



June 1999

Review of *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare*. Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown. Reviewed by Dorothy van Soest, University of Texas, Austin.

Dorothy van Soest
University of Texas, Austin

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



Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

van Soest, Dorothy (1999) "Review of *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare*. Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown. Reviewed by Dorothy van Soest, University of Texas, Austin.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol26/iss2/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



who want to explore some recent innovations in psychological theories. And on a methodological note, some of the novel scales and indexes that can be replicated in future studies.

Eric Swank

Morehead State University

Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. \$45.00 hardcover.

The current antagonism against social welfare is deeply rooted in the nineteenth century. Contemporary quarrels are remarkably similar to arguments used at that time and, in fact, very little is being said that is new. As recent passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act - euphemistically referred to as "welfare reform" legislation - reveals, substantial numbers of people in the United States continue to look with distrust and even abhorrence upon impoverished people and the system designed to provide them with minimal assistance. Nineteenth century judgments about immigrants flooding our borders in search of fortune and burdening us with needs associated with disease and squalid poverty continue to be revealed in current anti-immigrant legislation. Nineteenth century alarm about increasing juvenile delinquency and crime among those whom Charles Loring Brace referred to as the "dangerous classes" who are a menace to society continues to be revealed in a growing attitude of zero tolerance of youth who commit crimes. This is illustrated by the current focus on harsher punishments, including incarceration of youth with adults, capital punishment at younger ages, and holding parents responsible for the behavior of their children.

Modern day reformers who challenge the regressive direction our country seems to be headed often do so with arguments that invoke the needs of innocent children. Similarly, reformers of the nineteenth century often invoked the interests of the children. In fact, much of the history of American welfare can be written in terms of attempts to save the children of the poor from the negative effects of poverty. *The Poor Belong to Us* is written in just such terms. Historian Dorothy Brown and theologian Elizabeth McKeown analyze the evolution of Catholic Charities between

the Civil War and World War II from its local volunteer origins to a centralized and professionalized workforce that played a prominent role in the development of the American welfare system that is now under attack. In this fascinating contribution to contemporary welfare scholarship, the authors' study is grounded in concerns and care for the children of the poor.

It was as clients of charity that Catholics made their initial appearance in American welfare history. Accounts of alarmingly large incidences of Catholic dependency and delinquency resulted in Catholic providers beginning to claim "their own" after the Civil War. Religious congregations and lay volunteers developed a collection of local institutions to serve primarily Catholic immigrants. From the beginning, Catholic social provision was anchored in child-care. Growing numbers of congregate institutions, operated primarily by religious congregations of women, housed thousands of infants and children in major cities. Most of the children were not orphans but children whose parents could not provide adequate care. The first four chapters of *The Poor Belong to Us* trace the history of Catholic care for poor children: the story of The New York System of institutionalized child care, the situation in other U.S. cities, conditions inside the institutions, and the movement toward provisions outside the institutions. Blow by blow descriptions of historical events reveal the tensions and conflicts among those involved in efforts to "save the children." The conflicts recounted are remarkably similar to opposing perspectives that continue to be debated today: public funding for private organizations, governmental intrusion, centralization vs. decentralization, religious and political tensions, professionals vs. non-professionals as service providers, needs and rights, charity and justice, government or religious organizations as primary providers locally, etc.

The book captures the long tradition of charity and historical allegiance of the Catholic Church to serving the poor. While traditional Catholic doctrine was more tolerantly disposed towards the poor than the more individualistic doctrines of some Protestant denominations, the history of Catholic charities resists theoretical bracketing. According to the authors of *The Poor Belong to Us*, the Catholic Church is the most pluralist of all denominations in the U.S., with a history rooted in local parishes and dioceses

and driven by divisions of class, ethnicity, and generation. It is thus not surprising that the history of the Catholic Church's role in the development of the American welfare system is complex and filled with conflicts, tensions, and contradictions. While the struggles recounted in this book sometimes seem interminable, the authors also capture the times when adaptation brings resolution through unity and cooperation. The story ultimately is one of significant transformation of Catholic Charities from local to central control and increasing reliance on the services of professional social workers. With the Depression, which brought widespread poverty and an overwhelming need for public solutions, Catholic charities faced a staggering challenge to their traditional claim that "the poor belong to us." While complexities and contradictions remain, it is clear that U.S. Catholic Charities has demonstrated remarkable adaptability in responding to the changing environment and remarkable consistency in its advocacy for the poor.

In the final chapter of the book, Brown and McKeown point out that the issues confronted in the 1870s persist. Our children are still in peril and poverty still haunts our country. When nineteenth century remedies are proposed as current solutions, the authors provide a clear response (p. 196) by quoting journalist Ellen Goodman who, in a 1994 syndicated column, exclaimed in disbelief: "Try these for openers! Charity and Orphanages! Been there. Done that."

Dorothy Van Soest
The University of Texas at Austin