



December 2002

*The Road not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work
in the United States.* Michael Reisch and Janice
Andrews

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

 Part of the [Social History Commons](#), [Social Work Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2002) "*The Road not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States.* Michael Reisch and Janice Andrews," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 4 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol29/iss4/16>

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



Book Notes

Michael Reisch and Janice Andrews, *The Road not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States*. New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2001. \$59.95 hardcover.

It is an indication of social work's maturity that numerous historical studies of the profession's development over the last century have now been published. While all of them provide a chronological narrative of the major events in social work's history, most frame this narrative by linking particular events to a wider theme or perspective. For example, some accounts of social work's historical development have been inspired by the belief that profession is the embodiment of humanitarian and altruistic forces in society. Other accounts have viewed social work's evolution as a struggle by middle class women to secure professional status for their charitable activities. Social work history has also been described as little more than an attempt to exert social control over the poor, or as a means of legitimating capitalism.

In this detailed and thoroughly researched book, Reisch and Andrews trace the history of social work from the perspective of social workers who were (and still are) committed to a radical approach. The authors point out that radical social work is as old as the profession itself, having been advocated by some of its most acclaimed founders including Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr and Florence Kelley. During the years following the First World War, radical social workers had to deal with a concerted attempt by the political right to discredit their efforts. Somewhat later, during the time of the New Deal, they formed the Rank and File Movement which linked social work with the labor movement and a wider campaign to promote the ideals of socialism. Many radical social workers were inspired by a Marxist analysis of society, and some believed that communism offered the best hope for the future. This engagement resulted in retaliatory action being taken against them during the McCarthy period. Many were ostracized and some even lost their jobs. During the 1960s and 1970s, radical social work experienced a revival as the War on Poverty encouraged community action and a welfare rights approach. It was also

a time when many more publications explicitly committed to radical social work were published. However, following the Reagan era of the 1980s, radical social work became less influential even though new organizations such as the Catalyst Collective and the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society were formed to encourage greater radical engagement among social workers.

Several themes emerge out of this important book. First, the authors conclude that the pursuit of professionalism by social work's leaders over the last hundred or so years amounted to a missed opportunity—a road not taken—to promote a critical perspective in the profession. A second theme concerns the definition of radical social work. Despite their efforts to define the term, the authors recognize that no satisfactory definition of radical social work has yet been formulated. This is partly a semantic question and partly a question of trying to include under the radical label the many social workers who have a sincere commitment to social change and social justice, but who do not proclaim themselves to be radical. Unfortunately, the result is a muddle! It is not only oxymoronic but indicative of the meaningless of the term when social workers of many different ideological persuasions and occupations (including some serving in the United States military) are described as 'radical'. If terms such as Marxist, democratic socialist and populist activist were used instead, the concept might have had some utility. A final theme, is one of failure. Time and time again, radical social workers are depicted as being on the losing end of a struggle not only within the profession but within the wider society. The fact that the United States today has one of the most radical right-wing federal administrations in history is indicative of the extent to which the struggle has indeed been lost. It is depressing that a century of radical social work has not been able to prevent the coming to office of a group of people who are as aggressively committed to their beliefs as are radical social workers.

Despite its limitations, this book should be essential reading for social workers everywhere. By tracing the history of activist and 'left' social work, the authors make an original and important contribution to the literature. Social work educators who teach the history of social work ought to prescribe this book and ensure that students understand that the Charity Organization Society

and the Settlements were not the only pioneers of the social work profession. The book's attempt to recognize the contribution of social work colleagues who, over the years, have thought of themselves as radical, is important and timely.

Alvin L. Schorr, *Welfare Reform: Failures and Remedies*. Westport, CT: Praegar Publishers, 2001, \$59.95 hardcover.

Ever since President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in August 1996, the term 'welfare reform' has become well-known among social welfare observers. The notion of government intervention within a market economy sparks controversy whenever the issue is raised, and the current welfare reform debate is no exception. While some would say that the replacement of the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) was necessary to end welfare dependency, others argue that TANF is an overly coercive measure that will only exacerbate social problems such as child poverty and homelessness.

Schorr's nine chapter book begins with a brief explanation of the pervasive dissatisfaction that characterized the AFDC era. He shows that this distinction prompted the welfare reform movement and the introduction of TANF. Following an explication of TANF's substantive features, Schorr provides a historical context to the current welfare policy landscape by tracing the development of AFDC. He also enumerates a series of convincing rebuttals to many of the negative stereotypes which fueled public disenchantment toward AFDC recipients.

The middle chapters (four and five) discuss the current TANF program. They reveal that, despite the current decline in welfare caseloads throughout the country, the efficacy of welfare reform is severely compromised due to the many labor market barriers facing impoverished families, particularly single-parent families. These barriers include a lack of health care coverage and insufficient access to affordable and effective child care services.

Chapters six and seven give the reader further insight into the inadequacies surrounding welfare reform efforts by highlighting issues such as declining wages, the absence of affordable housing for low and moderate-income persons, and the growing disparity