

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

S. Jay Kleinberg. *Widows and Orphans First: The Family Economy and Social Welfare Policy, 1880-1939.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xiv + 230 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03020-8.



Reviewed by LeRoy Ashby (Department of History, Washington State University)

Published on H-Childhood (December, 2006)

S. J. Kleinberg has written an informative, cogently argued study of U. S. social welfare policy. On one level, she provides a double-barreled look at how policies evolved from the Progressive Era to the New Deal concerning widows and orphans—two highly significant, but often overlooked, groups. On another level, she astutely builds her discussion by comparing developments in three industrial cities: Fall River, Massachusetts; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Baltimore, Maryland. Her careful research in a wide variety of sources is commendable, and she writes clearly and with authority. The end product is a valuable contribution to the scholarly literature that documents the omissions, inadequacies, and shortsightedness of America's handling of social welfare.

A dominant theme in *Widows and Orphans First* is that local economies and practices have been vital in shaping the nation's welfare policies. Although the New Deal's Social Security program marked a groundbreaking nationalization of crucial welfare elements, it also reflected patterns that local experiences had mapped out over the previous half century. "In a time of economic crisis, the New Deal returned to Progressive Era understandings about the family economy, gender, and race instead of forging a new path or acknowledging emerging family forms (e.g., households headed by divorced or never-married women)," Kleinberg concludes. "Viewed

from that perspective, it was an old deal, now sanctioned by federal law" (p. 163).

The bulk of Kleinberg's book focuses on the several decades before the New Deal and evaluates emerging responses in the late 1800s and early 1900s to the needs of widows and orphans. Through the painstaking use of census and local records concerning her three cities, Kleinberg shows how local economies, demographics, and attitudes on poverty, gender, and race created a grab-bag assortment of policies. She never loses sight of the larger social, economic, and cultural backdrop against which those local experiences played out. Although the percentage of widows in America's female population barely changed from the colonial era into the early twentieth century, for example, their age composition did, with those under age forty-five declining significantly and those over forty-five increasing notably. Critical demographic influences on widowhood included rising female life expectancy—which added to longevity—and falling birth rates, which reduced family size and left aging widows with fewer children to help support them.

In her opening chapters, Kleinberg examines "how women responded to the financial challenges of widowhood, how family structures changed, and how local economic configurations affected widows' strategies" (p. 18). Pittsburgh's heavy industries were "widow makers"

at the same time that they limited female job opportunities. In contrast, Fall River (which by 1900 produced 20 percent of U.S.-manufactured cloth) provided many jobs for women and children in its cotton mills. The port city of Baltimore featured a more diversified economy. There was typically seasonal employment for women, “who constituted three out of every ten workers” (p. 14), and children in places such as packing sheds. Just as these local economies differed, so did attitudes on charity. In Fall River, for example, the much-celebrated nineteenth-century “Cult of True Womanhood” was less influential because “jobs for women were plentiful and the small middle class had no desire to raise taxes or charitable funds to protect working-class, immigrant women’s domesticity” (p. 39). In Baltimore, racism played a more important role in determining who received assistance. Nevertheless, Progressive reformers’ opposition to female and child labor helped to galvanize a major welfare strategy—widows’ pensions.

Kleinberg includes three fine chapters on the development and implementation of the widows’ pension movement, which was supposed to keep children at home and in the care of their mothers. While a number of widows, widowers, and working-class families turned in desperation to orphanages for temporary child assistance, many reformers increasingly disdained institutional care, as the 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children made clear. To child-savers who were searching for ways to get children into home-like settings, or to keep them there, widows’ pensions seemed a compelling solution. A major portion of *Widows and Orphans First* explores “the economic and social conditions that gave rise both to mothers’ pensions and to provisions for older widows” (p. 5) and concludes that “local economies produced distinctive charitable regimes” (p. 69). While Massachusetts provided “comparatively well-funded relief” to mothers, Pennsylvania’s system was “poorly financed” and Maryland engaged in “out-right heel dragging” (p. 104).

Communities honored Motherhood with far more rhetoric than assistance. Indeed, Kleinberg argues that “the divergent charitable structures and battles for widows’ pensions in the three cities” demonstrated “the limits of maternalism as the basis for the development of social-welfare policy during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era” (p. 69). In Fall River, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore—as elsewhere—pension programs invariably fell victim to local assumptions regarding charity, gender, and race. “Even where groups from different classes or races agreed on the importance of mother-

hood, they differed in their visions for accomplishing their objectives” (p. 85). One thing was certain, as a reformer insisted when extolling a mother’s economic ties to her children: “Only in her relation to her children does she need financial assistance” (p. 86). This disregard of women’s own economic needs was pivotal in the forging of welfare policies. Aging widows without young children had no claims on financial help short of what charity groups grudgingly provided. As a result, older widows typically had to survive outside developing social programs.

African American women, and others of color, were at a special disadvantage in the emerging pension system. The assumption was that they, like their children, were more likely to be employed. In practice, widows’ pensions thus invariably favored assistance to whites. Even then, funding was a pittance and subject to continuing investigations of the recipients’ moral fitness. Standards of such fitness revolved around a host of areas, including how well the mother could sew, cook, and keep her house clean. This moral policing often victimized children.

While Kleinberg echoes what a number of scholars have shown in this regard, she provides her own succinct analysis and details. In Massachusetts, for example, the State Board of Charity ruled that mothers with illegitimate children were unfit for assistance because such aid would violate “the moral feeling of respectable mothers” (p. 87). In all of Maryland, as late as 1933, only 235 mothers received aid grants—which meant that “only one family per 10,000 people that year” qualified for assistance (p. 123). Although states and cities marched to different local drums, they contributed to a similar result: the forging of “gender- and race-based poverty in the United States” (p. 16). Against that backdrop, the New Deal stitched together the Social Security Act of 1935.

Kleinberg provides a compact overview of the New Deal’s pension solution. The quotation that she uses from Abraham Epstein in 1939 is telling: “While we watched for the aged and the blind watched for themselves, nobody watched for the poor widows and orphans and they got stuck” (p. 136). For them, localism prevailed amid a federal program. Building upon Linda Gordon’s major work, *Pitied but Not Entitled* (1994), Kleinberg interprets Social Security’s two-track system of entitlements and a stigmatized charity that “reinforced the divisions in American society between male economic security and female welfare dependence” (p. 139).

Kleinberg concedes that widows’ pension programs demonstrated a greater acceptance of state assistance to

the poor. And she credits the New Deal with providing more relief to widows' families and, via survivors' benefits, boosting assistance to older widows. Still, "states retained significant control over the programs for women and children" (p. 152) and, at the outset, "the retirement pension system covered about half the working population, forgoing protection for nearly three-fifths of all women workers and more than nine-tenths of African Americans" (p. 153).

Overall, Kleinberg's assessment of crucial aspects of America's welfare policies from the 1880s to World War II is hardly uplifting. Given her statistics, examples, community case studies, and arguments, one wonders how even the New Deal accomplished what it did. *Widows and Orphans First* is an important reminder of the powerful constraints that local conditions, race, and gender have imposed on the development of America's social welfare system.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-childhood>

Citation: LeRoy Ashby. Review of Kleinberg, S. Jay, *Widows and Orphans First: The Family Economy and Social Welfare Policy, 1880-1939*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. December, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12678>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.