



Volume 27

Issue 1 March - *Special Issue on the Changing
American Mosaic*

Article 5

March 2000

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Recommended Citation

Sidel, Ruth (2000) "The Enemy Within: The Demonization of Poor Women," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol27/iss1/5>

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The Enemy Within: The Demonization of Poor Women

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The denigration and demonization of poor women was central to the effort to repeal Aid to Families with Dependent Children by the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The utilization of negative stereotypes involving race, class and gender effectively marginalized impoverished women and their children, who were blamed for virtually all of the social problems of the United States during the 1990s. Despite the massive concentration of wealth and income in the hands of the wealthiest Americans and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, the United States continues to ignore the need for fundamental economic and social reform.

They are despised, denigrated, ostracized from mainstream society. In earlier times, they were known as the "dangerous classes;" today they are labeled the "underclass." They are pictured as virtually irredeemable, lazy, dependent, living off the hard-earned money of others. They are poor single mothers. They are welfare recipients. They are the enemy within.

The demonizing of poor, single mothers has been an integral part of the recent onslaught on the safety net, meager and inadequate as it is. Poor mothers have been deemed unworthy, the "undeserving poor;" millions of welfare recipients were painted with one brush, were relegated to that area in society that is beyond the Pale. Systematic stereotyping and stigmatizing of "welfare mothers" was necessary in order to dehumanize them in the eyes of other Americans before the harsh and tenuous lifeline of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the other bare-bones social programs could be shredded. The

implicit and often explicit message is: if welfare recipients are so unworthy, perhaps such harsh treatment, such punishment is warranted, even necessary, in order to modify their social and reproductive behavior. Perhaps, it has been said, removing cash and other benefits, forcing mothers to work even at dead-end jobs for poverty wages, and denying aid to children of teenagers and to additional babies born while the mother is receiving AFDC is the only way to deal with this "deviant" and "irresponsible" group. Many politicians claim, moreover, that they promote these Draconian measures against the poor as a form of "tough love," "for their own good." These cuts in assistance and services may be painful at first, this reasoning goes, and some suggest that this current generation of poor parents may have to be written off, but in the long run these harsh measures will enable the next generation to "stand on their own two feet." Congress, the tough but responsible parent, will force the poor, as though they were rebellious adolescents, to shape up, to reform their delinquent ways.

Just over a decade ago, social scientist Charles Murray, author of *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980*, articulated the values, priorities, and underlying agenda of America's war against the poor: "Some people are better than others. They deserve more of society's rewards, of which money is only one small part. A principal function of social policy is to make sure they have the opportunity to reap those rewards. Government cannot identify the worthy, but it can protect a society in which the worthy can identify themselves," (Murray, 1984, p. 234). Thus Murray was calling for government to legitimize the existing social and economic hierarchy by safeguarding the affluence and lifestyles of those whom he has deemed "better" and more "worthy."

The rhetoric that accompanied and paved the way for the continuing assault on programs for poor women and children was fueled by a pledge made by candidate Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential campaign to "put an end to welfare as we know it," (DeParle, July, 1994). As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat from New York, stated, "The Republicans took him at his word" and went much further. But the only real way to end welfare as we know it, Moynihan continues, is "just to dump the children on the streets," (Pear, 1995).

Prior to the repeal of Aids to Families with Dependent Children by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the litany of criticism against poor, single women was relentless. Mother-only families were blamed for virtually all of the ills afflicting American society. Out-of-wedlock births were blamed for the “breakdown of the family,” for the crime rate, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, poor school performance and the rending of the social fabric. The labeling of some citizens as “dependent”—that is, dependent on social welfare programs rather than on spouses, parents or other family members, or other, more acceptable Federal programs—has been used indiscriminately to discredit an entire group of women and children without regard to their character or their specific work and/or family history.

As the political tide turned rapidly against the poor, particularly poor women, rhetoric escalated to previously unimagined levels of hyperbole and vitriol. At a 1994 news conference called by the Mainstream Forum, a group of centrist and conservative House Democrats affiliated with the Democratic Leadership Council, the political organization President Clinton helped found and headed when he was Governor of Arkansas, Representative Nathan Deal, a Georgia Democrat, declared that welfare was dead. He went on to state, “The stench from its decaying carcass has filled the nostrils of every American,” (DeParle, May, 1994).

The very words that are being used tell us what to think and how to feel. Poor women are characterized by their “dependence,” an absolute negative, a polar opposite from that valued American characteristic, “independence.” This label presumes that *they* are “dependent,” that *they* passively rely on the government for their day-to-day needs while *we*, the rest of us, are “independent,” “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps,” are out there “on our own.” These designations leave no room for the considerable variation and complexity that characterize most people’s lives, for the fact that virtually all of us are in varying degrees dependent on others and on societal supports during our adult lives—that many of us have been recipients of financial or other kinds of help from family members, that many have been helped by inheritance, by assistance in finding (and sometimes keeping) a job, by tax

deductions for mortgage payments, or the Federal subsidy of farm prices or highways, or by programs such as Medicare or Unemployment Compensation or disability assistance.

Dividing people into "us" and "them" is facilitated by the resurrection of terms such as "illegitimacy" that encourage the shaming and denigration of mothers and their out-of-wedlock children, for it is far easier to refuse aid to "them," to people who engage in disgraceful, stigmatized behavior than to people who seem like "us." David Boaz, executive vice-president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian organization, even hoped to resurrect the term "bastard:" "We've made it possible for a teen-age girl to survive with no husband and no job. That used to be very difficult. If we had more stigma and lower benefits, might we end up with 100,000 bastards every year rather than a million children born to alternative families?" (Wines, April, 1995).

Poor, single mothers, particularly AFDC recipients, have been portrayed as the ultimate outsiders—marginalized as non-workers in a society that claims belief in the work ethic, marginalized as single parents in a society that holds the two-parent, heterosexual family as the desired norm, marginalized as poor people in a society that worships success and material rewards and marginalized as people of color when in reality millions of whites live in poverty. One of the key myths in the demonizing of poor women is that most of the impoverished, single, child-bearing women are black. This image of the poor, inexorably intertwined with the long-standing baggage of racist ideology, facilitates their being perceived as deviants, as the ultimate outsiders. As anthropologist Leith Mullings has stated, "Women of color, and particularly African-American women, are the focus of well-elaborated, strongly held . . . ideologies concerning race, class, and gender." She goes on to state that "the images, representation, and symbols that form ideologies often have complex meanings and associations that are not easily or readily articulated, making them difficult to challenge," (Mullings, 1994, pp. 265–89).

Historically, African-American women have been described on the one hand by the image of "'Mammy,' the religious, loyal, motherly slave . . ." and, on the other hand, by the image of "'Jezebel,' the sexually aggressive, provocative woman governed

entirely by libido." As Mullings states, this Mammy/Jezebel stereotype is a variation of the widespread madonna/whore dualism but the issue of race adds an even more pernicious element to the classic stereotype. The view of African Americans as a different species, what Mullings and others have termed the "otherness of race," has "justified the attribution of excessive sexuality." That "sexuality continues to be a major theme in the discourse about race" assures that it is also a major theme in the discourse about poor women. Moreover, the Mammy image, so prevalent through the first half of the twentieth century and memorialized in popular culture by the film *Gone With the Wind*, has been replaced, according to Mullings, by the image of the "emasculating matriarch," (Mullings, 1994, pp. 265–89). Therefore, whether through overt sexuality or through control within the family that supposedly robs black men of their authority and power, black women are portrayed as deviant and as the primary cause of the problems within the black family and within the black community.

Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, analyzes the ways in which these deeply rooted images of black women underlie and buttress the harsh treatment of poor women over the past two decades and particularly during the 1990s:

Portraying African-American women as matriarch allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children. Assuming that Black poverty is passed on intergenerationally, via value transmission in families, an elite white male standpoint suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on white, middle-class children and that diverts attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Those African-Americans who remain poor are blamed for their own victimization (Collins, 1990, p. 74).

Since the 1994 election, attacks on other groups in the United States—particularly on criminals and potential criminals and on immigrants—have also escalated sharply. This process has included verbal denigration as well as cruel and unusual treatment of those who are traditionally perceived as outsiders. There has

been harsh rhetoric against documented and undocumented immigrants, as well as attempts to deprive them of essential human services. Prisoners who are mentally ill, functionally illiterate, and otherwise usually exempt from such inhumane punishment are being executed. Chain gangs and forced labor have returned to the Alabama penal system. It is surely no accident that all of these groups are made up largely of low-income people of color. But the harshest rhetoric and most sweeping policy changes have been reserved for the poor, particularly poor women. It is the convergence of class, gender, and race that makes this sweeping attack on one segment of society possible.

This denigration of poor welfare recipients is based in large part on dichotomous thinking and on the repetition and reiteration of commonly held myths about poor women and their children. The dichotomous thinking underlying much of the so-called welfare debate divides people, primarily women, into "good" and "bad;" "workers" and "idlers;" those who abide by the traditional "family values" and those who do not; good caring mothers and those who have been characterized by Charles Murray as "rotten mothers." Even children are being characterized by this either/or language: "legitimate" versus "illegitimate" (or "bastards"); young people who become productive citizens as opposed to those who are truant, drop out of school, or engage in early childbearing and other forms of "anti-social" behavior.

As Elaine Pagels points out in her book, *The Origin of Satan*, many cultures throughout the world and over the span of recorded human history have divided people into "we" and "they," "human" and "nonhuman." The "we" is often correlated with the "human" while the "they" are envisaged as "nonhuman." Pagels claims this kind of dichotomous thinking is deeply embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Pagels, 1995, xviii).

The scathing stereotyping of poor mothers has severe consequences for them, for their children, and for the society as a whole. As sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) has pointed out:

By definition, of course we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents . . . (p. 5).

Perhaps the most dehumanizing and degrading references to welfare recipients occurred on the floor of the House of Representatives on March 24, 1995 during the debate on a bill that would cut \$69 billion in spending on social welfare programs over the next five years. Welfare recipients were compared to animals by two Republican members of the House. Representative John L. Mica of Florida held up a sign that said, "Don't Feed the Alligators." He explained, "We post these warnings because unnatural feeding and artificial care create dependency. When dependency sets in, these otherwise able alligators can no longer survive on their own." Mica then noted that while "people are not alligators . . . we've upset the natural order. We've created a system of dependency," (Pear, March, 1995).

Representative Barbara Cubin of Wyoming carried the analogy still further:

The Federal Government introduced wolves into the State of Wyoming, and they put them in the pens, and they brought back elk and venison to them every day. This is what I call the wolf welfare program. The Federal Government provided everything that the wolves need for their existence. But guess what? They opened the gates and let the wolves out, and now the wolves won't go. Just like any animal in the species, any mammal, when you take away their freedom and their dignity and their ability, they can't provide for themselves . . . (Pear, March, 1995).

Toni Morrison (1974) in her book *The Bluest Eye*, a novel that deals explicitly with the denigration of black women in white America, describes the impact of demonizing an entire sector of society:

Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life . . .

There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition (p. 18).

The persistence of myths about welfare recipients and the resistance of policy-makers to the true facts despite repeated reiteration of them by experts in the field of social welfare are noteworthy. It appears that the United States *needs* to have someone

to blame, people to hate, a group to rally against. For nearly a half century Americans had a clear-cut enemy—Communism. Throughout the Cold War, there was an ideology we could despise, countries to fear, foreign leaders to demonize. We had external villains whom we could blame for many of the world's ills and whom we could identify as evil in order to define ourselves as good. With the virtual world-wide breakdown of so-called Communist countries (with the exception of Cuba and North Korea), who would be the enemy now? Whom could we distrust and despise? Who would be the devil that in comparison would make us feel righteous and worthy? Who would be the "them" to help us to feel more truly "us?"

Moreover, over the past two decades we have seen a dramatic economic shift within the U.S.—a massive concentration of wealth and income in the hands of the richest among us. In 1977, the highest fifth of all households received 44 percent of total national income, the middle three-fifths received 51.8 percent while the lowest fifth received 4.2 percent. By 1993 the income of the highest fifth rose to 48.2 percent, the highest percentage of income on record for that group; the income of the middle three-fifths dropped to 48.2 percent, the lowest share on record; and the bottom fifth only received 3.6 percent, also the lowest share ever recorded. Over the same decade and a half, the income of the top 5 percent rose from 16.8 percent to 20 percent (Center of Budget and Policy Priorities, 1994). Furthermore, according to Kevin Phillips (1994), author of *Arrogant Capital: Washington, Wall Street, and the Frustration of American Politics*, "the 100,000 American Families in the top tenth of one percent enjoy by far and away the greatest wealth and income gains in the 1980s" but despite their enormous affluence "the Clinton tax increases of 1993 did not concentrate on the high-income, high-political-influence, investment dollar rich, the people making \$4 million or \$17 million a year," (pp. 206–07). There is consequently a greater gap in income today between rich and poor than at any time since such data have been collected and, as Phillips points out, those profiting the most are the top tenth of one percent.

If we examine differences in wealth among the U.S. population, we see an even more dramatic differential. In 1989, the top one half of one percent (the "super-rich") owned 31.4 percent of

total household wealth, an increase of five percentage points since 1983. Moreover, the top 20 percent of the population owned 84.6 percent of total wealth. Since one-fifth of Americans owned 84.6 percent of total wealth, the remaining four-fifths of Americans owned only 15.4 percent. More specifically, the top one-half of one percent owned nearly twice as much wealth (31.4%) as the bottom 80 percent of all Americans (15.4%). Moreover, preliminary estimates indicate that between 1989 and 1992, 68 percent of the increase in total household wealth went to the richest one percent—an even greater gain than during the 1980s (Wolff, 1994, pp. 143–174).

Despite the economic boom and low unemployment rates of the 1990s, millions of families have seen their neighborhoods deteriorate, the quality of schools, public transportation, health care and other services decline, their feelings of physical insecurity rise, and their overall quality of life plummet. Whom can they blame? During the past twenty years when the working class and the middle class were losing ground, a period during which the rich and “truly rich” were increasing their income and share of the nation’s wealth to what many consider obscene levels, we have seen a strategy on the part of many politicians, policy makers, and conservative strategists to encourage the middle and working classes to blame the poor and the powerless, particularly women and people of color, rather than the rich and powerful for their losses.

As Thomas and Mary Edsall, authors of *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (1991), point out:

Racial polarization, in effect, helped create a political climate receptive to an economic agenda based on the conservative principle that sharply increasing incentives and rewards for those people and interests at the top of the economic pyramid and decreasing government support for those at the bottom would combine to spur economic expansion and growth . . .

Insofar as those in the bottom quintile of the income distribution can be identified as disproportionately black and Hispanic—making possible the isolation of the poor as conceptually separable from the white majority—racial polarization facilitates the enactment of regressive redistributive policies. And insofar as the government programs serving those in the bottom of the income distribution

simultaneously divide the poor from the working class and black from white, whose programs are highly vulnerable to conservative assault (p. 13).

Blaming the poor and powerless for America's social and economic problems is far more comforting and acceptable than blaming the rich and powerful. Blaming the poor upholds a fundamental tenet of the American Dream: that individuals can dramatically alter the course of their own lives, that they can rise in the class hierarchy on their own initiative. To maintain our own dreams of success we must blame the poor for their failure; if their failure is due to flaws in the structure of society, these same societal limitations could thwart our dreams of success. The notion that the failure of the poor is due to their characterological weaknesses enable others to blame the impoverished for their own poverty while simultaneously preserving the faith of the non-poor in the possibility of success.

The times are therefore ripe for scapegoating. Scapegoats have been used throughout history to solve societal problems. In ancient Greece human scapegoats (*pharmakos*) were used to ward off plagues and other calamities. In early Roman law an innocent person was allowed to take on the penalty of another who had confessed his/her own guilt. In the Old Testament ritual of Yom Kippur, a goat was symbolically burdened with the sins of the Jewish people and then sent into the wilderness to rid the nation of its iniquities. Scapegoating has become national policy in the United States. We are indeed heaping the sins of a violent and unjust society on the poor and sending them out into the wilderness.

The problems the United States must address as we move into the next century are widespread poverty amidst incredible affluence, massive hopelessness and alienation among those who feel outside of the boundaries of the society, and a deeply-felt despair among the poor and the working class that is increasingly expressed through violence. There is no question that the welfare system in particular and the society in general has not addressed these issues and, in fact, has exacerbated them—not through generosity, not through making poor people dependent on a panoply of services but rather by not providing the essential

education, job training, child care, health care, and perhaps most important, jobs by which families can support themselves at a decent standard of living. The central problem American society must deal with is not the character of poor women and the structure of the welfare system; the central problem is poverty and the multiplicity of ways that it is embedded in the structure of American society. We must recognize that people are not poor due to characterological defects but rather that the poverty that plagues so many Americans has been socially constructed and therefore must be dealt with by fundamental economic and social change.

Over three decades ago, Michael Harrington ended his powerful expose of poverty in America, *The Other America*, with the following words: "The means are at hand to fulfill the age-old dream: poverty can now be abolished. . . . How long shall we look the other way while our fellow human beings suffer? How long?" (Harrington, 1963, p. 170).

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