

In the Aftermath of Welfare “Reform”

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Dedication

This issue has a face quite distinct from that which we expected, which is a recurring theme of scholarship. It also, almost unbelievably, is going to press at a time when the world stands at the brink of war, where the building where we met and worked for a time has seen utter devastation, and where recommendations for improved social policy seem almost certain to find little purchase in a world focused on annihilation.

We offer this issue In Memoriam to all World Trade Center victims, with particular gratitude to the fire brigade who worked across the street, oversaw our periodic practice evacuations, and walked into an inferno, knowing with each step that they were keeping the oath of service, but almost certainly walking away from their own lives. We thank you, and we honor your memory....

Introduction

THE IMPACT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) is making itself felt across the United States. Welfare rolls are down dramatically, and public officials hail a new day of “personal responsibility.” Yet, the popular press and ethnographic accounts increasingly challenge that interpretation, pointing to staggering human costs among those who are standing in the ideological crossfire.

Since we first proposed this edition, Tourigny has moved to Australia, which remains a country committed to a far sturdier social net than the United States ever allowed. In social and other matters, the economic influence of the United States means that other countries must at least consider implementing parallel social retrenchments, or be prepared to bear fiscal disparity in a competitive world market. Hence, some of the ideological shifts that occurred in the Republican

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conversation before PRWORA are finding echoes in conservative politics in Australia and elsewhere; this is part of the reason we created space for Australian and U.S. scholars.

Consequently, this issue of *Social Justice* reflects our geography.¹ It seeks to evaluate the fallout in the U.S. and, perhaps in that process, to create an intellectual space where colleagues and policymakers in the United States can begin to rethink the possibility of new directions. At the same time, it includes contributions aimed at assisting those who work elsewhere to appreciate the gradual but telling ideological erosion that surrounded the adoption of PRWORA in 1996. O'Connor (1999) illuminates that process in these pages and more comprehensively elsewhere.

Evaluation research is always complex; in the case of PRWORA, that is rendered more difficult by the devolution of responsibility for implementation and administration to the smallest legislative units. Anyone attempting empirical analysis of the evidence therefore faces an impregnable body of laws, guidelines, regulations, and bureaucracies, aside from the impact of administrative appeals and lawsuits (Jones-Brown and Mahoney, this volume).

We were encouraged to present “success stories,” but found none that could withstand our own admittedly skeptical scrutiny. Some people argue that the dramatic decline in welfare rolls is itself an intrinsic measure of success — and it would appear that, by bipartisan political standards, that is deemed to be so. But there are simply too few answers to too many important questions: What happens at the end of lifetime limits? What of those who found marginal employment, but are unable to keep it because their lives — or the economy — take a turn for the worse? What becomes of those who used to occupy bottom-rung positions that have been eliminated to create workfare places? What will the long-term consequences be of discouraging education in favor of “working first,” in a world where knowledge is the primary economy?

Both our contributions (Tourigny; Jones-Brown and Mahoney) make clear our separate ambivalence not only about the outcomes, but also about the intent behind the legislation. Interestingly, our articles reflect work in vastly different areas: Jones-Brown and Mahoney concern themselves with education in New York City, while Tourigny looks at young male drug users in Detroit as a way of arguing that “welfare reform” was only one of a number of contemporaneous pieces of legislation intended to resurrect old prejudices and stimulate, yet again, marginalization of the “other.” Along with Murphy and Sales, we individually conclude that many of the events that have since transpired — which we resist calling “consequences” out of academic restraint — were predictable, if not intentional.

As ethnographers, we document — and find ourselves convinced by — the endless stories of caseworker reticence, reduction in the number of offices and increases in the stringency of the application process, families doubling up, and the

immeasurable worry, stress, and anxiety of the many who have yet to face the brutalities certain to accompany lifetime limits. Those countless poor will be left to their own virtually nonexistent resources.

Our colleagues from the Southern Hemisphere suggest more theoretically grounded analyses.² Kelly utilizes Oceanian and international evidence to speak of our future: youth! Short and Mutch center their analysis on principles of access and the challenges to human rights posed by the third sector. North Americans may find those perspectives highly idealistic: their notion of “redistributive forms of provisioning...based simply upon a recognition of the (human) rights of recipients to meet their basic needs” is, regrettably, no longer part of the U.S. lexicon.

We hope that an international approach will benefit readers and remind us all that, not so long ago, it was customary to link notions of welfare with those of human or basic rights. Can we hope that the pendulum will swing again?

NOTES

1. We have asked that the journal respect the linguistic differences between the two countries: it seems proper to allow Australians to write about Australia using their own form of English, which is closely aligned with U.K. English.

2. Interestingly, while O’Connor is a New Zealander-Australian and Tourigny is a Canadian-Australian, both of their analyses reflect U.S. data. Therefore, the Southern Hemisphere colleagues are those whose work reflects an Oceanian perspective, namely Short and Mutch, and Kelly.

REFERENCES

- O’Connor, Brendon
1999 *American Liberalism, Conservatism, and the Attack on Welfare: From the “Great Society” to the “End of Welfare as We Know It.”* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, La Trobe University.