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# Welfare Workers as Surplus Population: A Useful Model?\*

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*Analysts of organizational and employment issues in social welfare are in need of a more critical orientation for framing debate. We propose that an understanding of welfare workers as surplus population offers critical insights into a number of longstanding welfare concerns, including political coalitions, professional standards, and worker burnout. Empirical evidence is presented to undergird the credibility of the surplus population argument.*

Considerable literature in social welfare implicitly if not explicitly employs a functionalist theoretical orientation. That is, it takes existing social structures as givens and focuses on questions of social integration, consensus-building, and the quest for societal equilibrium. Literature in this tradition is more abundant than analyses grounded in conflict theory. The latter framework, by contrast, highlights questions of resource and power differentials, socially-structured tensions and contradictions, and societal change. In our opinion, conflict theory has much more to offer welfare analysts than we have yet acknowledged and pursued.

Most recently, the critical work of selected political economists has considerably enhanced our understanding of state welfare initiatives—their origins, contradictions, and potential. For example, writers focusing on the interface of political and

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economic institutional dynamics have lent insights to such complex issues as the fiscal crisis of the welfare state, interrelations between state warfare and welfare functions, and the structural and ideological sources of social policy failures (O'Connor 1973, 1984; Offe 1984). As yet however, the theoretical soil out of which these insights arise has not been tilled for fresh perspectives on organizational and employment issues in social welfare work. This article makes an initial effort to address that oversight. In doing so, we hope to demonstrate the unique and useful contributions that a conflict theoretical orientation can make to social welfare analyses.

Specifically, we believe it is fruitful for analysts of the welfare system to explore the political economic concept of a surplus population. According to theory surrounding the concept, both workers in the welfare state and their clients are said to comprise the economically marginal group designated as surplus population. This concept is ordinarily only embedded in larger discussions of the welfare state; consequently its implications have not been explored. The specific purpose of this article, then, is to offer initial and suggestive rather than exhaustive responses to the following questions:

1. What is meant by the concept of a surplus population?
2. How can it be elaborated for richer explanation of the U.S. welfare state?
3. What empirical evidence can be offered to further its soundness as a theoretical filter?
4. How can it be employed to reframe longstanding issues in social welfare work and to generate new ones?

### The Surplus Population Argument

The surplus population argument as developed by critical political economists can be explicated briefly as follows. The central government (hereafter the state) in a capitalist political economy has two key, albeit ultimately contradictory, functions. The first is to develop and support mechanisms that enhance private production and capital accumulation. The second is to develop and support mechanisms that promote a socially harmonious and politically legitimated environment within which the accumulation of capital can occur (Dover and Moscovitch 1981; O'Connor 1984). The latter function provides the founda-

tion out of which state-sponsored social welfare efforts are fostered.

Unemployment, underemployment, and unstable low-wage employment in peripheral jobs are logical outcomes of capital accumulation and the technological changes of maturing capitalism. In other words, it is predictable that some members of the population will be rendered marginal or surplus to the core economy; profitable production precludes their employment. The state manages the human costs of capital production through assorted welfare initiatives. According to political economic theory, the function of social welfare efforts under maturing capitalism is to provide assistance to the economically displaced in order to prevent massive social unrest (Piven and Cloward 1971). Furthermore, assistance must be undertaken in a manner that does not challenge the legitimacy of the political economic environment that spawns need or reduces individual incentive to work, even for minimal wages (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984).

Of particular interest for the purpose of this article is the next point made by political economists who articulate the surplus population argument. The state, as already noted, must generate various palliative social programs to appease the economically displaced. Quite functionally, these very programs provide employment to some members of the surplus population, whose work is to tend the needs of the remainder of the surplus population. In this manner, then, the political economy that generates a surplus population is argued to be partially self-correcting through the creation of new jobs in state-supported social welfare work (O'Connor 1973).

In short, a political economic approach to social welfare informed by conflict theory argues that the workers in state-sponsored welfare activities differ from their clients mainly insofar as the former have jobs and the latter do not. Both groups, it is argued, are members of the surplus population, which is an inevitable feature of a maturing capitalist political economy. In addition, as members of the surplus population, both groups are equally dependent on the state for their subsistence.

#### Elaboration of the Argument

The concept of a surplus population is class-based. Individuals become economically marginal through routes as varied as

long-standing membership in an entrenched underclass or precipitous downward mobility due to termination of an executive position in a declining industry. While class is indeed a critical stratifier of people and organizer of their life chances, we cannot fully appreciate the dynamics of inequality in the United States unless we acknowledge both the racialized character of the class structure and the marginalized relationship of women to the political economy. The concept of a surplus population in itself is neither gender- nor race-specific. However, members of the surplus population in the United States are disproportionately women and members of racial-ethnic groups. The composition reflects both the patriarchy and racism of the broader society and particularly (for our purposes) its economic institutions.

There is need, then, to elaborate the concept of surplus population to incorporate gender and racial-ethnic stratification as well as class dynamics. Our argument is that all three variables inform the composition and dynamics of the surplus population, operating at times independently, at other times conjointly, geometrically, and with mutual reinforcement, to organize the life chances of specific segments of the population (e.g., Brittan and Maynard 1984). In the following paragraphs we briefly explicate key institutional dynamics that make women and racial-ethnic groups particularly vulnerable to membership in the surplus population.

Women's disproportionate economic marginality is grounded in the interrelated patriarchal ideologies of men as instrumental agents and women as nurturers. Both ideologies are manifested in the capitalist policy of a family wage system. In short, a family wage system posits the man as the family's agent in and linkage with economic institutions. His labor, it is argued, should produce sufficient income for support of the entire family. In turn, the woman performs childcare and unpaid domestic labor. Consequently, the woman and her children are dependent upon the man for their income security. Of course, the assumption that women themselves have never been wage (or enslaved) workers is historically inaccurate (e.g., Jones 1984; Glenn 1985; Kessler-Harris 1981) as is the assumption that all families contain a man. Nevertheless, the ideology of the family wage has provided a longstanding basis for both private wage decisions

and public social policies. Because the family wage system assumes a male economic agent and a female care-provider, women in the workforce are viewed as secondary workers for whom low wages and limited occupational opportunities in service and support work have been rationalized (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984).

As a consequence, millions of women experience poverty due to divorce, separation, or death of their male partners, or due to their difficulty as single household heads in finding work that pays women adequate wages. In sum, the location of women in disproportionate numbers in the surplus population is intimately linked to the sexual division of labor in a political economy premised on the family wage system. This is not to say, however, that all women are equally vulnerable. To be sure, the variables of class and race-ethnicity also inform women's life chances and qualitatively differentiate their life experiences (e.g., Burnham 1985).

Vulnerability to membership in the surplus population is structured along racial-ethnic lines in both economic and political ways. The economic marginality of racial-ethnic groups in the United States is grounded in part in capital's profit-oriented need for low-wage labor. The systematic devaluation of groups of people—whether former slaves, native-born, or recent immigrants—through the promulgation of racist ideologies provides rationale for low pay and occupational segregation. Furthermore, the availability of some people to work for lower wages depresses majority group workers' wages and discourages majority group members from challenging oppressive workplace arrangements. However, racism, like sexism, cannot only or always be explained in terms of labor requirements. Indeed, the systematic exclusion of particular groups from certain arenas of the workplace may even be antithetical to rational capital self-interest. Part of the vulnerability of racial-ethnic groups to membership in the surplus population can only be understood in terms of power, that is, in the political efforts of whites to subordinate racial-ethnic peoples (Brittan and Maynard 1984). Such efforts have evolved from blatant legal differentiation by race to more subtle institutionalized patterns of racial control (Baron 1985). Regardless of their form, however,

racist practices have relegated racial-ethnic group members disproportionately vulnerable to socioeconomic marginality.

Having expanded the concept of a surplus population beyond its original formulation to incorporate the key issues of gender and race-ethnicity, let us summarize our main theoretical points:

1) Patriarchy and racism intersect with capitalist economic dynamics in the United States to produce a surplus population comprised disproportionately of women and racial-ethnic groups.

2) The state responds to a surplus population with publicly-funded welfare efforts that employ some members of the surplus population to address the needs of the remainder of the surplus population.

3) These same gender and racial-ethnic groups, then, also predominate among the growing population of state-supported welfare workers.

4) Consequently, the distinction between public service providers and their clients is becoming increasingly blurred with the elaboration of public welfare initiatives that began in the 1930s.

How accurate, and therefore how useful, is this theoretical formulation? In the following section we offer an empirical basis for consideration of the surplus population argument.

### An Empirical Basis

Systematic data to test the surplus population argument do not exist, for several reasons. First, census definitions have changed over 50 years, making the various categories encompassing the notion of a social welfare worker noncomparable. Second, employment categories are not always delineated in terms of work in private and public agencies. Yet, because the surplus population argument focuses on the state as employer, this distinction becomes important. Third, the distinction between private and public social agencies has become increasingly problematic because of state funding of private not-for-profit organizations (Gilbert 1983).

Consequently, the empirical evidence below is suggestive rather than exact. It includes time series employment statistics tempered by the above qualifications, Depression-era employ-

ment practices, legislative mandates of the 1960s about public social service employment, and limited empirical analyses conducted by ourselves and others.

### *Employment Statistics*

Women and racial-ethnic groups have always been employed in social service organizations. What is significantly different about welfare employment upon federal government ascendancy in the 1930s is the sheer volume of jobs that was created. These jobs absorbed workers who otherwise would have been economically marginal. Indeed, in the private sector the same workers would have encountered resistance to their employment, except from employers in a limited number of female—and Black-intensive work settings.

Table 1 documents the number and percentage of employed workers in social welfare by sex and race from 1920 to 1980. In all of the years documented, women are found in the occupation disproportionate to their representation in either the population at large or in the workforce specifically. Furthermore, significant anti-poverty and civil rights legislation opened doors for Black Americans' increased, and also disproportionate, participation in the welfare workplace from the 1960s on.

Selected data address the specific claim that female and racial-ethnic workers employed in government welfare operations are indeed both financially needy and surplus, for whatever reason, to the private sector economy. First, historically and contemporarily social work has attracted a disproportionate number of non-married women (Chambers 1986; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 1952, 1960; Stamm 1969; Fanshel 1976; Annual Report to the Trust 1984). Despite the 19th century image of the upper-class woman in voluntary social services (Becker 1964), paid welfare work is increasingly an occupation women enter to secure their own financial livelihood. Second, prior to antidiscrimination legislation of the 1960s Blacks in social welfare work tended to be better educated than whites working in the occupation (U.S. Department of Labor 1952). This finding suggests that significant numbers of well-educated racial-ethnic workers have been shut out of the private sector except in token numbers.



Table 1  
*Women and Racial-Ethnic Groups in Social Welfare Work: 1920-1980*

	1920 <sup>1</sup>	1930 <sup>2</sup>	1940 <sup>3</sup>	1950 <sup>4</sup>	1960 <sup>5</sup>	1976 <sup>6</sup>	1980 <sup>7</sup>
Total Social Workers	41,078 <sup>(a)</sup>	29,424	69,677	76,890	133,051	231,927	499,090
# Women Social Workers	26,927 <sup>(a)</sup>	23,251	44,809	53,220	76,164	147,525	337,389
% Women Social Workers	65.5	79.0	64.3	69.2	57.2	63.6	67.6
# Black & Other Minority Social Workers	1,329 <sup>(b)</sup>	1,042	2,683	5,520	15,720	50,359	145,005*
% Black & Other Minority Social Workers	3.2	3.5	3.9	7.2	11.8	21.7	29.1*

\*Figures are somewhat inflated due to overlap of "Black" and "Spanish Origin" categories.

Sources:

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the year 1920, Population 1920*. Volume IV, Occupations. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1923. <sup>(a)</sup>Chapter II, Number and Sex of Occupied Persons, Table 4. <sup>(b)</sup>Chapter III, Color or Race, Nativity, and Percentage of Occupied Persons, Table 5. Figures are for "Religious, charity, and welfare workers" age 10 and over.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*. Vol. V, General Report on Occupations. Chapter 7, Gainful Workers by Industry and Occupation, Table 2. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933. Figures are for "Social and welfare workers" age 10 and over.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*. Vol. III, The Labor Force. Part 1: United States Summary, Table 62. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943. Figures are for "Social and welfare workers" age 14 and over.

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*. Vol. IV, Special Reports. Part 1, Chapter B, Occupational Characteristics, Table 3. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956. Figures are for "Social and welfare workers, except group" age 14 and over.

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *U.S. Census of Population: 1960*. Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, Part 1, United States Summary, Chapter D, Detailed Characteristics, Table 205. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964. Figures are for "Social, welfare, and recreation workers" age 14 and over.

<sup>6</sup>U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *1970 Census of Population*. Vol. 1, Characteristics of the Population. Part 1, United States Summary, Section 2, Table 223. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973. Figures are for "Social workers" and "Welfare service aides" age 16 and over.

<sup>7</sup>U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *1980 Census of Population*. Vol. 1, Characteristics of the Population. Chapter D, Detailed Population Characteristics, Part 1, United States Summary, Section A: United States, Table 278. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980. Figures are for "Social workers" and "Welfare service aides" age 16 and over.

There is no doubt that federal, state, and local governments and publicly-funded nonprofit organizations have been major employers of women and racial-ethnic groups (and the poor, as discussed below) in their social welfare initiatives. According to the surplus population argument, it is no coincidence that such jobs have emerged in the face of growing activism by dispossessed groups, an increasingly urbanized wage-labor force, and most recently a declining industrial workplace.

### *Depression Era Employment Practices*

The massive relief programs initiated by the federal government in the 1930s provided early historical documentation for the surplus population argument. During this era far more social work jobs were created than the limited number of professionally-trained practitioners could staff. Conveniently, unemployed persons were “hired from relief roles and paid with work relief funds” (Haynes 1979, p. 89) to perform the new jobs. They included “college graduates with no work history, unemployed teachers, unemployed insurance salesmen, former technicians and professionals of a dozen varieties—a cross-section of the white-collar class thrown into the labor market by the effects of the depression” (Fisher 1936, p. 10). The characteristics of these paraprofessionals differ significantly from their counterparts in the social programs of the 1960s (see below). Nevertheless, the circumstance that spurred their employment in welfare work is comparable: a political economy whose private sector costs must be absorbed by public initiatives. Such initiatives then as now stem the tide of broad-based criticism of the political economy at the same time that they address the most acute needs of its marginalized citizenry—welfare workers and clients alike.

### *Legislative Mandates*

More recent evidence can be garnered for the surplus population argument in a series of policy statements and legislative mandates of the so-called War on Poverty of the 1960s. The historical context for these measures consisted of a growing urban wage-labor population, overt acknowledgement by the federal government of poverty amidst plenty, and increasing Black activism. Out of these and other social, economic, and political

conditions emerged a host of federal welfare initiatives designed ostensibly to ameliorate human need and to address various political pressures at the same time. From the early 1960s and into the next decade the federal government spawned countless programs and services that explicitly called for the utilization of target group members as workers in the anti-poverty efforts (Brager 1965; Gartner 1969). While "indigenous paraprofessionals" came to be employed in activities as wide-ranging as education, neighborhood crime prevention, and public welfare, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 calling for "maximum feasible participation" by the poor in community services and its subsequent amendments not only opened up entry-level jobs for the poor but also provided for educational assistance and advancement opportunities for the new paraprofessionals.

In other words, legislative initiatives of two decades ago explicated state welfare work as an important arena for the employment of members of the surplus population. In light of our earlier theoretical arguments, it is not surprising that paraprofessional jobs, even more so than the professional social work jobs, were populated disproportionately by women and racial-ethnic group members (Table 1). More specifically, economically marginal Black women are to be found in these slots proportionally more than any other sex-race group.

The decade of the 1980s has witnessed the broad-based cut-back of federal commitment to the anti-poverty efforts initiated in the 1960s. Nevertheless, the government remains a significant employer of the poor, women, and racial-ethnic group members. A subtle but far-reaching trend underway in this decade allows service agencies to replace more educated welfare workers with paraprofessionals as part of workplace retrenchment measures. Specifically, job reclassification efforts are being undertaken by numerous state civil service commissions to reduce the educational requirements for employment in public social service (Karger 1983; Pecor and Austin 1983). In effect, priority for employment under a reclassified system is given to the more educationally (and therefore economically) marginal members of the surplus population who can be paid a lower wage than their counterparts with college degrees or graduate work and higher pay expectations. However, a counter-effort is being waged by

professional workers to consolidate their positions. In numerous states they are seeking and achieving passage of licensure requirements for practitioners, a measure that appears to have at least temporarily contained the advance of paraprofessionals (Dressel, Waters, and Sweat 1985).

### *Empirical Analyses*

Finally, selected studies of employment and social welfare offer a more detailed understanding of the contours of the public welfare enterprise as a work arena for members of the surplus population. Collectively, these studies show that, although the field of social welfare is a major employer of the surplus population, it is not itself immune from the discriminatory practices of the private sector (see Wright et al., 1982). Differential treatment on the basis of gender, race, and class is evident in terms of occupational clustering and changes being fostered to "industrialize" the welfare work setting.

Collins' (1983) analysis of Blacks in public service employment reveals the clustering effect by race. She found that at the city level Blacks outnumber whites 5 to 1 in public welfare functions; the ratio at the state level is 1½ to 1. Her argument is that Black middle-class government employment is concentrated in the public services that disproportionately serve Blacks, rather than being more evenly distributed across functions related to the general public. As such, it is likely that these workers are paid less than their counterparts in more general public services and that their positions are more vulnerable to government cutbacks.

Dressel's (1987) analysis of clustering on the basis of gender shows a strong sexual division of labor in social welfare work. Clustering occurs both vertically and horizontally. Specifically, women are underrepresented in administrative positions, despite their comprising the majority of welfare workers. At the line staff level they are more likely to specialize in casework, whereas men are more likely to be found in community organization. The effects are several: in general, women get paid less (even for the same work), interact less with community groups, and take work direction from men.

Recent changes in the organization of welfare work operate

even more insidiously than clustering to stratify the workplace. The changes in effect are "industrializing" welfare work, that is, attempting to make it more efficient, productive, accountable, and rational (Miller 1978; Patry 1978). The simultaneous dynamics of deprofessionalization and proletarianization are detailed elsewhere (Dressel, Waters, and Sweat 1985). The important point here is that these trends have elaborated agency hierarchies, deskilled many tasks, and increased administrative control of workers. As work has been transformed in the name of cost-effectiveness, the division of labor has broken down even more clearly along gender, race, and class lines. Available data by agency function (administrative, professional, paraprofessional) reveal the disproportionate representation of men and whites in administrative positions; they also document the overwhelming presence of women and disproportionate representation of racial-ethnic groups in paraprofessional jobs (Table 2). In other words, women and racial-ethnic groups (especially those who are poor) are most likely to perform the proletarianized and low-wage jobs of the welfare workplace. Furthermore, it is likely that males (especially white males) will gain even greater control over executive positions as business and public administration degrees supplant MSWs as appropriate credentials for administrative work (Patti and Maynard 1978). Coincidentally or not, the educational criterion is shifting at a point when more males may begin seeking work in state welfare organizations. Unprecedented retrenchment in the core U.S. economy in the 1980s due to plant closings and the exportation of work outside national borders is rendering a growing number of males (including a significant proportion of white males) surplus to the core economy.

The foregoing studies indicate that the surplus population argument is more complex than originally stated. To be sure, state welfare operations provide work for economically marginal peoples; at the same time they also reproduce the stratified arrangements of the political economy that spawned the need for state welfare in the first place. In effect, marginal people might get work, but they are less likely to get good pay or power in the workplace.

Table 2

*Line Staff in Social Work, 1972-1981*

Year	Social Workers			Welfare Service Aides		
	Total Empl. (in 1,000)	% Female	% Black and other	Total Empl. (in 1,000)	% Female	% Black and other
1972	265	58.6	18.3	34	82.4	47.1
1973	267	60.8	20.0	52	82.4	31.4
1974	303	61.3	19.7	59	86.2	36.2
1975	300	60.8	19.9	63	87.1	41.9
1976	332	61.6	21.3	60	86.4	37.3
1977	330	61.2	19.1	78	89.6	31.2
1978	391	62.3	19.0	98	87.5	34.4
1979	367	64.3	20.8	105	88.3	34.0
1980	390	65.0	18.5	89	88.5	37.9
1981	390	63.8	21.0	88	88.6	31.8

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Labor Force Statistics Derived from the Current Population Survey: A Databook, Volume 1*. Washington, D.C.: USGPO, September 1982, Bulletin 2096. Table B-20. Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, and race, 1972-81.

### Reframing Issues

By this point we hope the reader is persuaded that the surplus population argument is both theoretically interesting and empirically plausible. In this section we suggest ways in which it can shed new light onto longstanding discussions of welfare work issues and raise new questions about the welfare enterprise. Of course, our points are illustrative rather than comprehensive and are intended to demonstrate the conceptual power of the surplus population argument. Specifically, we focus on the call for worker-client political coalitions, the prevalence of service provider burnout, and the debate about credentials and licensure in social work.

#### *Worker-Client Political Coalitions*

The need for and potential of welfare workers and their clients to join together for concerted political action is a recurring theme of the welfare literature and a recurring undertaking by welfare activists. Recently, for example, Piven and Cloward (1982) not

only heralded the emergence of a new class composed of these groups but also actively promoted their cooperation through voter registration campaigns in social service agencies. We are personally supportive of such organizing efforts. However, we also suggest that an examination of the likelihood of worker-client political coalitions through the surplus population filter leaves one less than optimistic. Rethinking this issue in terms of the surplus population argument, we must note the following points (see also O'Connor 1984), all of which make the question of worker-client politicization problematic. First, one segment of the surplus population (welfare workers) needs the ongoing marginalization of the other segment (recipients) to guarantee their own positions (McKnight 1980). Second, workers, out of their own self-interest, may develop an allegiance to the service system at the expense of retaining allegiance to the target population out of which they have come (Adams and Freeman 1979; Grosser 1966). Third, clients may displace their frustrations with the welfare system on its closest representative, the welfare worker. Indeed, their dissatisfactions may be heightened if the worker is an indigenous paraprofessional from the target community. Finally, the fact that some members of the surplus population achieve upward mobility through service positions conveys the message, albeit a false one, that the political economic system works. Endorsement of that message defuses political activism.

### *Service Provider Burnout*

The panoply of studies on service worker burnout emphasizes that burnout derives from stress that goes unresolved. The critical shortcoming of the bulk of such studies is their failure to look for sources of stress beyond the individual level. Dressel (1984), on the other hand, demonstrates contradictions inherent in the welfare enterprise along organizational, political, and cultural dimensions that inevitably produce stress and burnout. The surplus population argument suggests yet another set of structural contradictions faced by welfare workers. In brief, workers are structurally located as mediators between clients and the state. As such, workers are likely to have dual allegiances—to the state as its employees and to the client with

whom they may have common demographic characteristics and whose needs they work to address. Yet, the nature of state social welfare as described by critical political economists makes it impossible to realize the interests of both parties simultaneously. It appears inevitable, then, that the worker will experience conflicts, stress, and likely burnout. From this theoretical angle burnout is a structured occupational hazard rather than an individual malady.

### *Credentials and Licensure*

As noted earlier, the social work profession is presently facing assaults by state civil service commissions seeking to reduce educational requirements for social service employment. It has responded by efforts to get state legislatures to require licensing of individuals before they can represent themselves as social workers (NASW News 1985, p. 6). This struggle can be seen as an attempt by dominant group members (especially white males) and educated members of the surplus population to solidify their interests in the field at the expense of less educated members of the surplus population working in welfare. As cutbacks in funding for state welfare jobs continue and as employment in the core sector of the economy continues to decline, it is likely that the struggle will intensify.

The struggle itself highlights both the heterogeneity of the surplus population in terms of education (and its gender, race, and class correlates) and the cross-cutting schisms within the surplus population that dissipate the likelihood of collective political action. The schism is manifested politically by the existence of both professional associations and trade unions representing different levels of welfare workers and frequently pursuing different—and occasionally conflicting—interests on their behalf. The volatile issue of credentials and licensure demonstrates the complex demographic composition of the surplus population itself and the cleavages along which its common interests become muted.

### Conclusion

There is a tendency in the social welfare literature, as well as in social science disciplines generally, toward functionalist



and micro-level analyses of issues and events. The political economic concept of a surplus population focuses on institutional and gender, race, and class dynamics from a conflict perspective. As such, it offers a fresh and critical approach to understanding both everyday, close-range experiences of welfare workers and clients as well as more long-term dynamics and trends in social welfare work. This article should serve as an introduction to its utility for academicians and activists alike.

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### Footnote

1. In this article the terms "welfare worker", "social welfare worker," and "service provider" are used interchangeably. They refer to individuals who provide publicly-funded social services and financial assistance to targeted groups through direct contact with those populations.

