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First Pity Then Punishment

The History of Women and Welfare

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capitalism” of Europe and the US 1930s movements mirrors the accommodationist stance of the 1930s women reformers she criticizes. By lining up with their race and class allies in the battle over the 1935 Social Security Act, these women didn’t gradually get more people included as the years passed, but merely set in stone an inadequate system that stigmatized and failed those whom it set out to help.

Welfare struggles are important to support because they assert a person’s right to decent food and shelter, as well as our responsibility towards one another as human beings. But the kind of ‘mutual aid’ where the well-off give to the poor isn’t enough; the real struggle is against class division itself. But keeping this larger goal in mind doesn’t mean we shouldn’t work with welfare groups or argue for the value of “giving to strangers” while we live in a class society. It is up to us as anarchists and revolutionaries to think and act in a way that doesn’t count on an increase in poverty and despair as the spur of potentially revolutionary social collapse. In this age of anti-social individualism, welfare rights struggles, which shore up values of mutual aid and community, are an important part of the battle against right-wing revolution.

of resistance that added up to a 1930s “pro-welfare political culture,” in striking contrast with today’s popular perception of federal aid. Gordon also describes successful protests by people on relief when benefits were cut in Detroit and Harlem. People gained, explains Gordon, a sense of entitlement to relief payments. One woman even sued her case worker for “attempted starvation of her family.” Another family held their caseworker hostage on a home visit. In most cases, these folks got what they wanted and no jail time.

While Gordon ultimately comes out in favor of the Communist Party-inspired “Lundeen” bill which would have granted universal welfare similar to programs existing in Europe, she doesn’t argue that this bill was truly Communist, nor does she seem to offer a truly anti-capitalist alternative to the welfare state in her book. Gordon supports many social movements such as the National Welfare Rights Organization and the Communist Party’s “unemployed councils,” but she never goes beyond the goal of preserving a welfare system within capitalism.

It’s in the context of welfare rights movements that anarchists and other revolutionaries need to enter the discussion more forcefully. We should step up our efforts to help build movements fighting for programs of mutual aid, and to put forward the general vision of a society with free education, free health care, and enough food to go around. But we should never forget as we defend a communal value system that it is capitalism itself and the greed at its core that stands in the way of realizing values of mutual aid. We need to keep movement towards long-term solutions in mind, even while working with groups focused on short-term measures.

The problem with welfare isn’t just the belief in the family wage, but the notion that wage-slavery is a natural and irresistible state of affairs. Capitalism creates its own surplus labor pool (the unemployed) in order to keep wages low. While Gordon might privately advocate a view that capitalism needs to be overthrown, her own support of what she calls the “moral

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Because aid was given not on the basis of single mothers' right to good childcare and health, but on the basis of their supposedly temporary desperate need, AFDC required "means testing" of applicants. This "means testing" forces potential welfare recipients to get rid of assets and resources in order to qualify as "truly needy." Gordon points out that people can be rich and still get old age pensions — why should AFDC be any different? Means testing continues throughout the system, so that if people make more money, their welfare stipend is reduced. AFDC was unlike every other program because it wasn't designed, as were social security and old-age pensions, to "prevent poverty," but to prevent "pauperism:" a situation of moral degeneracy believed to adhere to all single moms and their children.

Current welfare "reformers" wouldn't change this basic system of means testing for AFDC. They would merely increase the punitive treatment of single moms, against whom they use both gendered and racial stereotypes. Remember when Dan Quayle blamed the L.A. riots on Murphy Brown? It's the same basic logic here: zero tolerance for single moms. Democrats and Republicans are in fundamental agreement that single parent families are a sign of general moral decline; they now battle only over whether to pity or blame the victim.

How Welfare Was Won

But without early social reformers, misguided as they were, there would never have been an AFDC program. Medicaid and public schooling initiatives, Gordon reveals, can be similarly credited to Black women activists' agitation during this time period. Gordon shows how the pressure from social movements in the 1930s played a major part in the passage of the 1935 Social Security Act. She describes many demonstrations, letters from citizens, third party efforts, and individual acts

The founders of our current welfare system were mostly elite women social reformers of the 1890s and 1900s who started the program known as “mother’s aid” — the first ever welfare program. It was run on a state level to “rescue” unwed mothers and their children. Some of the women were associated with socialism, others with feminism, some with both, and they opposed the terrible conditions that children faced in orphanages. Before the days of welfare, women had to give up their children to orphanages because they couldn’t support them. Many of these orphanages had mortality rates above 50%.

Showing that women’s understandings of “gender” can be closer to those of men of their own class than those of other women, Gordon explains how these wealthy women used the existing gender system to gain power through men while helping “needy sisters” in a limited way. They advocated a view of women as sources of social pity and compassion, while men constructed male-centered welfare systems around the concepts of rights and earned entitlements. The welfare system was also structured in a way to make Black workers invisible, cutting both “domestic workers” and agricultural laborers out of Social Security benefits and unemployment insurance, so that they would only qualify on the basis of need — for AFDC, a program administered through local and state governments.

Early welfare activists demanded public assistance for single mothers because they saw single-motherhood as a social problem, dangerous to families and society in general. AFDC was designed to save families from utter destitution, and society from the ills of poverty. Welfare payments were supposed to help women move on by getting married or moving in with relatives; they weren’t supposed to be enough for her to make it on her own, which in the reformers’ eyes, would only encourage “immorality.” From its very beginning then, the welfare system has operated to perpetuate poverty, a state of affairs otherwise known as “welfare dependence.”

The welfare state is a product of capitalism — not an alternative to it — yet many leftists, including communists and anarchists, are currently involved in struggles to defend it. Is this a contradiction? At the same time, many opponents of welfare are often described by some as anti-government “anarchists” because they’re generally against “government intervention.” Of course there’s no real puzzle here: The people posing as “anti-government reformers” or even “anarchists” are actually two groups: the leaders are old style “robber-baron” capitalists who don’t want the government to interfere with freedom of profit, and the others are fed-up tax payers whose “anti-government” ideas against welfare, taxes, and social programs might be better described as a revolt against communal values in general. This group doesn’t want scant resources being spent on “other” “less-deserving” people.

Welfare states might be seen as a way of applying small village values of mutual aid to modern nation states. The big difference is that in small villages you share resources with neighbors and friends; in welfare states you seem to be “giving to strangers.” Americans in general (not just robber barons) have been convinced that “giving to strangers” is too much to ask.

These anti-welfare attitudes are varieties of individualism and the opposite of anarchism as we understand it. Anti-authoritarian politics are not “anti-communal,” or “anti-welfare.” Anarchists have long supported systems of mutual aid, and that’s what welfare, public education, and nationalized health care could be. The problem with traditional, localized models of mutual aid is that they often go hand-in-hand with rigid social control. In small traditional villages, which some anarchists want to return to, conditions were not “free” by today’s standards but based on rigid patriarchal authority. Back in the old days in England, for instance, whole communities would get together to beat unwed pregnant women in hopes that they would have miscarriages. They did this because illegitimate children were the responsibility of the entire town.

One of the big questions for modern anarchist revolutionaries is how to develop a system of mutual aid without recreating a state structure or smaller-scale but more authoritarian village life.

Big, Mean Government

Anarchism is not “anti-communal,” and neither are the so-called welfare reform bills “anti-government” at all. The political leaders who currently pose as “anti-government” rebels are busy planning a near police state for welfare recipients. Like old-style villagers, their stated goal is to “reduce illegitimacy,” and their methods are even more punitive because they work on a larger scale. AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), a program designed to serve single mothers, is the main program under attack in the so-called welfare reform bill. Coercive paternity testing for women applying for AFDC, denial of funds to pregnant teens and immigrants, mandatory work for mothers after the child is two years old, not to mention continuous testing of female recipients for drugs, “sexual immorality,” deception and fraud are all parts of this “anti-government” package. This bill gives states responsibility to distribute money, financially rewards states for cutting people off the welfare rolls, and ends in one blow the entire federal welfare program.

Shifting welfare administration to states seems like it might be more democratic but it’s actually not because local businesses can flee states where welfare benefits give their potential employees too much bargaining power. These corporations aren’t so much against “welfare dependence” as they are for workers’ total dependence on them for jobs. And the incentive to trim the welfare rolls encourages states to “race to the bottom” as they compete to chase poor people away.

Because of our belief in mutual aid, anarchists have a lot to contribute to the debate around the welfare system, which has become limited to two views: one a defense of the “social safety net” or “welfare state,” the other an attack on the poor. Historian Linda Gordon’s arguments, presented in her talk “How Welfare Became a Dirty Word” and her 1994 book *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare*, while coming from a social-democratic position, should be required reading for every activist, because they clarify the history of the current welfare system. Her analysis of the history of welfare from its origins in the 1890s to its institutionalization in the 1930s shows how ideas about gender, class, and race combined to create a “two-tiered welfare” system which has always made some kinds of public spending (Social Security and unemployment insurance) seem like “rights” for everyone, while stigmatizing aid to single mothers.

First of all, Gordon defines welfare more broadly than many of the loudest voices in the “welfare reform debate.” She considers not only Social Security and unemployment insurance as welfare, but also tax benefits to corporations, public schools, sidewalks, roads, public parks, and almost all other public spending done in the interest of public “welfare.” Gordon uses convincing statistics to back up her claims as well, pointing out that AFDC only takes up about 1% of the annual federal budget!

Most of Gordon’s book is dedicated to explaining not why we should defend the current welfare system, but why we must change it. She asks, “why was AFDC, designed by feminists, so bad for women and children?” and finds that the current system of welfare is based on the idea of the “family wage” — the ideal of men supporting a dependent wife and children — and for this reason the system has punished single mothers who it sees as temporarily desperate and in need of assistance from the more fortunate.