



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 36
Issue 1 *March*

Article 12

2009

Review of *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*. Felicia Kornbluh. Reviewed by James Midgley.

James Midgley
University of California, Berkeley

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



Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation

Midgley, James (2009) "Review of *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*. Felicia Kornbluh. Reviewed by James Midgley.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 36: Iss. 1, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3415>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol36/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

or whose work group is experience-rated such that insurance is too expensive for employers to subsidize. In France, payroll levies finance public health insurance, and only wage earners and their employers pay for public health insurance, though everyone benefits, including those whose income comes from investments and property. Dutton argues that this connection is outdated, and that the link between insurance and employment stymies economic growth and must be cut for meaningful reform to occur. In the U.S., workers are hesitant to switch jobs for fear of losing insurance, resulting in a mismatch between worker and job, and thus lost productivity. In France, companies are hesitant to hire workers because of the increased levies they must pay to finance the health care system.

Dutton's conclusions and suggestions vis-à-vis the U.S. health care system are insightful, if not entirely novel, and most experts would agree with him. His discussion of interest groups including insurance providers, employers, unions, and physicians suggests that major health care reform is an extremely challenging task that will not be easily accomplished, if history is any guide.

Krista Drescher Burke, University of California, Berkeley

Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. \$49.95 hardcover, \$24.95 papercover.

For most of human history the concept of social welfare has been linked to charitable giving and has been regarded as the responsibility of the churches, mosques or temples or otherwise of the benevolence of charitable individuals or organizations. The charitable conception was gradually undermined in the 20th century as governments expanded social service programs and assumed greater responsibility for welfare. It was also undermined by the increasingly popular argument that welfare is a human right and that all citizens are entitled to receive support when in need. Today, international human rights instruments proclaim the duty of the state to provide

social assistance and increasingly, domestic law in many countries has asserted the right of needy people to be provided with income benefits and social services.

In the United States, this idea became popular in academic circles in the 1950s and gradually filtered through to advocacy organizations representing the interests of welfare recipients. As Felicia Kornbluh shows in this informative study, the welfare rights movement was originally fueled by resentment against the bureaucratic and intrusive way government social services agencies dealt with their clients. In some cases, clients who had been abusively treated were aided by social workers who refused to comply with directives that they believed, demeaned welfare recipients. In addition, some academics actively supported the emergence of the welfare rights movement. However, Kornbluh points out that the movement was primarily driven by women welfare recipients themselves most of whom were African-Americans.

These women began to mobilize in urban centers such as New York by asking public social service agencies for additional assistance with clothing, furnishings and other items that were not covered by cash benefits but which, they insisted, were essential to maintain a decent standard of living. As they attracted more support, these informal grassroots associations were transformed into a number of dynamic and effective local organizations which, in 1967, established a national organization, the National Welfare Rights Organization or NWRO. This organization and its affiliates were able to make effective use of legal advisers, public relations specialists and staff who were schooled in Alinskyan community action techniques. Following marches, demonstrations, sit-ins and legal battles in the courts, important concessions were secured. However, by the mid-1970s, as the economy experienced a serious recession and as antagonism to the racial character of the movement increased, it lost momentum. Many local organizations disintegrated and at the NWRO, the organization's leaders became increasingly divided over tactical and governance issues. Finally, as sponsorship from large foundations which were concerned about the organization's strident rhetoric dried up, core staff resigned and the organization shut down.

Kornbluh has produced a scholarly and informative

account of the welfare rights movement and particularly of the work of the NRW. She has drawn on an impressive range of sources including interviews, archival records, court decisions and previous academic analyses to provide what is probably the most detailed and comprehensive documentary history of welfare rights in the United States. The book will be a major resource for scholars who are interested in the topic. In addition to its academic contribution, it will hopefully rekindle the commitment to advocacy that characterized much social welfare and social work at the time. As poor families continue to struggle to meet their basic needs, the notion of welfare rights, which has been largely discarded, deserves great attention and debate.

James Midgley, University of California, Berkeley

Frank Stricker, *Why America Lost the War on Poverty – And How to Win It*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. \$59.95 hardcover, \$19.95 papercover.

Why didn't the anti-poverty programs of the 1960s work? Frank Stricker's new book answers this question by tracing poverty policy and programs in the United States from a refreshingly structuralist point of view, refreshing because the overwhelming majority of the classic literature on poverty focuses on cultural explanations. Stricker's argument is structuralist at its core, and is not only coherent, it is robust and compelling without being dogmatic.

Starting in the 1950s, each chapter is devoted a decade by decade analysis of how poverty was addressed through policies and programs as well as how it was talked about. Stricker's thesis is that the 1960s liberal War on Poverty was mis-focused on individual weaknesses and rather than on structural forces, and that the resulting wave of programs aimed at helping individuals was ultimately ineffective. In the 1980s, when poverty was still significantly present in the U.S., the debate shifted to the claim that generous welfare programs did not solve poverty. As the 1990s progressed, the debate about poverty became even more individualistic. This culmi-