

FEATURED REVIEW

A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia. By LISA LEVENSTEIN. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xvi, 300 pp. Bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45; paper, \$22.95.)

“Health Care Reform or Welfare Program?” asked a conservative columnist in an attack on a health care bill in Congress in 2009.¹ Opponents of health care reform inserted the “welfare wedge” into the health care debate.² With it came the racialized and gendered imagery of the poor and an “us-versus-them” analysis in which the reform package was characterized as “putting one-fifth of the U.S. on welfare”—a program for the undeserving, provided at the expense of the deserving.³ “This little tyke” read an anti-“Obamacare” poster of a smiling, blond boy, “will work thirty years to pay for your E.R. visits, abortions, tattoo removals, smoking cessation,” and other supposed medical misuses perpetrated by a lower class caricatured in gender and race stereotypes. For these, the new policy will “rais[e] . . . everyone else’s rates, redistributing their wealth to the new freeloaders.” Such critiques rest on assumptions about (white) middle-class independence—“independent individuals” in favor of “paying your own way”—and lower-class (nonwhite) dependent medical “freeloaders.”⁴

The health care debate’s descent follows the path tread by many other public policies in the past several decades. Since the first accounts of the Great Society’s demise, journalists and scholars have argued that as African Americans became associated with War on Poverty programs and

¹ Steve Selengut, “Health Care Reform or Welfare Program—Who Pays the Bill?” *Fortune Watch* (blog), Aug. 23, 2009, <http://www.fortunewatch.com/health-care-reform-or-welfare-program-who-pays-the-bill-2/>.

² Ed Kilgore, “The Return of the Welfare Queen,” *Salon.com*, Aug. 31, 2009, http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2009/08/31/welfare_wedge/index.html.

³ Conn Carol, “In Pictures: Obamacare Puts One-Fifth of U.S. on Welfare,” *The Foundry* (blog), Heritage Foundation, Nov. 16, 2009, <http://blog.heritage.org/2009/11/16/obamacare-puts-one-fifth-of-us-on-welfare/>.

⁴ Robert Tracinski, “Dems’ Plan Will Eliminate Health Insurance,” *Real Clear Politics*, Aug. 5, 2009, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/08/05/obamas_war_on_health_insurance_97767.html.

welfare, whites lashed back against government spending on social services ranging from public housing to job training, food stamps to Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income to disability.⁵ More recently, scholars of white Americans in postwar-era cities and suburbs, while challenging the 1960s “backlash” narratives, nevertheless have arrived at similar conclusions. They describe with more detail and nuance the long-developing relationship between race, government programs, and politics in the postwar period. They argue that whites, while relying on less visible forms of government support, such as home loan subsidies, came to identify African Americans with more visible public institutions and public spending. That perception had devastating political and policy consequences.⁶ Missing from these otherwise astute analyses of race, the state, and politics are arguably the most important people in this story: African American women. It is they who laid claim to government programs, public institutions, and public sector employment in large numbers—numbers disproportionate to their percentage of the general population. It is they who became political stock figures, deformed stereotypes of “laziness” or “immorality” inextricably linked to denunciations of government programs as wasteful, mismanaged “handouts.” And it is they who have been disproportionately harmed politically and materially as public programs for health, education, and welfare have decreased and public sector jobs have disappeared.

Lisa Levenstein’s wonderful book, *A Movement Without Marches*, reinserts African American women into the picture. Her research provides a starting point for understanding the gendered and racialized politics of public policy of the last fifty years. It is a path-breaking account of the relationships between African American women and state institutions in the decades after World War II. A social history at its core, Levenstein’s methodology follows in the simple, elegant tradition of the best histories of the poor and working classes and their relationships with

⁵ See, for example, in chronological order: James L. Sundquist, ed., *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience* (New York, 1969); Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 1984); Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1991); Jill S. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York, 1994); Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence, KS, 1996).

⁶ Perhaps the best examples of this are Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); and David M. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago, 2007).

public institutions.⁷ She mines the archives of five separate public institutions, documenting how African American women in postwar Philadelphia made their way into public-assistance offices, municipal courts, public housing, schools, and hospitals in order to secure their lives and those of their families. She considers what these institutions meant to them, and she chronicles the generally alarmed reactions of Philadelphia policy makers.

Levenstein's purpose is to demonstrate how African American women's everyday survival strategies intertwined with the state and politics in the early post-World War II decades. Political dynamics shape each of her stories about African American women and public institutions. Her primary emphasis is on these women's determined efforts to gain access to public resources and to use them in ways that served them best. Levenstein views these efforts as fundamentally political—as making claims upon the state. All five of her chapters highlight African American women's savvy utilization of the public resources available to them. “Many women tried to turn ADC [Aid to Dependent Children] into a program that better met their needs,” writes Levenstein, “by using their grants in ways that authorities did not condone” (47). Some used ADC to allow them to leave poorly paid, arduous jobs; others augmented ADC with “under the table” employment to compensate for miserly payments. Still others used ADC to leave abusive or unreliable men, and many ignored social workers' narrowly defined list of “necessities” and utilized their grants to purchase the food and other consumer products they deemed necessary for their homes. Since “pursuing legal action was less stigmatized than receiving welfare,” African American women turned to the municipal courts in remarkable numbers in order to bring state power to bear on their unsatisfactory relationships with men (67). Their cases for financial support pressed the state strategically to force men to contribute to the support of their children. Moreover, they “placed the issue of domestic violence squarely on the public stage” when no one else did (64).

If welfare and the courts often represented places of last resort, other public institutions represented respectability. Public housing symbolized

⁷ Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (Philadelphia, 2001); Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890–1945* (New Haven, CT, 1993); Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down & Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (New York, 2002); Raymond A. Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783–1825* (New York, 1971); Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, 2008).

“undreamed of luxury”—clean, new, safe, secure housing for African American women who had suffered in overcrowded, substandard apartments in segregated neighborhoods (91). They fought city bureaucrats to gain access to public housing and, once situated, “cultivated community relationships.” Levenstein details housekeeping and gardening efforts, safety concerns, and the formation of “Mothers Clubs” and “Boys and Girls Clubs” within the various public-housing communities. Like housing, the public schools symbolized progress and upward mobility to many African American mothers.

Levenstein provides a truly innovative view of educational activism, highlighting how working-class African American women considered dressing their children in the best quality clothes, sending them to Sunday school, and keeping their streets and neighborhoods safe from crime as being essential components of supporting their children’s education. She also documents their efforts to enroll their children in the best possible schools—often majority white—in order to improve their education. Though African American women had high hopes for schools and public housing, the Philadelphia public hospital was the institution they admired most and the one that best met their needs. Levenstein chronicles how African American women’s exceptional use of the hospital for primary-care needs in pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and internal medicine prompted the hospital to expand and improve these programs enormously.

As Levenstein discusses the claims African Americans made on public institutions, she details a second, less auspicious political dynamic—the powerful pushback from policy makers and service providers seeking to limit African American women’s access to those institutions. Except for one public institution—the public hospital—they featured administrators, judges, and policy makers who feared or resented African American women’s assertive involvement in their programs. They instituted new rules, monitored behavior, and attempted to reduce program costs. In telling these stories, Levenstein illustrates bureaucrats’ evolving and sophisticated use of state power and reveals the extension of existing institutionalized sexism and racism in these institutions.

The chapter on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, the successor program to ADC) confirms much of what we already know from other studies of the program: in Philadelphia, the more women gained access to AFDC, the more city officials and welfare administrators

sought to limit their access to grants and proscribe their behavior. But Levenstein tells new stories about the other public institutions. The social control of the public welfare program seeped into the municipal courts, for example. There, judges sought to decrease welfare costs and limit African American women's discretion in seeking nonsupport claims by forcing women receiving AFDC to pursue nonsupport claims even against men who might have been dangerous to them. Seeking additional cost savings, they also "established uniform procedures for domestic abuse cases that emphasized reconciliation," without considering the results for threatened wives (85).

The dynamics of social control even entered into those institutions for which African American women had high hopes. Public-housing tenants were shocked at the number of rules instituted upon their entrance. "Fearing that tenants would ruin public housing if they were not tightly controlled," administrators limited women's ability to beautify their homes and public spaces, they monitored their overnight visitors—and hence their personal relationships—and performed routine inspections of homes and apartments (91). Teachers and public school administrators similarly seemed to fear working-class African American mothers. While mothers attempted to get their children to school safely, and to meet with teachers at conferences, school administrators tracked their children into inferior curricula, allocated greater resources to white schools, and even published a report on how single mothers "retard" pupils' academic progress (138).

Levenstein's investigation of the fraught dynamic between working-class African American women and the leaders of the public institutions to which they laid claim effectively reveals the contested politics of the public sector in the postwar period. Levenstein largely succeeds in making a broad case for what she's found in Philadelphia. As she notes in her introduction, it is impossible to understand the history of the so-called urban crisis and "underclass" without thinking about the actions of African American women residing there. She also fundamentally challenges the preeminent place accorded to AFDC in the history of gender, race, and social policy. Her study properly resituates AFDC as one among many public programs and institutions utilized by African American women. This insight also forces historians to reexamine the surprisingly rich "pre-history" of the welfare rights and antipoverty activism of African American women in the 1960s and early 1970s. Her book demonstrates

the concrete investments in and knowledge of a host of public institutions that would be necessary to African American women's successful political mobilization.

These historiographical accomplishments exceed expectations, as Levenstein makes a broad case for what she's found in Philadelphia. However, she might have pushed her savvy research and acute analysis one step further to demonstrate fully how the "movement without marches" mattered for American politics writ large.

First, there is the matter of numbers. To solidify her case for a mass movement of African American women into public services and institutions, Levenstein might have augmented her Philadelphia findings with national data, or at least data from other major cities. Admittedly, some statistics, such as aggregate figures on municipal court usage, may have been too difficult to compile. But a good deal of basic information exists, and much of the national data would likely have amplified her Philadelphia findings: poverty rates for African American women were high; they used welfare in numbers greater than their proportion of the population; they took advantage of public housing where they could, becoming majority users in several cities; and schools in northern cities were deeply segregated and had higher enrollments of African Americans due to white flight. Though Philadelphia may have been unique in some respects, its general reflection of national trends would strengthen Levenstein's case for a significant, broad-based movement of African American women into these programs and for the political argument she builds around it.

Next, there is the matter of scope. While Levenstein studied a remarkably wide range of public institutions, she nevertheless left out one of the most notable examples of African American women's claim on state resources in this period: public-sector employment. Government became a major employer of African American women in the postwar period. Between 1950 and 1960, African American women increased their representation in government employment by nearly 45 percent. Between 1960 and 1970, when government employment accounted for over one-fourth of all job growth in the United States, African American women increased their representation in government employment by nearly 100 percent, resulting in one-quarter of all government jobs being held by African American women in 1970. By 1983, African American women held nearly one-third of government jobs, before their representation lev-

eled out and began to decline.⁸ These jobs provided a relatively secure living and “have proved the most powerful vehicles for African American economic mobility.”⁹ It would be interesting to know how women in Philadelphia—and by extension the nation as a whole—experienced public-sector employment and how it played into their sense of citizenship and state entitlement.

It would also be important to understand the political consequences of African American women’s overrepresentation in government jobs. Just as public health, welfare, and education institutions have been cut and stigmatized, so, too, has public-sector employment. Government employment has not expanded since the 1970s, and it has been scaled back in precisely those areas in which most African American women are employed—health, education, and welfare programs.¹⁰ In addition, negative stereotypes of government workers as “lazy, self-serving, and misguided” have become widespread. Is it coincidence that these images are the same as those used to describe African American women who use public-sector social programs and institutions?¹¹ Levenstein’s conclusions about the gendered racialized politics of a wide range of other public institutions suggest that we must investigate their role in public-sector employment. This fuller picture of the gender and racialized public sector would significantly expand historians’ understandings of the evolving politics of gender, race, and government institutions in the postwar period.

Finally, there is the matter of impact. To push her story to its widest possible conclusion, Levenstein might have fleshed out further her own evidence about the connections between citizenship, race, and the state. In each of her chapters, Levenstein notes to some degree the reaction of the white public: African American women’s increasing use of public institutions transformed these institutions for many whites. White Philadelphians began to regard welfare, the courts, and public housing as

⁸ Lynn C. Burbridge, “The Reliance of African-American Women on Government and Third-Sector Employment,” *American Economic Review* 84, no. 2 (1994): 104. Levenstein notes in passing that Philadelphia African Americans pioneered the entrance into this sector and constituted a remarkable 39 percent of the municipal labor force by the early 1960s (p. 18).

⁹ Michael B. Katz and Mark J. Stern, “Beyond Discrimination: Understanding African American Inequality in the Twenty-First Century,” *Dissent* 55, no. 1 (2008): 61–65.

¹⁰ Burbridge, “Reliance of African-American Women on Government and Third-Sector Employment,” 106; Philip I. Moss, “Employment Gains by Minorities, Women, in Large City Government, 1976–83,” *Monthly Labor Review* 111, no. 11 (1988): 23, 19.

¹¹ Bradley Wright, “Public-Sector Work Motivation: A Review of the Current Literature and a Revised Conceptual Model,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 11 (2001): 560.

somehow disgraceful; thus, they avoided them. Even institutions that required no means testing and no public humiliation—inner-city schools and hospitals—were tarnished. In other words, at the very moment that—and because—African American women expanded their notion of citizenship to include their entitlement to state institutions, whites abandoned and discredited the institutions. Of course, white Philadelphians turned to other forms of government support, such as subsidized home loans, suburban public schools, banking regulation that helped ensure high property values in white neighborhoods, and Social Security and Medicare, among others. But these proved less visible in comparison to the public institutions like welfare, the courts, public housing, schools, and hospitals. Levenstein therefore provides telling glimpses of a process she does not fully describe or analyze: African American women and whites were drafting different notions of citizenship and the state at precisely the same moment due to their opposite reactions to the same phenomena. And the results were disastrous.

While other recent histories of race, the state, and politics have revealed specific slices of the racialization of citizenship through differential use of state programs, none are as promising as Levenstein's. Though she never situates her study directly in this literature, nor fully analyzes her findings on these issues, she nevertheless points to the fact that others have missed: the absolute centrality of gender to this process. In addition, her wide-ranging study of five public institutions suggests a pervasiveness, depth, and force of this phenomenon that historians have not recognized. The field of twentieth-century U.S. politics desperately needs more of her sustained analysis of how African American women's "movement without marches" reshaped the racial and gendered politics of citizenship and the state in postwar America.

Rutgers University, New Brunswick

JENNIFER MITTELSTADT