Review of *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution.* David Wagner. Reviewed by Paul H. Stuart.

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David Wagner, *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution*.
    Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. $ 60.00
    hardcover, $ 22.95 papercover.

Most social welfare histories characterize poorhouses, alms-
houses, workhouses and poor farms as punitive nineteenth-
century institutions. Following the 1834 English Poor Law
Reforms, English and American authorities provided relief to
poor people in institutions, "indoor relief," in preference to re-
lieving the poor in their own homes, "outdoor relief." Indoor
relief, reformers believed, would discourage all but the truly
destitute from seeking public relief and thus discourage pau-
perization, or as we would say, chronic dependency. After the
turn of the twentieth century, the vogue of indoor relief waned.
The English abandoned the Poor Laws and Progressives in the
United States endorsed a more humane outdoor relief policy,
according to most accounts.

David Wagner challenges this common understanding in
The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution. Based on newspa-
per accounts, poorhouse records, oral history interviews, and
local government records, Wagner provides a rich description
of life in six New England poorhouses between the 1830s and
the 1940s. After an introductory chapter which clarifies terms
and places the poorhouse into the context of the historiogra-
phy of U.S. social welfare history, Wagner provides a series
of "scenes from the poorhouse" designed to put "people into
poorhouse history" in Chapter 2. Then, in a series of short
chapters, Wagner discusses the motives of the founders of
the poorhouses, the development of an inmate culture, the
politics of poorhouse management, poorhouses in the twenti-
eth century, and poorhouse staff members. In a final chapter,
Wagner speculates about a "return of the poorhouse" in recent
decades, focusing on the growth of homeless shelters, prisons,
and nursing homes.

Rather than grim *Bastilles*, as the English working class re-
ferred to nineteenth-century workhouses, Wagner finds that
poorhouses were humane institutions that adapted to their
residents even as residents themselves shaped aspects of in-
stitutional life and exerted influence on poorhouse managers.
Good poorhouse management, especially the need for poor

farms to raise crops, sometimes contradicted the goals of re-habilitation and independence inherent in poorhouse philos-ophy. Wagner shows that poorhouses survived much longer than has been commonly understood, as late as the 1960s for several of the institutions described in this volume.

The six poorhouses singled out for intensive examination include large and small institutions, located in rural areas and small and mid-size cities in Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. In the case of each institution, Wagner discovered and exploited rich documentary evidence, including town and county records, institutional records, letters, and newspaper accounts. He also conducted oral history interviews with the children of a poorhouse superintendent. This book is in many ways a model of what can be accomplished in local social welfare history.

There are a few lapses in this otherwise admirable book. Wagner sometimes relies on secondary sources for primary quotations. A passage on p. 1, cited as an excerpt from the "English Poor Laws on the workhouse," is actually from the 1834 Report of the English Poor Law Commissioners. Wagner quoted it from Piven and Cloward's *Regulating the Poor* (1971), who in turn quoted it from de Schweinitz's *England's Road to Social Security* (1943). Both of these sources attributed the quote correctly. On p. 155, note 20, a quotation attributed to Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, as quoted in Frank Bruno's *Trends in Social Work* (1957), is actually not Sanborn's words but Bruno's. Sanborn's paper, cited by Bruno several pages before the quoted words appear and apparently not consulted by Wagner, is an 1884 survey of the management of New England almshouses. Finally, Wagner's statement that the term "the Whig interpretation of history" was "initially coined" by Asa Briggs in 1961 will surprise readers of Sir Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931).

Wagner might have paid more attention to images of the poorhouse in popular culture in his discussion. For example, Will Carleton's nineteenth-century poem "Over the Hill to the Poor House" inspired several popular songs and a 1920 motion picture. Wagner's conclusions about the human di-mension of the poorhouse will be familiar to readers of John Updike's first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959). Like many US

social welfare historians, Wagner focuses on the Northeast. He does not discuss poorhouses in very large cities, such as Boston, where much of the Progressive Era reform movement was most active. One wonders how and to what extent the poorhouse experience in large cities and in other regions – the Midwest, the South, and the West – differed from what Wagner describes. Hopefully, Wagner's success in this effort will result in the completion of studies on poorhouses in large urban areas and in other parts of the nation.

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Stuart A. Kirk (Ed.), *Mental Disorders in the Social Environment: Critical Perspectives.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, $69.50 hardcover, $34.50 papercover.

Kirk sets out to provide a "counterpoint to conventional wisdom" (p. 17) about mental health practice in general and mental disorders in particular. To do so, he has gathered an impressive cadre of mostly male colleagues and invited them to author chapters which would "selectively raise critical questions" (p.17) on the topic. He introduces the reader to the text by summarizing what will be the arguments of many, but not all, of the 30 authors whose comments will follow his: namely, that social work's ties to psychiatry are intensely problematic, that we have been co-opted and thus are blind to market forces that shape mental health practice, and, along that line, we lack a sufficiently critical perspective on mental health practice today. The book is a good read, infuriating at times with its own ignorance of a critical perspective, but also at times educational, useful, entertaining and thought-provoking. I may very well adopt it in my mental health courses.

However, perhaps predictably with such a text, neither the tone nor the content of the chapters is consistent. Yes, the book includes Wakefield's confrontation of the social worker's role in using the deeply flawed DSM and in "treating mental disorders," as well as Epstein's articulate and destructive words about our ignorance of the "plausibility of ineffectiveness and pernicious harm" (p.323), and Gambrill's angry, albeit