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2008

Review of *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and  
Poverty in Modern America*, by Felicia Kornbluh

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#### Custom Citation

Schram, Sanford F. Review of *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*, by Felicia Kornbluh. *Social Service Review* 82 (2008): 345-348.

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ing and placement services, as well as among consumers of services provided by government-sponsored, community-based, and nonprofit organizations. Some LMIs have succeeded; others have not. This variation is lost in the presentation of survey data.

Qualitative interview data (with LMI leaders and staff) highlight some examples of strong and weak programs, but these examples reflect the choice of programs selected for inclusion in the study and do not represent the full scope of program models available. These data are also insufficient for understanding how LMI services relate to employment outcomes, as LMIs do not provide detailed job placement data.

Another shortcoming is that the book fails to capture the employer's perspective. The authors recognize that LMIs broker deals between employers and job seekers. A discussion of the employer's perspective could have provided important additional context for understanding LMIs' roles in brokering labor market transactions (between employers and job seekers) and ways in which the positioning of the negotiators shapes labor market outcomes for disadvantaged job seekers.

Still, *Staircases and Treadmills* provides an important overview of the expanded roles of LMIs within the new economy. As the authors state, more detailed research is needed to uncover additional variations in LMI services, especially those services for disadvantaged populations, and to explain relationships between services and employment outcomes.

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**The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America.** By Felicia Kornbluh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. 312. \$24.95 (paper).

More than 10 years have passed since the landmark welfare reform legislation of 1996 (110 Stat. 2105) dramatically revised public assistance in the United States for single mothers with children. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program that grew out of the Social Security Act of 1935 (49 Stat. 620) was replaced by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant program, which mandates that states must impose time limits and work requirements on recipients who receive assistance from this program. As a result, the welfare rolls plummeted approximately 50 percent from 1996 to 2000, falling another 38 percent by 2007.<sup>1</sup>

Although recipients, advocates, and activists organized to oppose the reforms, the retrenchment of welfare rights did not lead to an upsurge reminiscent of the one led by the single mothers on welfare who helped form the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) in the 1960s. Felicia Kornbluh's wonderfully written, elegantly structured, and meticulously researched history of that 1960s activism is a moving reminder that women on welfare were once important political actors who actively pushed to make social policy more sensitive to their needs. By the end of her book, one may find it hard not to ask whether can this happen again, and, if so, why not now?

Kornbluh convincingly presents the welfare rights movement of the 1960s from the perspective of women like Beulah Sanders, Jennette Washington, Johnnie Tillmon, and others who led it. She thereby effectively demolishes the idea

that women on welfare are somehow passive dependents. Nonetheless, the book inevitably reads as if its historical analysis is at odds with its political intentions. The narrative unavoidably leads to the conclusion that structural forces are overwhelming and women's agency is limited in what it can do to attune welfare policy to the real-life conditions of low-income single mothers and their children. The historical analysis is compelling, but the political lesson may be different than what Kornbluh suggests.

Kornbluh begins her book by stating that

while the events in this book occurred within the living memory of many of the people with whom I have discussed them, accounts of them have sometimes seemed to arrive on my desk not merely from a distinct moment in the past but from a distant planet. In sharing the history of welfare rights, I . . . wish to recall that astonishing things are possible. The past does not exist to teach later generations a lesson. In the case of welfare rights, however, it offers an opportunity to see that astonishing things are possible even in modern U.S. politics. It also offers an opportunity to see that what has been done, no matter how astonishing, can be undone in the blink of an eye. (13)

She returns to this sobering thought only at the end, where she writes of the women who led the 1960s welfare rights effort: "They enjoyed a string of successes, demonstrating that 'enduring and deeply entrenched social beliefs' are more flexible in response to popular pressure than they may at first appear. Ultimately they were defeated, leaving behind so few traces that it became the job of historians to remember them" (187).

The historian's job to which Kornbluh alludes is one she executes with great care and skill. These efforts bring a number of distinctive qualities to the narrative. Each chapter is organized around an analysis of what was happening in New York City, the epicenter of the 1960s welfare rights movement, and how that resounded in developments across the country. Kornbluh describes, for instance, how in New York, the City-Wide Coordinating Committee of Welfare Groups (or Citywide) served as the foundation for what became the NWRO and its eventual leadership in the nationwide welfare rights struggle. She observes that activists with experience in civil rights campaigns adjusted their organizing techniques to push the issue of welfare rights both in the city and around the country. Kornbluh, for instance, demonstrates that the campaign to get supplemental benefits for low-income mothers in New York was an excellent organizing tool that became popular elsewhere. She chronicles Beulah Sanders's New York experiences, as well as Sanders's leadership of NWRO's efforts when they shifted from pressuring the local welfare offices to lobbying Congress for a guaranteed income.

The book's narrative is focused primarily on the role of the single welfare mothers in leading the activism associated with welfare rights. Each chapter is keen to demonstrate how these women thought and behaved in contrast to others, including George Wiley, the civil rights activist and executive director of NWRO at its pinnacle. Kornbluh also details the pivotal role played by Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, who served as key advisors, especially in developing campaigns to increase access to assistance among eligible families. Most prominently, what they called their "crisis" strategy became central to the efforts of NWRO ("A Strategy to End Poverty," *The Nation* May 2 [1966]: 512). Most eligible families were not receiving aid at the time. If the movement were able to help them get assistance, Cloward and Piven recognized, pressure would build to replace overburdened state and local welfare programs with a nationally funded guaranteed income of some sort. While Kornbluh mentions the critical roles played by Cloward and Piven, Wiley, and staffers like Faith Evans, Hulbert

James, and Tim Sampson, the focus remains on the women leaders, who most often were nonwhite single mothers on welfare. This focus underscores not only the fact that these women were active leaders in the movement but also that they often had their own distinct perspectives that could stand in contrast with those held by others in the movement.

Kornbluh provides copious documentation of the history of these women's efforts. She complements archival materials with extensive interviews of the leaders and their collaborators in the welfare rights organizations. As a result, Kornbluh tells a very convincing tale, and her thesis cannot be easily dismissed.

Part of this thesis is that women on welfare are real people, just like everyone else, and deserve to be treated just as they demanded: as full citizens. Kornbluh shows that they were active agents in their own history-making efforts. Yet, another part of her thesis is that the success of the movement was bound to be short-lived because "historical forces far from Citywide and NWRO were responsible for the movement's demise" (185). She therefore takes issue with the idea that mistakes in strategy killed the movement, rejecting most especially the charge that NWRO's opposition to President Richard Nixon's limited guaranteed income proposal, the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), led to its defeat and eventually meant that none of the subsequent guaranteed income plans would get through Congress.

Kornbluh brilliantly dissects this issue, showing with striking clarity that NWRO was not powerful enough to stop FAP and, more importantly, that Nixon himself ensured its defeat. His political interests shifted away from domestic policy to the war in Vietnam. At the same time, his Southern strategy for building Republican support below the Mason-Dixon line no longer called for the national government to take over the costs of welfare in the South. Further, Kornbluh correctly notes that Wiley was willing to negotiate with the White House on FAP. Her larger point is that local and national welfare rights organizations could have done things differently at various critical junctures, but there were limits to the possibility for a different outcome in a society that expected the individual to work if he or she were to be seen as a full citizen, regardless of whether the job could get him or her out of poverty. That structural impediment overrode the agency of the women activists.

Kornbluh also acknowledges that potential for success was limited by (and that the current fight for welfare rights must struggle within) the constraining parameters set by profound class, race, and gender biases. It is as if black women on welfare are operating with three strikes against them. This raises the issue of why is it important to remember the welfare activists of the 1960s if the activism and agency of such women are most often not likely to override the structural limits of American society.

One answer that Kornbluh's narrative provides is that structural limits are themselves susceptible to change in the face of concerted political action by oppressed people. Yet, Kornbluh could have emphasized that all policy victories, not just the welfare rights gains of the 1960s, are always provisional in a democracy, and that this is especially the case regarding the gains made for low-income and other marginalized groups. As Piven and Cloward themselves argued, structure matters, but it never completely precludes effective action by the disempowered (*Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* [New York: Vintage Books, 1979], 1–37). Disruptive action from below sometimes produces lasting change, but more often it produces temporary (although nonetheless crucial) victories that are eventually eroded by the powerful and must be fought for again.

In this sense, I think that Kornbluh actually understates the importance of the welfare rights movement by focusing on it only as a historical exemplar. The

welfare rights campaign in the 1960s was an entirely human endeavor, fraught with uncertainties and riddled with conflicts. The women leaders did make missteps, and some of the most dramatic ones are not detailed in the book. Nonetheless, the welfare rights movement did win major resources for the poor for quite a few years. It had a real impact on the extent of suffering and hardship in the United States, as well as on the distribution of public resources. Moreover, the welfare rights movement produced real change even with all sorts of structural forces arrayed against it (as well as some that propelled it). That these victories turned out to be impermanent should not be surprising. In fact, one of the effects of the welfare rights victories was to mobilize the very forms of agency by other actors that eventually rolled back the victories. All of this is to say that politics, the realm in which people exercise agency and influence the use of power, is a critical, if contingent, element in the policy-making process.

As Kornbluh notes, the welfare rights struggle of the 1960s shows that “enduring and deeply entrenched social beliefs’ are more flexible in response to popular pressure than they may at first appear” (187). Although the changes activists helped create were not to be everlasting, they serve as a reminder that as long as political action is possible, change can come yet again.

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## Note

1. Author’s calculations; see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, “1996: AFDC Total Caseload,” <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/caseload/afdc/1996/fycyttotal96.htm> (accessed April 8, 2008), “TANF: Total Number of Recipients; Fiscal and Calendar Year 2000,” [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/caseload/2000/2000\\_recipient\\_tan.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/caseload/2000/2000_recipient_tan.htm) (accessed April 8, 2008), and “TANF Recipients through June 2007” (2007), [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/caseload/2007/tanf\\_recipients.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/caseload/2007/tanf_recipients.htm).

**Speaking Out for America’s Poor: A Millionaire Socialist in the Progressive Era; The Life and Work of Robert Hunter.** By Edward Allan Brawley. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2007. Pp. 372. \$39.00 (paper).

In 1904, Robert Hunter, who had recently stepped down as head resident of University Settlement in New York City, published his enduring social study, *Poverty* (New York: Macmillan, 1904). In the tradition of Seebom Rowntree’s *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, and *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, Hunter culled together personal observations from his settlement house days in New York and Chicago, as well as wide-ranging statistics, to provide a descriptive and analytical account of poverty in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Hunter estimated that over 10 million individuals lived in poverty in the United States. The bulk of this poverty, he concluded, was attributable to social problems that could be addressed only by widespread social reform.

Hunter followed social convention in drawing subjective distinctions between the worthy poor and paupers. He also drew on popular xenophobic impulses of the day in calling for limits on immigration to protect both the wages of laborers and American culture. His broad emphasis on the scope and social