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Review of *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution*, by David Wagner

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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  
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**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

occasional (unsystematically sampled) newspaper reports. His evidence does not support detailed case studies, and, while he occasionally provides far too much detail concerning an isolated local issue about which evidence happens to survive, for the most part he rotates his gaze over the six almshouses to match existing evidence with the interpretive theme at hand. This is forgivable. Institutional historians work with the bones they find, and “suggestive” is the operant caveat for the bearing of evidence on interpretation. In the spirit of fairness, I confess that some of my own work is no different (see Jim Baumohl, “Inebriate Institutions in North America, 1840–1920,” in *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, ed. Cheryl L. Krasnick Warsh [Montreal: McGill University Press, 1993], 92–114).

There is a curious factual error in *The Poorhouse* that is symptomatic of a more serious interpretive problem. Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled (APTD) was a means-tested forerunner of today’s Supplemental Security Income (SSI), along with Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Blind. The APTD program was not created by the Social Security Act of 1935 (U.S. Public Law 74-271), as Wagner asserts (132), but by its amendment in 1950 (U.S. Public Law 81-734). The program’s first federal payments to states began in October 1950. This is a small error in itself. More important, and apparently unknown to Wagner, was APTD’s intent: it was in some measure an antipoorhouse law. Although federal officials approved widely different state plans, and APTD eligibility was not denied to residents of institutions until the 1960s (when “permanent” was dropped as a modifier in the program’s title), the program’s architects fully understood that some states (most in the South) still had thousands of people in almshouses. (Indeed, on a per capita basis, the most ardent early consumers of APTD were Louisiana, Alabama, and South Carolina.) Disappointed that Congress included the term “permanent” in the program title, APTD’s administrators emphasized that benefits were not to be restricted to the “completely helpless” and that the goal of federal support was to encourage people to care for themselves (see Phyllis Hill, “Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled,” *Social Security Bulletin* 13, no. 12 [December 1950]: 12; in 1950, Social Security administrators pushed through a legislative provision requiring that, by 1953, any state providing benefits to residents of institutions must establish a state board to effectively regulate those institutions).

Wagner neglects the story of how new welfare and insurance-like programs stifled use of the poorhouse and contributed to its transformation. As a result, chapter 6 (“The Long End”) only hints at the policy context appropriate to understanding the demise of the poorhouse. Even when he introduces obvious influences, such as Old Age and Survivors Insurance, Disability Insurance (after 1956), and Aid to Dependent Children (later, Aid to Families with Dependent Children), Wagner avoids any serious discussion of their effect. This results in an odd confusion of perspective that inflates the importance of the poorhouse in the postwar era. It also overlooks what surely was an important source for the processes of medicalization and specialization in some poorhouses: state medical assistance programs connected to and partially supported by APTD.

Historical census data and evidence about benefit utilization in the germane New England states and counties would have put Wagner’s poorhouse sketches in much better perspective. For example, New Hampshire adopted APTD almost immediately (1951), whereas Massachusetts and Maine waited until 1955, and Maine used the program sparingly until the SSI era (the first SSI benefits were paid in January 1974). One would also want to know how these states used Old Age Assistance, of course, and whether the various state plans permitted payments to individuals in institutions. If permitted, these would have represented important third-party support to ease greatly the burden on the local tax base, thus facilitating the survival of poorhouses so long as they changed to conform

to eligibility standards for the federal matching funds that passed through the states.

My point, perhaps belabored, is that the history of the poorhouse cannot be appraised adequately without such considerations. A deeper reading of the historical literature on institutional development would have alerted Wagner to the importance of this for purposes of interpretation. He is correct to intuit that the poorhouse shared an important function with jails, mental hospitals, nursing homes, and other residential repositories for surplus people; in others' terms, they are all, simply put, species of a wider "abeyance" apparatus that absorbs those who lack niches in society.<sup>1</sup> However, Wagner's analysis fails to locate the almshouse in the emerging state and locally administered systems of social welfare and control that gradually dismantled it. Those systems spread the abeyance function more widely by relying increasingly on specialized institutions (whose administrators often fought among themselves about who belonged where). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the character of America's poorhouses was shaped by an interinstitutional politics that was mediated by state boards, legislative committees, and, finally, federal overseers. These politics and their outcomes varied greatly from state to state and even among localities in states with strong (and sometimes constitutionally mandated) traditions of administrative decentralization (compare California and Wisconsin with Massachusetts, for example). Had he extended himself to consider the greater institutional field, Wagner's comparison of New Hampshire's and Maine's poorhouses with those in Massachusetts might have been far more revealing of how we parsed the old poorhouse population, why, and to what effects.

Because he does not analyze the history of the poorhouse in the context of social welfare system building, Wagner's claims about a kinder and gentler past are impossible to evaluate. To be sure, shelters for homeless people are often brutalizing, some nursing homes are among the most discouraging places on earth, and arid county jails set off by gleaming razor wire are far removed from the often casual confinement of minor offenders a century ago. Unclear, however, is whether Wagner believes that release in lieu of bail (own recognizance), small-scale community treatment, stingy but more available and adequate outdoor relief (compared to a century ago), and other manifestations of deinstitutionalization have made any difference, on the whole. Although never simple in urban areas that teemed with private rescue and mutual aid, the abeyance function (the poorhouse function) has become quite diffuse over the past century. The measure of its humanity in relation to the past should not be casually inferred from the juxtaposition of a few ugly contemporary institutions against some archetypal poorhouse, revised and redeemed, that, especially in big cities where they were much larger, probably bore little resemblance to Wagner's sketches. Nor is it fair to suggest, as Wagner does (136), that deinstitutionalization has been mere transinstitutionalization, though a lot of that surely has occurred, notably in settings that concentrate technology in the service of social or medical surveillance.

All this said, many of *The Poorhouse's* themes are good ones, and social work students would benefit from encountering them all in one place. But there is very little here for the serious historian. The themes have been sounded before and more clearly in the literature on the history of social welfare institutions. It is a valuable literature of which Wagner seems largely unaware. The understanding that the poorhouse was a "hybrid institution" (Stuart A. Rice, "The Failure of the Municipal Lodging House," *National Municipal Review* 11, no. 11 [1922]: 358–62) dedicated to various and sometimes contradictory purposes is an old one (see Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*). That people used institutions, including the poorhouse, for reasons that did not jive with official purposes is

also well known (e.g., Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence; Boston, 1880–1960* [New York: Viking, 1988]). That a variety of constituencies (families, judges, local employers, inmates, and staff) determined how institutions functioned and the fact that inmates often walked away from nominally coercive settings are also commonplaces of historical analysis.<sup>2</sup> The sophisticated reader is apt to conclude that, in its attention to history's ethnographic purpose, *The Poorhouse* does little more than discover the obvious anew or poach with scant citation the insights of more thorough historians.

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## Notes

1. Ephraim Mizruchi, *Regulating Society: Beguines, Bohemians, and Other Marginals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1; see also Kim Hopper and Jim Baumohl, "Held in Abeyance: Rethinking Homelessness and Advocacy," *American Behavioral Scientist* 37, no. 4 (1994): 522–52, and "Redefining the Cursed Word: A Historical Interpretation of American Homelessness," in *Homelessness in America*, ed. Jim Baumohl (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1996), 3–14; Kim Hopper, *Reckoning with Homelessness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

2. For example, Barbara M. Brenzel, *Daughters of the State: A Social Portrait of the First Reform School for Girls in North America, 1856–1905* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983); Ellen Dwyer, *Homes for the Mad: Life Inside Two Nineteenth-Century Asylums* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Jim Baumohl and Sarah W. Tracy, "Building Systems to Manage Inebriates: The Divergent Paths of California and Massachusetts, 1891–1920," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 21, no. 4 (1994): 557–97.