The passage of welfare reform legislation in 1996 was welcome and long overdue. We had to reform our poor-relief programs, and the public finally demanded that we do so because they were expensive, inefficient, and too riddled with waste, fraud, and abuse. Worse, by seizing income from middle-class taxpayers and giving it to poor mothers, and only unmarried mothers at that (while expecting nothing in return), welfare discouraged work, marriage, and thrift while it subsidized out-of-wedlock births, long-term dependence, and irresponsibility. By teaching children of welfare mothers all the wrong lessons about the need to work and be accountable for their own well-being, welfare trapped people in a cycle of intergenerational poverty and created an underclass, a poverty culture. As a result, entire neighborhoods were beset by crime, stagnation, and despair. Relief harmed the poor. We can see why Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, despite good intentions and massive expenditures, inevitably failed: the roots of poverty are ultimately moral and individual, not economic and social, and the federal government is too distant from local conditions to effectively solve these problems. State governments, closer to the people, can do better, but there is an
even more effective and ultimately more compassionate way to aid the poor: before the massive modern welfare state that was built from the 1930s to the early 1970s, welfare was voluntary, privately funded and administered, and personal; it addressed the moral roots of need, often because religious and community organizations were more centrally involved. That is the model to emulate if we are serious about improving the lives of the dependent poor. And indeed, because it finally took these matters seriously and overcame partisan political intransigence and the pleadings of the poverty industry, welfare reform has succeeded, and quite spectacularly, despite the overwrought predictions of doom from its opponents: welfare reform has saved money, reduced poverty, reduced dependency, encouraged marriage and more responsible childbearing, and has finally given poor women and their children real opportunities to escape poverty and to be self-reliant.

Or so goes the conventional wisdom. It is, like much of conventional wisdom, wrong in almost every respect. Welfare was always a small portion of the federal budget, paid benefits that never lifted recipients out of poverty, and never reached even half of all poor people. Welfare use is not transmitted like a birth defect from one generation to another, although in America people born poor are more likely to remain poor than they are in many other advanced industrialized nations. Women on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) typically had fewer children than the average woman, and because benefits were low they often worked, although sometimes at poorly paid “under-the-table” jobs in the informal economy. Most recipients used welfare for relatively brief periods of time (about a year and a half, on average, although many returned) as a transitional program that allowed them to survive while looking for a better job, escaping an abusive relationship, going to school, or caring for their children; those who remained on the rolls longer were, by virtue of their lower educational achievements, or because of disability or illness, usually of little value in the modern labor market. The roots of need are not moral; they are industrial, political, and systemic. Note, for example, that the Federal Reserve Bank has historically considered that when 5-6 percent of the working-age job-seeking population was without work, the United States had reached “full employment”: even the most conservative financial and regulatory institutions do not expect the economy to be able to provide enough jobs for everyone. The War on Poverty, which was too poorly funded for us to say that it was fought in earnest, nonetheless achieved real results, notably by reducing poverty, especially among the old. The difference with state-level administration of relief is not that local governments are more effective but that they permit variation in policies and benefits to suit local conditions, which has historically resulted in, among other failures, arbitrary and racially discriminatory practices and policies that are more subject to pressure from business threatening flight to more hospitable climes. There is no evidence that churches or private charity providers per se are more effective than public agencies. And so on. The brief against relief is built on myths, on lies, on the simplistic reading of complicated data and a propensity to reason by anecdote and analogy.

There is, however, some truth to part of the indictment, and this is where the objection to welfare is really rooted: the availability of cash relief, even if modest, allows people to refuse low-wage, low-benefit work. Anti-welfare activists describe this as a “perverse incentive,” as a structural failing of relief, a root of dependency. But welfare does not make people dependent. Rather, it allows them the ability to trade one kind of dependence for another, sacrificing dependence on the labor market or a husband or family or the noblesse oblige of private charity for dependence on the state. Relief thereby gives poor women some measure of power, of freedom even, for it pro-
vides them with a choice, however limited it may be. Our modern usage of the term *dependence* is loaded, an epithet now reserved only for the poor, but we are all dependent: upon each other, upon our jobs, upon government. We are all needy, although in different ways. Moreover, by removing some people from the labor market poor relief sets something of a floor under wages, helping other workers by pushing up their earning power, if only modestly. The benefits of welfare reach further than the public knows, and much of the apparent opposition to it has been rooted in ignorance of its virtues and its true functions. Welfare can be good for you, even if you never use it. But higher wages, while good for workers, are not so welcomed by their employers.

Which brings me to the explanation I want to offer for why welfare was reformed in 1996. Beginning with the New Deal, in the twentieth century the federal government was increasingly willing to intrude in the private sector with progressive taxation, protections for workers and unions, expansive social welfare programs, and massive new schemes of industrial and financial regulation. As a result, poor and working people fared increasingly well: wages rose and poverty declined. Profitability also declined, however, and business and the corporate classes, feeling under assault, responded and organized, at first quite loosely, to regain influence in politics. They funded lobbying firms, public relations departments, political action committees, and, especially important for our purposes, sophisticated Washington, D.C.-based think tanks to help them advance their cause with Congress, the executive branch, the media, and the public. There were many targets, and welfare was only one among them, but it was an important one. First, welfare violated the basic tenets of capitalist free-market philosophy, and many genuinely believed that it did more harm than good; since these men (and it was mostly men, white men) had little personal experience with poverty, discrimination, or dead-end jobs, they believed that with hard work anyone could advance, and thought welfare an unnecessary crutch. Second, they knew that readily available and moderately generous relief could increase wages (from their perspective, labor costs) because it gave recipients an alternative to low-wage work. Finally, for reasons that had much to do with race, welfare served as a symbolically powerful and politically vulnerable program that could lie the rhetorical groundwork for much broader assaults on more entrenched government interventions in the market on behalf of poor and working people. Over roughly three decades of smart, persistent, well-funded advocacy that began in the early 1970s, these anti-welfare activists achieved their narrow mission by turning public debate away from the questions of poverty that were prominent in the 1960s to the problems of welfare and the state itself, which helped lead eventually to the repeal of AFDC. The broader project of which welfare was only a part is still ongoing—the efforts to undo the social welfare programs that were the hallmark of the twentieth century. This mobilization of the right is the key political narrative of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a mobilization whose successes are seen not just in the repeal of AFDC but in a host of regulatory, tax, and other regressive policy changes, in a resurgence of the ever more conservative Republican party throughout all levels of the American political system, and in the more corporatist-conservative identity of the Democratic party—even, perhaps, in an undoing of the small solidarities in American political culture fostered by the New Deal and the Great Society. In this way, the repeal of AFDC reveals something about a much larger political history, and as Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* gave theater-goers a “worm’s-eye view” of *Hamlet*, retelling the tale from the standpoint of two very minor characters and thereby showing us something new about the prince himself, I want to use an examination of the
battles against the relatively modest interventions of welfare to give us a worm's-eye view of this larger and more threatening class war.

But these twentieth-century events are only part of the story, for this "unprecedented" assault on American poor relief was not unprecedented at all. It has happened before.

In the wake of the depression of 1873, to respond to challenges posed by the industrialization of the nation, to help alleviate the misery increasingly concentrated in the growing cities, which were full to overflowing with migrants from rural regions of the United States and immigrants from other nations, and to defuse the threat of these "dangerous classes," cities undertook large expansions in their programs of public relief for the poor and unemployed. Simultaneously, as the industrial corporation took form and grew more powerful, states and, increasingly, the federal government were showing themselves newly willing to regulate and restrict its activities and would, from time to time, for various reasons, align themselves with a growing, angry, insistent, and oftentimes violent labor movement. In response, business organized to help secure and increase its power. One of their targets was poor relief, because in addition to it being anathema to them, they found that it allowed workers the ability to decline their offers of what was often very low-wage and dangerous work. They sought to influence public opinion and public policy, and one of the ways in which they did so was through what they called Charity Organization Societies, a very early kind of think tank. The arguments elites used about the dangers of poor relief and the harm it caused the poor as well as the working and middle classes effectively portrayed their narrow class concerns as matters for the public good. And thanks to some three decades of effort, poor relief was ended or cut back in almost 80 percent of large American cities.

Taking these events together, the claim I make in the following pages is that welfare was "reformed" in the Gilded Age and in our New Gilded Age not because relief was corrupt or wasteful, not because the public demanded it, not because a better means of assisting the poor was contemplated, but because of the successful campaigns waged by organized and determined actors who were advancing their own narrow interests. During these periods of profound economic transformation, they used similar arguments to make ending or restricting relief seem an act of compassion, not of cruelty, thus giving political viability and moral legitimacy to their self-serving cause. Such propaganda was disseminated through similar kinds of organizations, Charity Organization Societies in one era and think tanks in another, that functioned as mediating institutions, linking their funders, the media, and the political system. Those funders, business elites who stood to benefit from such campaigns and who continued their financial support as the campaigns achieved success, were behaving rationally and intended these results. While they remained mostly behind the scenes during these battles, their investments allowed ostensibly neutral intellectuals with decidedly Victorian sensibilities to take the stage, reformers who helped, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes not, obscure their patrons' economic goals with moral rhetoric; that moral interpretation surely resonated with these business and professional men, but they could identify an economic interest as well, which in moments of candor they would admit, as we will see.

Reformers achieved significant results. Though it would occasionally fail, in the late nineteenth century anti-relief agitation helped lead to the widespread reduction or elimination of "lavish" outdoor relief (what we now call welfare) in cities throughout the country, an impressive outcome given organized charities' relatively limited budgets and the opposition they faced, especially in their early years. Late-twentieth-century reformers achieved even more striking successes than
their predecessors, rolling back the "explosion" in welfare rolls and elements of the "failed War on Poverty," in part because they had greater resources, well-cultivated influence with politicians, and easy access to a national media, and because, ironically, the New Deal had centralized poor relief, thereby narrowing their target. Their achievement is all the more impressive given the vast body of social science research that gave the lie to their claims. The enactment of similar kinds of work-enforcing policies had similar results, with need among the poor increasing, along with their dependence on the low-wage labor market, public costs rising, and private contractors reaping the financial rewards. These campaigns simultaneously sent a stern message to all marginal and disgruntled workers about the price of idleness, for as Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward wrote a generation ago, "to demean and punish those who do not work is to exalt by contrast even the meanest labor at the meanest wages." Moreover, such efforts helped to delegitimize a range of government interventions on behalf of the poor and working classes. Both campaigns were battles in much larger wars about the proper role of the state and the legitimacy of its interference in the free market, wars undertaken in response to the very real gains made by poor and working people in the post–Civil War and post–World War II periods.

There is one key difference between these reform epochs. While many charity reformers in the Gilded Age helped convince their cities to abolish or restrict public poor relief and to shift the burden of care to the voluntary sector, as their counterparts have done more recently, they later admitted that they had failed and that they had misdiagnosed the problem. In the aftermath of the 1893 depression, many cities found themselves overrun with the newly unemployed, a growing, angry, dangerous class desperate for food, fuel, and work. Cities found that voluntary charitable efforts were insufficient to confront the need they faced and more expensive than the public relief they had replaced. In fact, it turns out that many campaigns were not battles against public relief at all, but were instead battles against the patronage-driven private relief that rose in the wake of public relief abolition—Gilded Age reformers often fought against the ill effects of privatization; and the lessons that "compassionate conservatism" founder Marvin Olasky, President George W. Bush, and other Victorian revivalists would have us draw from this era about the successes of "faith-based" charity are entirely unsupported by the historical record. By the end of the nineteenth century many people who had once been anti-relief activists petitioned local governments to intervene and reinstate relief; many reformers softened or abandoned their opposition to public aid and waged new campaigns to expand public relief and to increase government regulation of the turbulent economy through efforts we now identify with the Progressive Era—struggles for unemployment insurance; state pensions for widows; sanitation, housing, and workplace reforms; controls on monopoly capital; regulations to govern manufacturing; and more. The failure of Gilded Age reforms helped lead to these very different kinds of reforms, reforms that in turn laid the foundation for the New Deal and the construction of the American welfare state. From 1893 through to the early 1970s, moral understandings of poverty largely gave way and were replaced by a more complicated science of social problem solving that took seriously the industrial, environmental, political, and economic causes of deprivation. It is this one-hundred-year-old transformation in understandings of the roots of misery and a tenuous political truce about the proper role of government that the late-twentieth-century mobilization against relief has sought to undo; we have returned to the Gilded Age and readopted a once-discredited discourse in
which poverty is a moral failure, aid to the poor itself causes poverty, and government efforts to ameliorate suffering exacerbate it.

The point is not that because comparable reforms failed then, they must fail now, but rather that we are building reforms upon the same assumptions that governed late-nineteenth-century reforms, in much the same way, for many of the same reasons, and the outcome of those similar struggles should inform current debate. More than that, viewing events through the worm’s eye can tell us about more than just poor relief or welfare. It can remind us that history does not move only forward and that the advance of time does not always bring with it progress. This is worth emphasizing, for with some few exceptions, those who have devoted their efforts to understanding welfare (cash and in-kind assistance of goods and services to the very poor) and the welfare state (broader protections such as old-age pensions, unemployment and disability insurance, and government-funded health care) have discussed them in evolutionary, progressive, forward-moving terms. From the grudging poorhouse relief of the colonial period to the broader gains of the Progressive Era, then the New Deal and the Great Society, a common story line suggests that over time, and especially in the twentieth century, poor and working people steadily gained protections from the state. It is a tale of progress. But how then do we account for the fact that twice in American history this evolutionary process seems to have moved backward, from 1873 to 1898, when thirty-nine of the fifty largest American cities cut back or eliminated their public cash-relief programs, and from 1973 to 1996, when the campaign that culminated in “welfare reform” finally repealed the New Deal’s federal-state guarantee of poor relief to all eligible people? Perhaps an examination of these policy changes can tell us something about how democratic governments can act against the best interests of the majority with relative impunity.

Perhaps it can teach us lessons about the operations of class in the supposedly classless United States and draw attention to sometimes-neglected corners of the American political system and the ways in which influence is exerted behind the scenes. Finally, perhaps it can show that despite the association of propaganda with totalitarian regimes, it is an essential tool of the powerful in democratic polities too, who can use it to deceive a populace into supporting policies that are against their best interests but are in the best interests of an elite minority. This last might seem a particularly timely lesson.
I

*Same As It Ever Was*

If we can restore the language of morality, reviving such words as illegitimacy and promiscuity, we may also be able to revive such concepts as discipline and self-discipline. Perhaps we may even be able to revive such archaic ideas as virtue and vice. And if we can remoralize social discourse, we may be able to remoralize social policy.


Too often it will be found that the root of the evil lies in the characters of the poor themselves—in habits of laziness, shiftlessness, intemperance, or vice, which have reduced them to an irregular and meagre subsistence. To such people, almsgiving, far from being the universal remedy, is a simple aggravation of the trouble. For demand and supply are the law of life as well as of trade. In Nature’s economy, strength tends to appear where it is called for; and strength will degenerate into weakness when another supplies the needs one could and should supply for one’s self. When, therefore, the lazy man finds that he gets on just as well without working, he will be less and less inclined to work. So of intemperance; for the drunkard who finds that, when he fails to provide for his family, his prosperous neighbors do, is to place a direct premium on drunkenness. Why should such people care to work to buy their children food and clothes, when they can get them for nothing for the asking? Moreover, alms to the improvident do not even relieve their material needs, for by no device can we permanently stand between a man and his own character. Others can never take as good care of him as he could take care of himself; and indiscriminate charity is by its very
nature insufficient and uncertain,—it first encourages a man to be idle, and then keeps him on the verge of starvation.

—Mrs. Glendower Evans,
National Conference on Charities and Corrections, 1889

This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.

—St. Paul, 2 Thessalonians 3:10

On September 15, 1995, U.S. secretary of health and human services Donna Shalala delivered to President William Jefferson Clinton a study predicting that the welfare reform legislation being considered by the Senate would drive over one million American children into poverty.\(^1\) Less than one year later, on August 22, 1996, Clinton, whose 1992 election campaign famously vowed to “end welfare as we know it,” signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRA), legislation in some respects harsher than the bill Shalala had warned him about.\(^2\) “The current welfare system is fundamentally broken,” he said, “and this may be our last best chance to set it straight.” The PRA repealed the New Deal’s Aid to Dependent Children program, imposed new work requirements upon relief recipients, made public assistance harder to get, and enacted time limits on its receipt. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, who had advocated work requirements since the 1960s, nonetheless called this new law “the most regressive and brutal act of social policy since Reconstruction.”\(^3\) One critic wrote: “We know how welfare reform will turn out . . . wages will go down, families will fracture, millions of children will be more miserable than ever.”\(^4\) Yet by 2002, on the eve of the first efforts to reauthorize the PRA, national rolls had been cut in half and there were fewer people on welfare than at any time in three decades. Official national poverty rates, even among children, even among African American children, had declined to record or near-record lows. A majority of former welfare recipients had entered the workforce. When reintroducing a reauthorization bill in early 2003, by which time relief rolls had fallen 60 percent from their peak in 1994, California representative Bill Thomas crowed: “Welfare reform has been a huge success. Work is up, dependence and poverty are down and hopes are brighter for the future.” Political scientist Lawrence Mead, like many others, noted with satisfaction: “Little evidence of hardship has surfaced.”\(^5\) Welfare reform has been widely proclaimed a success.

Some observers have been struck by the similarities between these late-twentieth-century American reforms and the English Poor Laws, especially the harsh New Poor Law of 1834.\(^6\) That comparison can be revealing: inspired by the eighteenth-century writings of Parson Thomas Malthus and his belief that poor relief subsidized the uncontrolled reproduction of the lower classes and protected the poor from the consequences of their own actions, the New Poor Law sought to abolish relief in industrializing Britain and relegate care for the “able-bodied” poor to the workhouse, where they might learn diligence, restraint, and independence, goals much like those of more recent policy events, it is true. But we need not go quite so far back in history or cross the Atlantic to find antecedents. Between 1874 and 1900 one-fourth of the fifty largest American cities (and many smaller ones as well) abolished welfare (“outdoor relief,” or “out relief,” they called it); one-third reduced their rolls and relief expenditures; and one-fifth offered only in-kind aid like food or coal, but no more cash. Most imposed a new “work test” as a condition for relief, which even to the most “deserving” was given sparingly, if at all. Reformers claimed that no harm had come to the poor. As Levi L. Barbour of Detroit said in 1891: “Quite a number of our large cities provide no outdoor relief,
and their statistics fail to reveal more suffering than exists in other cities which provide a large and yearly-increasing fund for that purpose. Poorhouse populations did not swell, street begging was eradicated, and the moral tone of the cities was improved, they observed with pleasure. By the early 1890s reform was proclaimed a success, just as it would be a century later.

These Gilded Age assaults on poor relief offer a more apt comparison than the English case, for while the resemblance between the Personal Responsibility Act and the Poor Law is real, its source is indirect: it was nineteenth-century American charity reformers such as the formidable Josephine Shaw Lowell, Rev. Stephen Humphreys Gurteen, and Children's Aid Society founder Charles Loring Brace who, long before the PRA, adopted and adapted the principles and programs of the Poor Law to suit Gilded Age America. Lowell even proclaimed the grim Report of the Royal Poor Law Commission, which led to the English reforms, "probably the most instructive historical document in existence which relates to pauperism" and devoted her 1884 book Public Relief and Private Charity to quoting it at length, extolling its virtues, and demonstrating how its features could be applied in urban America. The Poor Law— Influenced ideas espoused by Gilded Age reform leaders and the policies they helped enact would then, much later, serve as models for Marvin Olasky, Newt Gingrich, Charles Murray, and other leaders of the more recent reform movement; among our modern anti-welfare moralists, only historian Gertrude Himmel-farb would find occasion to draw explicitly on English policy. It is from these American Victorians that we have gained our current thinking about poor relief policy; it is from this Gilded Age experience that our New Victorians have borrowed, often quite consciously. That is why there is the faint whiff of Poor Law practice and philosophy in the PRA. The Poor Law first struck American shores not in 1996 but in the nineteenth century, and if we are going to look to the past for insight into contemporary politics and policy making, and in this case I think that we should, then we should first turn our attention to the neglected welfare history of Gilded Age America and not to more distant, foreign events.

**TWO GILDED AGES**

A comparison of these two late-century reform movements is important because they mark the only sustained and successful assaults on poor-relief programs in all of American history. But it is more than that, for there is something similar about the context in which they took place, something peculiar about these two historical epochs. History does not, of course, repeat itself—although we might remember Karl Marx’s warning that history is repeated, first as tragedy, then as farce—and much changed in American politics, society, and economy between the Gilded Age and our New Gilded Age; any historical analogy is treacherous, always imprecise and can obscure more than it reveals. The former was a period of nascent industrialism marked by economic and political conditions that were fundamentally different from the latter postindustrial age. The federal government had no relief role in the first era (even states were peripheral players), while debates about the relative roles of states and the federal government were central to our recent reforms. And the late nineteenth century was a period of widespread, often violent protest from workers and poor people demanding that government give them relief or, more commonly, work and higher wages. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, by contrast, and especially during debate over the PRA, poor people and their potential allies were mostly passive. The list could readily be expanded, but suffice it to say that circumstances were different.

Nonetheless, the ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had much in common, as author Kevin Phillips has been
at pains to point out. Both eras were marked by the dominance of laissez-faire philosophy and anti-government politics, large-scale economic and corporate restructuring and consolidation, massive tax cuts, a fragile labor movement under attack, concentrated wealth, high individual and corporate debt, and a speculative finance bubble. Both ages saw record influxes of immigrants, many of whom arrived to work long hours in dangerous jobs for low wages. For most families, no male breadwinner’s salary was sufficient, so women (and in the late nineteenth century, children) typically worked too. Prison populations exploded, teeming with poor immigrant men in the late nineteenth century and poor black and Hispanic men in the twentieth. The Supreme Court concerned itself with limiting national power over states and protecting private property from public responsibility, while the Congress attended to questions of monetary policy, tariffs, and civil service reform in the late nineteenth century, and budget policy, trade agreements, and campaign finance reform in the late twentieth. In these eras of divided government, in which one political party rarely controlled both the Congress and the presidency, complaints grew that the parties were indistinguishable and beholden to the same corporate interests. Note this stanza from U.M. Fisk’s “The Plutocrat’s Jubilee,” published in the American Nonconformist in 1894:

We own all the money—we will own the land.
The courts and the Congress are at our command.
Our fortunes have gone up like beautiful rockets.
We’ve the Dems and Republicans both in our pockets;
And to please the fool people, we make our salam,
And let them choose either—we don’t give a damn! 13

It sounds curiously like something The Nation’s “deadline poet,” Calvin Trillin, could have written in the early twenty-first century. And never mind the odd parallels between the contested presidential elections of 1876 and 2000.

But the most startling similarity is surely the economic inequality of both periods. In 1890, the wealthiest 12 percent of the population possessed 86 percent of all wealth, and the top 2 percent earned 50 percent of all income. 14 In 1999, the top 10 percent of the population possessed 71.8 percent of all wealth (while the wealthiest 1 percent owned 40.1 percent), and the top 1 percent earned 50.4 percent of all income. In 1976, by contrast, the wealthiest 1 percent owned 19.9 percent of all wealth. 15 The only other time in which wealth was as concentrated as these two periods was in 1929, just prior to the stock market crash. 16 Cities especially revealed the stratification of American society, from the vast mansions of the Vanderbilts set to the squalid, crowded slums of Five Points, or think more recently of dot-com millionaires’ mammoth new Silicon Valley houses while homelessness reached record levels.

Others before me have noted the extremes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Nexis news database, for one crude but suggestive measure, records from just 1995 to 1997, the years surrounding the PRA, hundreds of stories in major American newspapers that explicitly compared the 1990s to the Gilded Age, in articles about immense mergers, growing corporate power, ineffectual antitrust laws, robber barons and Bill Gates, old and new muggwumps, regressive tax policies, and tariff or trade policy wars. One article compared House Speaker Newt Gingrich to President McKinley’s cunning strategist Mark Hannah and, alternately, to the nineteenth century’s most influential social Darwinist, William Graham Summer; others reported on lavish parties, extravagant new restaurants, and the grand new houses of the twentieth century that made Gilded Age Newport mansions “look like servants quarters.” 17 The New Yorker later published an anthology of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century articles from its
pages titled simply *The New Gilded Age*. And *plutocracy* returned quietly to our political vocabulary.

This is more than superficial likeness. Both are pivotal eras of systemic change: the late nineteenth century marked the full flowering of American industrialization, and the late twentieth century the end of that era and the burgeoning of a (still-evolving) postindustrial economy. At the heart of both was a struggle to redefine the legitimate role of the state and to redraw the lines separating economic and political power, separating the public from the private: as political economist William Tabb wrote, “Globalization has put pressure on workers the same way the emergence of the national economy did a century earlier. These transformations, as capitalism moves into new stages of its development, are profoundly unsettling.” 18 Or, as Henry George wrote in 1879, “The ‘tramp’ comes with the locomotive, and almshouses and prisons are as surely the marks of ‘material progress’ as are costly dwellings, rich warehouses, and magnificent churches.” 19 Grand rewards for the few came with new miseries heaped upon the many, and the concentration of capital and the rise in power of those who controlled it enabled late-nineteenth-century corporations to extract and acquire new authority and legal privilege without the obligations that had previously attended them, as it does again today. 20 That new freedom from government and over labor was neither inevitable nor an inevitably “efficient” outcome, as business historian Alfred Chandler would have it; it was the result of a contest in which the private prevailed over the public (until, beginning in the Progressive Era, those gains were rolled back, controls were imposed, and the balance of power was shifted, for a time). 21

**Rhetoric of Reforms**

Regimes seeking to limit the disruptive potential of such division must either repress dissent or disarm it; totalitarian dictatorships or military rule are means to maintain such injustice, but to sustain (and exacerbate) such aristocratic class division in a putatively classless, democratic society is more complicated, and more discreet forms of control are required. 22 Those with wealth and power who sought to protect their status and enlarge their gains needed, among other things, some cohesive rationale, a dominant story that could explain the need for what might seem to be unjust and undemocratic outcomes. “Trickle-down economics” was one such story. Reformers who sought to roll back the already limited aid available to poor people created another kind of story, one in which relief did not reduce poverty but caused it, one in which the roots of need were moral, not industrial, one in which failure was the fault of the individual alone. There was less need for such elaborate public justifications from the 1930s to the 1970s because American society was less evidently split: the booming post–World War II economy distributed its bounty so that wages and living conditions of working people and the poor improved rather steadily and the privileged classes seemed willing (if grudgingly so) to share their wealth, even at the expense of their net income or corporate profits. 23 Not so in the Gilded Ages. The privileged fought more aggressively to increase their relative wealth and power; thanks to their efforts economic gains were more unevenly distributed and the immiseration of the many could reasonably be seen to be the price paid for the advancement of the few. Thus, historian Richard Hofstadter explained the Gilded Age rise of social Darwinism—the application of survival-of-the-fittest and natural-selection theories to economics, public policy, and charity—by observing that changes in the structure of social ideas wait on general changes in economic and political life. In determining whether such ideas are accepted, truth and logic are less important criteria than suitability to the intellectual needs and preconceptions of
[dominant] social interests. This is one of the great difficulties that must be faced by rational strategists of social change.24

These ideas took hold and came to prominence because they served a purpose that fit the times. That industrialist Andrew Carnegie identified himself as Herbert Spencer’s “disciple” (it was Spencer, not Darwin, who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest”) and that Sumner was exceedingly popular among businessmen are measures of the usefulness of such ideas in the Gilded Age and of the assurance they provided: “Successful business entrepreneurs apparently accepted almost by instinct the Darwinian terminology which seemed to portray the conditions of their existence,” reported Hofstadter. As one Standard Oil lawyer blithely observed, there is poverty only “because nature or the devil has made some men weak and imbecile and others lazy and worthless, and neither man nor God can do much for one who will do nothing for himself.”25 Reformer Josephine Shaw Lowell agreed: “we must start with the fundamental principle that all relief of bodily wants by outsiders is in itself bad,” and that to avoid this injury poor relief must be withdrawn and, instead, “paupers and paupers’ children may be re-educated and redeveloped into self-respecting men and women,” just as Malthus had recommended, just as so many have recently.26 This is at the center of Charles Loring Brace’s The Dangerous Classes and the core of his comprehensive reeducation and reacclimatization program for children, institutionalized in the Children’s Aid Society and made famous by its “orphan trains,” which took tens of thousands of poor children, many not orphans at all, and shipped them off to more pastoral settings. Brace, who was a friend of Darwin’s, read Origin of Species thirteen times.27

In the already chaotic mid-nineteenth-century world, the arrival of evolutionary theory shook the foundations of theological thought, but later it served a political function by bridging the gap between laissez-faire ideology, which demanded that the government not interfere in the market, and cultural and religious impulses for social welfare, which required aid to the poor on moral grounds; it was a “scientific” means to recast charity as an immoral intervention, and inaction as the more moral response. As one relief reformer commented, “Harsh as the law of survival of the fittest may appear, it is the law.”28 This may seem like tough love indeed, but it is in the best interest of the poor, and in the interest of society as a whole. Unlike Carnegie, reformers who found homes in nineteenth-century charity organization societies or twentieth-century think tanks were not necessarily acolytes of Spencer or Sumner or Malthus, but they deployed these theories to help formulate a “rationalization of the status quo” and an assault on the protections afforded poor and working people.29

How much of this rationalization was conscious and how much merely the reflexive, instinctive action of people seeking to justify their privileged place in the world is unclear. Many of those most responsible for constructing the philosophical foundation for anti-relief campaigns likely did believe that they were helping the poor, but as Bronislaw Geremek wrote about the repressive poor-relief policies of the Middle Ages, “History abounds in examples of schemes to thrust happiness upon men by force.”30 Arguing that offering assistance to poor people only deepens their poverty and insisting that economic self-sufficiency, even if it results in suffering, is the route to moral health and a rise from poverty, charity reformers of the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries sought to thrust happiness upon poor people by taking away what meager cash, food, or fuel was available to them. As Lowell urged: “We should be willing to suffer ourselves and see our poor friends suffer to save them from this fearful permanent evil,” the evil of out-relief.31 Besides, wrote well-born, well-to-do Lowell, “we exaggerate the importance of physical suffering,” for “hunger and
cold are not so pressing or so sharp as they are represented to be,” and we “must accept the statement that there has been nothing eaten for twenty-four hours rather as a fanciful way of describing the general poverty than as the exact truth.” Charity organization member Jacob Riis, famous for his photographs of the slums, suggested, “There is enough of real suffering in the homes of the poor to make one wish that there were some effective way of enforcing Paul’s plan of starving the drones into the paths of self-support: no work, nothing to eat.” The Heritage Foundation’s Robert Rector argued that there was no real hunger or poverty in late-twentieth-century America, and besides, any such need could be salutary, a spur to industry. Marvin Olasky somberly reminded us that the word compassion is from the Latin, meaning “with suffering.”

Suffering is compassion. This is not intuitive, and charity organization societies had to fight hard to convince the public, especially the old-money elites and the churches, of the evils of any almshousing apart from their proposed system of rigorous investigation and moral education. So too did the modern think tanks and their reformers struggle to overcome the ideas that seemed prevalent by the 1960s: that poverty was a blight on democratic society, that it could be alleviated, and that state intervention was an essential component in doing so. They succeeded, for here we are again, building public policy on unfounded, discredited, racist, and eugenicist social philosophy, unlearning the lessons of the twentieth century. While the rhetoric of reform was elaborate and extended well beyond any simplistic social Darwinism and was not by itself enough to compel the repeal of relief, it was a necessary condition for it. Had policy makers and the public believed that what a century of increasingly sophisticated social science has proved true—that poverty is rooted chiefly in industrial and economic causes beyond the control of the poor—then repeal would have been much harder to achieve. What both ages’ anti-relief reformers had in common was the insistence that poverty was the result of immoral or unwise behavior, and that remoralizing the poor must be the principal focus of any effective program. It was therefore not the state, business, markets, tax policy, education, discrimination, or any other politically controllable aspect of society that required alteration, and therefore a reorganization of power relations, but the poor themselves.

Late-twentieth-century policy has been built on nineteenth-century knowledge. Hofstadter predicted this, in a way: “A resurgence of social Darwinism . . . is always possible so long as there is a strong element of predacity in society.” We have entered that new predatory era. While the policies of the Progressive Era through the New Deal and Great Society generally conceded that poverty was the problem to be addressed and government intervention in the market was to be an integral part of the solution to it, in the Gilded Age and our New Gilded Age, efforts to relieve poverty were the problem and, oddly enough, the cause of poverty itself. The success of the Personal Responsibility Act was thus often judged in the press and by policy makers in terms of how many people were driven from the welfare rolls, not by whether their poverty had been reduced or their standard of living improved, just as the charity organization societies proclaimed their effectiveness in their annual reports by demonstrating that with each passing year they offered assistance to fewer people than they had the year before. Dependence and pauperism were the evils to be remedied, not poverty: “the focus must be on changing and saving people,” lectured Gingrich, to find ways to overcome, insisted Mead, the “fundamental incompetence” of poor women.

The sheer futility of trying to help the poor with material aid was a central theme of both eras’ reformers and a key component of their brief against relief. Just as journalist Mickey Kaus observed in a 1992 anti-welfare book that “giving people money only gives people money,” one writer in 1886 sighed,
“Out-door relief inevitably becomes, in a greater or less degree, a mechanical, hard, and unfeeling grant of codfish, of oatmeal, of potatoes, of coal,—in the worst cases, of money.” Consider this from William Slocum’s 1892 address to the National Conference on Charities and Corrections (NCCC):

Indiscriminate almsgiving is a crime against society. It is opposed to the divine order. It saps the very foundation of the self-respecting home. It destroys the best element of true society. It destroys citizenship and those active powers of the human soul that put it in sympathy with the divine ideal... almsgiving, while it may, in a way, express charity, has not the essence of charity.40

Compare it with this, from a 2000 Heritage Foundation report by Robert Rector, their chief welfare analyst:

One-way handouts usually hurt those they are intended to help. True charity begins by requiring responsible behavior from the beneficiary as a condition of receiving aid. True charity seeks to generate in the recipient the virtues, commitment, and self-discipline necessary for success in society, rather than passively subsidizing ever-escalating levels of social pathology... what is needed is transformation in the realm of ideas, a change in the current philosophical foundations that govern both government and private aid to the poor.41

These were hardly new ideas, nor were they unique to these epochs—late-nineteenth- and late-twentieth-century relief antagonists employed tropes with centuries-long pedigrees. Nor is this to suggest that there was no opposition to anti-relief rhetoric, for there were dissenting voices across both eras. But pro-relief ideas and voices did not dominate; it was the vision of relief articulated by Slocum and Rector that set the terms of the debate, and the reassertion of Gilded Age, Victorian conceptions of charity and poor relief was an explicit goal of many of our New Victorian moralists and anti-welfare reformers. As Mead urged in 1994: “Researchers might return to a discourse about poverty more like that of a century ago,” when “debate chiefly was about the mentality or morality of the poor and how they might be reformed by special institutions, such as the work house or the mental hospital.”42 He advocated a “New Paternalism” that would use the power of the state to compel upright behavior from the wayward poor, which had much in common with Rev. Gurteen’s agenda of moral reforms pursued in late-nineteenth-century Buffalo.43 The Hudson Institute’s Joel Schwartz, writing after the enactment of the PRA, told readers: “The virtues of diligence, sobriety, thrift, and familial responsibility were unhesitatingly commended to the poor in the mid-nineteenth century... [and] are actually more applicable today as remedies for poverty than they were when the moral reformers first espoused them.”44 Murray, whose 1984 polemic Losing Ground remained influential into the 1990s debate, and Rector, by most accounts among the greatest influences during the drafting of reform legislation, each found occasions to refer us back to the supposed golden age of nineteenth-century private charity. Himmelfarb also harkened back: “contemplating our own society, we may be prepared to take a more appreciative view of Victorian moralism—of the ‘Puritan ethic’ of work, thrift, temperance, cleanliness; of the idea of ‘respectability’... of the reverence for ‘home and hearth’; of the stigma attached to the ‘able-bodied pauper’ and of the spirit of voluntarism.”45 She argued that only a return to the traditional virtues—chastity, charity, fidelity, thrift, work, self-discipline—could keep modern society from spinning apart; by re-creating a sense of shame in receiving relief, as the English Poor Law did, self-reliance and thus a healthier society would result. And then there is Olasky, who insisted that
in America "during the nineteenth century, a successful war on poverty was waged by tens of thousands of local, private charitable agencies . . . [they were the] platoons of the greatest charity army in American history." 46 His 1992 book The Tragedy of American Compassion explicitly encouraged policy makers to emulate the supposed successes of the personal, private, "faith-based" charity of the Gilded Age. "Many lives can be saved," he promised, "if we recapture the vision that changed lives up to a century ago." 47

That vision is easily identified. As poverty research pioneer and charity organization society member Robert Hunter said: "The sins of men should bring their own punishment, and the poverty which punishes the vicious and the sinful is good and necessary." 48 Nineteenth-century reformers told salacious, cautionary tales about the sinfulness of relief recipients that were made familiar again by Ronald Reagan, who warned us of the welfare queen, lolling about, living her life on the dole, and breeding a nest of predatory, dependent paupers. Said Reagan, "She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve social security cards and is collecting benefits on four nonexistent deceased husbands . . . Her tax-free cash income alone is over $150,000." 49 At the National Conference on Charities and Corrections of 1877, R.L. Dugdale presented a paper on "The Jukes," a multigenerational tribe of degraded, drunken, illegitimate, and licentious paupers who in seventy-five years, he said, had together cost the public well over $1 million. Inspired by the Jukes, at the NCCC the following year Indiana's Oscar McCulloch presented his own study, "Tribe of Ishmael: A Study in Social Degradation." These paupers and their descendants, he claimed, "underrun society like devil-grass." Dugdale and McCulloch lingered on the effects of sex and alcohol with a prurient fascination that seems all too familiar among the New Victorians of the late twentieth century. Here's Senator John Ashcroft, some years before becoming attorney general under

George W. Bush, speaking to celebrate the then-impending welfare reform:

There is also the story of Ernesto Ventura. He is at least the fourth generation of a welfare family that includes about 80 welfare recipients and takes up nearly $1 million a year annually in welfare funds . . . At the time of his abuse, his mother was 26, pregnant, and the mother of six children by five different fathers. She was a drug addict supported by welfare. 50

As part of their efforts to undo relief, many reformers have worked hard to portray welfare recipients as the irredeemable poor, members of a culture of poverty or an underclass, and the connection with Spencer is inescapable: to identify a separate culture of poverty is to define a whole class of the unfit. 51 It is the inability or unwillingness of the ghetto poor to change culturally transmitted pathologies—as anthropologist Oscar Lewis described some of them, "present-time" orientation, early sexual activity, female-centered families, lack of impulse control—that is the chief cause of their high rates of violence, out-of-wedlock births, welfare dependency, and poverty. This culture-of-poverty notion was widely promulgated in the late twentieth century, 52 and as popularized by Ken Auletta's The Underclass and even Michael Harrington's The Other America, it became rhetorical shorthand for describing an immobile, black, dangerous, intergenerational ghetto class nourished by welfare payments. 53 Whether there is a culture of poverty and what its functions might be for the urban poor are ultimately irrelevant here—the idea of a permanent underclass is useful for opponents of relief, just as Spencer and Malthus are useful, for it places the solution to such problems outside of government intervention. 54

This stigmatization of the poor was elaborated in even bolder ways. For Hunter and for so many others, pauperism,
"like parasitism," was "a disease of character," a natural illness that marked the poor as a special class of the sick. Disease metaphors were common; historian Kenneth Kusmer called it "the rhetoric of contagion." Wrote Buffalo Charity Organization Society General Secretary Frederick Almy in 1900, "Pauperism is far too contagious a disease to be tolerated with safety. When once contracted, it becomes rapidly virulent, and the epidemic spreads from room to room in a tenement and from house to house in a street." Slocum told the 1892 Conference on Charities that "pauperism is a disease ... it must be destroyed." Moreover, "the presence in the community of certain persons living on public relief, has the tendency to tempt others to sink to their degraded level," for it is "infectious," observed Lowell. For Social Gospel proponent Washington Gladden, relief was a "cancer that is eating out the heart of our social morality." Brace wrote, "When this disease of pauperism is fairly mingled in the blood of children, their condition is almost hopeless." We have again sought to understand poverty or, more typically, welfare receipt as symptomatic of disease with what Sanford Schram and Joe Soss call a discourse of "disorder, sickness and infantilism"; to take an extreme example, in the wake of the WPA one welfare office prescribed the antidepressant Prozac for its applicants, offering a pharmaceutical "cure" for welfare dependence.

Or as Almy said, "Alms are like drugs, and are as dangerous; they create an appetite which is more harmful than the pain which they relieve." George Gilder observed many decades later that "excessive welfare hurts its recipients, demoralizing them or reducing them to an addictive dependency that can ruin their lives." Economist William Niskanen in the Cato Journal called relief a "narcotic" (as FDR had decades earlier). For Samuel Bishop relief was a "poison." Moses King's 1893 Handbook of New York proudly reported, "Thousands of active philanthropists are daily saving New York from the po-son of its depraved and degraded humanity and the venom of pauperized peasant immigration." More recently, George Vaillant offered "a psychiatric viewpoint" by which he described poverty as both an addiction and a disease, and proposed various treatments to cure it, and would no doubt be pleased with the pharmaceutical treatments described above. These understandings of poverty have precedence even in law; in 1837 the U.S. Supreme Court in City of New York v. Miln allowed New York to bar poor people from the city, citing "the moral pestilence of paupers." Not until 1941 in Edwards v. California would they overturn that decision, arguing, "We do not think that it will now be seriously contended that because a person is without employment and without funds he constitutes a 'moral pestilence.'" But contended it would be again.

Recipients were compared unfavorably to animals, too, for "as vultures flock to the carrion, drunken and shiftless paupers crowd the cities having the largest poor-fund. They are all entitled, they think, to a share, and they want it." Alfred Crozier of Grand Rapids said in 1897, "Instead of finding employment for the poor woman who begs for temporary help, you give her alms. It is easier, and perhaps cheaper. But you have poisoned her soul. Her children are now taught lies by their mother, and sent out under fictitious names to forage on the public. You have converted that once happy though poor home into a nest of paupers, breeding like vipers, and multiplying their accursed species." Barbour told the NCCC, "A swarm of bees, it is said, when removed to a tropical clime, learn that winter never comes, and soon cease to lay up a store of honey. So the pauper, learning that there is a fund for his support, basks in the sunshine of constant expectation, neither toiling nor spinning." This remains familiar. During welfare reform debate in the House of Representatives, John Mica of Florida, arguing that "we have upset the natural order. ... We have created a system of dependency," suggested that the logic of signs posted...
in his state that commanded “Do Not Feed the Alligators” might be applied to welfare and its recipients. Later that day Representative Barbara Cubin of Wyoming again emphasized the dangers in feeding wild animals, the harm that came from her state’s “wolf welfare program,” and the similar danger of interfering with the natural order and creating dependence by offering welfare to the poor.72

Efforts to isolate and stigmatize the poor—and thereby discourage the middle class from identifying with them—have taken more predictable forms as well. Race pervaded late-twentieth-century discussions of welfare just as fears of the foreign-born permeated relief debates in the nineteenth century. As Murray wrote: “AFDC evolved into the bête noire of the social welfare system. By the fifties it had become embarrassingly, outrageously clear that most of these women were not widows. Many of them had not even been married. Worst of all, they didn’t stop having babies after the first lapse. They kept having more. This had not been part of the plan. The most flagrantly unrepentant seemed to be mostly black, too.”73 Similarly, in 1876 the first of many papers claiming that it was immigrant children who must burden public coffers was presented at the national charities conference, while Theodore Roosevelt Sr. recommended a year later that relief funds be reallocated to ship the “generally shiftless” and impudent Negro back to the South.74 Between 1880 and 1892, the New York State Board of Charities forcibly repatriated 1,879 European paupers, at a cost of $41,000.75 It was a renewed terror of overpopulation by the unit.

The portrayal of welfare mothers as sexually rapacious beings reproducing a brood of future thugs, all with the help of the public purse, was another shared theme: “The paramount goal of welfare reform,” observed Rector, “was to reduce illegitimacy and restore marriage.”76 In fact, one of the proclaimed welfare goals of Gingrich’s Contract with America was to discourage illegitimacy and teen pregnancy by prohibiting welfare to minor mothers,” and the very first words of Title I of the PRA declared, “Marriage is the foundation of a successful society.”77 Murray had long advocated “group homes” for unwed pregnant teens, and famously wrote, “Illegitimacy is the central social problem of our time, and... its spread threatens the underpinnings of a free society... the main reason for scrapping welfare is to reduce the number of babies born to single women.”78 As American moralist William Bennett told the House Ways and Means Committee in 1995, “Welfare may not cause illegitimacy, but it does make it economically viable. It sustains it and subsidizes it. And what you subsidize, you get more of. Welfare is illegitimacy’s economic life-support system.”79 Traditional Values Coalition lobbyist Andrea Sheldon threatened during the welfare reform debate that if any bill didn’t squarely address illegitimacy, “then you don’t have anything.”80

These are not new goals of American poor relief policy. Some Philadelphia public officials as early as 1827 complained that it was unmarried mothers who were the principal users of relief, and in 1835 the city briefly eliminated pensions to women because they “fostered dependence and vice and discouraged women from taking up wage labor jobs outside their homes.”81 Lowell wrote later when urging the passage of a state law that would have committed any poor woman with two illegitimate children to a reformatory that “the very character of the women must be changed. . . . The unhappy beings we are speaking of need, first of all, to be taught to be women; they must be induced to love that which is good and pure, and to wish to resemble it; they must learn all household duties; they must learn to enjoy work; they must have a future to look forward to, and they must be cured, both body and soul, before they can be safely trusted to face the world again.”82 Hysteria over sex and marriage traveled a line from Malthus and Lowell to Murray and Gilder and
the Heritage Foundation. But while such rhetoric has focused upon the dependence of women, especially black or "foreign" women, it is their independence, from men and from low-wage work, that seems to be the real target.

The insistence upon work in lieu of relief is at the core of reformers' worldview, tethered to the promise of upward mobility. Stories like those in the novels of Horatio Alger loomed large in the relief narratives of the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, demonstrating that any industrious young man could rise to the better classes and reinforcing the idea that welfare was unnecessary, an enabler of immoral and irresponsible behavior. Alger was a key figure in Newt Gingrich's videotaped college course, Renewing American Civilization, the myth updated to include Oprah Winfrey, Clarence Thomas, and Arnold Schwarzenegger as paragons of the boundless opportunity available to the diligent and virtuous. Alger's novels do not live up to the myth of them, however, for it is not hard work alone that enables the poor street urchin to rise to commanding heights. Rather, improbable coincidence and blind luck, an almost mystical and magical luck, are always central elements. American class mobility in the nineteenth century has often been exaggerated, and despite the much-touted example of Carnegie and his rise from poverty to power broker, he was atypical. Corporate and political leaders were, with rare exception, native-born, Protestant, of British heritage, and the sons of businessmen or professionals; between 1880 and 1890, at best 12 percent of Boston's blue-collar workers advanced to white-collar jobs. Yet the myth persists, and American mobility continues to be exaggerated. The United States, for example, today offers less income mobility than do Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Our exit rate from poverty is among the lowest of advanced nations, with a substantially higher likelihood that those who do escape will return within five years. The typical

low-wage worker in an advanced European economy earns over 40 percent more than he or she would in the United States, while in 1998 only a Portuguese worker was likely to work more hours than an American. Over 26 percent of American workers earned poverty-level wages in 1999, and American poverty rates continue to rank the highest among OECD nations. The Alger cult, like any effective ideology, like the rest of the rhetoric of reform, obscured the reality of the world we inhabited then and obscures the world we inhabit now, a world in which, for many, hard work does not offer an escape from poverty.

But this rags-to-riches mythology was essential to the claims of reformers. If we believe that there is truly equality of opportunity in America, then any inequality of outcomes must be a problem of individual failure, and government interference is inappropriate favoritism. In such a world, government can only be a neutral arbiter by refusing to intervene, allowing the marketplace (of politics, of ideas, of economy) to decide the rightful, deserving victors. Diligence alone is salvation, or as Gilder put it, "The only dependable route from poverty is always work, family and faith." Like so much anti-relief philosophy, the relentless focus upon the individual and her supposed moral failure distracts attention from the much more powerful forces and actors that limit such mobility to the few. Those who do nonetheless overcome such formidable obstacles are then held out as exemplars, never far from the photo op when a politician celebrates reform.

Contemporary anti-relief reformers still hold tight to these ideas. Mead conceded that work may be difficult to obtain, "dirty," and offer few rewards to poor people with little education and few marketable skills, yet he nonetheless insisted that "employment is a school of virtue" and has argued that "poverty may be due not so much to a lack of opportunity, as to a lack of enforcement of social norms such as the work ethic."
He noted elsewhere, “Reluctantly, policymakers have begun to accept that work must be enforced as are other civilities such as obedience to the law or tax payment . . . the solution to the work problem lies in obligation, not in freedom. . . . The great question is how to get more of the employable poor to participate in the economy, in any kind of job, not how to improve those jobs.” Olasky has made the same argument, that true freedom is hard work, that in the nineteenth century “freedom was the opportunity for a family to escape dire poverty by having a father work long hours and a mother sew garments at home.” As Murray has observed, “to sustain [upward] mobility, the United States has depended on the willingness of the poor to make investments—of time, energy, psychic commitment, and money. Because these investments are being made by people with very little to spare in the first place, investing means that an already difficult existence must be made even more difficult.” New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani argued that the job centers he proposed to replace welfare offices would transform the city and former welfare recipients, because instead of offering cash or Medicaid or food stamps, “the first thing we try to do is to find you a job, because we really care about you, we really love you and we really understand the human personality a lot better than the people who brought us dependency.” As the words over one medieval workhouse proclaimed, labore nutras, labore pecora: “by work I am nourished, by work I am punished.” In the reformers’ lexicon, justice is inaction, obligation is freedom, liberty is responsibility, and work is love.

MISUSES OF PUBLIC OPINION

This late-twentieth-century resurgence of Gilded Age interpretations of and responses to poverty and relief is important, as is the rhetoric used by policy makers and pressure groups, yet the production of policy ideas, the creation of public opinion and the sources of “conventional wisdom” have been absent in most accounts of welfare policy making. Yet without them, our understanding is too limited. Welfare reform did not rise to the top of the national political agenda in the 1990s because “the public demanded policy change,” as many analysts have put it. Anti-welfare activists set out decades earlier to alter opinion. They tapped into resonant, almost archetypal ideas about poverty and about poor people, about women, of self-sufficiency and the work ethic, and of ethnic or racial stereotypes, and created with them a rationale, a political logic, a philosophical foundation for their preferred policies. Their arguments were then repeated so often in an environment in which alternative messages were so rare that the public, quite predictably, followed the lead of elites and accepted those arguments as fact. As public opinion expert Robert Shapiro and his colleagues wrote about work requirements, “the public consensus is a broadly sweeping and vague preference in search of a viable policy,” and polls are notorious for the ambivalence and confusion they record, with respondents consistently supporting “aid to the poor” while at the same time opposing “welfare.” Growing opposition to the supposed expense of welfare was evident only after Clinton's anti-welfare campaign rhetoric was disseminated, reached its peak when news coverage of the issue peaked, and had already begun to fade by 1997. Nor can we explain nineteenth-century relief withdrawals by saying that “public clamor compelled a change,” despite the claims of charity reformers and later historians. To the contrary, public opinion was initially allied against reformers and their charity organization societies and only began to change after their anti-relief campaigns had become widespread and the subject of much laudatory newspaper coverage.

Contrary to another bit of conventional wisdom, politicians can and do ignore public opinion, seeking instead to manipu-
late it, or prime it, in order to "create the appearance of responsiveness . . . to find the most effective means to move public opinion closer to their own desired policies." Public opinion did not drive reform; reform drove public opinion. To be sure, we cannot explain these policy outcomes without describing the specific political circumstances that enabled these reforms to "succeed" when they had failed so often before, but we cannot adequately explain those micro-politics without understanding the ways in which the very context within which reform was debated and understood had been altered. People have always been ambivalent about poor relief, after all, and governments have for centuries celebrated work while they blamed the poor and punished their poverty: in the Middle Ages, Venice sentenced those caught begging without a license to imprisonment or public whipping, Rouen required all the dependent poor to identify themselves by wearing yellow crosses on their sleeves, and the gallows were often erected next to the poorhouse to make the link between poverty and punishment unmistakable. Antipathy to public relief and efforts to stigmatize and punish the poor have been documented throughout American history; as I've noted, even Franklin Delano Roosevelt characterized relief as a "narcotic." To point to our "exceptional" and racialized political culture or American opinion aligned against welfare is thus to identify constancy, not change, and to identify public antipathy to welfare as a cause for policy change is therefore illogical. The more useful question, it seems to me, is to ask why it is that only twice have such common sentiments so governed policy making and resulted in a retrenchment of relief.

Part of the answer is that it matters which voices dominate debate. Political scientist Vivien Schmidt, comparing Britain with New Zealand, the Netherlands with Germany, and different regimes within Italy and France, argued that successful modern implementations of regressive welfare policy change have depended upon the use of what she calls "transformative communicative discourse." Effective discourse helped democratically elected government actors "justify policies that go against the immediate or perceived interests of [their] own constituency" to benefit a narrower set of more powerful national or international interests, she found. So too, I argue, for the United States. Such transformative discourse—such rhetoric, such propaganda—is one means by which the institutionalized and entrenched resilience of the modern welfare state can be overcome, allowing the state to rescind benefits without resistance from those who would be harmed. Ideas really do matter, and they were made to matter in similar ways in both Gilded Ages.

Relief reform was not a democratic political response to public dissatisfaction with failed programs. Instead, reformers portrayed their actions as a reaction to public backlash against the "indiscriminate relief" of the 1870s or the "failed War on Poverty" ninety years later. Mead, to take one example of this, asserted, "Controversy about welfare arose because of rising welfare rolls." That is a common claim, but it presumes far too much: it implies that there was only one way to interpret the fact of rising relief rolls, only one possible meaning to attach to the event. But we could imagine other interpretations, other meanings, other ways to understand this fact. Perhaps in noting the expansion of welfare since the late 1960s, which occurred in part because many of the discriminatory practices that had kept eligible black women off the rolls were ended by the Supreme Court, leaders might have concluded that larger welfare rolls more accurately measured true need in the United States, and thereby increased their determination to reduce poverty. Or they might have taken pride in the new racial inclusiveness of government programs that now protected more of the most vulnerable workers from the worst features of the low-wage labor market. Or they might have asked how many
in need were still not receiving the benefits for which they were eligible, and set out to enroll them as well. Rising rolls could have been interpreted as a mark of success, not of failure; rising rolls need not have been identified as a political problem and did not necessitate rising antipathy to welfare—that was only one of many possible outcomes. The “fact” of rising rolls had no single independent meaning—such facts do not exist independent of interpretations of them.113

None of these or other alternative stories about rising relief rolls came to prominence, of course, and part of my task is to explain why. Public antipathy to welfare, or, to be more precise, the perception of public antipathy to welfare, was created. It was created in the latter period by think tanks, foundations, and politicians of both parties with the help of a complicit (if sometimes unknowingly complicit) mass media, and in the former period by the charity organization societies, the chambers of commerce, sympathetic politicians, and partisan newspapers. Reformers then pointed to such opinion as one justification for enacting their proposed policy changes. Relief reform was in part the result of a successful propaganda campaign, the outcome of an effort to sell ideas to the public and, more importantly, to policy makers, about how the most effective means of assisting poor people was not to extend aid to them but quite the reverse—to cut off public aid and compel work. The arguments used to justify relief withdrawal—that giving cash, food, or shelter to poor, hungry, or homeless people would only impoverish, injure, and debase them—have always had adherents. These ideas have always been taken seriously by some, but never by so many. Never have they so formed the basis for public policy as they did in the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. But whatever its failings, and they are legion, poor relief, by setting a floor for wages and by allowing some, for a time, to refuse low-wage work, is a boon not only to those who receive it but to all low- to midrange workers. This is the dirty little secret of welfare.114 Antirelief activists succeeded, in both eras, in convincing the working classes that they were being exploited, funding expensive welfare out of their own pockets, and that it was against their own best interests to do so. It's an old story, pitting one subordinate class against another to better secure power, but no less effective for its familiarity.