



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 35

Issue 3 September - Special Issue: *Beyond the Numbers: How the Lived Experiences of Women Challenge the "Success" of Welfare Reform*

Article 24

2008

Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality. Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld.

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



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2008) "*Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality.* Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 3 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss3/24>

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.



situated in a broader analysis of the globalization debate and pays particular attention to different normative perspectives in the field. Although the authors present a rather depressing account of the effects of globalization on American society, they draw on Karl Polanyi's writings to suggest that a counter movement will arise to challenge globalization's negative forces.

Although the book is readable and comprehensive, the way it equates globalization with international speculative capitalism is somewhat limiting. As was noted earlier, many scholars believe that globalization involves processes that transcend current international economic trends and the hegemony of neoliberalism. However, these perspectives are not recognized in the book and no attention is given to alternative explanations that are not as pessimistic. There is growing research evidence to show that governments and their social policies and programs are more resilient and capable of resisting the demands of speculative capitalism than many believe. The book would have been enhanced by recognizing and addressing this research. Nevertheless, this enjoyable book should be widely consulted by anyone interested in globalization and its effects on American society today.

Joel F. Handler & Yeheskel Hasenfeld. *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. \$80.00 hardcover, \$29.99 papercover.

In the United States, the payment of income benefits to single women with children became a highly contentious issue in the 1970s and 1980s. Although it was previously accepted that "respectable" widows and deserted wives should be assisted, increasingly negative media reports about the abuse of the welfare system by applicants with illegitimate children changed attitudes. By the 1980s, blaming welfare became a popular media preoccupation and a major electoral issue. As welfare recipients were increasingly believed to be women of color, the social problems facing the nation were frequently attributed to a generous welfare system that encouraged indolence, illegitimacy, drug usage and crime. Since liberal

pro-welfare attitudes were often linked to the Democratic Party, the need to address the problem became a high priority for the Clinton administration. As is well-known, the AFDC program created during the New Deal was abolished in 1996 and replaced with the stringent TANF welfare-to-work program.

Although the abolition of AFDC may have taken the welfare issue out of national politics, Handler and Hasenfeld demonstrate that the problems of poverty and inequality have hardly been solved. While the incomes for corporate executives and many professionals have soared to unprecedented heights, low-income families and single-headed households continue to struggle to make ends meet. The result has been growing social fragmentation and the persistence of widespread deprivation. Among the high income Western countries, the United States continues to experience extraordinary levels of poverty and social deprivation, even though it is the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation.

The book is a valiant attempt to analyze the problem and make policy recommendations for raising family incomes, reducing inequalities and providing opportunities for all hard-working people to achieve their goals. It begins with an overview of the nature and extent of poverty and inequality in the United States today. It then reviews the development of welfare policies over the years, paying particular attention to the evolution of the AFDC program. Useful information about the program and its clients is provided. The authors then describe the political struggles which culminated in its abolition and replacement with the TANF program. They emphasize the role of moral symbols in the attacks on welfare and show how moral issues have continued to dominate policy debates in recent years. The book ends with a carefully thought-out set of recommendations for addressing the problems of low income and limited opportunity that continue to afflict a sizable proportion of hard-working families today.

A major attraction of this book is its comprehensive nature. The authors have covered a huge terrain in a readily readable and comprehensible way. They not only detail the workings of the welfare system but address a variety of related issues, including healthcare and preschool education, that directly affect the well-being of low-income families. In addition to its

core message, the book will be a valuable resource for anyone wanting to grasp the intricacies of contemporary American social welfare policy. It deserves to be widely consulted.

Franz von Benda-Beckmann & Kebeet von Benda-Beckmann.
Social Security between Past and Future: Ambonese Networks of Care and Support. Berlin, Lit Verlag, 2007.

Although scholarly research into social security has been primarily concerned with Western countries, these programs have also been introduced in developing countries, and today much more is known about the way they function. However, it is well-known that formal social security programs in most of the Global South cover only a small proportion of the population and that the majority, particularly in the agrarian sector are excluded. Often, those who are excluded are the poorest and those who are most in need of income protection. Fortunately, the challenge of extending protection to the excluded majority has now become a major policy objective in international social security circles.

Until comparatively recently, research into social security in the developing nations has focused on formal statutory programs, and the question of how people without access to these programs cope with the contingencies and risks of everyday life was neglected. It is largely through the efforts of a small group of European scholars, including the authors of this book, that this issue is now on the international agenda. Since the 1980s, Franz and Kebeet von Benda-Beckmann have been actively involved in promoting research into what may be loosely called "nonformal" social security in the developing world. Writing from the perspective of legal anthropologists, they have published widely on the question of how people in the developing world cope with insecurity and how culturally institutionalized obligations, norms and practices respond to the contingencies of everyday life.

This book is comprised of a collection of original and previously published papers dealing primarily with their work on the Indonesian island of Ambon. The authors have lived and worked on the island and have an intimate knowledge