

Bryn Mawr College

## Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

---

Graduate School of Social Work and Social  
Research Faculty Research and Scholarship

Graduate School of Social Work and Social  
Research

---

3-2006

### Review of *Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present*, by Ellen Reese

Sanford F. Schram

Bryn Mawr College, [sschram@brynmawr.edu](mailto:sschram@brynmawr.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswr\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswr_pubs)



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

#### Citation

Schram, Sanford F. Review of *Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present*, by Ellen Reese. *Social Service Review* 80 (2006): 201-205.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.  
[https://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswr\\_pubs/27](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswr_pubs/27)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

move us toward a better understanding and a more effective integration of paid work and personal life.

Mary Secret  
University of Kentucky

## Note

1. For example, Gary L. Bowen and Joe F. Pittman, eds., *The Work and Family Interface: Toward a Contextual Effects Perspective* (Minneapolis: National Council on Family Relations, 1995); Saroj Parasuraman and Jeffrey H. Greenhaus, eds., *Integrating Work and Family: Challenges and Choices for a Changing World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen and Andrew E. Scharlach, *Families and Work: New Directions for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Diane F. Halpern and Susan E. Murphy, eds., *From Work-Family Balance to Work-Family Interaction: Changing the Metaphor* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005).

**Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present.** By Ellen Reese. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. 372. \$50.00 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Ellen Reese has written an important book on welfare policy that is very much reminiscent of the classic by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1971). Both books are elegantly written, theoretically sophisticated, historically informed, empirically rich, and politically pertinent in providing a much-needed political economic critique of welfare policy. Reese's book resembles Piven and Cloward's in these many ways but for the irony that Reese explicitly states early on in her narrative: her analysis is designed to show where Piven and Cloward got it wrong about U.S. welfare politics in the post-World War II era. As a result, she argues that their analysis limits our ability to make sense of the more recent backlash against women on welfare that came to a head in the 1990s.

Whereas Piven and Cloward famously argued that welfare was a secondary institution calibrated to serve the social control needs of the political economy, Reese writes, "Piven and Cloward's analysis oversimplifies business interests regarding welfare, failing to capture significant variations in the views of business leaders. Nor do Piven and Cloward provide a clear analysis of the mechanisms through which business interests become expressed in welfare policies and interact with racial and gender politics. American welfare policies, after all, regulate not only the labor market, but also gender and race relations" (29-30). Reese compounds this scholarly criticism with the political critique that Piven and Cloward, as leaders of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), pushed for a national guaranteed income in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but, when that failed, they had helped marginalize the welfare poor by not forging coalitions with other groups. As a result, Reese argues, they left a political vacuum that was filled by a growing reservoir of mass resentment for the expanded population of welfare recipients. This resentment would eventually be tapped by right-wing propagandists in their quest to mobilize mass support for welfare reform.

Reese argues that ideologically conservative and low-wage employers led the backlash against welfare in the 1940s and 1950s. They used race and gender bias to demonize welfare recipients in the eyes of the broader public, building support

for welfare restrictions, especially in the South, in the form of “suitable home” and “employable mother” rules (40). Reese further argues that this backlash eventually took hold on the national level in the wake of the failure of the push for a guaranteed income. A sustained campaign using propaganda, especially from right-wing think tanks, resulted in the welfare retrenchment that came in the form of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (U.S. Public Law 104-193). The act abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Reese begins with a recounting of how welfare reform in the current period has succeeded politically in no small part by fanning the flames of racial resentment and gender backlash. In order to understand the current nationally driven retrenchment, though, Reese suggests we must look back to the earlier one, in which states led the way and the federal government tended mostly to go along. Federal complicity stemmed from the desire of national policy makers and administrators to prevent welfare from impeding their attempts to institutionalize the preferred social security system. But federal officials were uneven in their complicity, eventually working at times to strike down state attempts to limit access to AFDC. With time, the welfare rolls grew to include more nonwhite single mothers, and opposition to welfare became more strident.

Reese provides a variety of data to substantiate her thesis. She begins with a multivariate logistic regression analysis that predicts which states would adopt by 1960 either the suitable home or the employable mother rules. She finds that lower income states with high demand for agricultural labor and large farms, as well as those states that had welfare populations with high proportions of nonwhite recipients, were more likely to adopt either of these rules. This uneven support for welfare cutbacks shows, according to Reese, that the retrenchment of the 1940s and 1950s was more pronounced in states where low-wage employers could use race and gender bias to greater effect in gaining support for the cutbacks.

Reese triangulates her multivariate analysis with paired case studies of state backlash in the southern states of Georgia and Kentucky and the nonsouthern states of California and New York. Each case study adds detail and complexity to the picture, further underscoring the fact that the uneven nature of the welfare backlash was dependent upon a number of variables, including the extent to which there was a low-wage economy that could profit from employing welfare recipients and the extent to which race and gender could be used to demonize the welfare population enough to push through restrictions. Georgia was such a place, but Kentucky was less so. This was in part because liberal Democrats loyal to the New Deal still had sufficient standing in the state legislature at that time to resist conservative initiatives. Further, “racialized opposition to welfare was more limited in Kentucky than elsewhere in the South” (84), in no small part because blacks were only 7 percent of the state’s population in 1950 and only 15 percent of all AFDC recipients.

California had a substantial portion of its large agricultural sector join with taxpayer associations to lobby for restrictions that could lower the costs of welfare, and racial resentments did play a role in driving retrenchment. But Reese notes that racial resentment was less influential in California than in many other states. California had a strong urban and liberal political base, and the African American population was still relatively small (only 16 percent of AFDC cases in 1948). Most low-wage farm laborers were Mexicans, who were a small proportion of welfare cases and more often relied on “migrant relief” (94) from county offices. New York resisted a welfare backlash in part because it, too, had a strong urban liberal constituency that could turn back most, but not all, of the draconian restrictions that more conservative policy makers pushed on behalf of low-wage employers.

After discussing the failure of the guaranteed income effort by the NWRO during the Nixon presidency, Reese indicates how Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter made subsequent, failed proposals along these lines. This political stalemate left the door open to the rise of the right and its general push to roll back the welfare state. Welfare became a casualty of this broader campaign that used race and gender backlash to mobilize support for its program of retrenchment. Reese details how the right reframed the debate such that liberals were given very few opportunities to resist the discourse of demonization. Instead, Bill Clinton, a so-called New Democrat, claimed he could help bring about the “end of welfare as we know it” (William J. Clinton, “Acceptance Speech to the Democratic National Convention by Governor Bill Clinton from Arkansas” [address delivered at the Democratic National Convention, New York, July 16, 1992]). Clinton signed welfare reform into law, ending public assistance as an entitlement to poor single mothers and instead leading to a system that emphasizes moving these mothers as quickly as possible into the low-wage jobs of the globalizing economy. Employers like Wal-Mart and others, which were growing through such an economy, became champions of welfare reform and helped to make it a reality.

Reese concludes with a critique of liberal timidity and a call for bold proposals in the name of a new New Deal that, like Franklin Roosevelt’s old New Deal during the Great Depression, provides real aid to working families so that they can raise their children without having to endure the hardships of poverty. Her proposals make much sense, and so does her analysis, at least for the most part. I do, nonetheless, have a number of concerns.

First, I feel that Reese’s book should be read more as a paean to Piven and Cloward than as a critique. As I mentioned at the outset, *Backlash against Welfare Mothers* is remarkably similar to *Regulating the Poor*. This is true not just of its politics and theoretical perspective but also of its style. Both books offer a compelling analysis, grounded in a strong historical perspective and founded on a rich empirical base, to speak eloquently to the political struggle over welfare, then (when *Regulating the Poor* appeared in 1971) and now (when reform is shifting people from being the welfare poor to being the working poor). Both books represent an important genre of welfare policy research that uses history and theory to contextualize the analysis of empirical research in such a way that welfare policy is considered in light of the changing political economy.

Second, Reese’s critique that Piven and Cloward failed to differentiate business interests and did not identify low-wage employers as the main proponents of welfare retrenchment rings hollow with me for a number of reasons. The multivariate analysis of the state retrenchment in the 1940s and the 1950s is strong but less than definitive. Summary statistics for the models tested are not provided, leaving the reader to wonder about the robustness of the results presented. In addition, the fact that states with more agriculture workers and large farms were more likely to adopt certain restrictions does not in and of itself automatically mean that all low-wage employers were more interested in welfare retrenchment than other business interests are. What about low-wage employers other than those associated with agriculture? Reese does not provide enough labor market measures to help us decide that question. Further, Reese overlooks the fact that Piven and Cloward themselves specified that welfare would be calibrated to the needs of the local political economy. In fact, Piven and Cloward went so far as to note that, in the South, with its agrarian economy of the 1940s and 1950s, welfare provision would be even more limited to ensure the continuing availability of the largely black sharecropping workforce.

But, more seriously, Reese’s problem here is that she does not follow Piven and Cloward’s mode of analysis enough; she fails to sufficiently contextualize

her statistical evidence. As a result, she does not see that welfare restrictions may be calibrated to the needs of the low-wage labor market but in ways that serve the overall interests of a capitalist political economy. The exploitation of welfare recipients to feed the need for low-wage labor redounds to the advantage of the entire political economy. Such exploitation brings an influx of low-wage labor; the less employers pay for low-wage labor, the greater their profits. In addition, cutting back on welfare sends a strong signal to the laboring classes that the state will be less supportive in sheltering workers from the vagaries of the capitalistic economy. So, even if states with high agricultural employment and many large farms were more likely to adopt welfare restrictions than were other states with less agriculture and fewer farms, it could still be that welfare retrenchment was supported by business interests. In fact, Reese's own narrative shows that a variety of economic actors supported cracking down on welfare recipients in the early decades of AFDC.

The second part of Reese's critique, that Piven and Cloward fail to show how race and gender resentments could be mobilized to push through welfare reform, is a bit anachronistic. Reese does a good job of showing that indeed race and gender resentments were critical resources to be tapped in the push to generate mass support for reform. But she is writing in a time after much scholarship has highlighted the need to consider race and gender along with class in understanding the mechanisms of oppression in modern society. In *Regulating the Poor*, Piven and Cloward gave less stress to this, to be sure, but it was definitely part of their story. Note, for example, their extended discussion of poor, nonwhite, female-headed families and their intense involvement with them at the time through the NWRO. Piven and Cloward were doing nothing if they were not writing about and working with low-income women of color to resist the ways in which welfare policies systematically worked to keep those women down. Implicit in their work, therefore, are the acknowledgments that welfare performs social control functions for the capitalistic political economy and that this control works through race and gender relations, which buttress the system's oppressiveness for particular poor families.

In any case, these differences fade when Reese turns to the current period of national welfare retrenchment. At this point, the role of low-wage employers is still part of her story but is less distinctive, as they are lumped in with the other business interests that worked with right-wing think tanks to push for the abolition of AFDC. Reese again does a good job of showing how race and gender bias were mobilized to convince the public to champion welfare retrenchment. But in the years since Piven and Cloward wrote *Regulating the Poor*, their coauthored work and Piven's own writings have joined with others in agreement on this point.

Last, I find most unconvincing the political critique that the failure of the NWRO's push for a guaranteed income marginalized welfare activism and, bypassing the opportunity to forge broader alliances with other coalition partners, left the field of welfare politics open to those who wanted to push through retrenchment. Piven and Cloward noted in *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon, 1977) how the NWRO in fact tried hard to build coalitions with other groups only to be spurned, especially by organized labor. Further, it is important to note that the NWRO's success in helping create the growth of the welfare state actually produced the backlash of powerful capitalist interests. This, by the way, was a backlash that Piven and Cloward predicted would inevitably come as the powerful tired of making concessions to quell protest from below. The goal of Piven and Cloward's dissensus politics was to practice what I have elsewhere called "radical incrementalism": to get what could be had while it could be had and to do so in ways that could

lay the groundwork for future efforts. (On radical incrementalism, see Sanford F. Schram, *Praxis for the Poor: Piven and Cloward and the Future of Social Science in Social Welfare* [New York: New York University Press, 2002], 49–108.) One hopes that we are starting to see these efforts as the country comes to grips with a systematic marginalization of the poor that the Katrina disaster has so starkly and painfully demonstrated.

*Backlash against Welfare Mothers* is an important, if not perfect, book. It perhaps tries a bit too hard to go beyond Piven and Cloward when standing on their shoulders would have been more than enough.

Sanford F. Schram  
Bryn Mawr College

**The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution.** By David Wagner. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. Pp. 200. \$60.00 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper).

For a small volume, David Wagner's *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution* has a hefty agenda. Over seven short chapters, Wagner sketches the story of the fabled symbol of vulnerability and failure that for generations accumulated America's infirm, superannuated, and dispossessed while birthing specialized institutions for child welfare, substance abuse treatment, and psychiatric, medical, and geriatric care. In the last 20 pages (chap. 8), he turns to the contemporary relevance of this history, noting that the poorhouse endures, particularly in the homeless shelter, nursing home, and county jail. This observation and others will not be new to historically savvy students of poverty; there is not much in *The Poorhouse* that escaped the notice of Michael Katz 20 years ago (see his *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* [New York: Basic Books, 1986], 3–109). But Wagner makes the arresting claim that today's manifestations of the poorhouse might well be a lot worse than the genuine article. On grounds of evidence and interpretation, I am not persuaded.

Reconstructing poorhouse history requires arduous excavation. Except for published reports in which the voices of ordinary staff and inmates rarely are heard, time has not been kind to institutional records: ancient bindings have broken down and scattered their pages; flood, fire, and even earthquake have destroyed records wholesale; in some cases, well-meaning advocates of confidentiality systematically trashed them. Oral histories are of little help: very few among us have any recollection of the daily routines of poorhouses, and these hardy few are not a plausibly representative sample of historical experience. In sum, the historian of social welfare institutions has more to go on than the paleontologist, but the evidence typically is thin. To complicate matters, the extreme localism of American social welfare created many variations on institutional forms. Thus, generalization about an institution like the poorhouse requires careful comparative study, a method impeded quite seriously by fundamental evidentiary problems.

Like many who would give history an ethnographic turn, Wagner understands but cannot transcend these obstacles. His accounts of six poorhouses in the northern New England region—two in rural areas of New Hampshire, two in small cities in Maine (Portland and Lewiston), and two in fair-sized Massachusetts cities (Worcester and Haverhill)—rely on published documents, remaining fragments of records, interviews with local elders who experienced the places, and