



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 36
Issue 1 *March*

Article 13

2009

Review of *Why America Lost the War on Poverty-And How to Win It*. Frank Stricker. Reviewed by Mary Ager Caplan.

Mary Ager Caplan
University of California, Berkeley

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



Part of the Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, Social Work Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation

Caplan, Mary Ager (2009) "Review of *Why America Lost the War on Poverty-And How to Win It*. Frank Stricker. Reviewed by Mary Ager Caplan.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 36: Iss. 1, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3416>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol36/iss1/13>

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

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-

nated in the end of welfare entitlements in 1996, despite high unemployment rates caused by a slowing economy and jobs leaving the country. In this decade, Stricker argues, the debate about poverty and corresponding policies and program is essentially idle.

This book is both an impressive account of the historical mechanics of poverty in the United States and a rich description of how politics and culture shape the poverty discussion and resulting policy interventions. Stricker's writing style is engaging, and he often uses Socratic questioning that engages the reader with his discussion. Not only is the writing in this book appealing, it is graphically pleasing as well. Illustrations, photos, cartoons, and charts pepper the pages and enhance the central argument. Accessible enough for the layperson and undergraduate student, the richly detailed appendices provide the scholar with abundant supplementary material.

While Stricker does a first-rate job of addressing the first part of his title, the "how" of "How America Lost the War On Poverty", the weakness of this book is that the second part of the title, "And How to Win It" is much less developed. Out of 243 pages, he only devotes eight to outlining "What needs to be done." What does this mean? It perhaps shows just how profoundly difficult the issue of poverty is to solve, even for a scholar who is devoted to unraveling the mystery of why the anti-poverty programs of the 60s failed. Despite this disappointing flaw, this book is a very worthwhile examination of complicated questions about poverty policy, programs, and debates over the past fifty years.

Mary Ager Caplan, University of California, Berkeley

Lisa DiCaprio, *The Origins of the Welfare State: Women, Work, and the French Revolution*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007. \$ 40.00 hardcover.

Historical accounts of the evolution of modern day social welfare policies have made a major contribution to scholarly understanding of how the welfare systems of different countries emerged and currently operate. Numerous historical