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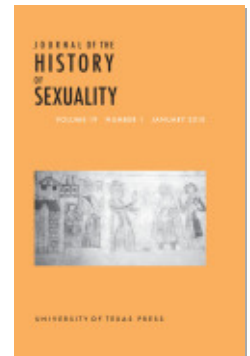
*Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present* (review)

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category, as this interpretation seems to require us to do, what happens to sexual morality? Isn't the neutral sexual agent ripe for abuse?

One may insist here that neutral sexuality is something we all must reach together. That may ameliorate the moral difficulties, but it is hard to imagine what sexuality would become under such conditions. Picture two partners who have forsworn desire, pleasure, and orgasm in sex. What activities would they engage in? How would they be moved to engage in such activities?

In my view these questions are pressing because thinking of sexuality without desire and pleasure challenges our understanding of the nature of sex in ways deeper than Perniola seems to acknowledge. What would make an act a sex act if it had none of these qualities? The mental image of two persons touching one another in intimate ways with no desire and no pleasure is an unhappy one. Perniola seems to acknowledge something like this when he calls pleasure "the saddest topic of this book" (132), but his discussion there just concerns the ancient philosophers and their musings about the dangers of pleasure and the distinctions between false and true pleasures.

This book contains many short discussions on other topics, such as Hegel and Heidegger on thingness, Kant on the morality of the fetish, the interrelationship between philosophy and sexuality, and theories of sex differences. Some of these are thought-provoking; others just seem strange, such as the proposal that we consider euthanasia in the sphere of sadistic sexuality (25) or the claim that the dependence of sexuality on the organic can be blamed in part on feminism and psychoanalysis (48). As I see it, none of these discussions adds support to the main thesis of this book, that we are becoming, and ought to become, sexual objects in a new and radical way.

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*Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present.* By ELLEN REESE. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. 372. \$55.00 (cloth); \$21.95 (paper).

The scholarship on the U.S. welfare state is rich and broad. Particularly in recent decades, studies of social policy by historians and historically minded sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists have been published at a steady pace. These studies have considered the welfare state from a wide range of perspectives. Informed by comparisons with other wealthy countries, a wide array of answers have been offered to the overarching question of why the U.S. domestic state has differed especially from its European counterparts—including the answer that the U.S. state in its

formative period at the turn of the twentieth century differed much less than we generally think it did.<sup>1</sup> Although the scholarship on the period before 1935 and immediately after the New Deal is far more developed than the scholarship on the later period, scholarship on the post-World War Two decades has been informed by questions similar to the ones that have engaged scholars on the earlier period: Is the United States different? How and, above all, why? How do we explain the deep (apparent?) paradox in the long history of programs to alleviate poverty and the equally persistent political complaints about these programs, many of which have resulted in successful campaigns to constrain access to them?

One main line of interpretation that has been offered concerns the relationship between welfare and work. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, for example, brought a neo-Marxist theoretical perspective as well as an understanding of comparative European examples to bear on their important *Regulating the Poor*.<sup>2</sup> They argued that the apparent paradox was no paradox at all; understood from the standpoint of its relationship to the needs or desires of employers, the simultaneous existence and precariousness of support for the poor made eminent good sense. From at least the Elizabethan Poor Law in England on, Piven and Cloward argued, parish, county, state, and federal aid for poor people had the goals of maintaining the labor supply in a minimal state of health (enough to ensure work effort), controlling its geographic mobility, and ensuring that people remained available for work—that is, ensuring that there were no reasonable alternatives to work, a principle that was expressed most poignantly in the Elizabethan principle of “least eligibility,” that cash aid must never exceed the level that the lowest-paid worker received for her or his labor. Government policy in their view may not have been a simple reflection of the desires of capitalists, but, despite what politicians or bureaucrats may have said about their generous motives in helping the poor, they were essentially doing the bidding of wealthy employers.

The argument about labor markets that Cloward and Piven represented so powerfully has had enormous influence in studies of the U.S. welfare state. The seemingly indefatigable historian Michael B. Katz made a similar argument one of his three major arguments about the purposes of social welfare in his classic synthesis *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*.<sup>3</sup> The equally indefatigable legal scholar Joel Handler has written, alone and with his colleague Yeheskel Hasenfeld and others, of the fake morality of recent

<sup>1</sup> For this last argument see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (1986; New York: Basic Books, 1996).

welfare reforms, which drive poor people into the low-wage labor market while pretending to help or change them.<sup>4</sup>

Sociologist Ellen Reese places herself squarely in this tradition. Reese's recent book, *Backlash against Welfare Mothers, Past and Present*, offers the most rigorous treatment of antiwelfare politics in the late 1940s and 1950s that has ever appeared in print. She extends her discussion of antiwelfare politics from the immediate post–World War Two period to the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. After sifting a vast amount of historical and contemporary data, Reese concludes that agricultural employers were the most significant advocates of welfare cuts in the period immediately following World War Two. She finds that a more diverse group of employers and wealthy individuals were largely behind the welfare “reforms” of the more recent period.

This is an extremely strong book, informed by Reese's intrepid and creative historical research. In addition to making the strongest case among scholars of her generation for an employment-centered understanding of U.S. welfare history, Reese adds the dimensions of race, gender, and migration to her treatments of both the earlier and later periods of welfare retrenchment. The book is clearly written and argued. Although it is not completely persuasive in every detail, *Backlash against Welfare Mothers* has an impressive combination of analytical rigor—especially in Reese's efforts to isolate a variable that explains the differences among U.S. states after World War Two in their responses to rising caseloads for public aid—and narrative flow.

Part of the reason that the tradition Reese favors has lasted for as long as it has is that it has a lot of explanatory power. There is no question that the employers about whom Piven and Cloward, Katz, Handler, and Reese have written did, indeed, attempt to use various systems of aid to the poor to serve their own ends. Cloward and Piven wrote of agricultural employers who favored payouts to the poor when the fields were fallow and withdrawals of aid during harvest season, when they wanted everyone to work for them. They preferred policies that discouraged mobility—by tying citizenship, and therefore eligibility for help, to a particular parish or town—when labor demands were high but advocated policies that encouraged mobility when their labor needs were low. In the twentieth-century cases Reese explores the dynamics are similar to those explored by Piven and Cloward. In Reese's telling large-scale farmers shaped policies at the county and state levels, and state chapters of the Farm Bureau Federation

<sup>4</sup> Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare: Ignore Poverty and Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Handler White and Lucie White, eds., *Hard Labor: Women and Work in the Post-Welfare Era* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999); Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld, *The Moral Construction of Poverty* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1991).

lobbied aggressively to curtail welfare benefits. In careful comparisons between states that passed major welfare cuts in this period and those that did not, Reese finds the presence or absence of major farm interests and advocates for agricultural employers as the single most important variable that explained the difference in outcomes. She clarifies the economic and political differences between states in two chapters that explore the sharp cuts in welfare in Georgia in comparison to the much milder antiwelfare backlash in Kentucky and the virulent antiwelfare politics of California with the more moderate political climate in New York State.

One persistent problem for Reese and other scholars who write in the employment-centered tradition, a problem that seems especially salient for readers of the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, is that much of what has been said and done in the name of welfare reform doesn't *seem* to have been about the labor market. Employers may always have been lurking in the background, pulling the strings of popular feeling or government policy, but much of what antiwelfare politicians and citizens have said has concerned sex, gender, and sexuality—as well as race, language, citizenship, and disability. Reese certainly acknowledges the presence of factors other than employers' prerogatives in shaping modern welfare policies. But she implicitly argues that employment relations were causal, or central, in a way that none of these other issues were.

In the historical examples she explores Reese presents the relationship between economic and other variables in two ways. Sometimes she suggests that economic relations were the base from which the superstructure of social politics (including rhetoric that appeared to be about race, gender, or migration) grew. At other times she suggests that portions of this history cannot be explained in reference to employment relations, and so she introduces another variable to explain what her primary emphasis on the economy cannot. In these moments Reese also discusses the historical role of activist and interest-group politics, for example, in the case of the African American civil rights movement in the South, which provoked welfare backlashes in Georgia and other states, and the array of advocates for social welfare in New York City who effectively fought back attempted welfare cuts in the New York State legislature. This latter approach seems honest if unsystematic, more like the way many qualitative historians proceed than the method that most sociologists prefer.

Reese does not make gender the heart of her explanation, but she does argue persistently for its importance. For her, state-level program cuts in the late 1940s and 1950s were informed by “the patriarchal family ideology” (57) of the period; those of the 1990s grew in part from “patriarchal family ideologies and racism and [were] aroused by shifts in gender and race relations” (196). She views patriarchy in a nuanced way, inflected by norms of race and class, such that even in the 1950s middle-class white women were expected to stay out of the labor market to care for their children

while African Americans and Latinas were expected to work for wages irrespective of children's needs, and welfare policies reflected this dichotomy (68). Although the way she subordinates gender to class is frustrating from a women's history point of view, this is all valuable.

Reese does not unlink sexuality from gender in her analysis or discuss the gendered dimension of social policy very much apart from "patriarchy." One result is that the book is replete with evidence that welfare policies have been shaped by political concerns about men's sexual and relationship behavior as well as by concerns about women's behavior. Reese does not pay attention to this fascinating dimension of her research. This omission is not surprising, but it does point to a productive direction for future research. Reese mentions, for example, that in 1950 Kentucky reformed the state Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program to make stepparents and common-law fathers financially responsible for their children and female partners who would otherwise be eligible for government aid. The proposal may have been motivated in part by a desire to raise funds, but, like most such policies, its main result appears to have been that scores of fathers were shamed and punished with prosecutions and jail terms (80). In California welfare reformers in 1951 started working on the problem of collecting child support from fathers of ADC recipients who were living in other states, and they successfully changed state law to compel the district attorney to investigate cases of parental (paternal) desertion of minor children (95). These examples do not fit well with a strictly class-based view of the past or with a view of sex that only addresses men's power over women. They point instead to anxiety about men's putatively unbridled and exploitative sexuality, an anxiety that has more often found expression in public policies directed at poor people than it has in policies directed at the rich. Among its other ambitions, social welfare policy in the United States has tried to control or punish men for their sexual (mis)behavior and therefore to teach men how to act.

The wealth of data in Ellen Reese's book brings to mind two last points that are suggestive of future research possibilities more than they are points of critique. Both emerge from my own current research.<sup>5</sup> First, in her treatment of welfare backlashes in the late 1940s and 1950s Reese does not remark much on the welfare *expansions* that preceded and inspired them. Rather than treating the period of expansion in the U.S. welfare state as simply the period of the New Deal, it is important to take note of

<sup>5</sup> My current research projects include a study of the National Federation of the Blind and its long-time president, Jacobus tenBroek, that covers the advocacy strategies of disabled people in the years between World War Two and the middle 1960s and a history of the U.S. welfare state in comparative and transnational perspective, coauthored with Sonya Michel, Sarah Rose, and Laura Frader.

the growth in public programs that advocates and activists achieved in the period of the Fair Deal. These were embattled and significant victories, products of left-liberal political efforts of the late 1940s to shape the meaning and legacy of the New Deal, which were distinct from it. Even during the 1950s, as Reese notes without really emphasizing the point, there were huge expansions in social welfare in the United States. Many, although not all, of these later expansions had more to do with creating what I call the “rehabilitative state,” that is, programs of vocational rehabilitation and assistance for disabled people, than with aiding impoverished mothers and children. This change in direction should be understood on its own terms rather than being lumped in with the antiwelfare rhetoric and program cuts that also occurred in the Eisenhower era.

Last, and relatedly, the next generation of scholars that studies social welfare in the United States should consider the role of disability in shaping policy. This is a new approach, one that may not have the immediate political appeal of interpretations based on the interests of employers, men, or native-born whites. However, disability has the potential to scramble and reorient our understanding of welfare states in the United States and elsewhere in the present and the past. In terms of Reese’s concern with the history of work requirements for recipients of public assistance, it adds a dimension of nuance to consider how and why certain people have been considered work ready and others have been considered disabled from participation in the labor force. In terms of sexual and reproductive behavior, which women and men have been considered appropriate parents and which have been considered disabled parents? In the area of activism and advocacy, what role did disabled people and their advocates play in shaping the welfare state? My research on the National Federation of the Blind indicates that, in the case of the expansions of the U.S. welfare state in the late 1940s and 1950s, they were very important political players.

Overall, Ellen Reese’s *Backlash against Welfare Mothers* is an important contribution to the scholarship on welfare and its discontents in the modern United States. She is a skillful researcher and writer. She is clearly passionate about her subject and eager to bring her data to bear on contemporary political debates. Reese’s ambitious work provides plenty of fodder for future scholarship and for future generations of debate over the meanings of Western social welfare policies.

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