

From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945–1965. By Jennifer Mittelstadt. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiii + 267 pp. Illustrations, photographs, tables, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-807-82922-6; paper, 0-8078-5587-1.

Reviewed by Rhonda Y. Williams

Jennifer Mittelstadt's *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945–1965* joins other scholarly studies of public welfare that have appeared since the Democratic-controlled White House and the Republican-controlled Congress dismantled Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996. Contemporary hyperbolic antiwelfare rhetoric has characterized single mothers as predators (calling them, for example, alligators and wolves) who would rather bleed the coffers dry than work. Mittelstadt provides a welcome historical examination of the roots of such injurious debates and welfare policies during the “nearly five decades before the elimination of welfare and the substitution of ‘workfare,’ three decades before the studies of the ‘underclass’ and the debates about ‘welfare queens,’ and one decade before the War on Poverty” (p. 4).

A well-organized study that draws on personal papers, organizational collections, and legislative records, *From Welfare to Workfare* focuses on welfare careerists' reform agendas, rather than—as Premilla Nadasen, for instance, does in her richly detailed study *Welfare Warriors* (2004)—on the lives and activism of welfare recipients. This is not to say that welfare clients are totally absent from Mittelstadt's book; they are present, but primarily as objects of liberal experts' and conservative politicians' concern.

More specifically, Mittelstadt writes about white liberal professionals who, despite their crucial influence on national welfare policy after World War II, have remained absent from historical narratives of social welfare. These professionals sought to expand New Deal social programs during the 1950s era of prosperity. Over the course of this decade, marked by the fear of socialism and communism and notable for “the rising wave of conservatism . . . driven by the empowerment of big business and the declining power and shifting goals of big labor unions” (p. 29), these welfare advocates

(and their allies) not only reaffirmed the need for public welfare but also tried to develop a fairer and more comprehensive system. This “revolutionary” goal, however, changed fairly quickly. Mittelstadt argues that political opposition to such broad reforms—as well as growing liberal and conservative anxieties regarding racial minorities, shifting gender roles, and alternative family structures—resulted in welfare professionals scaling back their broad agenda and redirecting their efforts toward improving the increasingly unpopular Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program. According to prominent liberal welfare experts, who “had long cared about poverty and social policy” (p. 5), ADC’s primary clients—single mothers—were poor not simply because they lacked money but also because they suffered from psychological and social problems. As a result, white welfare experts viewed single mothers as “the thorniest of America’s poverty problems” (p. 4).

This perception of single mothers as “dysfunctional” in a supposedly well-functioning society is by now familiar to scholars. While *From Welfare to Workfare* also engages this entrenched trope, Mittelstadt does so from a distinctive angle and thus complicates our understanding of the creation of workfare as a punitive welfare policy. Previous scholarly narratives have tended to discuss the emergence of workfare in the context of the 1970s conservative ascendancy. Making a critical temporal intervention, Mittelstadt begins her story more than two decades earlier, when post–World War II “growth liberalism” operated alongside political conservatism. Growth liberals believed that affluence and the market, in particular, would “provide security” and “reduce economic inequities” (p. 7). Mittelstadt argues that while welfare reformers were growth liberals, they represented a “distinct subgroup” (p. 8), in that they actually paid attention to poverty and welfare. These welfare experts combined their belief in economic growth with therapeutic practices and professional expertise in a way that gave rise to a rehabilitative ethos that transformed welfare and unintentionally but logically led to stringent policies, such as workfare. No longer envisioning welfare as solely an income-support program, welfare professionals aimed to rehabilitate ADC and its clients by providing social services and eventually by promoting economic independence through employment.

Welfare professionals' liberal stance also shaped their views on race, poverty, and welfare. Most acknowledged, but did not forthrightly attack, discrimination against black people. Instead, they believed that "'industrialism' as well as the democratic political system" (p. 80) would eliminate racism and poverty and lead to independence. But then and now the reality was quite different. Low-income single mothers, and especially black mothers, had (and have) an extraordinarily difficult time finding jobs that paid a living wage, because race and gender still limited their employment options. With race constituting a fault-line in U.S. society and the number of black women clients increasing in the 1950s, welfare experts decided to protect ADC from stigma, by depicting it as a "family" program *and* sidestepping discussions of race. These rhetorical shifts, though undertaken for strategic purposes, resulted in the conflation of rehabilitated families with whiteness. As a result, liberal welfare experts helped to undergird white privilege and arguably contributed to a weightier antiblack backlash against public assistance. The negative public response was intensified by the vitriolic Louisiana and New Jersey campaigns targeting primarily black recipients as "loafers" in 1960 and 1961, and by the rise of welfare-rights protests predominantly led by black women in the mid-1960s and 1970s.

From Welfare to Workfare is a valuable study. By delineating the uncharted historical roots of punitive welfare policies in liberal reform agendas, Mittelstadt gives voice to an overlooked generation of middle-class political actors with a dubious legacy. Her narrative is nuanced: for instance, she exposes the varied debates among welfare experts and proponents of civil rights, women's rights, and antipoverty programs. Furthermore, by tracing the "unfinished" work of welfare reformers, the dire ramifications of their legislative "successes," the internal contradictions of their rehabilitative visions, and their diminishing power in federal circles, Mittelstadt helps us to understand the complexities and limits of liberalism. *From Welfare to Workfare* will appeal to readers interested in women and poverty, reform and the policymaking process, the influence of economy on government, and the intricacies of federal welfare law. Finally, and significantly, this historical narrative reminds us that "good" intentions and egalitarianism are not necessarily the same—and that is a political truth well worth remembering.

Rhonda Y. Williams, associate professor of history at Case Western Reserve University, is the author of The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality (2004), which won the 2004 Letitia Woods Brown Memorial Book Award from the Association of Black Women Historians. She is also a coeditor of Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Bittersweet Song (2002).