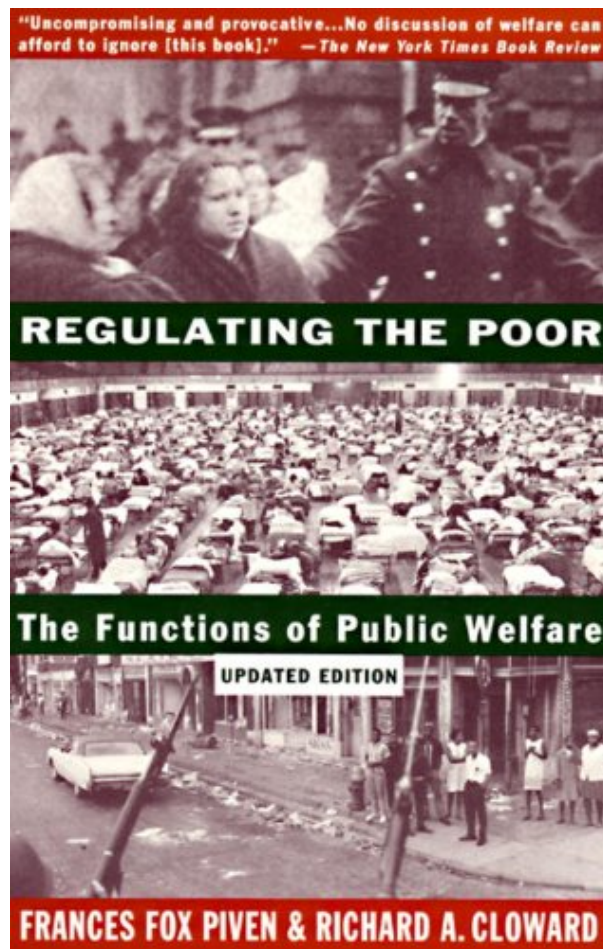


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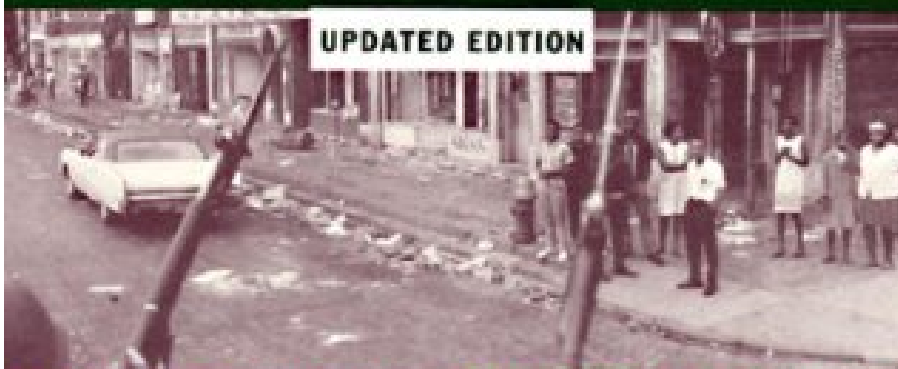
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## **REGULATING THE POOR**



## **The Functions of Public Welfare**



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Welfare as a Government Tool of Control

By DRob

i can pretty much guarantee that after reading this book, one will never quite look at welfare in the same way as before. The main premise of this book is that government provides aid for the poor to control political unrest and to control labor.

The book starts off by tracing the history and development of welfare in western civilization. Prior to the early 16th century, caring for the poor was considered to be primarily the responsibility of the church or of those of the more prosperous who tried to purchase their salvation through almsgiving. Leaving charity to the church meant that few received aid and those not necessarily according to their need. This increased social unrest so governments began to be involved in providing for the poor. This was done for two primary reasons: 1.) To control social order and 2.) To extol the virtue of labor even at the lowest wages by making the treatment of the destitute so punitive and degrading that the no one wants to descend into beggary and pauperism.

The book details such early government programs as workhouses, labor yards, and poor law subsidies whereby parish churches were required to care for the poor in their area.

In the united States, welfare was addressed somewhat differently. Poverty in the U.S. was regarded as the obvious consequence of sloth and sinfulness. Relief was scattered and fragmentary-each township or county

provided for its hungry in whatever manner it saw fit-giving of food, incarceration in almshouses, or indentured service. Poor relief was a local, not a state or national responsibility.

During the great Depression, unemployment became so widespread that the government was forced to develop programs to assist the poor and the unemployed. At first the government focused on direct relief, but as immediate needs were satisfied, the government moved on to work relief which, interestingly, was opposed by business leaders because it was felt that government was encroaching on areas that had been primarily reserved for private enterprise.

As conditions stabilized, US policies changed to conform with the earlier view of poverty as being the result of sloth and sinfulness. Relief programs excluded able-bodied men. Man-in-the-house rules excluded aid to a mother who was in any way associated with a man, particularly if the man lived in her house. Women and/or children were given aid but at the same time assigned to private entrepreneurs who were told to use them in any way possible.

With the growing mechanization of southern agriculture, blacks migrated into the cities, particularly the northern cities where relief rules were not as restrictive. Four million blacks came to cities in less than three decades-congregated in largest cities in the north-New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Los Angeles, Washington. Industry required an increasingly skilled labor force just as unskilled blacks reached cities in large numbers from the fields of the south, consequently, unemployment rose. Unrest mounted among poor blacks, culminating in the Civil Rights demonstrations of the early 60's.

Then was born the Great Society as Democrats realized that blacks were located in states of the most strategic importance in presidential contests. Democrats were losing traditional support in the South, so they needed the support of the northern cities. Service programs were developed for inner city as part of LBJ's "War on Poverty". According to the book, the true objective of the "War on Poverty" was to reach blacks and integrate them into urban political system. Method was to offer federal funds for the ghettos and to use federal funds to create pressure for reallocation of municipal services.

This book is eminently readable. I was assigned to read it for a college class and did not approach it with much enthusiasm, but I ended up thanking my professor for assigning it to me. Whether or not one buys into the book's overall premise, it certainly stimulates discussion about the overall treatment of poverty in the U.S. interrelationship of government welfare policies, racial politics, and political power plays.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone wanting to get a view of how society has responded to the needs of the poor in history, and how we continue to respond to the needs of the poor today.

35 of 41 people found the following review helpful.

A revealing examination of an insidious system

By Rocco Dormarunno

Authors Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven blew the cover off the public welfare system with this book over thirty years ago. I have yet to read any satisfactory rebuttal to their theory over the intervening decades. How best to keep the poor poor? How best to placate them? How best to control the labor pool of American society? Not with riot gear and tear gas (although we haven't been above using that). The best way is with money. Just a little, of course.

As the title suggests, the welfare system has played many roles. Certainly, there were good intentions. But Cloward and Piven, as good historians and theoreticians, examined its cumulative effects. Their determination is, in essence, that the American welfare system has served as a stabilizing force--as in retaining the status quo--of that class who relies on it.

I am way oversimplifying the case here: there is a lot more to it.

No matter which side of the fence you're on regarding the welfare system, Cloward and Piven's *REGULATING THE POOR* has a solid base in history, statistics, and policy-making that makes their thesis unshakeable. Like I said, over thirty years later, no one has even put a dent in it.

17 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

A genuine classic on public welfare and its functions

By Steven Peterson

This book by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward came out over three decades ago. And it is still powerful reading and powerful analysis. I would not expect everyone to agree with the authors' contentions, but once having read this book, you will be challenged in your understanding of welfare policy. Indeed, both many liberals and many conservatives alike are apt to be irritated by this book.

In short, the key point the authors make is that welfare policies are designed to pacify rebellious out of work people. Once they are pacified, welfare is reduced. And while welfare programs are operating, there will be a tendency to make benefits low so that recipients are impelled back into the work force, even for low wages. The authors put it this way (page xiii): "Historical evidence suggests that relief arrangements are initiated or expanded during the occasional outbreaks of civil disorder produced by mass unemployment, and are then abolished or contracted when political stability is restored. We shall argue that expansive relief policies are designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms."

The book itself spends a great deal of time on two American case studies: the New Deal and the Great Society. Again, they argue that in neither case was government very generous, that in both instances programs were designed to push people into the job market and reinforce work norms.

The authors use an early historical example to set the stage for their analysis, by going back to England of the 16th century and thereafter. They contend that the early examples of welfare as a force to quiet rebellious masses and discipline them toward norms supportive of work. And this sometimes meant government money. Piven and Cloward note that between 1760 and 1784, taxes for relief of the poor rose by 60%. The rationale? People were getting uprooted from life on the land, as farmers, and pressed to enter the industrial labor force. And relief provided the tool to move people from one economic realm to another--and to keep them from open rebellion. John Stuart Mill himself is quoted as to the design of such acts to keep the poor from rebellion.

But the bulk of the work is on "regulating the poor" in the United States. Here, the authors go into considerable detail on programs such as Social Security, which, they argue, was quite modest, would take time to implement, but which yet served to quiet the possibly disenchanted multitudes during the dark days of the Great Depression.

This work is still reputed today. I have seen little in the way of attempts to actually test the authors' argument statistically (although maybe I've missed something). I'd surely like to see what the evidence says. A couple case studies are interesting and suggestive, but I need more evidence to be fully convinced. Nonetheless, this is a though provoking work and one that helps one think about welfare programs in a different way, whether or not the reader is in accord with the authors.

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