were. Such analysis is deliberately divisive and attempts to elicit indignation from members of the general public, especially the working and middle class whose strife and frustration can potentially be exploited and directed toward mean-spirited caricatures. In effect, Rector was contributing to the reconstruction of a 1990s version of Reagan’s infamous welfare queen.

In April 1992 testimony before the Domestic Task Force of the Select Committee on Hunger, Rector outlined his terminological distinction between “material poverty” and “behavioral poverty” (Rector, 1992, p. 1). After reiterating that poverty and hunger are

greatly overstated in the USA, he specified, "Material poverty means [...] having a family income below the official poverty income threshold" (Rector, 1992, p. 1). Rector continued, "'Behavioral poverty,' by contrast, refers to a breakdown in the values and conduct which lead to the formation of healthy families, stable personalities, and self-sufficiency." Ironically, the argument can logically be made (and more validly) that conceptually flawed and mean-spirited rhetoric which stigmatizes the poor has this same effect, demonstrating an impoverishment of policy analysis. He warned that, "While there may be little material poverty in the United States, behavioral poverty is abundant and growing" (Rector, 1992, p. 2). This, he argued, would warrant a conservative approach to welfare, one which presumed that "spending on most welfare programs actually has increased behavioral poverty" (Rector, 1992, p. 2). What was needed, he argued, was a "comprehensive welfare reform strategy" (Rector, 1992, p. 9). Comprehensive reform would entail reducing benefits, requiring work, requiring responsible behavior, enforcing education requirements, experimenting with "Wedfare," using tax credits or vouchers for medical coverage, and providing tax relief to all families with children (Rector, 1992, pp. 9-11). From 1988 to 1996, a LexisNexis search of news sources showed that he had been mentioned or cited as a welfare expert just over 500 times. In 1996 alone, he was cited on average more than 15 times per month (Ackerman, 1999). Charles Murray was cited 679 times by media outlets between 1988 and 1996, and both he and Rector were discussing outlays for welfare spending in very spurious terms (LexisNexis Database). In Congressional testimony in 1995, Rector claimed that the USA had spent \$5.3 trillion since the beginning of the War on Poverty, but his statistic included in-kind benefits and other programs which targeted non-AFDC households (Ackerman, 1999). In fact, 70 percent of the \$5.3 trillion went to "non-AFDC households with elderly, disabled or 'medically needy' individuals, as well as students and low-income workers," groups not typically associated with "welfare" (Ackerman, 1999, p. 3).

The retaking of the House by the GOP in 1994 was eagerly anticipated by members of conservative and pro-capital lobbying groups and think tanks. Euphorically, within the network of lobbying and research institutions, predictions of retrogressive reform were made. Conservative policy analysts were optimistic about the possibility of a significant rollback in entitlement programs, something they had been advocating for a long time (Dowd and Marmon, 1994). Heritage representatives had given congressional testimony 11 times in just the first three weeks of the 104th Congress and contributed substantially in shaping the *Contract with America*. The *Contract with America* clearly defined the problem with "government programs," which it acknowledged were "designed to give a helping hand to the neediest of Americans" (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 65). Instead, it was argued, they have "bred illegitimacy, crime, illiteracy, and more poverty" (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 65). The book vowed that a welfare reform bill, the Personal Responsibility Act, would be proposed to "attack illegitimacy, require welfare recipients to work, and cut welfare spending" (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 66). In addition, it proposed family caps for mothers under 18, work requirements after two years, and a five-year time limit for AFDC participation overall (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 66). Also, the bill would have capped spending growth for Supplemental Security Income and public housing (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 67). Finally, and completely in line with what had been previously proposed by the HF, the *Contract with America* called for promoting program innovation through "state flexibility" (Gingrich *et al.*, 1994, p. 73).

The imagery of the behavioral paradigm was tinged with race and male patriarchal resentment over the changing American family structure. This chauvinism was

couched in an intellectual irreverence which presented itself as boldly going beyond the repressive political correctness imposed by the liberal left (D'Souza *et al.*, 1995). In the collective conservative imagination, liberals were not only the ones controlling the debate, but they had done more harm to poor women and minorities than good through misguided ideas and permissive policies (D'Souza *et al.*, 1995). In the *American Enterprise*, the journal of the AEI, a discussion on the "barriers that exist against certain kinds of intellectual inquiry" among controversial thinkers on the right was printed in a special issue dedicated to "Building a World Without Welfare." Murray defended *The Bell Curve*, which he wrote with Richard Herrnstein, against charges of racism. He told Dinesh D'Souza, moderator of the discussion, that he and Herrnstein had observed "strong empirical evidence of downward pressure on the intellectual capital of the country, due to differential birth rates between more or less intelligent individuals" (D'Souza *et al.*, 1995, p. 63). He was clear that neither he nor his co-author promoted the government's encouragement of fertility among some women and not others (D'Souza *et al.*, 1995). What was happening, he argued, was that the government was engaging in just that – social engineering through the welfare system. "It doesn't encourage women with high IQs to have babies, but rather women with low average intelligence. So we say the government ought to stop subsidizing births to anybody, rich or poor" (D'Souza *et al.*, 1995, p. 63). In *The Bell Curve*, Murray and Herrnstein made the claim that intelligence is largely hereditary and that there are disparities in the intelligence of different ethnic/racial groups (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Given the already racially encoded meanings which are enmeshed in welfare and underclass ideology, naturally, their study was controversial. The earnest style of his earlier and influential book, *Losing Ground*, which reads like a long qualification, is also apparent in *The Bell Curve*. Therefore, what emerges is a polite insinuation of black and Latino racial inferiority with the following inferred disclaimers: I am just reporting the facts; I am not saying that differences in IQ among the races are necessarily genetic; and though, if they are we're not trying to fuel racism (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). These inferences are of course hung out in a discursive milieu which is structured with overwhelming and pernicious imagery about race, intelligence, and poverty.

In the same issue of the *American Enterprise*, a roundtable of sorts was presented with reflections on Moynihan's 1965 report, with comments from several specialists on poverty and welfare, including Lee Rainwater, Charles Murray, Joseph Lieberman, Mickey Kaus, and George Gilder. The reflections of the participants were an accurate summation of the prevailing orthodoxy which had developed around welfare entitlements and of the ideology of welfare reform. Murray had compared the outrage which was directed at *The Bell Curve*, which he wrote with Richard Herrnstein, with the controversy of the Moynihan Report (Williams *et al.*, 1995). He congratulated Moynihan for being "right in 1964 about blacks" but warned that the same was true "in 1994 about whites" (Williams *et al.*, 1995, p. 14). He then warned that Moynihan should understand that adjusting the system is not enough, "and President Clinton's plan is guaranteed to have no more than trivial effects" (Williams *et al.* 1995, p. 14). Gilder had reiterated his explicitly sexist thesis from his book *Wealth and Poverty*, a book whole-heartedly endorsed by Reagan early in his first term (*Ocala Star Banner*, 1981). Welfare, Gilder argued, made the traditional role of males in poor families obsolete. He discussed that Moynihan recognized this to an extent as well, having noted that the welfare payment goes to the woman "and is often accompanied by female social workers" (Williams *et al.*, 1995, p. 35). This results in demoralizing poor men even further. "Already suffering from his failure as a provider, [he] is further demoralized by

becoming dependant on two women, one of them a stranger” (Williams *et al.* 1995, p. 35). Overtly championing patriarchy while injecting subtly racist overtones, he continued:

[The] analysis properly focused on the socialization of young men as the prime function of family and society. Society, as Moynihan put it, is continually beset by “invasions of barbarians,” i.e., teenaged boys. Unless they are tamed by marriage and the provider role, they become enemies of civilization. Males rule, whether through economic power as in civilized societies or through violent coercion by the male gangs of the inner city (Williams *et al.*, 1995, p. 36).

Democrat and future Al Gore running mate in the 2000 presidential election, Joseph Lieberman, put his support behind the findings of both the Moynihan Report and Murray’s *Losing Ground* (Williams *et al.*, 1995). He expressed dismay that, “Not only has the crisis deepened, but the American norm that Moynihan had described has changed, with one study claiming that 70 percent of young Americans (18-34) do not consider births to unwed mothers to be immoral” (Williams *et al.*, 1995, p. 21).

Douglas Besharov (1994, p. A23), a more moderate critic of welfare on the right, was warning welfare’s harsher critics in Washington to tone down the “Bring back the orphanages!” rhetoric. He and the AEI were advocating, like the other leading critics, more market discipline along with greater supervision and behavioral strategies. Besharov’s particular perspective, however, diverges from the small government libertarian rhetoric commonplace in the contemporary political arena, e.g. the Tea Party. He was not reticent about wanting the government to play more of a role if the outcomes promote “certain constructive behaviors” (Besharov and Gardiner, 1996, p. 82; Mead, 2009). Mead (1996, 2009) shared this view, and has called this perspective the “new paternalism.” He explained that his “view was that, rather than unfree, the poor were too free, that they had opportunities not to work that other people didn’t have, they needed to have those opportunities taken away by work requirements, and if you did that you would get behavior changes” (Mead, 2009).

Besharov argued that benefits should not be entitlements, but rather contingent on specific behavioral expectations (Besharov, 1992; Besharov and Gardiner, 1996). He argued that the persistence of behavioral pathologies makes behavior modification strategies quite urgent (Besharov, 1992, 1995, 1996b). From Besharov’s perspective, simply cutting benefits to promote work is not the answer, because “the pain such a cut would cause recipients who cannot work seems hardly worth this small gain (Besharov, 1992, p. 3). The solution for Besharov was to make welfare less convenient (Besharov, 1995, 1996b). Work had to pay, and in the existing system, the consensus among the conservative policy analysts was that it was not worth leaving welfare for a low paying job. He argued that rewarding positive behavior is more effective than penalties, citing Wisconsin and New Jersey’s “Bridefare” programs as examples of promoting behavioral changes without unintended consequences (Besharov, 1992). Besharov (1992, p. 15) argued that the right benefits and penalties could “encourage the internalization of long-term changes in behavior.” Additionally, from the perspective of this new paternalistic problem solving model, reforms, and behavioral approaches were not considered “punitive” or repressive (Besharov, 1995, p. 20; Mead, 2009). To Besharov, welfare was encouraging all types of pathology, such as child abuse, drug abuse, and even depression, and a strict work requirement was seen as a potential solution for the social isolation behind these unintended outcomes, itself a presumed consequence of welfare. The extent to which market or administrative discipline should be emphasized as an overarching policy strategy varied among these intellectuals. However, this continuum served as the basic means by which “good behavior”

was conditioned and enforced for target populations. More than Besharov, Mead (2009) is explicit that the new paternalism model of reform which targets behavior does not scale back government *per se*. He explained that the traditional debate, that of how much the government should intervene in the economy is based on “partisan” or “ideological” discourse (Mead, 2009). He continued:

There’s nothing in there about family. There’s nothing in there about single-parenthood and the associated social problems. That’s off the agenda. That isn’t even part of the traditional left-wing discourse, or the right-wing discourse for that matter. And those are the issues that come to dominate the poverty discourse. And it’s only after those are addressed and especially only after work levels rise that you can make a serious case for getting back to the older discourse about the scale of government – how much to intervene (Mead, 2009).

Besharov (1995, 1996b) argued that even if programs were more costly in the short term, they would promote constructive long-term behavior, and ultimately save money. Requiring recipients to engage in “mandatory skill-building activities,” argued Besharov (1995, p. 26), “could reduce caseloads substantially – if disadvantaged young people adjusted their behavior accordingly and stopped having so many babies out of wedlock, instead finishing their schooling and going to work.” Mead (2009) is less troubled than Besharov about the prospects of larger government spending to enforce behavior. Mead (2009) noted, “[A funding source] was uneasy with my argument, because it did involve a kind of form of big government conservatism which might eventually lead to larger government”. Just months before PRWRORA was signed, Besharov (1996b) produced a short paper for the AEI arguing for mandatory work and against training programs, as the state demonstrations for job and educational training had not been successful. He reiterated that he felt there was a lack of familial support in impoverished neighborhoods with “many of these mothers” suffering from “multiple personal problems, from clinical depression to alcohol and drug abuse” (Besharov, 1996b, p. 19). Stricter behavioral compliance was what was necessary to address the issue at its core.

Karl Zinsmeister (1995), Editor in Chief of the AEI’s journal, the *American Enterprise* expressed a measured optimism in the impending reform brewing in Washington. In the January/February 1995 issue of the *American Enterprise*, he was hesitant to not get his hopes up but sensed that real reform was “within reach” (Zinsmeister, 1995, p. 4). Presciently, he observed the convergence of some promising factors. Clinton had vowed to reform welfare, Moynihan (“the original sentinel of welfare-linked social decay”) was chairing the Senate Finance Committee, the public had grown dissatisfied with urban crime and illegitimacy, and the Republicans and their *Contract with America* were now dominant in the House (Zinsmeister, 1995). To Zinsmeister, this represented “one of those rare alignments of the cultural planets” where serious welfare reform was a real possibility. The provisions in the 1996 bill were based on administrative and behavioral rationales being reproduced through the network of research and political institutions. Scholars like Rector, Murray, and Besharov, though varied in how they described their political orientations, were just a few (but very prominent) contributors in creating the ideological atmosphere where the welfare system would become and remain vulnerable to regressive changes. Scholars and policy makers operating on the principle of paternalistic problem solving may not have seen their proposals as punitive, but they unapologetically reinforced the distinction between deserving and undeserving among the poor which directly contributed to the stigma of poverty and welfare use.

The construction of poverty as a managerial, economic, and behavioral issue with an emphasis on problem solving continued to be prominent “even in the ‘90s when there

was a resurgence of partisan controversy on account of the Republican plans to downsize welfare and turn it over to the states” (Mead, 2009). The concept of dependency and the stigma associated with it have created dire consequences for the poor. Besharov has identified addiction, feelings of isolation, etc. as consequences of dependency and as reasons for high unemployment and pervasive poverty. This dismisses the role of mutual aid and cooperation in working class and poor communities and the role of poverty itself in creating the dire consequences faced by the poor. Curiously, Besharov (1995) presumed that social isolation had been the cause of the pathologies identified and proposed a remedy of requiring and enforcing work. This discourse dances around the issue that markets produce an inadequate number of jobs to achieve full-employment and many of the jobs available to those on welfare pay very little and do not lift families out of poverty (Boushey, 2002). To propose that the solution to the problems facing the poor is to enforce regular work for low wages or a welfare benefit, which is an even lower compensation monetarily, deflects emphasis away from structural causes of poverty. This discourse has also produced consequences for poor families which contribute to the very outcomes they attribute to welfare. For example, one consequence has been the attitude that single mothers who have never been married are “bad mothers” (Fineman, 1991/1997). The social stigma, and not “dependency,” could very well be the source of these feelings described by Besharov. While being a source of humiliation and disparagement for poor families, stigma is instead rationalized by policy intellectuals as necessary for fostering “good behavior.”

Conclusion

The PRWORA of 1996 incorporated many of the propositions of the policy experts who had been subjecting the welfare system to ruthless condemnation and criticism. Key features of the bill include work requirements, a five-year time limit, education and live-at-home requirements for teen mothers, optional family caps for states, and state block grants which give states more autonomy in how benefits are administered (Administration for Children and Families, 1996; Post, 1996). Hobbs, Butler, and Murray were key advocates for devolution as were Rector and Besharov. With the exception of Besharov, the expectation and hope was that some states and municipalities would terminate benefits completely and others would impose even stricter time limits than that of the five years indicated in the bill. The “tangle of pathology” and underclass concepts inform the perspective of poverty which associates it with individual failings, immediately problematizing any efforts at providing a basic income entitlement for poor mothers without behavioral obligation. This same expectation of obligation and work is not expected of affluent women with children. This reveals a disdain for the “welfare mother” who, in the popular imaginary, is an impoverished woman of color residing in the inner city. Poor single motherhood, constructed as “other-hood,” therefore comes to inhabit the same plane of immoral behavior inhabited by other forms of “chronic pathology” demonized through dominant ideological narratives – sexual permissiveness, indolence, criminality, etc. – while reinforcing racial stereotypes and traditional heteronormative conventions.

Paternalistic problem solving has emerged as an overarching policy paradigm which appears politically rational and economically and administratively efficient. It has become part of the domain of the political center, rendering it neither “partisan” nor “ideological” (Mead, 2009). Effectively, we are all neocons now. Herbert Stein, who had been at the Brookings Institution and later the AEI, had said of these policy planning groups that by the end of the 1970s, it was probably “true that both [were] [...] moving to the middle, but the middle [was] [...] moving to the right” (quoted in Silk and

Silk, 1980, p. 182). Though not accounted for by Arthur Schlesinger, the “vital center” has revealed itself to be a movable and dynamic entity, and the policy planning network of the right had skillfully molded its own methods and ideas and influenced the political culture such that its basic premises would be situated in the center. More accurately, through its relentless (and impressive) agitation of the political waters, it gradually propelled the center in its direction. A social wage or basic income guarantee for poor mothers was represented as an enabler of social pathology and the very premise of relief as a right for able-bodied adults and poor single mothers would come to be regarded as ridiculous. This was more recently evident during the 2008 presidential campaign, when Barack Obama (thought of by many liberals as progressive and some conservatives as socialist or Marxist) was asked if he would have supported the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill. He responded that he “won’t second guess President Clinton for signing” (Goodman, 2008, p. A1). Almost 11 years prior, in the Illinois State Senate, he had said that he probably would not have supported PRWORA if he were in Congress. In President Obama’s now infamous speech in which he confronted the controversy around his connection to Reverend Wright and addressed race relations in the US, he had discussed welfare reform in a way which would have had him comfortably seated at the AEI roundtable mentioned earlier. He lamented that “a lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one’s family, contributed to the erosion of black families – a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened” (Obama, 2008, p. 7). Policy discourse remains significantly constrained, which is also illustrated in light of the debate leading up to the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the continued characterization of poverty by policy elites as produced from a lack of work ethic and a “tailspin of culture in our inner cities,” as we heard more recently from Rep. Paul Ryan during a call-in to a conservative radio talk show. In relation to the ACA, even the president, seeking to promote modest progressive reforms found his power limited in this respect due to the ideological climate in which such processes operate. In such circumstances, more moderate politicians and even those on the left have contributed to that very climate in the attempt to make themselves and their proposals seem prudent and politically feasible.

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Further reading

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