

## From Slavery to Poverty: The Racial Origins of Welfare in New York, 1840-1918

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**Reviewer:**

Axel Schäfer

At the height of summer in August 1996, *The New Republic* featured a front cover that depicted a young African American woman smoking a cigarette while feeding her baby. The words 'Day of Reckoning' were emblazoned in bold letters across the image, and the exhortation by the editors to 'Sign the Welfare Bill Now' was prominently placed underneath the photograph. Less than two weeks later, President Bill Clinton indeed signed the Republican-sponsored Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) that changed dramatically the conditions of welfare support for poor, single-parent families in America and spelled the 'end of welfare as we know it.' The legislation terminated the 61-year-old federal guarantee of cash assistance to families with dependent children and replaced it with far less generous state-based temporary assistance programs. It included a compulsory work provision, imposed a five-year lifetime limit on welfare, ordered significant cuts to food stamp benefits, and banned many legal immigrants from participation in federal benefit programs. The act also provided financial incentives to states to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and funds to contract out social services to religious organizations.

In Clinton's view the act was a historic opportunity to 'transform our broken welfare system by promoting the fundamental values of work, responsibility and family'.<sup>(1)</sup> In the eyes of many critics, however, the new welfare law was the culmination of a long process of reclassifying poverty from a problem of socio-economic inequality and the maldistribution of income to a problem of behavioral deviance, moral deficiencies and cultural pathology. In doing so, it helped further racialize a raging welfare debate in which the black 'welfare queen' had become the symbol of all that was allegedly wrong with an overgenerous and entitlement-based system of social provision.

Gunja SenGupta ends her book with a reference to the racist dimensions of PRWORA, but her story has its beginnings in a much earlier period. Seeking to uncover the origins of the racialized welfare discourse in modern American society, she has presented a book that deepens our understanding of the relationship between race and social policy. Her insightful study of an array of poor relief institutions and reform efforts in New York City from the middle of the 19th century to the First World War shows convincingly how welfare agencies became crucial places where race, ethnicity, gender and class identities were culturally and politically inscribed, but also negotiated and subverted.

Although she does slip into jargon at times, SenGupta never loses sight of the human dimension of welfare, whether she discusses those in positions of power or recipients of institutionalized care and benefits in institutions such as the New York House of Refuge, the Alms House Department's facilities on Blackwell's Island, and the Brooklyn Howard Colored Orphan Asylum. Her book offers a comprehensive analysis based on a perceptive and perspicacious reading of a wide selection of sources, including letters, scripts for pantomimes, statistics, census data and biographies left behind by philanthropists and managers as well as inmates and clients. Her case studies are assiduously researched and exhaustively documented. Though frequently reliant upon sources that reflect white Protestant middle class perspectives, the combination of materials allows her to unearth underclass self-portraits and experiences, and affords her insights into the 'elusive consciousness and lives of working poor New Yorkers' (p. 19).

The book provides a refreshing supplement to welfare state historians and social scientists who primarily examine the relationship between social reform and trans-personal factors, such as professionalization, bureaucratization, the extension of state administrative capacities, and interest-group politics, and whose abstract conceptualization of welfare in some ways replicate the rationalistic mechanisms of subordination they seek to unmask. SenGupta, in contrast, continues to listen to the people on the ground. In the process, she uncovers a plethora of ways in which poor relief institutions in New York offered opportunities for 'subaltern agency'. She describes how aid recipients devised imaginative ways of 'incorporating public (or semipublic) resources like alms houses, orphanages, prisons, and juvenile reformatories into their subsistence strategies' (p. 10). In the book, Irish mothers send their children temporarily to the workhouse, Irish workers seek voluntary imprisonment in search of medical attention, or willingly enter the workhouse due to the vagaries of the labor market. Not only did this conscious use of the workhouse as a public employment agency for needy citizens question the image of the able-bodied loafer, it also showed the extent to which the Irish working class defined poor relief as a right of citizenship, rather than as charity. In a similar vein, SenGupta uncovers the extent to which African Americans used relief agencies as material resources for disciplining or educating truant children, obtaining medical assistance, and settling family disputes in ways that shored up African American family and community structures.

At the same time, SenGupta recognizes that social policy is about norm enforcement and boundary maintenance, rather than poverty alleviation. Indeed, one of her main objectives is to uncover the role of welfare in 'training Europeans to define their racial identities in relation to that of African-Americans' (p. 20) in a culture that sought to acculturate the European immigrant and colonize, segregate and exclude the African-American. In her view, the welfare discourse, being at the nexus of normative conceptions and broader processes of urban and industrial transformation within liberal capitalist society, 'served as shorthand for definitions of race and nation' (p. 10) which associated freedom with whiteness and dependency with blackness. Poor relief, she suggests, was an instrument of assimilating European immigrants into a 'herrenvolk democracy'. In this process, New York offers an apposite case study, since it

was both the largest slave state north of the Mason-Dixon line and the main recipient of European immigrants.

While keenly aware of nuances, contradictions, hypocrisies and opportunities of welfare policy, the author sees the hegemonic dimension of poor relief as part and parcel of the wide range of strategies employed to reinforce white rule over the self-assertion of excluded groups. She links the welfare discourse to a political discourse in which whites used the language and principles of popular sovereignty, constitutional government, egalitarianism, and natural rights to declare excluded groups unfit for self-government. The very same language employed to turn white Irish paupers into independent citizens was thus used to ascribe a lack moral agency, independence, reason and self-control to African Americans. Similar to Matthew Frye Jacobsen, SenGupta does not stop at maintaining that dominant groups simply perverted republicanism to assert their own power and manage disruptions to the status quo.<sup>(2)</sup> Instead, racial exclusion was part of the deep structure of 19th-century democratic thought. The confluence of racialism and democracy, in which notions of self-possession and republican virtue were formulated on the basis of preexisting conceptions of an African American 'other', became a powerful narrative pillar upholding republican government.

Although her book covers three-quarters of a century, SenGupta engages most effectively with the racist redefinition of social reform and policy in the Progressive Era. Her case studies reveal convincingly how the shift from traditional charitable practices to the cost-benefit calculations of 'scientific charity' served the underlying racist aims. Statistics categorizing the Irish as 'white' in poverty policy documents legitimized both their integration into the republican order and the further exclusion of African-Americans. Likewise, Progressive-era efforts to replace outdoor relief with institutionalization in alms houses and reformatories hit African-Americans harder than European immigrants, since black traditions of self help were often more reliant on outdoor relief. Moreover, reformers used a rhetoric of incapacitation that couched racially-coded provision and gender discriminations in the authoritative language of the social science professional. Putatively scientific efforts to make relief measurable and calculable thus gave the legitimacy of objectivity to a racialized vision of the social order.

SenGupta concludes that racist concepts embedded in the modern welfare state had their origins in these politics of poor relief agencies. Following Jill Quadagno, she sees the politics of racism, rather than liberal individualism, the weakness of the working class, or the agrarian roots of democratization, as the main impediment to the development of universal social coverage in the United States.<sup>(3)</sup> There is no doubt that the racial divide embedded in the administrative organization and the normative content of social policy segregated African-Americans disproportionately into the most discretionary, stingiest, and politically-exposed programs. In the segmented welfare state of the 20th century, state and locally controlled non-contributory assistance programs for the poor, such as Food Stamps, the dismantled Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid offered meager support with many arbitrary exclusions, moralistic intrusion, and stigmatizing requirements for a largely female and minority population. Meanwhile, federal social insurance, such as Social Security and Medicare, became 'respectable' programs that served a largely male working and middle-class clientele without extensive discretionary leeway.

Nonetheless, this broader theme of how racialized welfare practices and discourses shaped the modern welfare state remains truncated in the book. In one fell swoop SenGupta links 19th-century paradigms of race and relief used to 'articulate the meaning and boundaries of American Citizenship' to late 20th-century legislative changes that 'resuscitated old links between welfare and racialized citizenship' (p. 244). Indeed, having so solidly tied welfare provision to racialism, SenGupta sometimes struggles to keep the subaltern agency momentum going. On the one hand, clients and inmates fashioned their own identity out of exploiting the contradictions of the dominant discourse and turned hegemonic relief institutions into contested spaces. Thus, African-American voluntary associations used the reform discourse to challenge racial assumptions and to offer a pluralist vision as an alternative. On the other, hand, SenGupta shows how subaltern agency remained contingent on the language and institutions constructed by the dominant culture. The guardians of the Colored Home, for example, combined an evangelical and proto-feminist vision of transracial equality with advocacy of separatist colonization. Likewise, the emancipatory potential of female

reform efforts was often mitigated by the conservative content of its social ideology, which was frequently moralistic, strictly middle-class, and designed to preserve traditional gender relations.

As with many good books, reading SenGupta's study generates the desire for further research, rather than leaving the reader with a sense that important aspects were neglected. In particular, her frequent references to institutions of poor relief as examples of private and public cooperation beg further analysis of the role of the hybrid nature of welfare in reinforcing or undermining racialist policies. Does the 'allocative welfare state' (Peter Dobkin Hall), which devolves welfare to state-supported philanthropic and private organizations, preserve the normative orientation and administrative leeway required for racialism to perpetuate itself? Or does it help undermine the centralized and rationalized system of social security that imposes powerful structures of subordination?

SenGupta discusses her subject with great verve and acuity. One rather minor critique needs to be noted, however. Whether it owes its existence to the soundbite fervor of an editor or to the author herself, the title of the book is not particularly apt. This is decidedly *not* a book about African-Americans moving from 'slavery' to 'poverty'. Instead, the book uncovers how the cultural conceptualizations of African Americans during slavery reverberate in poverty policy and institutions. It offers a broader discussion of institutions of poor relief and reform as places where race, ethnicity, gender and class were reinforced, negotiated and subverted in the interaction between agents of control and aid recipients. And it shows how racial images were reproduced in the social welfare systems of a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society.

## Notes

1. William J. Clinton, 'Statement on signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996', *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton* (Washington, 1998), pp. 1328–30. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York, NY, 1996). [Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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