



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 9
Issue 3 *September*

Article 6

September 1982

Defeminizing Social Policy

David Stoesz
Hood College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Gender and Sexuality Commons, Social Welfare Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Stoesz, David (1982) "Defeminizing Social Policy," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol9/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



DEFEMINIZING SOCIAL POLICY

David Stoesz, DSW
Hood College

ABSTRACT

Social policy initiatives by the evangelical right and neoconservative movements are reversing liberal programs that have benefitted women. This represents an attempt to defeminize social policy. Essential to this transformation are theoretical interpretations of economics and sociology which, combined with religious conservatism, portend the restoration of patriarchal culture. The ideology guiding the defeminizing of social policy is so pervasive as to suggest that regaining ground lost will be exceedingly difficult for those promoting social services for women.

INTRODUCTION

On February 18, 1981, President Reagan sought to reassure the truly needy that the social safety net was still in place.

Those who through no fault of their own must depend on the rest of us, the poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those in true need, can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts (1981:A9).

Underlying this conservative principle is a meticulously constructed ideology that far exceeds the ambitions of traditional conservatism: to limit the influence of government in social affairs. The ideology of the New Right as a synthesis of religious fundamentalism and conservative social science, seeks to reverse one of the more pronounced ventures of liberalism--the reduction of women's dependence on patriarchal institutions.

Conservative thought intends to reestablish traditional roles for women by subverting government mandates to achieve equality for women in the private sector and cutting social service programs in the public sector. Drawing from theology, sociology and economics, conservative scholars add an important measure of legitimacy for what is a carefully orchestrated attempt to defeminize social policy.¹ This paper is an examination of the theoretical and philosophical perspectives of the New Right based on the literature of that movement.

¹The term, "defeminize," means to diminish rights and benefits assigned to women in order to reduce sexual inequality. Such action increases the power and influence of men, thereby increasing sexual inequality. Margaret Masson of Hood College provided invaluable assistance in clarifying this, as well as other parts of this paper.

THEORETICAL BASES

Current attempts to defeminize social policy originate in two social movements, the evangelical movement and the neoconservative movement. The religious right endeavors to reestablish traditional values through political activity. Among the fundamentalist groups lobbying for a "national righteousness," Albert Menendez (1982) includes such groups as the Christian Voice, the Moral Majority, Catholics for Christian Political Action, Religious Roundtable, Library Court, and The Christian Embassy. Conservative moralist, Jerry Falwell, as an example, has assembled a formidable grass-roots organization, the Moral Majority, Inc., which he describes as "pro-life," "pro-traditional family," "pro-morality," and "pro-American."

The Moral Majority has touched a sensitive nerve in the American people. Many Americans are sick and tired of the way their government has been run. They are tired of being told that their values and beliefs don't matter and that only those values held by government bureaucrats and liberal preachers are worthy of adoption in the area of public policy (Falwell, 1981:17).

In 1980 this message proved persuasive enough to result in the election of several senators representing the New Right. Taking traditional conservative positions favoring free-enterprise economics, limited federal spending, and a strong national defense, the New Right distinguishes itself by including morality in the political gospel. As in the cases of the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion, this represents a frontal assault on issues vital to feminists. Reactions to liberalization of rights for women by the New Right is less than charitable. Jeremiah Denton, for example, during a hearing on marital rape, retorted, "Dammit, when you get married you kind of expect you're going to get a little sex" (Peterson, 1982:A2).

A more sophisticated critique of liberalism has come from the neoconservative movement. With the assistance of well-financed think-tanks, noted scholars representing theology, economics and sociology provide intellectual authenticity to conservative thought (Steinfels, 1979).

Theoretically, neoconservatives contend that initial dislocations precipitated by urbanization and industrialization no longer pose threats to the social order as did the Great Depression. Under an advanced, "democratic capitalism," a self-correcting economic order emerges that reflects "the infinity of human pressures, desires and inventiveness. It is truly protean" (Johnson, 1980:58). Government, in this formulation, is little more than an interference in the natural order of things. Reducing the role of government in social affairs is a premise of neoconservatism--its dismissal accomplished through conservative, anti-feminist, interpretations of economics and sociology.

Described in *Fortune* as "a bona fide conservative revolution," the adoption of supply-side economic theory by the Reagan administration involves stable money-supply growth, tax cuts, spending cuts and regulatory reform (Ehrbar, 1981:47). A hypothetical configuration proposed by Arthur Laffer, supply-side economics

promised to rejuvenate business by reducing taxes to the extent that "the private sector can be relieved of its onerous tax rates without requiring cuts in public-sector services" (Gilder, 1981:180). Under the shepherding of David Stockman, however, "supply-side theology"² was uncovered as a euphemism for "trickle-down" economic theory (Greider, 1981:46-47).

A less conspicuous--but no less significant--component of supply-side economics is regulatory reform. Unfettering the private sector, and thereby eliminating the incipient totalitarian tendency of big government, is accomplished by weeding out meddlesome obstructions, such as affirmative action policies. In an analysis of problems in higher education, for example, John H. Bunzel of the conservative Hoover Institution, targets affirmative action as "government's attempt to bring about social change through elaborate regulatory mechanisms, heavy-handed investigatory techniques, and a frequently undisguised built-in adversarial bias"(1980: 410-411). Speaking candidly in a publication of another conservative "think tank," the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Midge Decter complained,

My own pet passion among current issues is affirmative action. This is a policy that must be struck down. It is not only unpopular in itself--going against the American grain; people recognize that affirmative action has done a great deal to ruin the working habits in the country by creating a very debilitating cynicism. The message is that somehow working hard and achieving is a kind of fake. People can't stand this idea (1981:47).

The sociological contribution to defeminizing social policy emphasizes sex roles as a prime force in human relations. Biological determinism is evident in the works of George Gilder, effete literateur of the neoconservative movement. On the relationship between work and sexuality, Gilder speculates,

A man who feels affirmed sexually by his work environment, and his relation to other men and women in it, will produce more than a man who finds his job sexually erosive and confusing ...Sexuality is our principal way of perceiving and relating to people, and these relationships are more fundamental, psychologically, than our response to anything else--goods, money, ideology, or law (1975:97).

This sexual reductionism ignores the influence of discrimination in creating socio-economic disparities between men and women as well as between whites and blacks. Writing of black male poverty, for example, Gilder suggests that, "These men lack the motivation conferred by familial demands and the strength imparted by familial support" (1981:134). Putting men in harness and women in the home is a logical consequence of Gilder's gonad theory.

²Semantics aside, an important fusion between theology and economics can be found in the works of Michael Novak, most notably in Toward a Theology of the Corporation (American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C.:1981).

The importance of sex roles in conservative ideology is due to reliance on the family as "another safety net." In making a logical extension of the residual conception of social welfare, Rudolph Penner of the American Enterprise Institute argues that "there has always been a private safety net that supplements public programs and it is the intact family." Considering the intact family as part of the safety net of social welfare has enormous implications for several social problems, particularly unemployment. To the extent that intact families have two or more wage earners, they are better able to weather periodic bouts of unemployment. "On average," claims Penner, "members of intact families who experience unemployment fare reasonably well ..." (1982).

When men are still considered the principal wage earner, this formulation functions to displace responsibility for solving the unemployment problem from the economic system to secondary wage earners in families: women who are expected to meet the economic needs of a family by periodic participation in the labor force. For this reason conservatives would prefer to omit or reduce the significance of women in computing the unemployment rate; as President Reagan complained,

Part of the unemployment is not as much recession as it is the great increase in the people going into the job market, and ladies, I'm not picking on anyone, but because of the increase in women who are working today and two-worker families and so forth (sic) (Molotsky, 1982:37).

On the other hand, reliance on families, and particularly women, to absorb the impact of unemployment has functional utility only so long as women do not compete with men for jobs. Herein is the significance of combining conservative economics and conservative sociology. Admonishing women to stay home in traditional sex roles, except when unemployment of the primary wage earner requires participation in the labor force, guarantees that women will not develop work histories that make them competitive with men. The consequences of this logic are then used to justify sexual inequality. "Most of the differences in pay between men and women," notes Gilder,

derive from the fact that women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-nine are eleven times more likely than men to voluntarily leave work, and the average woman spends only eight months on a job compared to almost three years for a man (1981:130).

Conceivably, conservatives could attempt to redefine the unemployment rate to account for the effect of multiple-earner families, further eroding the rights of women to make valid claims on an economic system that already discriminates against them.³

³Such an event would not be unprecedented. In the late 1970's conservative theoretician Martin Anderson (1980) suggested that the number of families below the poverty line would drop if in-kind benefits were given a cash-equivalent value and added to income maintenance benefits. By 1982 the Census Bureau calculated that the number of poor families could decrease as much as 42.3% if the market value for food, housing and medical benefits are added to income benefits (New York Times, April 18, 1982). This type of market-equivalence analysis has been a powerful weapon for the conservative assault on human service benefits.

THE RESTORATION OF PATRIARCHAL CULTURE

The intention of those opposed to liberally-inspired programs that benefit women is the reestablishment of a traditional social order consistent with the sexist values held by the religious right and neoconservatives. The reinstatement of patriarchal culture serves to "restratify" the social order along lines established by "traditional--i.e. patriarchal-sex and family relations" (Washington Area Study Group, 1982:106-7). As Marvin Harris (1981) notes, this conservative impulse becomes imperative as disadvantaged groups scramble for what jobs are available in a tight labor market.

Women and blacks, in particular, have been pitted against each other, as Kathy Sawyer's analysis of recent Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows. Between 1970 and 1980 the percent increase of the working population for women exceeded that of black men in four major occupational areas, as shown in the following chart.

Percent Increase of the Working Population from 1970 to 1980

	<u>Officials & Managers</u>	<u>Professionals</u>	<u>Craftworkers</u>	<u>Technicians</u>
Women	7.8	11.3	3.0	12.4
Black Men	1.3	.6	2.2	.9

Because most of the increase in employment for women was found among white, as opposed to black women, Sawyer concluded that "blacks, especially men, express resentment that white women are reaping greater benefits than they" (Sawyer, 1982:A10).

For conservatives needing to reaffirm an economic system that tends to discriminate against marginal workers in a time of chronic stagflation, the only logical response is to prioritize the claims that some groups would make on the economic system (Greider, 1981). Given a choice between blacks and women, the conservatives select women for sacrifice because women allegedly can rely on familial social and economic supports.

Justification for this choice has come in the form of a conservative depiction of a natural order which identifies the family as a fundamental institution. The foundation for this is found in To Empower People by Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus (1977), an analysis financed by the American Enterprise Institute that spawned a number of works. Berger and Neuhaus posit the family as a mediating structure, like neighborhood, church and voluntary association; all struggling against the oppressive tendencies of modernity, embodied in mega structures, such as government and business. Through a subsequent publication, Michael Novak (1981:5) accomplished an ideological sleight of hand by reclassifying business as a mediating structure, leaving only government for reproach. In so doing, the family as private institution became portrayed as an "endangered species" continually threatened by intrusive government.

Most any government initiative relating to the family has become suspect, even those considered innocuously supportive by most standards.⁵ A particular target for government-associated programming has been day care for children. Brigitte Berger chastises "child care bureaucrats" for usurping from the family "its most recently rediscovered function, the care of children" (1979:8-9). Gilder is alarmed at the possible evolution of the "child care state" where parenthood has been expropriated by government (1975:162). Subsequent budget reductions in employment-g geared programs, like child care, serve to drive women back into the home, reducing family need for, or dependence on, the "friendly intruders" of government (Berger, 1980:160). Operationalizing conservative theory by reducing program benefits for women results in enormous pressures for women to stay home, thus reinforcing institutional sexism.

CONSEQUENCES FOR CLIENTS AND PRACTITIONERS

Perhaps most remarkable about conservative ideology has been the rapidity with which it has been dispatched. The execution of conservative policies rivals the Great Society in speed of delivery and the New Deal in its impact. It is as if Gilder's philosophy were instituted outright:

The attempt of the welfare state to deny, suppress and plan away the dangers and uncertainties of our lives--to domesticate the inevitable unknown--violates the spirit of capitalism but also the nature of man ...In order to succeed, the poor need most of all the spur of their poverty (Gilder, 1981:253,118).

Both clients and professionals have become casualties of conservative ideology. For clients of social services the consequence of this is a brutal confrontation with a reality against which they had been only partly protected. The hardest impact is felt by indigents and the destitute, for example shopping bag ladies (Rousseau, 1981).⁶

⁵For example, Michael Balzano, in Federalizing Meals-On-Wheels (American Enterprise Institute, 1979) criticizes government involvement in that program, preferring that it be turned over to mediating structure organizations.

⁶These women experience a reality that David Stockman later came to appreciate as a disappointment in calculating budget cuts for social services. Noting that corporate and military interests resisted budget cuts while social service beneficiaries were unsuccessful, he grudgingly acknowledged that "'weak clients' suffer from their weakness" (Greider, 1981:52). Consider comments by two women:

I don't know what I'll do now. Try to get work I guess. Certainly not getting anywhere sitting on my ass, pardon me, with the welfare and social security. What work? At my age I haven't the vaguest. I'm almost fifty and that isn't easy after twenty-five years of not working, raising a family. I'll try to collect unemployment insurance, of course, I haven't worked. Very interesting situation. Maybe I'll come back to the hospital. I just know the area around here. Like a cat or

For clients who are able to participate in the labor market, at least marginally, the result is apt to be more haphazard work with less likelihood that temporary, part-time work will lead to full-time employment, or that full-time employment in lower-skilled jobs will lead to a career that moves upward. Instead, women will move in and out of the job market, and once in it, laterally. Fewer women will find employment the way to independence, thus, increasing their dependence on male breadwinners. For some women this will mean being trapped in a stifling and perhaps dangerous, relationship with little chance for exit (Shields, 1981).

A lifestyle independent of government or a male breadwinner will be reserved for women who forego motherhood. If conservative policies continue to destabilize family life, women will be encouraged to avoid marriage as well. These independent women will find the transition from independent careerist to traditional female roles--wife and mother--very costly, and perhaps unaffordable. The dilemma for career women considering traditional roles may be as psychologically stressful as that of women who find developing a career so difficult due to the absence of employment supports, such as child care. In both instances life is bifurcated; patriarchal culture stifles personal growth by allowing only one road for individual development.

Conservative ideologies have singled out human service professionals, notably social workers, as evidence of the evils of liberalism. No longer portrayed as benign "do-gooders" conservative theoreticians depict human service professionals as agents of the state, often working against other social institutions. For example, Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, in defense of the family, contend that

when the rhetoric of children's rights means transferring children from the charge of families to the charge of coteries of experts ... that rhetoric must be suspected of cloaking vested interests--ideological interests, to be sure, but, also and more crudely, interest in jobs, money and power (1977:20).

Irving Kristol, described as "patron saint of the new right," views self-interest as the prime motive of human services practitioners.

The prime promoters and beneficiaries of government intervention ... are the social scientists, social workers, urban planners, academics and bureaucrats who make up the ever-expanding "new class." They get paid for running the programs they promote, and relish the accompanying power. The fact that their programs don't work never stops them (Goodman, 1981:203).

6 dog I come back, rotate toward it when I'm uncertain, I guess (p. 37).

Before I came to the shelter? Oh, starving. I didn't eat for weeks. I paid the rent at that hotel with one check and they robbed my eating money. So, I had a room, a tiny room and I stayed there. It was cold. They didn't have steam, nothing, because the furnace broke. It's a cold winter. I just stayed in bed all day. After a while I was too weak to go out or even bathe. When the others found me they put me right up in the shelter (p. 45).

And, in what may be the most clever of semantic distortions, Gilder labels social welfare programs that over-insure people against socio-economic risks as "moral hazards" (1981:105-113).

NEOLIBERALISM

Advocates for social reform have little reason to believe that redress against the defeminization of social policy can be obtained through the political process. Indeed, conservative doctrine has so thoroughly permeated the Democratic party, the traditional reserve of liberalism, that an ideological mutant has evolved, neoliberalism. Though not yet a fully-developed ideology, in its present form neoliberalism shares features of neoconservatism. Most importantly, neoliberalism emphasizes economic policy over social policy (Rothenberg, 1982). To the extent that neoliberals emphasize investments in production capital over social capital, their ideology mirrors supply-side economics. In so doing, they disregard social injustice as the consequence of an economic system that must be restructured if life opportunities are to be made more equal for all populations. By relegating social issues as subordinate to economic issues, neoliberalism makes it that much more difficult for feminists to find social policy as a vehicle for social reform. Instead, social policy becomes the instrument for furthering institutional sexism.

CONCLUSION

The current conservative trend is not a transient political phenomenon that is likely to collapse soon. A review of conservative ideology shows that it is a carefully-constructed and well-integrated system of propositions derived from theology, economics and sociology. The resulting synthesis is reasoned, however archaic, prescription for a society beset with a variety of problems. That the costs for addressing these problems is borne disproportionately by women is testimony to the power still reserved in patriarchal institutions. The absence of a strong and coherent response by liberals is further evidence that there is little reason for expecting a quick reversal of the present trend to defeminize social policy.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Martin
1980 "Welfare Reform" in P. Duignan and W. G. Campbell (eds.) *The United States in the 1980s*. Stanford University: Hoover Institution.
- Balzano, Michael
1979 *Federalizing Meals-On-Wheels*. American Enterprise Institutes: Washington, D.C.
- Berger, Brigitte
1979 "The Family and Mediating Structures as Agents for Child Care" in B. Berger and S. Callahan (eds.) *Child Care and Mediating Structures*. American Enterprise Institute: Washington, D.C.

- Berger, Brigitte
 1980 "Family as a Mediating Structure" in M. Novak (ed.) Democracy and Mediating Structures. American Enterprise Institute: Washington, D.C.
- Berger, Peter and John Neuhaus
 1977 To Empower People. American Enterprise Institute: Washington, D.C.
- Bunzel, John
 1980 "Higher Education: Problems and Prospects," in P. Duignan and W. G. Campbell (eds.) The United States in the 1980s. Stanford University: Hoover Institution.
- Decter, Midge
 1981 "Where Do We Go From Here? Directions from Stage Right." Public Opinion 3:47.
- Ehrbar, F. F.
 1981 "A Strong Start on the Economy." Fortune 103:46-52.
- Falwell, Jerry
 1981 "The Maligned Moral Majority." Newsweek, November 21, 1981:17.
- Gilder, George
 1975 Sexual Suicide. Bantam Books: New York.
- Gilder, George
 1981 Wealth and Poverty. Basic Books: New York.
- Goodman, Walter
 1981 "Irving Kristol: Patron Saint of the New Right." The New York Times Magazine, December 6.
- Greider, William
 1981 "The Education of David Stockman." The Atlantic, December: 27-54.
- Harris, Marvin
 1981 America Now: The Anthropology of a Changing Culture. Simon and Schuster: New York.
- Johnson, Paul
 1980 "Is There a Moral Basis for Capitalism?" in M. Novak (ed.) Democracy and Mediating Structures. American Enterprise Institute: Washington, D.C.
- Menendez, Albert
 1982 "Religious Lobbies." Liberty, March/April.
- Molotsky, Irvin
 1982 "Jobless Rate Tied to Big Work Force." The New York Times, April 18.
- New York Times
 1982 "Redefining Poverty: Some Interesting but Loaded Choices." The New York Times, April 18.
- Novak, Michael
 1981 Toward a Theology of the Corporation. American Enterprise Institute: Washington, D.C.

- Penner, Rudolph
1982 "The Family: Another Safety Net." The New York Times, April 25.
- Peterson, Bill
1982 "The Senate's Thunder on the Right Has a Contralto Overture."
Washington Post, January 17, 1982.
- Reagan, Ronald
1981 "Text of President's Speech Lists Savings, Program by Program."
Baltimore Sun, February 19, 1981.
- Rothenberg, Randall
1982 "The Neoliberal Club." Esquire 97:37-46.
- Rousseau, Ann Marie
1981 Shopping Bag Ladies. Pilgrim Press: New York.
- Sawyer, Kathy
1982 "Affirmative Action." The Washington Post, April 11.
- Shields, Laurie
1981 Displaced Homemakers. McGraw-Hill: New York.
- Steinfels, Peter
1979 The Neoconservatives. Simon and Schuster: New York.
- Stoesz, David
1981 "A Wake for the Welfare State: Social Welfare and the Neoconservative
Challenge." Social Service Review, September, 1981:398:410.
- Washington Area Study Group
1982 "None Dare Call It Patriarchy." Socialist Review 12:105-111.