

Response from the authors

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We want to thank Larry Mead for the thoughtful reading of and response to our book. We clearly consider our work in dialogue with some of the ideas he has put forward in *Beyond Entitlement* and other writings, and we welcome the opportunity to keep the dialogue going. We appreciated his acknowledgement of the gaps our book fills in the literature on the work experience of welfare participants, as well as our documentation of the episodic nature of welfare use in recent history, and our picture of how the system of provision works on the ground.

We agree with Mead that structured welfare programs have an important role to play in our society. We also agree that low-wage workers require supports, such as child care subsidies and medical assistance. However, we believe that Mead misreads our main point when he suggests that we are calling for a return to “entitlement” as it previously existed or argue that “mothers coping with children alone cannot be expected to work.” Rather, our critique of the current system is not aimed at the expectation that citizens work, but at the way that contemporary labor markets and mediating institutions allocate and reward work. As Mead notes, many of the mothers in our study really wanted to work. “If they could just make sure we have enough health care and child care benefits ...” one woman told us, “it would change the outcome.” Therefore, we think this exchange establishes a good basis for the discussions we hoped the book would spark—a broad rethinking of the proper responsibilities of government, employers and families for providing the support working American families need.

If this assertion of shared responsibility seems surprising at first glance, we need only remind ourselves that workers do not arrive on the scene fully grown and ready to labor; they need to be cared for and educated as children, their health needs to be safeguarded, they need clean water, food, and safe housing. In our book we use the rubric of “social reproduction” to refer to the work necessary to keep households and communities functioning and to allow them to send productive members out into the world. Because labor has a dual character, being both a commodity traded in the market and a human activity that cannot be “detached from the rest of life, stored or mobilized” as market demand changes, workers and their families require social protection.¹ The politicians who enacted New Deal legislation recognized this, regulating labor conditions and creating social programs to insure families against the risks entailed in depending on labor markets for income, including unemployment, retirement, and disability. In the post-World War II era, government-administered programs were augmented by an extensive private benefit system administered by employers but publicly subsidized and regulated. For middle class workers, these benefits included medical insurance, guaranteed benefit pension programs, and sick leave. In the book we refer to

this model as the “family wage” bargain. Finally, although the welfare state attached its most valuable benefits to wage work, federal lawmakers also created a series of programs that comprised a “second channel” for providing benefits to poor families who could not participate in the workforce.² Initially limited to Aid to Dependent Children, these benefits were later expanded when policymakers allowed widows and children to claim social security earned by a deceased breadwinner, and again when they created new means-tested programs such as food stamps, medical assistance and Supplemental Security Income.

These arrangements were designed to compensate for economic insecurity experienced during the post-World War II period; however, that economy and the labor market agreements we associate with it are largely gone now. When product markets became more volatile and profitability declined during the 1970s, companies began restructuring work and workplace contracts through automation, relocation, subcontracting and new contingent labor agreements. Structural unemployment and new labor contracts shifted much of the risk produced by market instability onto working families. Jacob Hacker points out that even those workers who were able to hold onto jobs or to find new long-term employment have had to assume greater responsibility for retraining and for their medical care and retirement.³

These shifts are consistent with the labor market models envisioned by free market advocates who designed welfare reform. In our book, we discuss how they “imagined a labor market in which each worker was free to pursue his or her best interest and was on his or her own (unaided by employers and unencumbered by family responsibilities) in doing so.” To highlight how these shifts strained the ability of working families to engage in social reproduction, we called this new set of labor agreements the “solitary wage bargain.” In the book, we show how Wisconsin’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program buttressed this new contractual model when it required welfare agencies to press mothers to take positions in low-wage jobs which left them dependent on the government for food, child care, and medical insurance. In his response to our book, Mead rejects our characterization of changes in low-skilled work, casting doubt on the prior significance of the family wage model. Nevertheless, dramatic increases in income inequality and income instability from the mid 1970s on suggest otherwise.⁴

Supporters of welfare reform and others have noted the movement of working class and middle class mothers into wage work after 1970. This movement helped to offset declining male income, but it also created a care shortage and new forms of income vulnerability when parents separated or when a parent had to leave the labor market to care for a young child or an ill or disabled family member. Mead

mentions several times that welfare reformers were simply asking of poor women what our society asks of all women. This is something we often receive questions about: “Isn’t it just incumbent on poor women to figure out how to do what other women are doing?” And we agree this makes some sense. But how do middle class and working class women manage to combine work and family? They do it by purchasing services on the market that substitute for their labor in the home, services such as day care, nursing home care, and restaurant food. We argue in the book that the ability of women of all classes to work—their ability to purchase on the market services they formerly performed at home—depends on some women (poor women) working non-standard hours in low paid work in these venues. And we argue that we need to have a discussion, in our society, about whether this is the way things should be.

Mead points to the importance of out-of-wedlock births in creating difficulties for poor women. We agree that loss of the family supports that came with marriage are part of what has changed for poor mothers over the past few decades. But as we note in the book, social policy has paid a great deal of attention to this issue while neglecting, relatively speaking, changes in jobs. The fact is that single-parenting has increased across the socio-economic spectrum over the past twenty years. Furthermore, as our research and child support research demonstrate, deindustrialization and employment discrimination in southeastern Wisconsin have made it very difficult for many low-skilled fathers to provide economic support for their children whether they live with them or apart from them.

We believe that the best way forward is to provide services and supports for working families that allow them to combine work and care. This could include things like Unemployment Insurance for compelling family emergencies and more broadly accessible healthcare. We agree with Mead when he writes that “the case for improved leave must be a general one, pitched to the needs of all mothers.” This goes to the heart of our points about economic citizenship in the book. If these programs are universal, they will not compromise the dignity and citizenship of those who participate. The worst thing about the old system of welfare was that it stigmatized participants (and we would argue that the kinds of paternalism Mead advocated in *Beyond Entitlement* were intertwined with and increased that stigma).

In conclusion, we argue that the array of social programs designed to protect families during the latter half of the twentieth century, and redesigned under welfare reform, needs to be reassessed in light of changing labor market practices and the new strategies families pursue to maintain their income. We disagree with Mead’s assertion that “[n]either employers [n]or government deliberately cut back worker or family protections.” Just as the welfare state was constructed through many political contests over social relations across multiple institutional sites, welfare state retrenchment has been an ongoing process prosecuted by multiple actors in the public and private sectors. Service sector jobs that comprise a majority

of employment opportunities today are not degraded by nature—we trust the health and education of our children and our parents to service sector workers. Employers have used labor restructuring to weaken unions as we document in the book, and employer-funded foundations like Milwaukee’s own Bradley Foundation promote legislation banning “living wage” and mandatory sick leave ordinances, and lobby against the minimum wage.⁵ The passion with which political struggles over the future of unions, good jobs, and social programs are being waged today—in Wisconsin and elsewhere—suggests that recent trends in labor contracting and neoliberal policy-making do not represent a social consensus on the way Americans want to move forward as a country. For this reason we especially appreciate this opportunity to participate in debates over how the division of responsibility for social reproduction—between government, employers, and families—might be recalibrated. ■

¹K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957): 72.

²B. Nelson, “The Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen’s Compensation and Mother’s Aid.” in *Women, the State, and Welfare*, ed. L. Gordon (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

³J. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift*; M. Morris and B. Western. “Inequality in Earnings at the Close of the Twentieth Century,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 623–657.

⁵2009 Annual Report, The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, Milwaukee, WI, 2009. Retrieved May 12, 2011 from <http://www.bradleyfdn.org/pdfs/Reports2009/2009AnnualReport.pdf>