

1981

Review of *The Response of Social Work to the  
Depression*, by Jacob Fisher

Leslie B. Alexander  
Bryn Mawr College, [lalexand@brynmawr.edu](mailto:lalexand@brynmawr.edu)

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

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswsr\\_pubs](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswsr_pubs)

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

#### Custom Citation

Alexander, Leslie B. Review of *The Response of Social Work to the Depression*, by Jacob Fisher. *Social Service Review* 55 (1981): 345-347.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswsr\\_pubs/23](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswsr_pubs/23)

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

benefits of such investments. By the end of the 1880s "philanthropy had come to be regarded mainly as a way of using surplus wealth" to help those who could help themselves, leaving to the public sector the remainder of the needy (p. 222). This division of labor acknowledged the superior resources of the state while accepting the virtue of selective aid in the hands of private philanthropists. Bremner properly concludes that with the exception of pensions, government was less successful in caring for its charges than was the private sector in meeting its responsibilities. Unfortunately, Bremner does not provide sufficient proof for his view that "the impact of the Civil War on philanthropy and welfare, therefore, was to enhance the prestige of voluntary efforts and to encourage reliance on them for solution to social problems" (p. 207).

Howard N. Rabinowitz  
*University of New Mexico*

**The Response of Social Work to the Depression.** By Jacob Fisher. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1980. Pp. xxi+266. \$17.95 (cloth); \$7.95 (paper).

Although the response of the mainstream of social work to the Depression era has received considerable attention, Bertha Reynolds's lively autobiography, *An Uncharted Journey*, has stood virtually alone in recounting the ideology and activities of the left wing of social work during the 1930s, the period in which the radical Left was born and had considerable impact within the profession.

Fortunately, in his spirited and informative new book, *The Response of Social Work to the Depression*, Jacob Fisher has done much to set the record straight and to fill this important gap in American social work history. Certainly no one is better qualified to write such a history than Fisher, who was intimately connected with all facets of the Rank-and-File Movement, the portrayal of which constitutes the major focus and contribution of this book. The Rank-and-File Movement was a left-wing social movement within the profession in the 1930s, which encompassed the following: (1) Social Workers' Discussion Clubs, active in a number of cities between 1931-35 as forums for talks, often of a leftist political nature, of interest to social workers; (2) practitioner groups in some chapters of the American Association of Social Workers and caseworker councils in private agencies, both dedicated to the discussion of professional and broader social issues; (3) *Social Work Today*, a journal serving as the national news organ and ideological mouthpiece of the movement from 1934 until its demise in 1942; (4) social work unions, emerging in the early 1930s and maturing by the end of the decade when formal affiliation with the CIO was achieved; and (5) a commitment to direct involvement in joint activities with a variety of other organizations on issues ranging from American foreign policy to racial discrimination to national social welfare programs.

Fisher was an active member of the New York Discussion Clubs. He was also prominent in the early 1930s in the Association of Federation Workers, the first union in social work; president of the New York Social Service Employees Union, Local 19, when it officially affiliated with the CIO; vice-president of the New York State Industrial Union Council of the CIO (1938-39); and president of the New York City Joint Council of the United Office and Professional Workers of America (1939-40). He was the first editor of *Social Work Today* and later served on its editorial board. He was on the executive committee of the Social Workers' Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (1938-39). He was

also the author of the official history of the Rank-and-File Movement, *The Rank-and-File Movement in Social Work, 1931-36*, published in 1936 by the New York School of Social Work. Like many left-wing radicals in social work and other professions, Fisher also suffered grievously during the witch-hunts of the McCarthy era; he was suspended as a "security risk" from the Social Security Administration in 1954 because of his earlier involvement in the Rank-and-File Movement.

Drawing on his firsthand impressions, selected secondary sources about the period, and a reexamination of primary sources, such as *Social Work Today*, *The Compass*, *Social Work Year Books*, and data from the University of Minnesota Social Welfare History Archives, Fisher divides the book into five major sections, each with several chapters. These sections are: "The Hoover Years, 1929-33"; "The First New Deal, 1933-35"; "The Second New Deal, 1935-37"; "The Last Years, 1937-40"; and "At Decade's End: Summary and Assessment."

Although necessary as a background for understanding the context in which the radical Left in social work emerged, I found the first section—"The Hoover Years"—the least satisfying, no doubt because, in contrast to the rest of the book, I was familiar with the ground covered. Also, though admittedly this is a minor point in Fisher's total discussion in section 1, he does readily adopt the all-too-familiar "psychiatric deluge" theory of social casework development in the 1920s (see pp. 16-19), which results in a somewhat caricatured presentation of caseworkers as totally enamored of and dedicated to psychiatric theories of causation and treatment, to the virtual exclusion of environmental factors. The majority of caseworkers were not so possessed, so convinced of their methods, nor did they adopt such a narrow view of the scope of their responsibilities and concern.

This criticism recedes quickly, however, as Fisher moves to the core of the book, the largely unfamiliar territory of activities within the left wing of social work from 1933 on. Although these developments are largely confined to the Rank-and-File Movement and social work's reaction to it, Fisher also uncovers some of the stormy debates about the shape and scope of public assistance and social security programs within several committees of the American Association of Social Workers (AASW). This is included in addition to detailed coverage of developments within the social security and public assistance programs in general. Fisher also traces the generally supportive attitudes of the American Public Welfare Association and the AASW toward unionization in social work, attitudes standing in sharp contrast to the standoffish response of some other professions in the same era to unionization within their ranks. Lively vignettes of more familiar social work figures, such as Bertha Reynolds and Harry Hopkins, are also sketched, as well as glimpses of leaders less well known to today's generation of social workers, such as Aubrey Williams, Mary Van Kleeck, Harry Lurie, and Grace Marcus.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Rank-and-File Movement was the introduction of unions in social work. Fisher's coverage of the origins and growth of unions in both the public and private sectors is complete and informative. Current advocates of unions in social work will find some familiar themes: whether unionization is "professional," whether there is really an inherent antagonism between management and line professionals, and whether social workers should strike. There are also unfamiliar themes, since union advocates in the 1930s stressed not only traditional union issues but also issues of domestic social reform, war, and peace.

It was especially this concern about the world outside the agencies, such as the preoccupation with policy toward Russia and neutrality in the European conflict, which increased charges that the social work unions were Communist-

dominated. Although all will not share his assessment, I think that Fisher discusses the Communist charge directly, thoughtfully, and fairly.

In summary, this is a highly readable book, bringing to light a great deal of unfamiliar social work history. It should provide extremely interesting research leads for students of social welfare history, a sense of origins for present-day radical social workers, and an opportunity to reminisce for those social workers actively involved in the struggles of the Depression era. As Clarke Chambers notes in his foreword to this book, those interested in social work history should also be alerted to Fisher's recent and charming autobiographical account of his coming of age in the 1920s, *On Vanishing Ground* (Fairfax, Va.: Piney Branch Press, 1979), which includes some discussion of his early years in social work, both as a student and practitioner. Social work history has been greatly enriched by both of Fisher's books. One might hope, too, that his example will inspire other practitioners to write their accounts of early professional developments.

Leslie B. Alexander  
*Bryn Mawr College*

**Confronting Youth Unemployment in the 1980s: Rhetoric versus Reality.** Edited by Ray C. Rist. Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon Press, 1980. Pp. 234. \$20.00.

This is a bread-and-butter book about breaking away and breaking in, much more about the latter than the former. It is a collection of articles by craftsmen in the youth employment field, attempting an approach to the problem that is new, both in substance and in methodology.

The book defines the youth unemployment problem since 1975 in economic terms and lightly analyzes it, discussing such issues as persistent high unemployment of sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds, 20-40 percent unemployment rates (depending on whether the youths are white or black), and the fact that one-fourth of America's unemployed are from this one-tenth of the laborers.

The book first considers basic theory, discussing such issues as whether demand creates supply or supply of trained youth creates demand. These issues, however, avoid consideration of whether youths might get jobs only through major changes in contemporary economic structures. The articles then search for successes among federal programs to put youth to work, particularly Labor Department Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) youth programs of recent years (as amended by the 1977 Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act). A number of these articles have been designed to provide answers of a sort. They aim at a modest goal of "knowledge development," which is something more than the knowledge of a media investigation and something humbler and more actionable than "research"; they aim for rough-and-ready, plausible, "how-to" guidelines, emerging from systematically observed local experience and apparently capable of replication.

Substantial federal funds have been invested in developing knowledge of this sort. There are projects which focus on in-school youth and projects to find replicable ways of helping youth stay in school. Projects are tests that encourage "linkages" among employment, educational, and economic institutions which affect youth employment; among schools and businesses and public employers; among schools, employment structures, and local CETA units; and among federal and local governmental agencies themselves. "Knowledge development" can occur in two arenas: (1) through local schools, by persuading schools to provide academic credit for work, for scholastic learning acquired at