

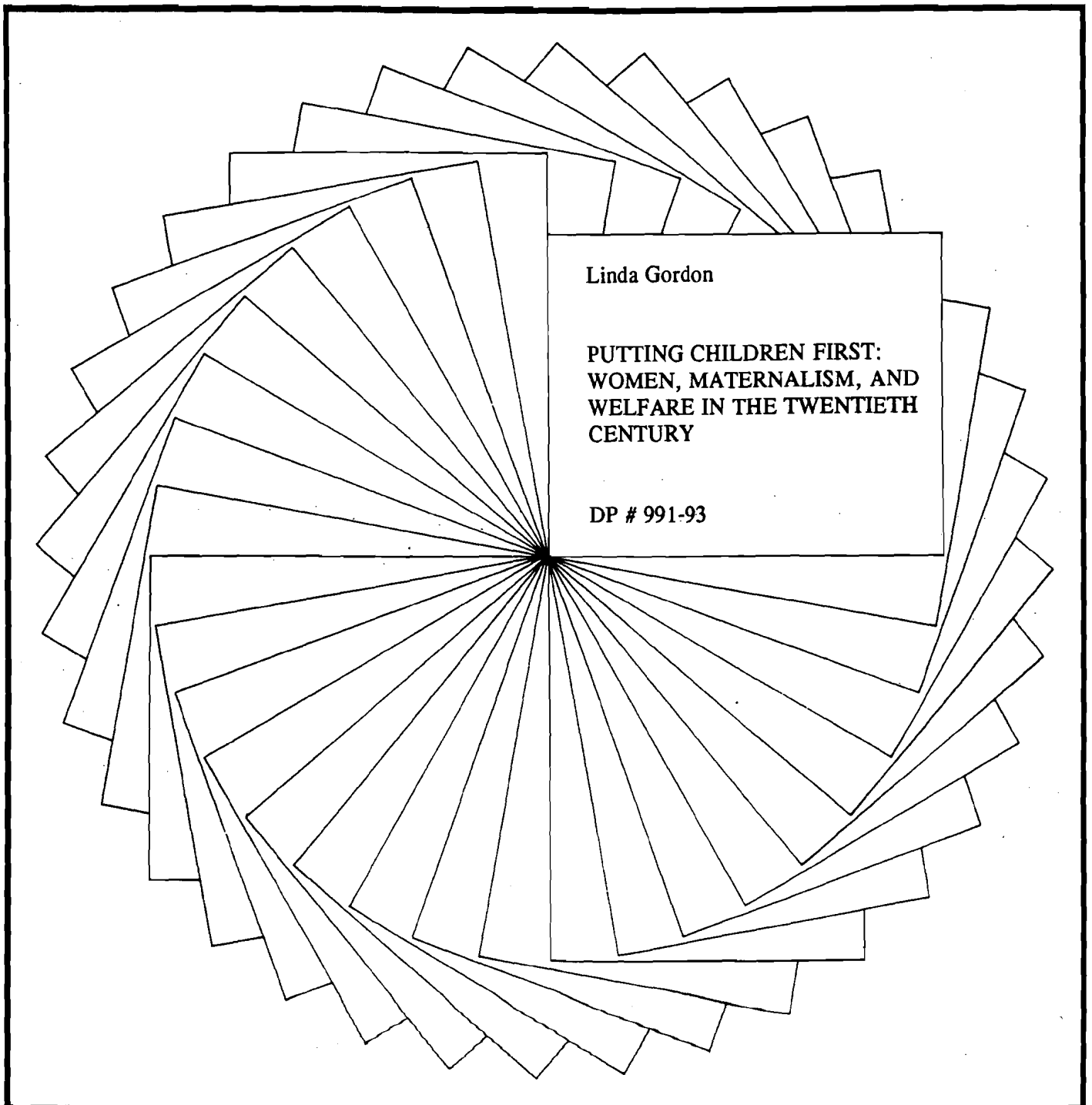
University of Wisconsin-Madison

---

# Institute for Research on Poverty

---

## Discussion Papers



Institute for Research on Poverty  
Discussion Paper no. 991-93

**Putting Children First: Women,  
Maternalism, and Welfare in the Twentieth Century**

Linda Gordon  
Department of History  
Institute for Research on Poverty  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

January 1993

## **Abstract**

A strategy of putting children first has indelibly marked the U.S. welfare state. The author traces the history of this strategy and examines its meanings and consequences. Around the turn of the century, women were influential in formulating and popularizing the view that promoting the welfare of the nation should begin with children. Women first promoted this view in order to gain respect and power for themselves as mothers and ultimately as women; later on, they also saw that children could be used as an opening wedge to expand the welfare state. Ironically, the putting-children-first strategy produced policies that may have made it more difficult for women to mother and for a welfare state to gain popular support.

## **Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in the Twentieth Century**

"I think it is unquestionably true that if a person wishes to do any constructive social work in a community that the confidence of the people . . . can best be secured by beginning with work for the children." (Emma Duke of the Children's Bureau, 1919)<sup>1</sup>

"Children are not safe and happy if their parents are miserable . . . The power to maintain a decent family living standard is a primary essential of child welfare." (Julia Lathrop, 1919)<sup>2</sup>

A strategy of putting children first has indelibly marked the U.S. welfare state. This strategy created, for example, the program to which most people refer when they say "welfare," Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC, and has been basic to the most prominent welfare advocacy for over a century. Women were influential in formulating and popularizing the view that promoting the welfare of the nation should begin with children. Thus, as men and women welfare reformers championed the well-being of children, they expressed and acted out a major concern of the world's most powerful women's movement and in turn shaped that movement. In this paper I sketch the historical development of "putting children first" and examine its meanings and consequences. I want to suggest that it was a strategy expressive of some of the conditions and assumptions of nineteenth-century and Progressive-era women reformers, always containing contradictions and limitations, and that more recently its defects may have outweighed its advantages.

The strategy contains both modern and traditional elements. The ethical and political notion that children should be the best treated of us all is quintessentially modern; in premodern, patriarchal societies children were often expected to make do with the worst food, with little attention, and with little opportunity to express their preferences. Although putting children first is by no means

exclusively a women's or a feminist point of view, its development was nevertheless closely associated with women's increased cultural and political power, and organized women were influential disproportionately to their formal political power in the creation of a modern child-welfare consciousness and movement. This consciousness, paradoxically, arose from the traditional: women's responsibility for children is a transhistorical, transcultural pattern, so it is hardly surprising that women carried that sense of responsibility into organized political activity. The identification of women with children was shared by feminists and antifeminists.

Historically, putting children first arose with putting forward motherhood as women's claim to respect and power. The dominant form of this construction among activist women has been what some call "maternalism,"<sup>3</sup> and this too has taken a variety of historical and political forms—sometimes asserting that women are uniquely suited to caring for children and should therefore stick to that homely task, other times that women are uniquely suited to caring for children and should therefore have political and economic power to make the world over. More specifically, maternalism in the industrial period usually meant acceptance of the family-wage principle—that men, husbands and fathers, should ideally be able to earn enough to support their families, freeing wives and mothers to devote themselves to homemaking. Yet maternalism has also been construed in an oppositional direction, challenging women's economic and political dependency on men as precisely unfitting them for their best possible work as mothers. And many women reformers used both senses of maternalism. Most renditions of maternalism have led women to give priority to the needs of children in their reform campaigns.

I approach this material as a women's historian who has been drawn to topics involving children: family violence, poverty, and welfare. I have been interested in bringing children into social history, not only as the objects of reformers but as subjects, to the extent that we can find the sources that allow us to do so. However, to study children without a gender analysis is to miss a great deal, because historically childhood was constructed in relation to motherhood, and vice versa.

In the late twentieth century, that relation is changing in several respects: women so often parent children without a man's support that single motherhood can no longer be called exceptional; widespread male parenting and nonmaternal women are ordinary. This vantage point makes possible a new view of the maternalist welfare tradition.

The welfare strategy of putting children first produced a series of contradictions which were always present but which have intensified recently. Most vivid today, and unavoidably influencing any scholarly discussion, is the deepening poverty of children in the United States. Children have been entering poverty at rates higher than other sectors of the U.S. population. The usual comparison is with the elderly who, at least in the middle and upper working class, were the beneficiaries of the New Deal's Social Security Act: in 1949, 60 percent of the elderly were in poverty, in 1990, 12 percent. Children also benefited at first from Social Security provisions (as well as economic gains in the mid-twentieth century): in 1949, 48 percent were in poverty, in 1979, 17 percent. But more recently children have fared decidedly worse, their poverty rate rising to 21 percent by 1990.<sup>4</sup> And the children of the poor never benefited relative to other age groups. Today half of all African-American children, for example, are classified as poor (by government figures which consistently understate impoverishment).<sup>5</sup> Several of the concerns most specific to the contemporary welfare crisis--drugs, teenage pregnancy, gangs--are about the young. Forty percent of the homeless--1.8 million--are children. The United States has become notorious in the world for its poor showing with respect to certain basic child-welfare indices: infant mortality rates, educational attainment, teenage pregnancy incidence, and poverty among children. It is difficult to reconcile these circumstances with the fact that we have a welfare system that was supposed to benefit children particularly.

Another contradiction of the maternalist welfare strategy is that, while it reflected the unusual power of women in welfare agitation in the United States in comparison to the power of women in comparable industrial countries, it may have ended by disadvantaging women. Ironically, the putting-

children-first strategy, to the degree that it identified interests of children as separate from those of their mothers, produced policies that made it more difficult for women to mother, especially as it became normative for mothers to be employed. Putting children first produced antifamily policies. Still another contradiction is that, while the child-centered strategy provided the basis for a strong reform alliance that from the 1870s through the 1940s pushed some welfare programs through the Congress against the resistance of powerful interests, the strategy may at the same time have limited the welfare state. Moreover, the child-centered programs built by this alliance became in the end weaker than more adult-centered programs.

By focusing on these contradictions, I do not mean to imply that the putting-children-first strategy was the major factor responsible for the limitations of our welfare state; as will become clear below, various constitutional, political, and economic factors were more important. Nor am I belittling the efforts of the remarkable welfare activists who worked so hard against the grain of a culture steeped in individualism and the mystique of "free" competition. What follows is a critique, not a criticism: the choices made by reformers at any given time may have been the only practicable ones. Historians can rarely collect enough evidence to prove the viability of paths that were not taken. I want merely to tell an historical story in such a way as to illuminate the implications of the paths that were taken. After a brief introduction to the history of the putting-children-first strategy, I discuss the meanings of this priority for the women's movement and offer an analytic description of the resultant overall structure of the U.S. welfare system; then I focus a bit more closely on two examples of putting children first: the rise of child-protection, or anti-child-abuse, work; and the development of AFDC.

I. The putting-children-first strategy might be traced to a reorientation in women's reform activity in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Lori Ginzburg locates in the 1850s a shift from moral

suasion as the primary mode of organized female reform discourse to a more pragmatic "political" discourse which emphasized what women could contribute to others. Particularly relevant in her analysis is a shift from autonomous women's organizations to male/female groups in which women sometimes functioned as auxiliaries but often did most of the work, allowing men to retain leadership roles; and from attacking societal injustice to creating institutions for victims of these injustices, children prominent among them.<sup>7</sup> Ginzburg's distinction is an improvement on, but related to, Aileen Kraditor's older one between "justice" and "expediency" arguments for women's rights. Kraditor's was a moralistic and misleading distinction because, on the one hand, women activists of most varieties were concerned with creating more justice in the world, and, on the other hand, most were willing to make compromises, gestures, and tactical decisions for the sake of expediency. But certainly the move to emphasize women's proclivities and abilities to help others was a move away from natural-rights arguments for women's empowerment to a more pragmatic one.<sup>8</sup> Anne Firor Scott has identified four stages of women's philanthropic work, and her analysis produces a slightly different but by no means contradictory periodization: "benevolence" at the turn of the nineteenth century, social reform in the antebellum period, an interlude of union patriotism and aid to the armed forces during the Civil War, and, fourth, a great expansion of activism stimulated by radical class and demographic changes in the society which produced in particular new kinds of urban poverty and its consequences. Scott's interpretation is the more universal because it is based on an examination of a variety of different groups of women activists--Black and white, northern and southern, middle class and working class.<sup>9</sup>

This historic turn in the nineteenth-century women's movement prefigured in some ways the split over the equal rights amendment in the twentieth century; the split is best seen as characterizing two aspects of a feminist (as it later came to be called)<sup>10</sup> outlook which have existed in varying proportional strengths since the beginning of organized women's reform. One aspect emphasized the



essential common humanity of women and men and criticized "artificial" imposition onto these differentiated beings of a division of labor and sensibility which produced "exaggerated" feminine and masculine types. Although close in some respects to the late-twentieth-century concept of gender, this perspective differed because it was in its way essentialist, postulating an authentic humanity (which, some have charged, remained in many ways modeled on the masculine). Some but not all feminists of this orientation favored absolute legal sameness in the treatment of men and women, not because they denied social difference but because they thought the best way to erase it was with complete formal equality. The second stream of feminist thought accepted in various degrees male/female social and psychological difference as desirable and sought means of raising women's status and power without denying the appropriateness of a large-scale sexual division of labor. This distinction within feminism is of the greatest importance to understanding the woman-dominated child-welfare movement and the concept of maternalism, and this distinction is often rendered as too absolute by historians. Most of these activists did not challenge women's uniqueness and their greater responsibility, and internalization of this responsibility, for children.<sup>11</sup> But the second perspective gave much more priority, obviously, to women's maternal role as important in itself and as a basis for women's social and political power.

In the second half of the nineteenth century these two perspectives remained united, if not unified, within a hegemonic "woman movement" large enough to encompass politically and socially different causes. These causes included temperance, suffrage, protection for working women, unions for working women, reproduction control (called then "voluntary motherhood"), divorce, married women's property rights, and many others. One such cause, the struggle for maternal custody of children in cases of marital separation, was important in the development of a maternalist feminism and the putting-children-first strategy. Women's victories in achieving preference in custody disputes illustrate the ambiguity of these gains, of their meanings for women and children, and the relative

unity among female reformers. As was typical of most U.S. family-law reform, the campaign for maternal custody took place on many smaller sites rather than one central locus, due both to the federalism of the United States and its weak central government, and to the separation of powers which left family law so much to the discretion of the judiciary for so long. And it was a reform with many meanings. For one, most women wanted their children badly, were unwilling to leave even the most abusive husbands if doing so meant losing their children. Thus child custody also gave women greater self-confidence in standing up to dominating husbands. Moreover, maternal custody was a reform which helped build the state, through building the power of the courts, as against a traditional patriarchal power invested in husbands and fathers; it was the courts, not women, which gained ultimate control over the disposition of children. Yet it was a reform which simultaneously created the expectation that the state had a responsibility to look after the "best interests of the child" as against the interests not only of fathers but equally against the more fragile respect for mothers' claims.<sup>12</sup> As Justice Brown said in 1902, in the context of upholding a piece of protective legislation, "Women and children have always, to a certain extent, been wards of the State."<sup>13</sup> Thus there was an ambiguity at the heart of maternal custody victories: that gains in women's power over children--which may well have been in most cases benefits for children--also strengthened state control over the family and gave it the potential to intercede against women's interests as well. But the meanings of this ambiguity would not be fully evident for a long time to come. At this time the campaign for maternal custody in the name of the best interests of the child was a women's-rights issue and produced one of the great women's victories of the nineteenth century. Edith Howe entitled an article later, in the early twentieth century, "Our Right to the Lives of Babies"; she meant it in the context of lobbying for work against infant mortality, but it was also a symbolic expression of her concept of women's rights.

In the 1890s the maternalist feminist reform movement produced a more coherent approach to social betterment which many then called "social work." It grew from traditional charity, largely religious and denominational, in the early nineteenth century, through "friendly visiting" and charity organization at the turn of the century. Religiously motivated "friendly visitors" for, say, a Provident Association felt themselves part of a community, albeit a conflictual one, with prison matrons, temperance activists, and advocates of tenement laws. And all this social reform impetus had a female character in the Progressive era. It was commonplace for men as well as women to speak of the emerging welfare state in the feminine gender: "Only thus will our great state fulfill her present duty to her citizens in the making,--those in whom are rightly centered her most minute solicitude and her largest hope," commented Minneapolis District Court Judge Edward Waite in 1914.<sup>14</sup>

This feminized reform community began to divide into clearly defined sectors in the 1920s. A professional social work developed, still female-dominated but increasingly with a male hierarchy. "Amateur" women's charity and service organizations continued to be strong. Starting in the 1890s Black women's welfare activism became nationally organized, its importance suggesting that African-Americans shared with whites the view that such activism was a "natural" extension of women's familial nurturing work. And women agitated for public welfare provision, some of the white women attaining footholds in new government welfare agencies, while others rejected the idea of public responsibility and defended private charity. Over time the children-first approach had been pioneered by the more conservative charity women, who felt comfortable with motherhood as the reason and justification for women's activism, but by the late Progressive era that approach was adopted by many public-welfare advocates as well. This was one of the factors that allowed the white groups--Black women were excluded--to overcome their differences and form lobbying coalitions at times.

The turn toward putting children first was by no means identical among all class, ethnic, religious, and racial groups of women. But it was a general trend. Two examples may suffice here.

Catholic charities, partly because of the unique Catholic sisterhoods, were even more woman-dominated than were the Protestant charities. In New York City, Irish Catholics from the mid-nineteenth century on, led by nuns, were developing their own welfare services. In the first few decades after the famine immigration these Sisters had emphasized care for unwed mothers and "fallen" women, as Protestant elite women had done in earlier decades; after the Civil War the Sisters, too, partly under pressure from the hierarchy, concentrated on schools, orphanages, and foster care.<sup>15</sup> African-American orientation toward children can be seen in the emphasis placed on building educational institutions, a necessity because of the refusal of the state governments of the South to provide schools for Black children. (Not enough research has yet been done about other nonwhite minority groups to allow us to know how different or similar their welfare views were to those of whites.)

By the early twentieth century the woman-dominated social-work networks had gained substantial coherence and even created national organizations, such as the National Consumers' League, the National Association of Colored Women, and the National Council of Catholic Women. Strategies were very different because the most influential network, mainly WASP and entirely white, was acquiring considerable influence on government, even without the vote, particularly at local levels. Their biggest legislative achievement in the Progressive era was the mothers' aid or mothers' "pension" laws passed in most of the states between 1910 and 1920. The discourse about these small public-aid enactments was largely about children. The laws were designed to remedy two kinds of damages to children: removal from their parents, particularly from single mothers,<sup>16</sup> because of their mothers' poverty; and child labor. Other reforms for which the women's network lobbied were also aimed at child welfare: protective labor legislation, the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, and juvenile courts, for examples.

Early in the twentieth century, leaders of this network generated a plan to gain a foothold in the federal government, the success of which was extremely consequential for the formation of welfare in the United States. In an extraordinary development unique to the United States, women welfare reformers established a federal enclave: the Children's Bureau, created in the Department of Labor (DOL) in 1912. Devoted to investigating child welfare, the fact that this agency antedated the Women's Bureau, established also in the DOL in 1918, reflects several aspects of the putting-children-first strategy: the women's own child-centered priorities, the greater legitimacy of women's work for children than for women, and women's manipulation of the symbolic meanings of children in order to force politicians to support welfare initiatives. Nevertheless, the Children's Bureau was as much a (generic) women's bureau as the Women's Bureau; the two agencies achieved a practical and for the most part amicable division of labor, with the latter focusing on employment issues while the former ranged widely into other areas, despite its location in the DOL. Indeed, the founders of the Children's Bureau hoped that it would become a kind of department of health, education, and welfare within the DOL.<sup>17</sup> The Children's Bureau served as a hub of a national woman-dominated welfare network and helped coordinate campaigns for many reforms not at all limited to or focused on children. Immediately after its establishment, the Children's Bureau's first chief, Julia Lathrop, called a conference of her informal social-feminist network, thus signaling what was to be the agency's continuing pattern of ignoring the boundary between governmental and civic organization; it was understandable that when women were so rare in government, their main lines of responsibility and consultation would tie them to their community of women reformers. By the 1920s, the Children's Bureau was the conduit used by many civic organizations pressuring for virtually any kind of social legislation.

II. Putting children first was not a mirror of women's mothering, neither an instinct nor a transparent internalization of social responsibility. It was a strategy and a vision, complexly reached, internally ambiguous. Its meanings are not obvious but require interpretation and may be contested.

The uniqueness of the female commitment to children becomes clearest when we note another fissure in the welfare-reform community, that between women and men. Among elite, white eastern reformers after World War I there developed two relatively separate streams of thought: the social-work tendency, which remained woman-dominated and child-centered; and a new social-insurance tendency, which was overwhelmingly male and virtually ignored children. A brief comparison will allow us to see the putting-children-first strategy vividly.

The social-work strain of welfare thought, continuing the nineteenth-century charity tradition, continued to assume that an effective program of public aid required distinguishing between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor and treating them differently. Social workers feared, even well into the Depression of the 1930s, that their own aid-giving practices might create "pauperism" by undermining the work ethic. Good social work required more than material relief; it required character reform. Aid to the poor must be preceded by careful investigation and accompanied by guidance toward prevention of or rehabilitation from pauperism. Thus welfare required supervision of a personal nature—of home, family, and neighborhood life, of work and school records—an approach that came to be called casework. And effective casework required individual treatment of each client, not simply across-the-board relief, and such treatment was more easily given in programs designed for particular categories of the needy. Categorical assistance, as this approach came to be called, produced special programs for children, for the blind, the disabled, and the unemployed, among others.

The social-insurance perspective grew up outside the charity tradition. Its proponents were mainly male academics, from a similarly elite class position as the largely female social workers.<sup>18</sup>

Learning from European programs, particularly German and British, they introduced at the turn of the century a new approach to welfare, whose basic principles were government provision, based on compulsory participation, and automatic (that is, not means- or morals-tested) benefits among covered groups. Social-insurance programs were not particularly directed at the poor; one of their selling points was that they benefited all classes. While the social workers focused on treating poverty so as to prevent pauperism, the social-insurance proponents aimed to prevent poverty itself, by aiding workers as soon as there was a loss of earnings, as in the case of workmen's compensation, or by providing incentives for employers to maintain steady employment and safe working conditions, as for example through the use of tax incentives. The social-insurance advocates had great confidence that poverty could be prevented, but this by no means made them necessarily more Left or democratic than the women's social-work network. Some social-insurance advocates leaned to the Socialist Party, while others were quite conservative. Despite different motives, socialist and capitalist, they shared the mission of altering economic structures, whether by radical transformation or by tinkering, to reduce poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Social-insurance thinking ignored children almost entirely. Focusing on what they saw as the core of the economy, the capital/labor exchange, these reformers' plans were aimed at wage earners. They believed that all welfare needs could be met by maintenance of the male family wage, thus allowing men to support their dependents, and so no need for any substantial programs for women or children. Their concerns excluded nonemployed women and children, except in their positions as dependents of wage earners. (They also tended to ignore women wage earners.)

By contrast, to the female welfare advocates, children were central, for a number of reasons. They did not concentrate on wage earners. Some were socialists, but not much influenced by Marxism and not much given to a class-conflict analysis. (Despite Florence Kelley's European socialist education, she quickly assimilated to the American reform community.) Rather many were

what we might call "socialists of the heart," such as Jane Addams with her noble disdain for greed and exploitation and her longing for higher forms of community than the market could produce. They inherited the charity legacy, with its direction toward the "helpless" and "innocent victims," and the "rescue" tradition of nineteenth-century moral reform, with its interest in control and regeneration. Children fit all these categories: helpless, "innocent," controllable, malleable. At the same time children were a connection to other women, perhaps the most universalizing of connectors. Women's own lives were inextricably involved with children, their identities and claim to respect strongly founded on motherhood. This was as true of childless women as of mothers, for the female relational, nurturant ego is formed long before women reach maturity and become parents. Girls were raised in large part as little mothers, trained in the skills of domestic economy and nurture, socialized to look out for the needs of others. (Indeed the women--especially but not exclusively the white women--who poured their energies into these welfare campaigns were disproportionately unmarried and childless.)<sup>20</sup> Moreover, all experienced the greater respect that women acquired through motherhood. In their predominantly liberal, as opposed to Calvinist, Protestantism, children were born innocent and thus quintessentially deserving among the poor. Children were helpless and thus ipso facto in need of help. Children were plastic and thus their characters could be influenced by guidance and reform efforts. And these women activists saw their own plight in that of children; we will see this vividly in their approach to family violence, below, but we can also see it in their approach to welfare for adults.

For the focus on children was of course not exclusive. Women social workers fought for many welfare reforms only indirectly related to children, such as industrial health and safety, protective legislation for women, and adult education. And on the other hand reformers and politicians of all perspectives used the rhetoric of "helpless" children to justify and gain support for their proposals. But the women's arguments had a particular feminist meaning, that anything of



benefit to mothers (or sometimes women in general, as potential mothers) benefited children. Putting children first implied and strengthened a particular construction of femininity. Listen to Edith Howe writing in 1909: "One, and only one, great power can stem the tide [of infant mortality]--mothers' love, informed, organized, militant. . . . Any step toward the emancipation of woman that does not register itself in a lower infant mortality is a step backward."<sup>21</sup> Emphasizing the unique connection between the well-being of mothers and that of their children must have played a role in their inability to think of men as capable of parenthood. Woman suffragists claimed the vote itself on these grounds; several of them, such as Harriot Stanton Blatch, grounded this claim biologically: "What chiefly distinguishes the human being from the lower animals is the increase in the former of cerebral surface and organization, and the necessary accompaniment . . . a lengthened period of infancy. . . . this increased time of immaturity is a direct tax upon the mother . . . natural selection has carefully fostered the maternal instinct. . . . The paternal instinct is not a factor in evolution. . . . Ever since the patriarchate was established there has been a tendency to cramp the mother in her maternal rights; so we see no race improvement comparable with our advance in material science. . . ." <sup>22</sup> Only through bettering women's conditions, then, could the race be improved. Since early-twentieth-century thinkers did not know Mendelian genetics, and believed firmly and imaginatively in the inheritance of acquired traits, they could use the eugenical thought fashionable at that time to argue that welfare provision would improve the children of the future.<sup>23</sup>

There were substantial differences in maternalist welfare politics as in maternal experience. Class, race, and wealth affected parenting in every way, from the quality of nutrition one could offer to the aspirations one had for one's children. The richest women transferred parenting work to nurses, nannies, and governesses; most upper-middle-class women hired domestic help, and many women were domestic help. While all were concerned to support mothering, the emphasis on children in the hands of the most influential social workers involved a greater romanticization of

motherhood, concentrating on its symbolic, domestic arrangements. Black women, for example, more often combined mothering with remunerative labor, both working-class and professional, and within their own race won more respect as economic and professional achievers than did comparable whites. Their motherhood did not, could not, emphasize and romanticize motherly domesticity as white women's did. Yet the rhetoric of Black women reformers could sound remarkably similar. Consider: "Yes, it is the great mother-heart reaching out to save her children from war, famine and pestilence; from death, degradation and destruction, that induces her to demand 'Votes for Women,' knowing well that fundamentally it is really a campaign for 'Votes for Children.'"<sup>24</sup> This was the voice not of a white suffragist leader but of Carrie Clifford of the Ohio Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Organized Black women in this period concentrated much of their welfare activism on day nurseries, protecting girls' purity, and education in motherhood. But this motherhood emphasis had considerably different meanings and would, had it been more influential, have resulted in very different policies. For African-Americans, motherhood rhetoric was in the vanguard of race uplift and civil-rights activity, and involved refusing the charges of impurity and incompetence so often directed by whites against Blacks. Indeed, motherhood assumed an oppositional meaning, directed against the racism of white women reformers as well as southern and federal rulers.

White women activists used arguments from motherhood, for children, in their own racialized way. Their definitions of good mothers and children were highly culturally specific, based on the conditions and aspirations of prosperous urban white Protestants. In the Progressive period, the white women's reform network saw non-WASP immigrants as racially different. They believed that children were crucial in the Americanization process precisely because of the greater resistance of adults to cultural reformation.<sup>25</sup> Many of these reformers joined the "race suicide" panic of the turn of the century, worrying that overly high birth rates among the immigrants would overwhelm Anglo-Saxon civilized values. In a variety of policies they advocated, from mothers' aid to tenement

housing codes, they sought simultaneously to use xenophobic fears and hostilities to gather support for social reform and to use social reform to remake minorities in their own image.<sup>26</sup>

Yet women's welfare focus on children did not emerge from a chute directly connecting women's private "experience" to public activism. The strategy to garner support for public social provision by organizing around children's needs was a political decision and a political tradition. Their focus on children represented a thoughtful appropriation of a sphere in which the politically disfranchised could claim power.<sup>27</sup>

The error of interpreting their emphasis on children as some sort of secondary sex characteristic, or as an unexamined emotional reaction to "experience," is apparent when we consider the variety of political meanings women have given to child-centered reform. Women from a variety of political positions have used motherhood as a base for activism and influence in the public sphere. Today motherhood is claimed by antinuclear activists, antiabortionists, the La Leche League, even nudists. These multiple possible political constructions of motherhood and childhood have been visible at least since the late eighteenth century, with the birth of what might be called modern feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft swung promiscuously back and forth from natural-rights theory to motherhood in grounding her claims for women's equal access to education and political participation. Linda Kerber showed how women in the American revolutionary era used a notion of republican motherhood to justify "absorption and participation in the civic culture."<sup>28</sup> Fifty years later Catherine Beecher, as Kathryn Sklar had so vividly shown, tried to reconstruct motherhood and domesticity as rationalized, socially respected labor, presenting a contradictory message: earning her living largely by public speaking and writing about the virtues of women's domesticity.<sup>29</sup> In the early twentieth century Ellen Key's version of politicized motherhood drew "new women," as they were called, to free love and disdain for marriage, while in New York mothers banded together to introduce film censorship to protect children.<sup>30</sup>

The choice of child-centered politics was not always conscious, but at times it was, even manipulatively so. By the second decade of the century activists like Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, and Grace Abbott argued that public provision for children could become an opening wedge for a broadly conceived, even universal, welfare state. The Children's Bureau urged this strategy upon others. Emma Duke, for example, Director of the Children's Bureau's Industrial Division, responded to an inquiry about how to do community organizing, "When you called at the office recently and spoke of the difficulty of . . . welfare work in a mill community . . . I think it is unquestionably true that . . . the confidence of the people who live in the community can best be secured by beginning with . . . the children. Work for children is so disinterested and must make an appeal to all classes of people."<sup>31</sup> Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott secured federal funding for the first national study of women workers by adding women as a rider, so to speak, in a bill authorizing a study of child labor.<sup>32</sup> The campaign against child labor influenced the campaign for regulation of women's labor, and both were intended by their major advocates to prepare the way for regulation of all labor. Members of this women's network even used children as an excuse for not-so-covert strike support: they had done this in the 1912 Lawrence strike and tried to get similar support from the federal government in 1928 when settlement worker Mary Dreier organized a committee to help bituminous coal strikers and unemployed textile workers obtain \$75 million in federal relief.<sup>33</sup>

Putting children first was not only a moral stance but a posture in which, as I imagine it, women held up children in front of them, plump little legs and adorable wide eyes used to induce a suspicious gatekeeper to open a door to the public treasury. Stephen Jay Gould has argued that the protective response to the childlike physique and countenance is universal and powerful. No doubt there are market researchers who work for the large charities today who can tell us whether it is still true that the proportions of a child's body are the most effective device for opening pocketbooks.

But the relation between pity for the suffering child and other goals has shifted considerably over time. This was particularly the case for those social-work activists who hoped to advance women's rights as part of the promotion of the general welfare. For feminists in certain periods the appeal for women's empowerment on the basis of its benefits for children had a powerful attraction as a standpoint from which to criticize male dominance within the family, opening the family to scrutiny. Through rhetorical moves which positioned children as the culturally accepted victims, women were able to bring into view male behaviors which had been rendered literally unspeakable when women were the object of concern. This was the case, for example, when to speak of wife-beating was to bring ignominy onto the victim--a shame arguably greater than that of the accused. By speaking of child abuse instead, the same culprit could be ostracized and the long-suffering wife turned into a moral hero. In such a situation the focus on childhood became close to irresistible.

In that kind of situation children symbolized all the victims of male dominance, young and old. By the twentieth century, however, the meanings had narrowed. Children were less often used as rhetorical surrogates for women or other needy ones. Indeed, in the 1920s putting children first became part of the receding of feminism, the re-burying of the particular welfare needs of women. In 1919 Julia Lathrop, Head of the Children's Bureau, argued that "Children are not safe and happy if their parents are miserable . . . The power to maintain a decent family living standard is a primary essential of child welfare."<sup>34</sup> But in 1935, despite the opportunity presented by the Depression and the newly positive attitude toward federal welfare provision, her friends and successors did not try to use this logic to develop basic income security for parents.<sup>35</sup> Instead the emphasis on children began to set up an antagonistic relationship between women's rights and children's welfare. Two historical narratives will show some of the contradictory consequences of the ostensibly chivalric deferring to children.

III. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century a new reform movement swept the country: the discovery of child abuse and the rise of child protection agencies (usually called Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, SPCCs).<sup>36</sup> This campaign was conditioned by women's reform influence too. In most states men led these agencies, the exclusion of women legitimated by the fact that ferreting out cruelty to children--which, it was widely understood, occurred mainly in the lower classes--required entry into dangerous neighborhoods and exposure to unseemly behaviors. Nevertheless the child-protection movement arose from woman-influenced streams of child-saving, such as the creation of separate asylums for children, campaigns against corporal punishment, and agitation for age-of-consent laws.

In raising the level of public outrage about child mistreatment, the women's-rights movement strengthened its critique of male domination in the private sphere. As in temperance before it, the anti-child-abuse movement made male violence a powerful subtext. The anti-child-abuse campaign was in an important way antipatriarchal.<sup>37</sup> The acknowledgment that there was parenting so bad that the state needed to protect children, and that parental rights should sometimes be severed, changed the culture toward much greater acceptance of formal public responsibility for child welfare, which in modern society meant greater governmental responsibility.

Yet the record of the anti-child-abuse programs is mixed, and it is a record about which we should think critically as we appraise child-protection work today. Antipatriarchal, yes, but the anti-child-abuse movement also had class and cultural meanings that were by no means so homogeneously progressive. Agencies like the SPCCs were attempting to impose on their largely working-class immigrant "clients" norms of proper parenting that were not only alien but that also sometimes created obstacles to their family welfare. Putting children first did not make sense to everyone. For example, SPCC agents prosecuted cases in which cruelty to children was caused, in their view, by children's labor: girls doing housework and child care, often required to stay home

from school by their parents; boys and girls working in shops, peddling on the streets; boys working for organ grinders or lying about their ages to enlist in the navy. The SPCCs worked with truant officers and even raised the ante, defining nonattendance at school as child neglect. But poor parents often needed their children at home or work; to the poor, often from farm or peasant backgrounds, it seemed irrational and disrespectful that adult women should work while able-bodied children remained idle. The SPCCs were opposed to the common practice of leaving children unattended and allowing them to play and wander in the streets. This violated the norm of domesticity for women and children; proper urban middle-class children in those days were not supposed to play outside without being attended. But working-class children lived in tiny crowded homes, and their mothers had no leisure to take them to parks.

Thus some cases of alleged cruelty to children arose from class and cultural disagreement about proper child-raising, and others from the inevitable cruelties of poverty, experienced by parents as well--such as disease and malnutrition, children left unsupervised while their parents worked, children not warmly dressed, houses without heat, bedding crawling with vermin, unchanged diapers, injuries and illnesses left without medical treatment. But child abuse was most definitely not merely a figment of cultural bias or an inevitable result of poverty. On the contrary, child abuse was identified as a problem even by its perpetrators, many of whom, despite their awareness of the discrimination they might encounter at the hands of the SPCCs, sought the help of these agencies.<sup>38</sup> For women and children, the biases of the SPCCs were often preferable to the oppressiveness of the discrimination they experienced at home. Children sought help against their parents. Women manipulated agencies concerned with child abuse to get help against wife abuse. Mothers also sought help in their own child-raising, often coming to agencies because they perceived themselves as inadequate parents. Child-protection agencies saw themselves as teaching good standards to poor and

ignorant parents, but in fact they were encountering people with their own views about good family life, who tried to use these agencies in their own interest.

Yet the SPCCs' paradigm for understanding and intervening in domestic violence remained, until the 1970s revival of feminism, one of protecting children from their parents. The SPCCs imagined children as innocent victims and parents as suspect, at least potentially noninnocent. The greater the emphasis on the innocent child, the harder it was to avoid a presumption of parental guilt. It is remarkable how little concern there was with nonfamilial cruelty to children. A few token cases against employers of child labor, and about industrial and chemical hazards to children, were investigated in the first decade of the anti-child-abuse concern, but not pursued thereafter. Physical punishment in the schools was not addressed.

And increasingly the parents against whom children needed protection were specifically mothers. As child neglect grew in significance, and sexual abuse declined, within child-protection discourse, mothers were often double-binded--always blamed for children's failures, but rarely credited for their successes and without much recognition of their own subordination and limited alternatives. Family-violence agencies tried--unsuccessfully--to ignore wife-beating.<sup>39</sup> There was never a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Women.

Thus child protection, although influenced by maternalist feminism, tended to oppose mothers' to children's interests. Yet, ironically, the child protectors had few tools with which to aid children who were being abused or neglected. Certainly they had no preventive program, for their model was one of crime and punishment, and luckily a residual civil-liberties tradition in the courts held back some of the most egregious invasions of privacy attempted by these agencies. When courts found that child abuse or neglect was taking place, social work still had little to contribute.<sup>40</sup> The sad history was that abused and neglected children were almost always worse abused and neglected if removed from their parents, because of neglect of institutional and foster care.<sup>41</sup> This neglect



resulted not only from cultural and economic individualism and political exploitation of hostility to taxes. It also revealed that the put-children-first policy orientation was never strong enough to alter the cultural commitment to nuclear family child-raising, and when such families failed children, no decent alternative was provided.

Child protectors recognized their failures to help abused and neglected children. At several points in the now 120-year history of child protection, reformers recognized that prosecuting parents rarely helped children, and urged rehabilitation of parents. But child protection always ran up against miserly welfare policy. Thus child protection was enfeebled by the paradox that in focusing on children, and thereby gaining widespread rhetorical support, protective efforts failed because of social and political miserliness toward needy adults, a miserliness in part created by the focus on children.

IV.<sup>3</sup> The children-first orientation in the development of public assistance programs similarly ended badly for children as well as women. The state mothers'-aid laws, passed between 1910 and 1920, took a step toward helping mothers as well as children. Then the Depression of the 1930s created a crisis and an opportunity to expand the welfare state. It was during the New Deal that the social-work network's commitment to putting children first most indelibly marked the American welfare state. When Roosevelt agreed to support a permanent program of social provision, both the social-work and the social-insurance networks tried to influence its design. The resulting omnibus law, the Social Security Act, was created through a mutually agreed-upon division of labor: social-insurance men designed the two biggest programs, Old Age Insurance (OAI, later OASI) and Unemployment Insurance (UI); the social-work network designed other provisions called the public assistance programs, including ADC, aid to the blind, old age assistance (for those not included in OAI), and a small child and maternal health program (\$7 million was asked for this). The social-insurance programs became well funded and widely respected, no longer included under the pejorative

rubric "welfare"; the social-work programs became stingy and deeply stigmatized.<sup>42</sup> Today, the inferiority of the public assistance as compared to the social-insurance programs is vivid and much analyzed. Indeed, some feminist critics have mistakenly attributed their inferiority to a transhistorical patriarchy, implying that men made them substandard out of contempt for women. This was not the case. What contributed to this stratification among welfare programs was, first, a common commitment to the family wage and, second, the particular dedication among elite women welfare activists to putting children first.

Family-wage assumptions led virtually all welfare reformers to assume that women's and children's poverty would usually be corrected by supporting husbands' and fathers' income. That is, the social-insurance programs for men would take care of men's dependents. Not even the most feminist welfare advocates expected single-mother families, for example, to be a significant or enduring fraction of the population. The needy that were to be served by the public assistance programs were expected to be few and, except for the permanently disabled, temporary. And they were to receive casework along with their stipends to make sure that they were not pauperized and to correct any character problems they already had.

The women designers of Aid to Dependent Children did not intend it to be an inferior program. In fact, some would have liked to do away with a two-track welfare system altogether. Edith Abbott, sister and often spokesperson for her sister Grace, then chief of the Children's Bureau, spoke for many when she argued for one universal program for all public provision. She believed it possible to abolish poverty through public aid--not social insurance--available to all without stigmatizing qualifications. She argued for a policy that would abolish the "pauper laws," the private and public charity programs, as "disgracefully opprobrious and un-American" and perpetuating inequality, and called for bringing all forms of public assistance together in one welfare statute, to which federal, state, and local government would all contribute.<sup>43</sup> The Abbotts did not like the

"insurance" programs because their policies of "contribution" represented regressive taxation, and in this respect the two sisters can be characterized as more Left-wing than the insurance proponents. And they were also strongly committed to the view that just giving out money was neither sufficient nor safe, and that the poor required supervision, counselling, and reeducation--casework by trained social workers.<sup>44</sup> In this respect they can be characterized as more conservative than the insurance proponents.

Continuing the old strategy of putting children first, ADC was designed to provide stipends only for children, not for their caretakers.<sup>45</sup> There were several reasons for this. The women lacked the confidence and self-importance to make demands on behalf of women; indeed they were accustomed by now to getting things for women through their role as mothers. Moreover, by the 1930s social workers had come to understand that the single-mother families who needed this help were composed not only of widows--who qualified as the deserving poor--but increasingly of divorced and separated women and sometimes even of never-married women. Wishing to avoid the hostility such women provoked, the designers of ADC accepted the odd fiction that children's support could somehow be separated from their parents'. They built on and strengthened the rhetoric about "innocent" children, arguing that they should not be burdened by the sins of their parents.<sup>46</sup> While children had once served as a surrogate for mothers, a means of increasing women's power, as in the campaign for maternal custody, they were now being given aid despite their mothers. During the campaign to "sell" Social Security, before and after its passage, there was a complete silence about single mothers. In a memo to the drafters of the Social Security Act, Katherine Ward Fisher wrote, "People too young for self-support have properly a direct claim upon the national (or social) income . . . at least as strong as their claim for free education . . ." <sup>47</sup> No one agitated for single mothers' own distinct needs for help. Thus Grace Abbott, in discussing the sufferings caused by the inadequacy of local mothers' aid: "Waiting lists have grown longer . . . many thousands of children

have been removed from their own homes or are living from day to day in uncertainty as to their future."<sup>48</sup>

The design of ADC was not only a matter of compromise and the politics of judging what was possible. It also represented the social-work network's views about proper family life.<sup>49</sup> Their "maternalism," we must remember, presupposed the male family wage as the basis of family life. They did not want to encourage single-mother families, and their insistence on casework reflected, in part, their concern that such families usually represented and created social pathology. They were nervous about mothers' employment, an anxiety that becomes particularly vivid when compared to Black women's much greater acceptance of it, and of the day-care needs it created. After the beginnings of a small movement toward establishing day nurseries in the nineteenth century, white women activists became more negative in the Progressive era, worrying that they might "tempt" mothers to "attempt the impossible" (i.e., combine family and work) in Jane Addams' view, or encourage family desertion, in Lillian Wald's.<sup>50</sup> Grace Abbott remained negative about day care during the New Deal.<sup>51</sup> They were not advocating maternal bonding ideas, that children needed full-time mothering, which appeared much later, but hesitated, precisely out of their feminist perspective, to burden women with what they conceived to be too heavy a burden of work and responsibility. To these social-work leaders, day care seemed to undercut women's claims as mothers.

One result was a very small program, with an original appropriation of \$25 million, intended to serve fewer than 300,000 families, because the designers, assuming the family wage as a norm, expected most children to be supported by fathers. Another result was the pegging of stipends at a very low level, \$18 per month for the first child and \$12 for each additional child, as compared to old age assistance stipends of \$30 per month per individual.<sup>52</sup> Still another was the premise that since child welfare was the issue, the government should have the responsibility to ascertain that the child was being raised in a suitable environment.<sup>53</sup> Known as the "suitable home" requirement, this

provision became the basis for a great deal of snooping into the lives of "welfare mothers," as ADC recipients came to be called: did they have boyfriends? were they buying clothes for themselves instead of for their children? did they have disallowed resources such as automobiles, telephones, or savings accounts?<sup>54</sup> The investigation and the means-testing were of course contradictory: the aid was supposed to be only for the child, and was rarely sufficient to support the mother too, but it was the mother's means that were tested. One justification was of course that an immoral or cheating mother was not good for children. The problem was that the punishment of the immoral mother was--cutting off support for the children. (Meanwhile, as we have seen above, public provision for children without a parent was so stingy that no matter how bad a parental home was--morally, economically, or in terms of abuse--institutional or foster-home placements were on average always worse.)

Another justification, which is being revived today in a new social contract theory regarding welfare, was that the ADC stipend involved some kind of exchange. This was actually a complex idea, interpreted differently by different participants in the discourse--and sometimes by the same participant at different times. At least four distinct meanings are identifiable. One interpretation rephrased the old deserving/undeserving distinction, assuming that an ADC grant was a charitable gift for which recipients should prove themselves worthy. Another was a more state-centered version, assuming that recipients should contribute to society, in this case through raising children well. The quintessentially social-work view was that state and mother formed a partnership to improve the race through improving child-raising. Katherine Lenroot of the Children's Bureau liked to tell a story about a mothers'-aid recipient speaking knowledgeably to a caseworker about child development. The worker asked, "Where did you learn all this . . . ?" 'Oh, I'm a state mother. I have to know these things.'<sup>55</sup> When a welfare-rights movement arose much later, it became clear that ADC recipients had their own interpretation of this exchange, similar to the wages for housework demanded by some

feminists in the 1970s. But this interpretation had older roots. During the original campaign for mothers' aid, some of its advocates had already argued that the stipends should be considered payment for services to society--hence the popularity of the term "pension," fashioned after veterans' pensions. In a more moderate variant Grace Abbott argued that the program rested on "recognition . . . that the contribution of the unskilled or semiskilled mothers in their own homes exceeded their earnings outside of the home and that it was in the public interest to conserve their child-caring functions . . ."<sup>56</sup>

Yet all these contractarian views implied that the mother was the recipient and participant in the exchange.<sup>57</sup> They all contradicted the official policy that ADC stipends were for children only.

Of course the flaws in today's public assistance programs do not only or even primarily derive from their design by the Children's Bureau network.<sup>58</sup> Race was the major factor influencing the exclusions of the Social Security Act. But it is hard to disentangle race from gender systems: for example, which system was it that made so many prosperous southern whites in the 1930s feel entitled to cheap domestic servants? Race and gender became connected further as AFDC expanded to include many unmarried, even never-married, mothers and their children. Older assumptions about the immorality of Blacks combined with new patterns. Urban conditions of poverty and unemployment increased the proportion of single-mother families among Blacks, and at the same time Black migration northwards took an existing family form and moved it into visibility among the prosperous in northern urban centers.<sup>59</sup> Thus the fear that "welfare" would destroy a "work ethic," making AFDC recipients unwilling to take low-wage jobs, spread from southern agricultural and domestic employers throughout the nation, affecting particularly service sector employers, and became combined with the anxiety that welfare actually encouraged high fertility and unmarried motherhood. It remains difficult to separate racial from gendered content in these attitudes.

Nevertheless it is fair to say that promoting the "innocence" and deservingness of children did not get them much material help and that the women's hope that kids could open the door to a maternal welfare state was disappointed. Children do not thrive when their caretakers are impoverished, depressed, or hopeless. Giving to children while those around them do without has proven unworkable. Depriving women does not maximize their effectiveness as mothers. Defining the interests of mothers as against those of children does not often help children.

Moreover, because AFDC is a program not for all children but particularly for single-mother children, the emphasis on "innocent" children made sense only in contrast to the noninnocence of their mothers. (It is impossible not to notice the similarity here to antiabortion rhetoric about the "innocent" unborn.) The justification for aid to children argued equal opportunity in childhood: no child should be held back by her or his parents' poverty. The silence here is quite articulate: adults did not have an equal right not to be held back by poverty (presumably because their poverty is their own fault, their punishment for various crimes or failures of character). This rhetorical strategy supported general suspicion of adults who needed public help. Then that suspicion turned back against children: given a modern psychology which assumes that children are deeply influenced by their parenting, it became difficult to maintain public hopefulness about children with poor parents, particularly single mothers, and this in turn undermined public support for the children's programs.

Thus beginning even in the nineteenth century, the putting-children-first strategy ran into several contradictions. First, it proved difficult to "deliver" services to children except through parents. But, second, the very identification of children as uniquely deserving tended to undercut the claims of adults to public help, which then made it more difficult to help children. Child-centeredness worked for women primarily when they were powerful enough to get themselves defined as good mothers; when there was any question about their qualifications or parenting style they

became vulnerable to losing control over their children. And putting children first tended to impose a set of maternalist assumptions upon women that did not help their struggle for freedom in other arenas.

This is not, to repeat, a universal conclusion nor is it an argument against special benefits for children. It is a reading of a particular history--of children raised in a culture that strongly legitimated individualism and nuclear families, of a feminist reform strategy worked out in the context of that culture. In trying to help children, there are of course many ways in which adults can construct children's "needs." I am discussing one such construction, one that romanticized mother-child bonding and women's and children's joint domesticity. It arose in an era in which dominant groups of female activists felt comfortable using children as their surrogates, secure (albeit constrained) in their identity as mothers, and confident in their power as mothers in charge of children. Some of the more privileged activists imagined mothers as regents preparing future dynasties and ruling in the names of their charges; yet many who knew the poor and tried to speak for them also cherished such visions of maternal importance, confident in the mobility provided by U.S. democracy. In such a context it was reasonable to conclude that any gain for children would be a gain for women.

Whatever merit this approach had a century ago, it deserves close scrutiny today. In a society of increasing inequality and cultural diversity, where single mothering is commonplace and motherhood is by no means the major definer of women's identity, it is not clear that this strategy is good for women or children, or that identifying any particular groups as especially "deserving" benefits the whole society.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Emma Duke, Director, Industrial Division, Children's Bureau, to Rev. J. C. Cunningham of Buffalo, S.C., 7-12-19, Children's Bureau Records, National Archives, box 152, folder 13-1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Clarke A. Chambers, Seedtime for Reform: American Social Service and Social Action, 1918-1933 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1963), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> This term has been used loosely and without definition by a variety of scholars: Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., Gender and the Origins of Welfare States in Western Europe and North America (Boston: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Poverty rates for 1990 are from the 1992 Green Book (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), p. 1275, table 3.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Wolfe, "The Deteriorating Economic Circumstances of Children," in Essays on the Economics of Discrimination, ed. by Emily Hoffman (Upjohn Institute, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> This periodization is based mainly although not exclusively on evidence about white and relatively prosperous women, but it offers a promising start.

<sup>7</sup> Lori D. Ginzburg, "'Moral Suasion is Moral Balderdash': Women, Politics, and Social Activism in the 1850s," Journal of American History 73 #3, December 1986, pp. 601-22.

<sup>8</sup> Aileen Kraditor, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920 (New York: Columbia University, 1965); Ellen Carol DuBois, ed., Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Correspondence, Writings, Speeches (New York: Schocken, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Voluntary Associations: From Charity to Reform," in Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy, and Power, ed. by Kathleen D. McCarthy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 35-49.

<sup>10</sup> I am aware that some historians, such as Nancy Cott, argue to restrict "feminist" to apply to a new, early-twentieth-century perspective, and to a time when the word was used by women activists themselves. I do not agree because I think there is a need for a generic word that identifies continuities across longer historical time--say, from the eighteenth century on--among women activists who explicitly sought to raise the status of women; and I know no other term.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Sarvasy, "Beyond the Difference versus Equality Policy Debate: Postsuffrage Feminism, Citizenship, and the Quest for a Feminist Welfare State," Signs 17 #2, Winter 1992, pp. 329-62.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Grossberg, Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), chapter 7.

<sup>13</sup> Wenham v. State [65 Nebraska 394, 1902], quoted by Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, Protective Labor Legislation, with Special Reference to Women in the State of New York, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, vol. 116, no. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Edward MacGaffey, "A Pattern for Progress: The Minnesota Children's Code," Minnesota History 41 #5, Spring 1969, pp. 231-32.

<sup>15</sup> Maureen Fitzgerald, "Saints, Seduction, and Social Control: Irish-Catholic Nuns in New York City, 1845-1900," Ph.D. dissertation in progress, University of Wisconsin.

<sup>16</sup> The phrase "single mother" was not used at the time and the laws were mainly intended for widows, although in many states mothers who were alone due to marital separation or desertion were also entitled to stipends, and some states even accepted unmarried mothers.

<sup>17</sup> Louis J. Covotsos, "Child Welfare and Social Progress: A History of the United States Children's Bureau, 1912-1935," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1976, p. 53. This historian saw the Children's Bureau's constant extragovernmental consultation as a sign of its weakness, but the record suggests otherwise.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to bear in mind, however, that the social-work tradition was by no means exclusively female. Men retained a majority of top positions in charity and social-work establishments; many men joined settlements and worked as caseworkers.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Gordon, "Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the United States, 1890-1935," American Historical Review 97 #1, February 1992, pp. 19-54.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945," Journal of American History, September 1991, pp. 559-90.

<sup>21</sup> Edith Howe, "Our Right to the Lives of Babies," Delineator 73 #3, March 1909, pp. 400-02, 480.

<sup>22</sup> Harriot Stanton Blatch, "Voluntary Motherhood," in Up from the Pedestal, ed. by Aileen S. Kraditor (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), pp. 167-75. This hereditarian thought, which became a full-fledged eugenics program by the early twentieth century, was characteristic of nearly all reformers at this time to one degree or another. It was based on the belief in the inheritability of acquired characteristics. For a discussion of this perspective, see Linda Gordon, Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America (New York: Viking, 2nd ed., 1990), chapter 6.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, Woman's Body, Woman's Right, chapter 6.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Carrie W. Clifford of the Ohio Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1915, quoted by Eileen Boris, "The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the 'Political,'" Yale Journal of Law and Feminism 2 #1, Fall 1989, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> The relationship between Americanization and the reconstruction of family life is discussed in Linda Gordon, Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston 1880-1960 (New York: Viking, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent discussion of these racial goals in reform see Gwendolyn Mink, "The Lady

and the Tramp: Gender, Race, and the Origins of the American Welfare State," in Women, the State, and Welfare, ed. by Linda Gordon (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," in Gordon, Women, the State, and Welfare.

<sup>28</sup> Linda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 284.

<sup>29</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, Catherine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Friedman, "Prurient Interests: Gender and Religion in Anti-Obscenity Campaigns in New York City, 1909-1945," Ph.D. dissertation, forthcoming, University of Wisconsin.

<sup>31</sup> Emma Duke to Rev. J. C. Cunningham of Buffalo, S.C., 7-12-19, in Children's Bureau Records, National Archives, box 152, folder 13-1-4.

<sup>32</sup> Ellen Fitzpatrick, Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> The Organizing Committee also included Zona Gale, Frieda Kirchwey, Norman Thomas, Eduard Lindeman, and David Starr Jordan. Proposal dated 2-24-28, United Neighborhood Houses papers, box 14, folder 132, Social Welfare Historical Archives, University of Minnesota. On the issue of using children as a wedge for further welfare development, see also Martha Minow, "Rights for the Next Generation: A Feminist Approach to Children's Rights," Harvard Women's Law Journal 9, 1986, pp. 1-24.

<sup>34</sup> Chambers, Seedtime for Reform, p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon, "Social Insurance and Public Assistance."

<sup>36</sup> In the following discussion about child protection, I rely primarily on Gordon, Heroes of Their Own Lives.

<sup>37</sup> I do not use "patriarchy" here as a synonym for male supremacy or "sexism." Rather I refer to an earlier, historical, and more specific sense of patriarchy as a family form in which fathers had control over all other family members--children, women, and servants. In this sense of patriarchy, fathers' control flowed from the fathers' monopolization of economic resources. The patriarchal family presupposed a family mode of production, as among peasants, artisans, or farmers, in which individuals did not work individually as wage laborers. That historical patriarchy defined a set of parent-child relations as much as relations between the sexes. The claim of an organization such as an SPCC to speak on behalf of children's rights, its claim to the license to intervene on behalf of children who were mistreated by their parents, was an attack on patriarchal power.

<sup>38</sup> From very early on in the history of the SPCCs, the major sources of complaints were family members themselves, primarily women and secondarily children.

<sup>39</sup> The story of how women maneuvered to force child-protection agencies to become involved in wife-beating cases is told in Gordon, Heroes of Their Own Lives.

<sup>40</sup> On social-work efforts against family violence, see Linda Gordon, "The Frustrations of Family Violence Social Work: An Historical Critique," Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare 15 #4, December 1988, pp. 139-60.

<sup>41</sup> Despite many reform efforts, contemporary foster care remains inadequate to a degree that is distinctly abusive to children. For one recent discussion, see J. C. Barden, "Foster Care System Reeling, Despite Law Meant to Help," New York Times, September 21, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> The argument that our welfare system has two unequal tracks has been widespread, and recently several scholars have pointed out the gendered as well as racialized nature of these programs. See Barbara Nelson, "The Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen's Compensation and Mothers' Aid," and Diana Pearce, "Welfare Is not for Women," both in Gordon, Women, the State,

and Welfare; and Linda Gordon, "What Does Welfare Regulate?" Social Research 55 #4, Winter 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Edith Abbott, "Abolish the Pauper Laws," Social Service Review 8 #1, March 1934, pp. 1-16.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Grace Abbott's 1938 essay "Mothers' Aid and Public Assistance," in From Relief to Social Security, ed. by Grace Abbott (New York: Russell and Russell, 1941), pp. 275-76; idem, "What about Mothers' Pensions Now?" Survey 70 #3, March 19, 1934, pp. 80-81.

<sup>45</sup> Several of the designers of the Social Security Act, in later recollections, reported that this had been a mistake, but it was a conscious decision among the Children's Bureau women.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Mary Dewson after the fact continually defended ADC as a program for children, never women; see her series of speeches in Social Security Papers, National Archives, Chairman of the Board group, box 39, folder 062.2.

<sup>47</sup> Katherine Ward Fisher, "Suggestions for Child Security," typed memo submitted to Committee on Economic Security, in Witte Box 200, no date, probably 1934.

<sup>48</sup> Grace Abbott, memo to Committee on Economic Security, July 1934, Social Security Papers, National Archives, Committee on Economic Security group, box 20.

<sup>49</sup> I have discussed elsewhere the complex ways in which these views expressed and confuted the women's own class and race position; see Gordon, "Black and White Visions."

<sup>50</sup> Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull-House (New York: Macmillan, 1910), p. 169; Lillian Wald, quoted in Jane Addams, My Friend Julia Lathrop (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 171; and Emily D. Cahan, Past Caring: A History of U.S. Preschool Care and Education for the Poor, 1820-1965 (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, School of Public Health, Columbia, 1989).

<sup>51</sup> Grace Abbott, The Child and the State (New York: 1939), p. 230.

<sup>52</sup> The authors of the ADC Title of Social Security did not ask for such low stipends, but it was

harder for them to prevent the low maximums because of the fiction that the money was only for children, not their parents.

<sup>53</sup> Although the suitable home provision was not in the federal law, it was in the model law drawn up and proposed to the states.

<sup>54</sup> This invasive investigative practice began being curtailed in the 1960s, as welfare recipients and lawyers supporting them won court challenges.

<sup>55</sup> Columbia University Oral History Collection, Lenroot interview, p. 26.

<sup>56</sup> Abbott, "Mothers' Aid and Public Assistance."

<sup>57</sup> Only one attempt has been made to involve the child-recipient in the contract, and that is the "learnfare" program recently tried in Wisconsin and widely condemned now as a failure.

<sup>58</sup> The Children's Bureau designers of ADC expected the program to provide better support for single-mother families because they expected greater federal authority over the local programs. Through this authority they expected to be able to insist upon civil-service (that is, non-patronage) administration by professionally trained social workers doing casework for each recipient. In these hopes they were disappointed by two separate but related defeats at the hands of Congress. First, the proviso for federal supervision of and standards for local ADC programs was amended out of the Act by a southern-led states'-rights voting bloc. Its motives derived from both class and race interests, wanting to retain the ability of state and local governments to exclude from assistance programs those who customarily performed low-wage work (see Jill Quadagno, "From Old Age Assistance to Supplemental Security Income," in The Politics of Social Policy in the United States, ed. by Margaret Weir et al. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], pp. 235-63.). Second, for related reasons a similar bloc prevented the ADC and other assistance programs from being administered by the Children's Bureau, whose personnel would have insisted on greater equity and higher standards in awarding stipends.

<sup>39</sup> On the incidence of single-mother families see Linda Gordon and Sara McLanahan, "Single Parenthood in 1900," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 919-90, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990, and Journal of Family History 16 #2, 1991, pp. 97-116.