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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 36
Issue 2 June

Article 15

2009

Review of *Ordinary People: In and Out of Poverty in the Gilded Age*. David Wagner. Reviewed by John M. Herrick.

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Recommended Citation

Herrick, John M. (2009) "Review of *Ordinary People: In and Out of Poverty in the Gilded Age*. David Wagner. Reviewed by John M. Herrick.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol36/iss2/15>

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work represents a sophisticated academic analysis, yet is easily accessible to the lay reader.

Christine Lou, University of California, Berkeley

David Wagner, *Ordinary People: In and Out of Poverty in the Gilded Age*. Boulder, CO.: Paradigm, 2008. \$24.95 papercover.

A Gallup poll once asked which is more to blame for poverty—lack of individual effort or circumstances beyond one's control? One-third of respondents opted for lack of individual effort, one-third for circumstances; one-third felt both were responsible. The history of social welfare reveals how those beliefs have shaped societal responses to poverty. *Ordinary People* is a remarkable examination of poverty from 1865 to 1895 during the Gilded Age, a period of rapid urbanization and industrialization, the creation of huge fortunes by entrepreneurs such as the Rockefeller, Carnegie and other "robber barons" and strengthening of social class distinctions and inequalities. Most histories neglect the lives of the poor and other marginalized people since they produced few records, leaving us with very little social welfare history written "from the bottom up."

Wagner, continuing his previous examination of the lives of marginalized people such as the homeless and residents of poorhouses, utilizes "inmate" biographies produced by officials of the Massachusetts State Almshouse at Tewksbury, census data and other records to craft remarkable portraits of "ordinary" people who were forced by circumstances to obtain shelter and support (indoor relief), in a Poor Law institution. Reflecting dominant social values, the biographies attempted to explain what led to the almshouse. Personal failings and "bad" behavior, such as intemperance, were noted; some inmates were "tramps," others were "insane." At the beginning of the Gilded Age, the almshouse housed those who were dependent-children without homes, the elderly and the disabled who were not otherwise cared for, and adults who needed care and shelter. Over time, as specialized institutions developed to care for the mentally ill, children and those who were not "able-bodied," the Tewksbury Almshouse changed

its purpose, becoming an “infirmity” for the sick and the elderly. As a good social scientist, Wagner is curious about how almshouse residency affected the lives of inmates. Tracing inmates’ lives, he finds almshouse residency did not necessarily doom inmates to lives of penury. Some left the almshouse and seemed to prosper if they had marketable skills, demonstrating resiliency and “vertical social mobility,” while others remained dependent.

Ordinary People clearly shows how social support, personal gumption and simple chance contribute to individual well-being and success over time. Wagner’s painstaking research provides useful demographic portraits of almshouse inmates. Most were immigrants (the Irish were the largest national group) and male, more were single than married and most were relatively young (15 to 30 years old)—16.3% were skilled craftsmen, 44.6% were laborers and domestics, and 2.6% were “colored.” Wagner skillfully places his research within the context of changes in American social welfare. By the 1890s, treatment of the poor had become a concern of social elites, academics and burgeoning helping professions. To what extent, he asks, were changes in how those in need were treated the result of pressure by workers, trade unions or powerful immigrant associations? In Massachusetts, the rise of Irish political power brought new attitudes towards the poor, a change from the class prejudices of the Boston Brahmins. Eventually, Poor Law institutions such as almshouses and workhouses were replaced by categorical services for those in need. Wagner gives us tantalizing insights into the lives of “ordinary” people who needed community support in a time of rapid social change. His innovative research enriches understanding of how we have considered poverty and have chosen to deal with it.

John M. Herrick, Michigan State University

Kojun Furukawa, *Social Welfare in Japan: Principles and Applications*. Melbourne, Australia: TransPacific Press, 2008. \$79.95 hardcover.

It would not be an overstatement to say that this book is one of the most comprehensive books written about Japanese