



2008

When Welfare Disappears: The Case for Economic Human Rights.
Kenneth J. Neubeck.

James Midgley
University of California, Berkeley

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



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Midgley, James (2008) "*When Welfare Disappears: The Case for Economic Human Rights.* Kenneth J. Neubeck.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 2 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss2/20>

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 wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Kenneth J. Neubeck, *When Welfare Disappears: The Case for Economic Human Rights*. New York: Routledge, 2006. \$90.00 hardcover, \$29.95 papercover.

A great deal of scholarly attention has been focused on the changes that have taken place in social assistance to poor families in the United States over the last ten years. The enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 and the introduction of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program heralded a major and historic shift in social welfare policy and it is not surprising that academic interest into these changes should have peaked. However, while it is generally agreed that the changes introduced by the legislation had a major impact, there are disagreements about whether the impact has been positive or negative. Although politicians have generally concluded that welfare reform has propelled many former recipients into regular work and created new opportunities to achieve the American dream, some scholars have challenged this conclusion.

Kenneth Neubeck is one of them and, in this engaging book, he examines the outcomes of the changes in considerable depth. While it is incontrovertible that the numbers of poor families receiving welfare benefits has fallen by as much as 60% since 1996, he challenges the belief that caseload reduction has resulted in these families working in regular well-paid jobs which provide a pathway to economic success. Although supporters of welfare reform contend that the doomsday predictions of the opponents of the new program have not materialized, he shows that poverty rates have in fact increased and that many more low-income and single parent families are living on the margin. He concludes that welfare reform has in fact amounted to little more than the abrogation of collective responsibility for caring for children and the reversal of previous commitments to address the poverty problem.

In discussing these changes, Neubeck invokes the discourse of human rights to show that the United States stands alone among the Western nations in its rejection of the fundamental human right commitment to ensure a decent standard of living for all. His approach transcends conventional debates about welfare reform and places them squarely in the

international arena, linking them to normative standards established by the international community in 1948. Although the United States played a leading role in promoting human rights, successive governments have focused on civil and political rather than social and economic rights. In an interesting chapter, he compares the United States with other Western countries and concludes that despite the American government's rhetoric about human rights, its performance in the area of social and economic rights has been dismal.

This is a lively and interesting book which addresses social policy debates from a novel perspective. Although the concept of social rights, which was introduced by T. H. Marshall in the 1950s, is well known in social policy circles in the United States, the wider discourse of human rights is seldom invoked. By examining a major social policy innovation in the United States in the context of international human rights discourse, the author has made a major contribution which will hopefully stimulate a great deal of further discussion.

James Midgley, University of California, Berkeley

Jonah D. Levy, Editor. *The State after Statism: New State Activities in the Age of Liberalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. \$55.00 hardcover, \$24.95 papercover.

Widely held assumptions about the positive and benevolent role of the state in social welfare, which prevailed for most of the 20th century, have been seriously challenged over the last two decades. With the ascendancy of market liberal ideas during this time, it is no longer generally accepted that governments should maintain extensive social welfare programs designed to meet social needs and promote the well-being of citizens. Collective notions have been replaced with a far greater emphasis on personal responsibility, the utilization of market provision and more reliance on the family, informal support networks and the voluntary sector.

Although these trends suggest that governments now exercise limited influence over economic and social policy, this