



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 22
Issue 4 December

Article 13

December 1995

Review of *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. Jill Quadagno. Reviewed by James Midgley, Louisiana State University.

James Midgley
Louisiana State University

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



Part of the Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Midgley, James (1995) "Review of *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. Jill Quadagno. Reviewed by James Midgley, Louisiana State University.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol22/iss4/13>

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



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1004. \$24.00 hardcover.

Comparative research in social policy had devoted a good deal of attention to what has been called 'American welfare exceptionalism'. This phrase connotes the apparent fact that the United States spends proportionally less than other industrial nations on social programs, and that it has less comprehensive social services. Unlike most European countries, the country has no universal health care system, no child allowances and less extensive housing and other social services.

Various explanations for American welfare exceptionalism have been offered. It has been claimed that the United States' dominant individualist ethos mitigates against social welfare and that the country lacks a strong and well organized industrial working class that can effectively campaign for social programs as social democratic movements have done in many European nations. It has also been suggested that the nation's size and heterogeneity impede the emergence of a comprehensive welfare state and that the lack of a powerful central bureaucracy capable of organizing national level social interventions has been a relevant factor.

Jill Quadagno has previously been involved in debates about American welfare exceptionalism but her book offers a new and significant interpretation of the issue. Quadagno contends that unlike the European countries, social policy in the United States is dominated by race and that racial inequality has been the primary impediment to the creation of the comprehensive welfare state. Pointing out that social policy is often used for political rather than social ends, Quadagno offers a plausible account of the way politicians have historically pandered to racist sentiments and how this has impeded the introduction of comprehensive social programs. Drawing examples from different periods of American history she show how the failure to address the issue of racial inequality precluded the expansion of social rights to the population as a whole.

Much of Quadagno's book focuses on the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. The War on Poverty was the most

comprehensive attempt to extend social welfare to excluded minorities. But, as on previous occasions, racial problems limited its effectiveness. While the component programs of the War on Poverty showed considerable promise, they failed to reach their objectives because they were subsumed under more dominant racial struggles. For example, the job training program was deadlocked when the unions refused to permit the entry of black apprentices into well-paying construction jobs. The introduction by the Federal government of affirmative action hiring sought to correct this problem but instead fostered hostility by blue collar workers towards the Democratic Party and undermined the purpose of the program. Similarly, the community action program failed to improve local service provision and instead became a mechanism for political control and patronage. With the election of Richard Nixon, the role of race in social policy was recognized and exploited through the introduction of social policies that produced electoral advantage for the Republican administration.

This important book makes a major contribution to the analysis of social policy in the United States. It is solidly grounded in historical research, well written and plausible. Its signal contribution is to explicate the significance of the racial factor in social policy analysis. With the increasing diversification of the populations of the European nations, its argument will have wider relevance.

James Midgley
Louisiana State University

Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza, *The Scar of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. \$19.95 hardcover.

It has been predicted that the decade of the 1990s will best be known as the years of the "cultural imperative" in the United States. It is certainly clear that the whole issue of race and ethnicity continues to have saliency for most of our American institutions. With the emphasis on domestic policies as expressed through the recent national election, this study appears at a critical time in contributing to an understanding of race and racial politics in