HOW WELFARE BECAME A DIRTY WORD

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I set out about a decade ago to puzzle out a central contradiction in welfare as we know it today: In our welfare state, the program designed for women and children – AFDC – was always markedly inferior and more stigmatizing than those designed for men; yet this program was designed by women, even by feminists, in the generic meaning of that term. Its designers were also pioneers of social work – such as Julia Lathrop and Grace Abbott – and as a result I came to learn about and to respect the community of feminist reformers who built the social work profession. In doing so I became in a sense an historian of social work, but only if one remembers how loose was the definition of social work at the beginning of this century: for most of these women it was indistinguishable from social reform. For example the women who campaigned for mothers’ “pensions” – the state predecessor to AFDC – in the first decades of this century virtually all called themselves social workers although most of them had neither jobs nor professional training. Well into the 1930s these women used the phrase “social work” to refer to casework, charity and reform politics. Frances Perkins called her work as Secretary of Labor for Franklin Roosevelt “social work.”

In this talk I want to trace some of the connections between the program we called welfare and the proud profession we call social work, because joining the two can illuminate both. I have to think of this talk as an eulogy at a funeral – a funeral for welfare. We need this ceremony because we need to understand what we have lost with the 1996 repeal of welfare. In 1935, the US belatedly entered the community of nations that took responsibility for providing a minimal standard of living, a minimal base of opportunity, for poor children; 60 years later Congress and the President repealed it, making the US the only advanced country in which poor children and their parents have no entitlement to help.

But mourning presents a problem for me. On the one hand I was taught that it is disrespectful to speak ill of the dead. On the other hand, I believe that the inadequacies of the welfare program we used to have are partly responsible for the backlash against it, and that social work is partly responsible for those inadequacies. I find the temerity to speak critically of our deceased welfare system only by refusing to accept that this is a burial. I want to trust, rather, that there will come a widespread revulsion against the denial of human responsibility for others that this welfare repeal reflects and reinforces. And that this reaffirmation of responsibility for the poor and for the work of raising children will require us to think again about how best to design ways of helping.

When people say “welfare” they are mostly thinking about what was AFDC, the program for single parents and their children, now repealed and replaced by TANF. These programs confer little but shame on their so-called beneficiaries. Why is it that today programs for the elderly, like “Social Security,” for the disabled, for the farmers – vast numbers of programs in which government subsidizes – are honorable while the only program designed for women and children – and the main program designed by social workers – is deeply stigmatized? In its original meaning, a welfare state referred to a wide variety of government provision and protection for its citizens, including schools.
farm aid, pollution control, airline safety regulations, as well as pensions and aid to the needy. The fact that today only some programs are called "welfare," and that the word has become a pejorative, has allowed today a truly vicious scapegoating and brutalizing of poor families. I want to talk to you today about how that change in our language occurred, and I think that taking you back in history will help to clarify its implications today.

All the "welfare" we have today derives from the Social Security Act of 1935. It is a complex law with 11 varied programs. That law has fed, clothed, housed and reassured many millions of Americans. But it excluded other millions and created a form of second-class citizenship. One of the major ways in which this inferior category of citizenship is defined is through a bizarre stratification in which some of the benefits that government gives to its citizens are viewed as honorable entitlements, virtually the property of the recipients, while others, called "welfare," are extremely stigmatized. Recently we have been drenched by a conservative rhetorical waterfall that tells us that welfare caused poverty by making people lazy and immoral. I believe it is vital to recognize a different criticism of welfare — that by stigmatizing recipients and keeping them poor, welfare DID contribute to the popular disgust with our welfare state.

In 1900 in the US thousands of children were in orphanages, but the majority of them were not orphans. They were usually children of living mothers, mothers who could find no way to simultaneously earn a living and support their children. These were usually what we might call single mothers, although they arrived at that condition for slightly different reasons than women do today: they were often widowed, since men died younger then, especially poor men; they were sometimes separated but rarely divorced, since divorce was usually out of the financial reach of the poor; and they were frequently escapees from drunken and/or abusive men. Their problems were essentially the same as those of most single mothers today: women's wages were so low that they could not earn enough to pay for child care, rent, fuel and food. This was not a small problem: already in 1900 mothers alone with children were as numerous as they were in 1960 — about 10% of children lived with single mothers — and these families were disproportionately impoverished, as they are today. In the orphanages, conditions were disastrous. The standard social-work textbook of the period — not a radical or a feminist tract — said: "In a great majority of cases, it can matter but little to the individual infant whether it is murdered outright or is placed in a foundling hospital." Infectious disease spread much worse when children were congregated together; death rates of 50% were common and one large big-city orphanage I studied had a death rate of 97% for infants. Poorly paid attendants neglected and even brutalized children.

Modern "welfare" began with the state and local mothers' pension programs of the 1910-20 decade. These programs were fought for and then administered by a network of women, many of whom we might call pre-professional social workers. They were mainly white, Protestant, middle class. They were simultaneously brave and compassionate and frequently blinded by their race and class privilege. By combining cash stipends and casework supervision, aid to single mothers sought to prevent the institutionalizing of children and to preserve mother-child bonds while also raising up the moral and child-raising standards of the poor and the foreign or "nonwhite" to allegedly "American" standards. The state mothers'aid programs were under-funded and reached only a minority of needy single mothers but they had never been intended to be universal. On the contrary, mothers'-pension advocates wanted a restricted program, one which would screen applicants carefully for moral promise. This vision arose from their desire to countervail against arguments that public welfare programs would be inherently corrupt and corrupting, and to do so they needed to demonstrate that
mothers' aid could be administered without creating incentives for corruption. So these social workers wanted every recipient to be exemplary and therefore insisted not only on means-testing but also on morals-testing of applicants.

Within the limits of the time this campaign was enormously successful. In one decade, 40 states passed mothers' aid laws. These offered what were then called "pensions" to single mothers. But their limitations tell us much about the race and class of their designers. Concerned to help only those women who became single without violating respectability, they mainly served only widows. Furthermore, these programs discriminated terribly against immigrants and minorities. Blacks, although much more in need on average than whites, were only 3% of recipients, and in the west, Hispanics and American Indians were usually excluded altogether. Their funding was usually so small, it is true, that only a small portion of those eligible got help; at a time when 93,000 families received help nationwide there were at least 1.5 million female-headed families with children. Nevertheless this program had established the principle that poor children would not be simply sentenced to die and that mothers would not be forced to lose their children simply because of poverty.

In this vision of mothers' aid, the social-work reformers expressed two distinct principles: moral reform and public responsibility. They were part of a large community of reformers insisting that only government could provide the regulatory and financial power needed to guarantee public safety, health, welfare and morality in a complex commercial/industrial society; they saw regulation of food and drug safety as of a piece with regulation of morality and believed firmly that the state and other authoritative institutions should see to the moral purification of a vice-ridden and cruelty-ridden society whose problems included prostitution, drunkenness, child abuse, wife beating and marital desertion. They believed that good social work required both economic relief and moral/psychological treatment, without which poverty would become pauperism. Listen to Belle Israel, a member of the social-work network, writing in 1908: "Poverty easily drags the poor man down, weakens him physically, diminishes his moral resistance, makes him less valuable as a working force, and frequently leads to [my emphasis] lack of employment, as at every crisis or industrial depression the mediocre working men and women are the first to be dismissed." The problem she is discussing is complex, many-layered, and self-perpetuating; being poor can make a person grow poorer still. And "In individual cases it is often difficult to determine if poverty is the result of idleness, or idleness the result of poverty." They believed that aid to the poor must always be discriminating, so as to prevent it from encouraging laziness, and accompanied by guidance towards rehabilitation or at least maintenance of "good standards" of home life. This notion of social treatment that included moral reform, careful investigation of clients, fear of pauperization and ad hoc recommendations for individual families rendered by trained workers using their best judgement - became, of course, the casework method.

These state mothers' pensions programs limped along until the Great Depression of the 1930s. Then, high unemployment rates reduced the taxes that states could collect, just as poverty greatly increased the demand for help among the citizens, and many states literally went into bankruptcy, unable to fund these programs. It was quickly apparent to the states and localities that only the federal government had the tax base and the enforcement power to meet the need.

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected on a platform of immediate, effective action against the Depression but at first he had no success. Unemployment and poverty grew steadily. But so, too, did
large-scale protest movements, including a big campaign for old-age pensions and a Left-wing movement for unemployment insurance, and these put significant pressure on FDR. In the field of welfare a particularly forceful pressure came from organized social work, and particularly from the union movement within the profession which sought to develop a democratic form of casework, a manner of helping that did not disrespect or condescend to clients. But the progressives in the field were weakened by the absence of a women's movement. Liberals of the time continued to cling to entirely conservative ideas about women's proper place in the home. New Deal-era social workers were commonly in the puzzling position of professional women preaching and enforcing provisions designed to keep women out of the labor force and in their homes. This orientation was to have major consequences.

By the time a reluctant Roosevelt was finally convinced to produce a permanent welfare bill, in 1934, he was facing a rapidly growing Left. Many in the unions and even in Congress were demanding a European style plan – a program of universal automatic benefits for anyone who was for whatever reason unemployed, whether from illness, old age, youth, or domestic responsibilities such as child care. Determined to resist such a radical departure from American liberal individualism, FDR called upon some academic welfare experts and asked for something less global.

His welfare task force at first consisted entirely of white male and mainly academic promoters of "social insurance," a vision of social welfare in which government would mimic the logic of private insurance. Their program included public medical insurance, unemployment insurance and old age pensions. Their goal was not to wait until unemployment made people impoverished but to act immediately to maintain family standards of living. But their vision had severe limitations. They assumed that the recipient of aid would be a male wage-earning head of household and a prominent part of this welfare strategy was to provide payments in ways that did not reduce his status and authority in the family. So social-insurance planners designed programs in which the receipt of help would be a dignified entitlement, kicking in automatically as soon as wages were lost. Social insurance advocates lost out on medical insurance, thanks to the determined opposition of the AMA, but they succeeded in creating old-age pensions and unemployment insurance.

Meanwhile the old female social-work network observed that the social insurance plans would be entirely male, covering women and children as dependents, although their mothers'-aid experience had taught them that not all women and children actually had a man to depend on. Many of these women had worked hard in Franklin Roosevelt's victorious 1932 campaign and their payback was the appointment of a member of their network – Frances Perkins – to head the DOL, the first woman cabinet member. She used her patronage power to get the women social workers and welfare advocates a place at the Social Security design table. Here they were at best tolerated by the men in charge and their ideas were accepted only because they focused exclusively on women and children; the women had no input into the major welfare programs. But the social-insurance advocates readily agreed that single mothers and children required some provision, at least temporarily, and were happy to have the women design some subordinate sections of the Social Security Act.

But these women were limited not only by the men's dominance in this state-building project; they were also limited by their own perspective. These women shared a set of beliefs which were in part mistaken and in part narrowed by their elite class and race backgrounds. They believed that the number of single mothers was small and that it would decline with the eradication of poverty that they expected from the New Deal. And they shared with the social-insurance group the belief that mothers
should not be employed outside their homes but ought to be supported, either by a husband or by the state, to do full-time mothering. They were committed to the state mothers’ aid programs they had designed earlier and wanted to shore them up with federal funding. They did not seize this opportunity to envision using the state actually to change the norms and structures of gender in any way.

Other groups were advocating different approaches. Black women welfare advocates working for the advancement of their people had no way to get mothers pensions from southern state governments which were, of course, 100% white, because African Americans were at this time still mostly disenfranchised. So theirs was a self-help approach.

These Black reformers had some more far-seeing proposals. They believed, for example, that mothers would often have to take out-of-home employment – because, of course, African Americans were disproportionately poor – so they organized child care centers. They urged women to seek education and not to assume that they could count on being supported by men. Had white women been willing to join forces with black women, or even to listen to them, they might have heard an implicit critique of the white approach. While white women still believed that women’s economic dependence on husbands was best, Black women reformers honored women’s economic independence. Because their people were so poor, they anticipated the future much better than did white women.

But Roosevelt’s committee was probably not even aware of this different perspective, because blacks were entirely excluded from this legislative process. Instead the Social Security bill that emerged was based primarily on male social-insurance principles, which produced unemployment compensation and old-age insurance, and gave one key title to the white women’s network: AFDC, which merely added federal money to the existing state and local mothers’ aid programs. The result was a stratified welfare system with women (and as we shall soon see, minority men) on the bottom.

As one example of this stratification, let me make some comparisons between the program today called “Social Security” and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC):

1) Social-insurance coverage was not reserved for the poor, while ADC was exclusively for the very needy. It was means-tested – a key word defining one of the principles of the public assistance programs like AFDC – so as prevent those not in need from collecting, and those with any substantial personal resources, such as home-ownership, were excluded. Applicants were thus forced to impoverish themselves first and then apply for aid.

2) While social-insurance benefits were paid in such a way as to preserve a claimant’s privacy, ADC benefits included supervision. A man receiving unemployment compensation or old age insurance could spend his entire benefit on opium, liquor, or gambling and live in a pigsty, with the clerk who administered his payment being none the wiser. A woman receiving ADC would be assigned an individual caseworker who would require her to prepare a weekly or monthly budget to make sure that the stipend was being properly used; she would receive home “visits” by caseworkers to evaluate her standards of housekeeping, child-care, and domestic morality. It was not only means-tested but morals-tested. To receive benefits, the ADC applicant had to position herself as a supplicant requesting help, one who might be refused, while the social-insurance recipient merely claimed his rights.
(3) Social insurance payments were designed to be big enough that a recipient and his family might live on them, and they soon became indexed to inflation. ADC was never sufficient to support a family, rarely even an individual, and it shrank with inflation.

(4) "Social Security" was an entirely federal program while AFDC was a joint state/federal program and states were not, at first, required to participate in AFDC. As a general rule the federal programs produced in their recipients a sense of security and entitlement, while the state-controlled programs remained contingent and seemed charity-like.

(5) Above all, "Social Security" was based on the workplace – eligibility was defined in terms of certain standards of employment, and some of the money was collected as an employment tax. This was part of a long-term tendency towards disregarding the unpaid work most women do in their homes. "Social Security" recipients are supposed to have "earned" their pensions by working, while women who worked at home all their lives were not considered to have earned anything. Wage work was a "contribution to society," while child raising was not.

How ironic that it was social workers who, in clinging to their deep-seated commitment to casework, designed a program that would continue to subordinate women socially and economically. The fundamental problem was that no one was thinking about the economic transformations that were demanding wage employment from women without altering the gendered structures of responsibility for domestic labor and child raising. Nothing was inherently wrong with casework; the invidious consequences came from the sexual double standard.

Many people today find it hard to accept the idea that "Social Security" is as much "welfare" as was AFDC. To understand this better, consider just a few of the vagaries of Social Security old age pensions.

- Social Security benefits are not calculated according to what you pay in. For example, the wives and widows of men enrolled in Social Security collect benefits, although they have not paid in anything.
- A wife who had been employed could not add earned benefits to those she got from her husband; her and her husband's benefits were the same as if she had not earned. (Planners did not want to do anything that would encourage wives to work.)
- Social Security's income was dependent on payments from those who were required to pay FICA taxes but did not accumulate enough quarters of eligible employment to get benefits; proposals to refund such people's payments were rejected.
- Old-age insurance funds were used by the US government for other expenditures, and the size of stipends was not based on what was collected from employees and employers.
- Social insurance could have been as easily paid for from general revenue; entitlements could have been derived from citizenship, not employment, in a manner that would have recognized unpaid labor, such as child-raising. The purpose of the separate employment tax was to make social insurance appear an entitlement which could not be abrogated and thus to separate it from poor relief. AFDC, by contrast, appeared as charity, paid for by others, unconnected to work or any other kind of contribution to society made by its recipient. But old age pensions are just as much charity as is "welfare:" for example, the average Social Security recipient receives 5-6 times as much of OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY as does the average AFDC recipient.
All these differences were fundamentally gendered. This does not mean they derived from misogyny. Virtually everyone, feminists and antifeminists alike, agreed that mothers ought not to be employed, and that men should support women and children. AFDC’s smaller stipends were understood as appropriate because their recipients – single mothers – were not to be long-term heads of households but only temporary caretakers during men’s absence. Gender norms of the time did not include imagining respectable women as supporting families. Citizenship and its entitlements were still conceived primarily as male. After all, woman suffrage was still a new innovation in the 1930s. And men were thought to have a right to personal dignity and privacy, while it seemed acceptable for women to plead for help and to be supervised. It would have been politically unacceptable to subject white men to similar supervision.

Social Security thus had one basic flaw from the very beginning: it did not anticipate changes in the family and in women’s status. Its designers did not imagine a world in which divorce was commonplace and the overwhelming majority of women, including mothers, were working for a living. These were understandable mistakes, given the outlook of the 1930s, and had the program been effective in other ways, it might have been gradually amended to keep it in touch with the changing lives of women.

Had the legislation, as originally intended, covered everyone, it might have gone a long way towards eliminating poverty despite its assumptions that locked women into dependency. But soon the legislation was intersected by a nastier and more radical discriminatory force, racism. Through Congressional amendments southern legislators changed Social Security dramatically, by excluding the majority of the population, a majority which included those who needed it most.

Let me explain briefly how these crippling amendments arose. In the US in the 1930s, most minorities remained ghettoized in regions where they had almost no political power. Blacks remained concentrated in the South. Hispanics in the Southwest, Asians in the far West, and American Indians in the rural West. In most of these regions minority people were almost entirely disfranchised and deprived of most rights pertaining to citizenship; this was especially true in the southern states where whites simply did not perceive Blacks as full citizens. The South was a one-party Democratic region and it was an essential part of FDR’s electoral coalition. Because southern politicians were unchallenged in elections, they acquired seniority in the Congress. Some of those powerful in Congress in the 1930s had been there since the previous century. Pat Harrison of Mississippi, chair of the key Senate Finance Committee, was in Congress from 1911 to his death in 1941; Carl Hayden of Arizona was in the Senate from 1912 to 1968, 46 years. Today Strom Thurmond continues this tradition. Within the majority party, seniority was at the time the only principle determining Congressional leadership positions. In other words, you got to be a committee chairman strictly on a seniority basis, and since Southern Democrats had more seniority than anyone else, they disproportionately controlled powerful Congressional committees (such as Finance, Rules, Ways & Means) which had to approve legislation and presidential appointments before they could reach the floor. As representatives of whites whose wealth rested on being able to employ blacks or Hispanics for extremely low wages, they knew that a federal government welfare program would make these workers less willing to labor for wages that were always several times lower than those paid in the north.

So key Southern Congressmen and Senators insisted on crucial amendments to the Social Security Act, and Franklin Roosevelt and his advisers believed that surrender on these amendments was the
price of getting Social Security passed. First, they eliminated agricultural and domestic workers – thus excluding virtually all Blacks, Latinos, Asians and American Indians – from the social insurance programs. They then eliminated most white women workers – by excluding the small businesses and temporary and part-time jobs. Second, amendments to the public assistance programs, which were operated on the basis of joint federal-state funding, eliminated federal controls which might have prevented southern states from discriminating. State and local authorities were thus left free to determine eligibility for public assistance and they did so in grossly discriminatory ways. The southern states were the most notorious in excluding minorities from ADC altogether or cutting off their stipends when cheap agricultural or domestic labor was needed. In a bitter irony, the federal government had designated most mothers as "unemployable" when being employable might have allowed them to benefit from more of the public works jobs created by the New Deal; but the state governments regularly designated them as employable when they were wanted in the cotton or tobacco harvests. Lest we indulge in northern superiority, let me add that such procedures were by no means the exclusive practice of the south: right here in Minneapolis in 1936 employers' associations got the welfare department to cut ADC grants in order to force "girls" to accept jobs as domestics. The net result of these exclusions and discriminations was that in 1940, 2/3 of eligible needy children were not covered by ADC, and those that were disproportionately white – quite an irony in a program that most people imagine as overwhelmingly black today.

The association of AFDC with shame was confirmed by amendments to the Social Security Act, 4 years later in 1939, creating the survivors' insurance system. This guaranteed that the widows and children of men covered by Social Security would be taken out of AFDC and provided for separately in an honorable system – entirely federal, with higher stipends, not called welfare. AFDC thus lost its most venerated constituency; those more politically influential SSI families were freed from the regulation and supervision imposed by AFDC, and the possibility for unity among welfare recipients was undermined.

In the 1950s the welfare caseload increased and began to include many more minority and unmarried mothers. This trend is usually described as a bad omen. But it was also a sign that minorities and poor white women were challenging their exclusion, insisting on citizenship rights by claiming welfare. Welfare claiming was a part of the civil rights movement. There is today a widespread but mistaken assumption that being "on welfare" is always a sign of dependency and despair. On the contrary, for many, especially women, going to the welfare office was a step towards citizenship, not only the first entrance into a relationship with government but also a statement of self-esteem. Welfare claiming and then the 1960s welfare rights movement was also a women's movement. Claiming welfare was a strategy for upward mobility, especially for one's children, a means of keeping them out of the fields where so many children of color labored, and in school.

Then the economy worsened. The demand for labor, which had brought so many immigrants and migrants into industrial cities, receded. The new migrants whose urbanization had represented upward mobility were also the first fired and the last hired. And marriage/family patterns changed. Divorce, marital separation, and out-of-wedlock births increased the numbers of single mothers.

Another factor that increased AFDC rolls was a new standard of medical care. Gradually most Americans began to have higher medical standards: we no longer expect our children to die from influenza or scarlet fever or tuberculosis or polio. We consider health care essential and in fact it is a crime NOT to seek medical care for one's sick child. Since the failure of the New Deal to develop a
public system of medical insurance, most middle-class and upper-working-class people won medical insurance through their places of employment, primarily through union struggle. Separate systems of medical funding were created for AFDC and old-age-pension recipients. But this left a huge section of the population — those who work but not in jobs good enough to provide health insurance — out in the cold. It also had the effect of keeping single parents trapped in AFDC because they would lose their medical coverage for their children if they tried to live on wages.

As AFDC rolls grew, so did its stigma. The shame associated with AFDC was created partly by the design of the program combined with conservative pressure against ever giving single mothers enough money that they could move out of poverty. As a result, casework became nothing but policing, an ugly parody of its founders' vision; the constant searches for moral or financial cheating actually worked to spread suspicion on all its recipients. And the stigma was magnified by the race, sex and marital status of its recipients. There emerged a downward spiral: The stigma made recipients politically weak; lacking political clout, programs exclusively for the poor could not gather the support necessary to keep up with inflation; the poorer and more demoralized these welfare recipients became, the less political clout they had, and the more impoverished their programs; which in turn only increased the stigma and so the vicious circle continued downward.

Meanwhile, the honorable welfare programs grew steadily more respected and immune from political attack. The Social Security Board conducted a campaign to convince Americans that the FICA withholding was not a "tax" but a "contribution," nourishing the myth that old-age pensioners got what they had paid in. Consider what might be the effect of a different sort of language: Suppose we called "Social Security" a tax, as it is, in which a family earning $20,000 pays a 7% tax off the top, while an individual earning $200,000 pays under 3% and income from real estate, stocks or securities is tax free. And more and more middle-class and upper-working-class employees got not only private medical insurance but also disability insurance and pensions from their jobs. This separated their interests from those of the poor — many were reluctant to support tax-funded insurance because they already had something else which worked adequately, and this of course further reduced the political support for decent provision for those without such private welfare. It also made many workers increasingly vulnerable, because when employers threatened layoffs and demanded subsidies and wage cuts, workers faced not only losing their jobs but also losing their insurance.

But perhaps most destructive of all was the message that receiving ADC constituted a type of "dependency," a parasitism, that was incompatible with the honorable status of a citizen. These programs intensified the idea that some government provision is an entitlement while some is charity: that some is earned and deserved, while some is not. We see this in the language: the good programs are called by specific names — Social Security or Unemployment Compensation, while what is called "welfare" is a last resort and mark of shame. The second-class programs escalate resentment: the supervision is costly to taxpayers, the means-testing keeps alive a fear that recipients are cheating, the morals-testing stimulates a sense of widespread immorality at government expense. While recipients of Social Security old age insurance feel as entitled as veterans, accepting their payments almost as a symbol of citizenship, ADC recipients are likely to experience their payments virtually as proof of noncitizenship. They receive so many messages in which they are described as parasitical, dependent, disreputable, immoral, and greedy that it is a wonder that any are able to value themselves and their parenting work.

The contemporary demonization of "welfare" recipients began in the 1960s. It was in this period that
racism combined with a misogynist narrative about single mothers' sexual immorality to construct a new and nastier kind of antiwelfare discourse. Two brief local episodes will illustrate. In July 1960 the Louisiana legislature, at the request of the governor, denied ADC to "illegitimate" children. The result was to throw 23,000 children, 95% of them black, off welfare. This radical action received at first virtually no publicity outside the state. The Urban League began a campaign for national attention and issued a world-wide appeal for food, clothes and money, but only Chicago's black paper The Defender carried the story. In fact the only reason the events came to public attention at all is that the Urban League appeal reached a group of British city councilwomen from Newcastle who raised money to airlift baby food to the children of New Orleans. The newspaper coverage that then followed defined the sufferers exclusively as children – it was as if they had no mothers – and the Governor came in for nearly universal condemnation; in fact ADC was widely referred to in the press as "Child Aid." The fact that the justification for the cut-offs – "illegitimacy" – derived from women's "immorality" was mainly ignored. Moreover, what Louisianians knew about the racial meanings of the cut-off was also missing from national press coverage: every year since 1953 the legislature had passed a "segregation package" – a series of provisions defending white supremacy in various ways – and the 1960 welfare cut-off was part of the most recent 30-bill package, viewed by many blacks as direct retribution for their increasing militance challenging segregation and disenfranchisement. Thanks to the intervention of the British women, the federal government ordered the reinstatement of the Louisiana kids later in the year.

A year later, in June 1961, the virulently conservative city manager of Newburgh, NY, a town of 31,000 just up the Hudson from NYC, announced a plan to overhaul the city's welfare system: it imposed a 3-month limit on assistance and excluded any children born out of wedlock while on welfare. Using welfare as a scapegoat for all the ills of a declining old industrial city, the Newburgh discourse included a new, tightly coded language which blamed the city's poverty on the influx of black migrants and focused on black mothers' immorality, while hardly mentioning the children. In other words, here ADC became mothers' aid, rather than Child Aid, as it had been called in Louisiana. City manager Mitchell claimed that welfare was attracting "trollops" and the "dregs of humanity" from the south. This plan engendered the largest national discussion of welfare to that date, even before it was implemented. And unlike the Louisiana case, the Newburgh actions evoked a great deal of support. A Gallup poll showed 80% of the public supported the Newburgh plan. What produced this backing was neither racism nor sexism alone but the deadly association of black women and sexual/reproductive immorality and irresponsibility. Newburgh was the direct ancestor of the bipartisan welfare repeal of 1996.

Ultimately, our stratified welfare system not only undermined social cohesion but also the Democratic Party. Roosevelt intended his Social Security legislation as an anchor for his Democratic coalition. But in its long-term effects, Social Security helped unravel that coalition. Many analysts of Democratic Party decline blame an excessively large welfare state. In fact, the limitations and fragmentation of government provision may be more culpable. By creating such great stratification among beneficiaries, Social Security deepened splits among the Democrat's own electoral constituency and undermined the legitimacy of its own welfare system. The popularity of welfare in the Depression offered a chance to break Southern control of the Democratic Party. A law that united all waged and salaried workers through universal entitlements to social citizenship – especially if

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1 I am indebted to Lisa Levenstein's research regarding these two events.
combined with an anti-lynching law and Black voter registration—might have solidified enough support so that Roosevelt could have dumped the Southern political magnates on whom he had depended. But in practice, Social Security nourished divisions among Roosevelt's potential supporters. Most destructive were those between beneficiaries of the primary programs—upper working-class and middle-class men and their families—and those who got "welfare." As taxes increased, recipients of the secondary programs became scapegoats. The rise of private health insurance and pensions further lessened middle-class support for a shared social security program. In electoral politics this meant that national Democrats had to target more conservative "swing" voters (once called "Reagan Democrats") who (erroneously) did not feel dependent on a welfare state; the poor, who did support welfare, increasingly dropped out of the electorate, both because of voter-registration policies and because of their own skepticism that voting produced any good results. This produced a downward spiral: the more the poor did not vote, the more the Democrats focused their appeals on conservative "swing" voters.

Meanwhile social workers moved steadily further from social policy. This is a story many of you know better than I do. The shrinking funding for public-sector casework led social workers to the search for a paying clientele and their historic collective sense of responsibility for poor women and children diminished—although never so much as that of other professions, I must point out. Few professionals are so well positioned to grasp the not-so-hidden injuries of being a poor single mother, or being stigmatized by the very programs that are supposed to help.

Changes in the role of women also made the New-Deal welfare structure more destructive and self-undermining. New Dealers accepted the view that married women's employment was a misfortune which should be temporary. New Dealers supported the firing of hundreds of thousands of married women workers on the grounds that men needed their jobs, and New Deals public jobs featured heroic, masculinist projects—bridges, dams—while the few women hired were virtually all placed in sweatshop-like sewing rooms. AFDC had been an alternative to, for example, what many European countries, such as France and the Scandinavian nations, did during the Depression: accept the fact that many mothers would be regularly in the labor force and help them with the task of combining breadwinning and domestic labor by providing child care and paid maternity leave. This country's failure to accept women's employment as a matter of principle did not stop women's employment, but actually created obstacles for working women: First, by confirming the stay-at-home mother as the ideal, it led many to aspire to this status and to feel badly about not achieving it. Yet it was increasingly out of reach as fewer men could support a family single-handed. Second, by not facing the problems of employed women and especially employed mothers, it weakened women workers' struggles to better their working conditions and helped lock women into the worst working conditions both at work and at home. Third, it underscored a double standard between what was expected of prosperous and what of poor women. How ironic that today women caught in a program theoretically designed to prevent employment are criticized today for aspiring to stay home with their children.

In the period just after World War II, another generation of social workers took up the challenge of democratizing casework. Sparked by Charlotte Towle, some brilliant social work academics put out a new vision of public responsibility, a program symbolized by the title of Towle's 1944 manifesto, Common Human Needs. My sense of Towle's place in the history of welfare is the subject of another paper, not this one, but let me say now simply that she reminds us that there is no inevitable opposition between social welfare and a social work that emphasizes personal growth.
What are the lessons of this history? One of the most important is the power of language. It is true that there has been a tendency for centuries to vilify the poor and to begrudge them help. But there have also been counter-tendencies, and periods in which the impulse to help and to expand democracy has been honored. Language helps create honor and dishonor. The fact that we use "welfare" to refer only to means-tested programs like ADC is not a neutral colloquialism but a fundamental aspect of how antwelfare "public opinion" was created. Mystifying language makes it possible for vast sectors of the American public to "believe" wild fabrications and to hold contradictory opinions. At least 80% of federal social-welfare spending goes to the nonpoor, and 50% of the US population receives direct government benefits, but these programs are often so invisible, so taken for granted, that we do not know when we are beneficiaries of them. Many people believe that cutting welfare was a way to cut the deficit. Wrong. AFDC accounted for about 1.2% of the federal budget; cutting the deficit requires cutting a big-ticket item. People are equally ambivalent about balancing the budget: 79% of Americans said they supported this, but only 32% did so if it meant cuts in "Social Security." On helping the poor. While over 75% say they support cuts in welfare, nearly 60% also say they don't want to cut support for poor mothers and children. We are a nation in deep denial regarding the truths about budgeting, taxes, and poor women's options.

Clinton, not the Republicans, started the current wave of attacks on welfare in his 1992 campaign. The Republicans then targeted AFDC for a vastly higher proportion of cuts than any other federal program; the Clinton Democrats responded as they always do by moving towards the Republicans and the result, after a mere 4 years of this escalation, was the repeal of AFDC. Make no mistake: what has been done is not only the elimination of the only program designed for poor children and mothers, but of the idea of public assistance altogether: the federal government has now abjured any responsibility for the poor, and poor parents and children no longer have any citizenship right to help. The shift to the states will give rise to a race to the bottom, as the states compete with each other to drive the poor out by offering the stingiest amounts of help. There's no evidence for the claim that state governments are closer to the people; what we do know is that state governments are far more vulnerable to business threats of disinvestment and flight. Historically the state governments have done little to protect women and minorities, and these groups have always had to look to the federal government for their rights.

AFDC was easy to attack first: its constituency may be one of the politically least powerful groups in the US – they don't much vote and they're often hidden from the prosperous who avoid the ghettos and rural areas where they are concentrated. Indeed, the very shame attached to their status by the incessant pounding of pejorative rhetoric induces welfare recipients to try to be unnoticeable, which is of course the very opposite of what it takes to exert political power.

But this attack on welfare is part of an attempt to create a much larger shift in our national political ideals. It is an attempt to rig one of the most massive transfers of resources from the poor and the middle-class to the rich in American history. This campaign to repeal reform achievements which took a century to build, to privatize Social Security, cut back on Medicaid and Medicare, and reduce the quality of medical care for all but the super rich – all these rest on a similar ideological premise, sometimes explicit, most often implicit. The premise is that government neither can nor should try to improve its people's wellbeing or to solve social and economic problems. The western and midwestern militias and other groups attacking federal workers such as park rangers are part of this movement. This campaign, funded by huge corporate fortunes, conservative tax-free foundations and a well-organized Right wing, but often, alas, supported by grassroots waves of anger, takes us back to
the robber-baron ideology that markets are natural and supreme, their consequences irresistible. The Republican legislative program, towards which the Clinton New Democrats are rapidly moving, would strip government of the capacity to reduce the extremes of inequality, regulate economic instabilities, and curb business excesses. The attack on affirmative action is cut from the same cloth; it rests on the notion that only the market should determine who gets jobs and education, that discrimination cannot be challenged by regulating the market. The gender and racial meanings of all this are central. Despite the tremendous influence that large corporations have always had over the state, the conservatives are right to see that popular movements of labor, women, minorities have been able to force government to intervene on the side of the subordinated. Using the democratic state to move us closer to social, political and economic justice has been a central part of the historic labor, civil-rights and feminist programs. Today's antigovernment rhetoric is a direct repudiation of these traditions.

The attack on welfare is part of an attack on democracy. What's the point of voting if government makes so little difference. We listen daily to laments about government intrusion and corruption, overreaching and inefficiency. The purpose of this chorus is to define most of our ills as beyond political control. And when people feel themselves blocked from political solutions to their problems, they will turn to fundamentalist, nationalist, racist and moral-rejuvenation appeals.

The attack on welfare is also, pre-eminently, a racial attack. The racial agenda behind these cutbacks is the same as that in affirmative action, now sometimes coded in the language of "no special rights," as if people of color were currently equal and asking for superiority or privileged treatment. Welfare repeal's callousness towards children is surely conditioned by the fact that so many of these children are not white – as well as by the fact that the labor market doesn't need them.

I don't consider the attack on welfare to be in the same way an attack on women and it is important that those who think that gender is an important matter not assume that it functions in the same way as race. Just as AFDC's inferiority to old age pensions was not a question of misogyny but of a vision of the proper gender order, so the virtual panic about single motherhood and out-of-wedlock motherhood today comes from some people who genuinely like and respect women. What's at issue is feminism, family and sexual morality. The "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996" is in part a backlash against the unorthodox, experimental, secular and feminist values of progressive social movements. Let me read to you the beginning of the welfare law: "The welfare repeal attempts to use support for children as a means of changing their mothers' sexual and marital behavior – something tried for centuries and always a failure."

I said at the outset of this talk that I have confidence in a counter-reaction to this agenda. We will read more and more about the sufferings caused directly and indirectly by making welfare a dirty word. We will also remember that "welfare" is about real mothers and real children. We need to understand that caring for children is hard and important work, very difficult for one parent alone and virtually impossible for a parent working at low wages without child care or medical insurance. We need to understand that welfare is a lifeline for women in bad relationships with men: high proportions of AFDC recipients have been victims of abuse. And that welfare is a program for the whole society, not just the poor. We need to make visible the main beneficiaries of government spending – the prosperous. We need to educate people about the "other" ADC in this country – Aid to Dependent Corporations. We need to promote a discourse about what we want from government, about our political as well as our economic vision. Above all we need social work leadership
because social workers are best positioned to keep the right goals in front of Americans. We have heard enough from those for whom cutting taxes and welfare rolls is the measure of success. We need to hear more from those for whom human welfare remains the goal.