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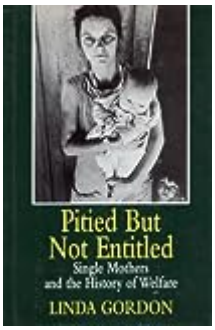

Linda Gordon. *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935.* New York: The Free Press, 1994. x + 433pp. $22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-02-912485-7.

Reviewed by Ruth Crocker (Department of History, Auburn University)

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Linda Gordon's history of the origins of Aid to Dependent Children represents a major intervention into current discussions of the welfare state and the origins of the transfer payments, variously called "welfare," "pensions," or "insurance," that mark our sense of common responsibility to those we define as entitled. Her study begins with the Progressive-era campaign for Mothers' Pensions and traces the various strands of "welfare thought" through the 1920s and the Great Depression. Final chapters describe the making of Social Security Act provisions for single mothers, or A.D.C. *Pitied but Not Entitled* is particularly concerned to trace the origins of the bifurcation between "public assistance" and "insurance"; her central insight is that it was "the relationship between the two types of programs that created the contemporary meaning of welfare" (145).

Modern social policies toward single mothers, usually today called simply "welfare," took shape in the early decades of the twentieth century when motherhood was valorized by all segments of society including policy makers. Believing that motherhood was or should be full-time work, Progressive reformers mounted a campaign to establish the responsibility of the states to aid "deserving" single mothers and their children at home, rather than removing the children to institutions. Their campaign was successful, and by 1930 Mothers' Aid or Mothers' Pensions had been enacted in 46 of the 48 states. These programs became the basis for ADC public assistance in 1935 when the architects of the 1935 Social Security Act simply added federal funds to the existing Mothers' Aid programs and extended them to all the states (37).

Gordon shows how the results of this successful Progressive crusade were profoundly contradictory for poor women. Seeking maximum emotional effect in their campaign, female reformers "engaged in rescue fantasies," (44) constructed the poor single mother as a widow (only about half actually were), and as a mother not a worker even though most poor women were also wageworkers. In this "maternalist discourse," poor women's rights were grounded in their positions within families, not in their identity as individuals. True, the labels "pensions" and "aid" signaled public recognition that recipients were worthy, and that their parenting activities earned them the support of the community. (37) On the other hand, mothers' aid was inadequately funded (in several states not funded at all), and was "intended to superintend and discipline as well as support its recipients" (45). Single mothers were pitied but not entitled.

Gordon makes it clear that she does not believe that ideas of entitlement (or any other ideas) float disembodied across the decades. The maternalist assumptions behind Mothers' Aid were "actively transported" into the

ADC by a "coherent network of welfare agitators" (67); in other words, this is an intellectual history of welfare that is grounded in careful research in the history of policy making. Gordon also makes use of biographies of "welfare leaders."

Here is the paradox at the heart of the history of the making of ADC: that provisions for poor, single mothers were designed not by misogynist male politicians but by those very female charity and welfare experts who had emerged onto the national scene as Progressive reformers and who had built institutional bases at Hull-House and Henry Street, in the social-work profession (especially at the Chicago School of Social Service Administration), and in the U.S. Department of Labor's Children's Bureau. Yet the public assistance programs they devised for poor women in the Social Security Act (1935) were punitive, stigmatizing, and inadequately funded, especially in comparison with the far more generous programs for old-age and unemployment contained in the same act. Why did the Progressive- era female reformers, experts in child and maternal welfare, such as Grace and Edith Abbott, when they finally had the chance to play a part in shaping the institutions of the New Deal welfare state create programs for single mothers that were unfavorable and grudging? *Pitied but Not Entitled* tackles this troubling question in a history that is analytically sophisticated, densely footnoted, and informed by the passion that comes from writing about issues that are as urgent now as they were sixty years ago, perhaps more so.

Gordon brings an awareness of the pitfalls of an uncritical reading of "woman" to this history of policymaking. Attentive to ways that class, race, ethnicity, and age, helped construct differences among women, she reminds us how the Progressive-era white, middle-class women's organizations (such as the LWV, WTUL, and the NCL) lost their way in the 1920s with the result that by the 1930s they "did not consider poor women central in their constituency" (213). Neither were the representatives of a new generation of younger, professional women such as Jane Hoey and Eveline Burns interested in legislating for poor women. These "postfeminist" professional women believed that they would be recognized and rewarded based on merit without regard to gender (259). (They were wrong.)

When it came to designing the Social Security Act, the male experts charged with devising insurance programs in the areas of unemployment and old-age pensions were content to leave the design of programs for poor mothers to the old Children's Bureau network. Yet Grace Abbott, Katharine Lenroot, and Martha Eliot had long been preoccupied with other issues. Gordon portrays them as unprepared and timid, fatally hampered by unexamined assumptions of maternalism, such as their stubborn belief in the family wage and their insistence on treating poor women as mothers rather than as workers. Gordon comments perceptively: "[T]he maternalist legacy of discouraging working motherhood fit with New Deal strategies to promote wage-earning manhood" (196).

The women of the Children's Bureau network who designed A.D.C. were content to "ground women's social rights in their family roles," and to accept the half a loaf of Mothers' Aid expecting that the rest of their agenda would shortly be enacted. They saw ADC as just the first installment in a major legislative enactment of social rights and maternal and child welfare, including protective labor legislation, minimum wage laws, and even general health insurance (61). Instead, it was the only part that got into law. Gordon comments: "Women's power does not always promote all women" (290).

Gordon's study is significant in that it explores the origins in the early twentieth century of the "two-channel welfare state." (See Barbara Nelson, "The Origins of the Two- Channel Welfare State: Workmen's Compensation and Mothers' Aid," in *Women, Change, and Politics*, ed. Louise Tilly and Patricia Gurin (NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989). Gordon finds its origins in what she calls a "sexual division of labor" between two distinct networks of "welfare leaders." One network, almost all men, with non-employed wives, statisticians, economists, and academics, developed solutions that they labeled "social insurance" and that became the unemployment insurance and old-age pension provisions of the 1935 Social Security Act (153). The other, mostly single women and social workers by profession, developed the public assistance programs for poor mothers (ADC) in the same Act. The beneficiaries of the first, old people and unemployed men, received "pensions" and unemployment payments labeled "insurance," conveying the sense of entitlement. Unemployment was defined as a male breadwinner problem. In contrast, the beneficiaries of the second, poor mothers, received "aid" that was discretionary and stigmatized, not an entitlement at all but a payment for which the recipient must prove her worthiness (eligibility).

Biographical data forms the basis for Gordon's analysis of these networks (Appendix). Yet, as she admits, this taxonomy of "welfare leaders" has some limitations

as an explanatory scheme. Assigning a single label to each welfare leader obscures some important commonalities as well as distinctions. Each reader will have his/her own reservations about this list of names, depending on their own expertise. My example, Robert Weeks De Forest, labeled here by Gordon a "lawyer," illustrates this problem. De Forest (1848-1931) was indeed a corporate lawyer, but he was also a philanthropist (he gave handsomely to the Metropolitan Museum of Art), and was President of the New York Charity Organization Society (COS) from 1888 until his death more than forty years later, and he helped found the Russell Sage Foundation in 1907, a major instrument for social-science-based reform. He helped write New York state's 1901 Tenement House Law and served as President of the National Housing Association, and was a founder of training programs that became the New York School of Social Work in 1898. Not only does "lawyer" miss too much of the complexity of De Forest's career, it obscures the fact that his activities combined many of the binary categories that we as historians use as analytical tools to unravel the various strands of reform in this period such as the pairs, philanthropy/Progressivism; social-science reform/moral reform; moral reform/foundation reform; even reform/charity.

On the other hand, Gordon's division of the early twentieth century welfare leaders into "charity" and "Progressive" traditions helps us to deal with someone like Mary Richmond, a founder of modern social work whose self-representation as a professional and rejection of women's networks or feminist identity puts her outside the "female dominion" that has been the focus of feminist historians. Richmond, whose major work *Social Diagnosis* (1917) was the bible of "scientific" social work, opposed mothers' pensions as creating an enlarged role for the state.

The pitfalls of analyzing early twentieth-century welfare thought are evident in Gordon's exploration of the theory and practice of casework. Casework's grounding in a discourse of science, its use of medical analogies (case, diagnosis, treatment) show its origins in COS "scientific charity," as well as in Progressive social science; yet its practice called on the caseworker's discretion and allowed for the social worker's class and nativist prejudices. There are complexities and contradictions here. Gordon's discussion of the COS, especially, raises the question whether these distinctions charity/reform may be more the product of our own time than of theirs: these were not considered mutually exclusive categories by contemporaries.

In this study as in her previous benchmark studies of gender and the state, a history of birth control (1979) and of domestic violence (1988), Gordon effectively deals with the theoretical problem of agency and domination. Her earlier books portrayed female clients as resourceful in their interactions with state agencies, private charities, and experts of various kinds, effectively resisting, even while they made use of, the benevolent institutions designed to control them. In *Pitied but Not Entitled*, client agency is harder to prove. This is a history of welfare leaders and welfare thought rather than of poor women. No poor women's movement clamoring for redress was heard among the other vocal popular movements of the Depression and New Deal era. While the Townsendites and organized labor mounted campaigns which "specifically valorized the elderly and those designated as 'unemployed' " (211) and effected "an extraordinary and long-lasting shift in definitions of entitlement" (225), poor women were unable to articulate an alternative vision of welfare, nor did they mount a collective movement of protest. Because of this silence, other accounts of the New Deal generally omit poor women. But Linda Gordon "examines silences as well as cries." In a chapter on popular and populist movements of the 1930s, she calls on readers to attend to these silences, reminders of "the existence of the powerless, the unmobilized, the alienated" (211).

A central purpose of this history of policy-making is to explore why "welfare" or ADC programs took the shape they did – how they emerged as one alternative among many. Black welfare thought provided one such alternative source of solutions, ignored rather than rejected by policy makers, and by historians of New Deal policy-making. Black welfare leaders were not consulted nor were their interests protected in the 1935 Social Security Act; their "alternative vision" was ignored by policy makers who also omitted domestic workers and agricultural workers from the Act's coverage. More disadvantaged than white women and disenfranchised even after 1920, black women nevertheless articulated a powerful "welfare vision" that was distinct from that of whites. Gordon provides a valuable summary of black women's welfare activism between 1890 and 1935. For African-Americans, the issue was not programs for the needy, but access for blacks of ALL classes to public services. These women organized, built, and sustained private institutions of health and welfare, defied stereotypes, asserted leadership, and struggled not as women, but as race leaders. Gordon makes the important point that for these women, welfare meant civil rights –indeed, the as-

sumption by policy historians of a dichotomy between welfare and civil rights stems from "a white notion of welfare" (119).

In 1990 in an exchange in *Signs* with Joan W. Scott over the uses of linguistic analysis in history writing, Linda Gordon conceded that historical change occurs not only through struggle between material interests but also through "contested definition and redefinition of problems." (See, Joan W. Scott, review of Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (1988); Linda Gordon, "Response"; and Linda Gordon, Review of Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (N.Y: Columbia University Press, 1988), and Joan W. Scott, "Response," *Signs* 15, 4 (Summer 1990): 848-60.

Pitied but Not Entitled, which combines historical analysis of poor single mothers with a history of the discursive construction of them, demonstrates the value of this pragmatic approach. The book begins:

In the last four decades the numbers of single mothers have increased so much that many incorrectly assume they represent a new phenomenon. In fact, single motherhood *has been defined as a social problem* for at least a century. Both actual single mothers and reformers' perceptions of them influenced our welfare system. (15) [My emphasis.]

The slippage in this passage between the reality (the numbers of single mothers) and how they were perceived continues throughout the book. This is not the author's oversight. Both the reality and the perception influence our notion of needs and rights and therefore the development of the welfare system, and she is not willing to decide between them.

This offspring of the marriage of feminist history and policy history, materialism and a postmodern awareness of the provisionality of everything is a more sophisticated history of policy-making. If the tensions between a materialist history where change rises from conflict between interests and postmodern history where conflict is constructed within language present at times some epistemological conundrums, it is no criticism to say that the author cuts this Gordian knot (no pun intended) by making choices that are at bottom political. For this is the best kind of history-writing, the kind that analyzes the struggles of an earlier time in order to speak eloquently to our own.

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