A People's History of Poverty in America

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INTRODUCTION
The Indignant Poor
and the Constants of Relief

I am reminded of the old lady who went from the interior to the sea. She had lived a life of poverty. She had never had enough of anything. All the food that went upon her table, all the clothing she wore, had to be carefully considered. One day, she was taken by some kind relatives to the seaside. There she sat in silence, and not a word was to be had from her at first; and, when they looked at her, the tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Why, aunt," said her niece, "what is the matter? Are you sick?" "No," she cried, "I am not sick; but, thank God, I have seen something there is enough of."

—Oscar McCulloch, 1889

One December early in the terrible depression of 1893, with Christmas approaching, a parade of finely attired ladies from the Children’s Potted Plant Society made their way down to the slums of New York’s Lower East Side on a charitable mission. Their plan was simple: they would give a small plant to each of the neediest young cases, offering them a bit of life and color for their grim, cramped abodes. They looked forward to the grateful, smiling faces as they distributed their bounty, one little plant to each little pauper. Perhaps that warm thought made up for the trepidation they must have felt venturing into such foreign territory. Helen Gould (daughter of Jay Gould, the ruthless robber baron) counted the society among her most favorite charities.

Perhaps you can imagine their surprise, then, when instead of being met by an orderly procession of humble supplicants, the children "rushed the
staging area, seized four or five plants apiece, and ran off to market them on the streets.” The women were beside themselves with fear, and perplexed. For some, it probably confirmed their belief that “the poor” were irredeemable: they were only trying to help, after all, and were met with incivility and ingratitude.

But the children were surely as perplexed as the women of the society: why would anyone bring them houseplants, which would inevitably die in their sunless, airless apartments, when they had so many urgent needs? And yet, useless plants could be turned into something useful. These children made their own judgments about what they needed and potted plants were not on the list, so they behaved as poor men. women, and children have behaved for centuries if they intended to survive—they took what little was made available to them and turned it to their own advantage. It might as well have been flour confiscated in an early American food riot, the milk and diapers taken by women during the supermarket raids of the New York blackouts, income illegally earned while receiving welfare benefits, or food and supplies looted from New Orleans store shelves in the awful aftermath of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina.

On another occasion some years later, it was pots of geraniums that were given away by “some sympathetic and leisureed ladies” to ten thousand children gathered from the New York tenements. Apparently no violence ensued this time, the flowers were successfully distributed, and the women must have felt well satisfied with having done such a good deed. One year after, they returned triumphantly, “in luxuriously equipped automobiles,” to the scene of their benevolence, “to smile and be condescended to,” and to award prizes to the worthy children who had best cared for their floral charges. It was to be a grand day. But few of the children were to be found, and even fewer of the flowers. Many were dead, of course, children and flowers alike. The women were shocked, and they probably returned to their homes a little unsettled, a little confused, just as their sisters had been in 1899.

At around the same time, Alexander Irvine, who had risen to some success despite a boyhood in the poorhouse, brought a collection of poor children from the city to a friend’s “lawn party” in Montclair, New Jersey, so that he might expose them to the salutary effects of fresh country air. The children, two-thirds of whom were Jewish, were suitably agape at such suburban wonders as elaborate flower gardens and towering trees, but, it would appear from Irvine’s telling, insufficiently appreciative of the luncheon—milk and ham sandwiches. By all accounts the children tried to be polite, and suitable food was found for them, but they too must have been a bit taken aback by the uselessness of the aid that was offered to them. So it is with so many efforts to help, then and now: the good intentions of comfortable men and women, private charities, and governments is not enough, and they cannot provide meaningful assistance if they are blind to the reality of the lives they seek to improve. Novelist Edith Wharton, a sharp observer of class in America, said it well:

Affluence, unless stimulated by a keen imagination, forms but the vaguest notion of the practical strain of poverty.

Private charity and public relief have often lacked not just keen imagination but consistency, for plants and flowers have not always been deemed suitable comforts. Early in the 1900s, one social worker took a client to task because she had planted a few flowers in her yard. The poor woman was reminded that she should have devoted the space to growing something productive, something edible. It is not known whether she dug them up to please her benefactors or kept for herself this corner of indulgence in her tiny garden. In other times, such as during the boisterous Lawrence “mill girls” strike of 1912, flowers even became a symbolic part of a claim that mere subsistence was not enough—dignity and beauty, too, were legitimate expectations, these working women insisted. As the song went:

Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.

As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead  
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.  
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.  
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,  
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.  
No more the drudge and idler, ten that tell where one reposes,  
But a sharing of life’s glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes; 
Hearts starve as well as bodies; bread and roses, bread and roses.6

For this they received much scorn. But why shouldn’t poor and working Americans expect more than mere subsistence? Why should it be ludicrous that they demand some measure of joy in their lives? And why should we accept the easy and arrogant presumption that philanthropists and relief agents should substitute their own judgment for that of their clients? As one homeless man recently said to me in response to new programs in New York City that pay welfare recipients and others for certain “responsible” behaviors, “I’m not stupid, I’m just poor. People don’t seem to get the difference.”7 It is ironic, as historian Michael Katz has noted, that in the name of fostering independence among the welfare-reliant, public and private assistance alike often require their subservience and their supplication.8 In 1789, those seeking aid from the Committee for Improving the Condition of Free Blacks were required to display “a becoming deference,”9 just as New York City welfare administrator Jason Turner noted after 1996’s welfare reform that a condition of aid should be that applicants exhibit “respectful behavior” toward caseworkers.10 In 1967, one proud woman was held for “psychiatric evaluation” in Bellevue Hospital after having stubbornly refused to allow an agent of the welfare department to inspect her closets.11 As some Alabama women told the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1968, eligibility for relief has often been dependent upon other kinds of appropriate behavior, too:

They are not going to help you if they find out you are in the civil rights . . . they better not know you are participating in the civil rights movement.

When the commissioner asked what the consequences would be, a Mrs. Wage replied:

Well, if they have given you any money, they will try and cut your money off and just treat you cold and all; beat you to death, if necessary.12

There is something peculiarly counterproductive about the disapprobation that has been heaped upon poor, homeless, and welfare-reliant Amer-

icans, and the manner in which they have been infantilized, articulated here in 1973 by a Head Start parent, Mrs. Robert Manwarren:

You see, the fact that most people who have never been poor can’t understand is that it doesn’t make any difference if you are poor white, poor black, or any of the combinations. You are forced to feel that you are not as good or as smart as other people. . . . How can we expect people who don’t believe that they are worth anything, to get anywhere.13

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith has written that in an affluent society, “nothing requires it to be compassionate. But it has no high philosophical justification for callousness.”14 But Americans are callous, when not merely indifferent, and we have been throughout most of our history. Which brings me to one last flower story. In the late 1990s Walt, a homeless panhandler living in Washington, D.C., said this:

There are people who are gonna be rude to you—that are gonna look at you like you’re an animal. It’s no different than looking at flowers. Some people look at flowers and they say, “That’s a beautiful flower.” And they stop and smell them. Others look at the thing and say, “That’s just something growing in the yard.”15

Today, as it has often been, poor men and women are thought of, when thought of at all, as just something growing in the yard. Perhaps social critic Dwight Macdonald had it right in 1963:

There is a monotony about the injustices suffered by the poor that perhaps accounts for the lack of interest the rest of society shows in them. Everything seems to go wrong with them. They never win. It’s just boring.16

These are almost random vignettes, but they highlight a few of the features that have been constants in American poverty and welfare history, and suggest the bottom-up manner in which I’ll recast that history in the following pages.17 There is a general ignorance about the lives led by poor Americans, an ignorance, whether real or feigned, that shapes public discourse about poverty and welfare, and policy itself. At the turn of the twen-
tenth century, New York photographer and journalist Jacob Riis famously documented “how the other half lives.” But to learn why they lived as they did, or how they survived, we will have to turn elsewhere. One goal of this book is, with Edith Wharton’s indictment in mind, to help form more than that “vague notion” of poverty—to more fully introduce readers to poor and working people, showing how thin the line has been and still is between just getting by and not getting by at all; to document the heroic efforts mere survival has often required; to celebrate the security that well-placed and reliable assistance can offer (while revealing its more oppressive face); and to demonstrate how a generous and fairly administered program of welfare can make responsibility and dignity possible by providing recipients with the ability to care for children or for frail parents, to attend college, to access health care for their children, to escape violence or abuse in the home, or to refuse degrading, dangerous, low-wage work. As we will see, welfare can make you more free.

More attention to those most affected by but often missing from our histories of poverty and welfare might also help unseat a cruel deceit at the heart of American political culture. A creed of individualism may well suit the better off, but it’s a danger to the more fragile classes, who must share their resources and pool their need. Their interdependence is a necessity and a balm, and another constant throughout American history. One with ample funds, a bountiful table, and a stable, secure life can afford to be independent, alone even. The rest cannot, and must form communities of shared need. The complex webs of dependency that poor people have formed in order to survive have been too absent from our histories of poverty and welfare. Government is the largest of those communities, and the welfare state its most salutary ideal, a “compromise between capitalism and democracy,” in the words of philosopher Eva Feder Kittay. The independence that is hailed by so many (and they mean independence from government aid, not independence from grueling labor or loveless marriage or capricious charity) is a mirage and a trap. The wise man or woman will seek out those dependencies that will ease their struggle, enrich their lives, and comfort their neighbors and their children. An imposed independence can be antisocial, alienating, and dangerous; it should not be made a cultural, social, or political goal. There is no virtue in autonomy, necessarily. But there can be value in dependence, and public welfare is a requirement—the requisite dependency—for a moral and humane soci-

ety. Thomas Paine, whose Common Sense helped rally public support for independence from Britain, saw this at our founding. He writes this in a tract called “Agrarian Justice”:

There are, in every country, some magnificent charities established by individuals. It is, however, but little that any individual can do, when the whole extent of the misery to be relieved is considered. He may satisfy his conscience, but not his heart. He may give all that he has, and that all will relieve but little. It is only by organizing civilization upon such principles as to act like a system of pulleys, that the whole weight of misery can be removed... It ought not to be left to the choice of detached individuals whether they will do justice or not.

Paine makes a deceptively simple argument for public relief: It ought not to be left to the choice of detached individuals whether they will do justice or not. But throughout American history it often has been, with predictable results. Among “advanced” nations, we have the highest or almost the highest rates of poverty (highest), childhood poverty (highest), elderly poverty (second highest), long-term poverty (highest), permanent poverty (highest), and income inequality (highest); we can boast of our rates of incarceration (highest), health-care costs (highest), CEO pay (highest), average hours worked (it’s more only in Australia and New Zealand), and infant mortality (among the highest—it’s lower in Taiwan, Belgium, Cuba, and the Czech Republic, among others). Seven advanced countries nonetheless have higher productivity than the United States, many with shorter work weeks. At the same time, the United States ranks among the very lowest for high school graduation, health-care coverage, mandated vacation and paid parental leave, voter participation, women in the national legislature, working-class wages, living standards among those at the bottom, and life expectancy. A 2005 study by Save the Children found ten countries in which mothers and their children fare better than in the United States. The infant mortality rate for African Americans in Washington, D.C., is higher than in the poor Indian state of Karala, and the overall infant death rate in the United States is the same as in Malaysia. Men in Bangladesh stand a better chance of surviving to age sixty-five than black men in Harlem. There is much that is exceptional about the United States, much that is extraordinary and worthy of celebration, but many Americans, per-
haps most, would be better off elsewhere. As social-welfare analyst David Wagner has observed, it may be that our self-congratulatory rhetoric, what he calls our “virtue talk,” obscures the less noble reality: Americans do less for the least among us than do other Western industrialized nations. 25

American attitudes toward poverty and welfare have been fairly constant, too, with roots that run deep. In thirteenth-century Europe, one prominent theologian cited the “habitual idleness, debauchery and drunkenness” of poor people as their chief failing, much as the Hudson Institute’s Joel Schwartz more recently argued that the remedy for modern urban poverty was to “remoralize” them to the “three cardinal virtues” of “diligence, sobriety and thrift.”26 As early as the fourteenth century the now-familiar manner in which we classify and judge poor people had appeared: the “poor with Peter,” the voluntary honest poor of mendicant orders and the like, whose poverty was deemed an act of submission to God and a mark of humility; versus the “poor with Lazarus,” those dishonest poor who suffered poverty not by choice but by circumstance and, perhaps, as punishment. They would become what we have called the “deserving” and the “undeserving,” the “worthy” and the “unworthy,” the working and the idle, the poor man and the pauper. The most recent brief against the welfare state by the American Enterprise Institute’s Charles Murray brings us right back to these fourteenth-century conceptions, encouraging us to distinguish as a matter of policy between involuntary poverty (“when someone who plays by the rules is still poor”) and voluntary poverty (“the product of one’s own idleness, recklessness, or vice”). 27 Although the language has varied, we have, with rare exceptions, thought of poverty in just this way and classified those seeking aid accordingly. It is only slight exaggeration to say that those with political power have worried principally about the morals of poor Americans, while poor Americans have been concerned about their stomachs.

Some of our long-standing resistance to generous programs of public welfare can in part be traced to the pernicious myth of the lazy (black or immigrant) poor, who are supposedly glad to live off the dole and ready to exploit any effort by government (or private charity) to offer food, cash, or shelter. 28 As with any good myth, it persists despite the lack of evidence to support it. Even Josephine Shaw Lowell, one of the nineteenth century’s fiercest opponents of poor relief (what we now call welfare), eventually came to realize it. Here she is writing to her sister-in-law Annie about the poor New Yorkers brought to the attention of her agency:

They all want work, work, work: many are widows with young children; many are men who have had accidents; so far we have not really found many “unworthy,” or at least, those are not the ones that make an impression.

And later that same year, she wrote:

If it could only be drummed into the rich that what the poor want is fair wages and not little doles of food, we should not have all this suffering and misery and vice. 29

No anomaly, this is also a constant, as we’ll see. What poor Americans have usually demanded (when they have demanded anything at all) is not charity or welfare but a safe job at a decent wage. What they have had to settle for (when they could get anything) was paltry and demeaning aid or work with wages so low that they still remained poor. In either case, what has been available has often amounted to, in the words of songwriter Mike Millius, “Not enough to live on, but a little too much to die.”30 As a result, people in need have taken institutions and programs that sought to control them, or sought to aid them on the institutions’ terms, and have turned them to their own purposes, like the children described above, sometimes much to the surprise of those who thought they were in control. Indeed, when poor people have behaved in this way, instead of being praised for their independence or ingenuity or for taking responsibility for their family’s well-being, they have been castigated for their activism or offered gentle, condescending reminders that a more passive stance might be more appropriate to their station. In a January 1890 editorial, the Chicago Weekly Democrat railed against the poorhouse and its inhabitants and approvingly quoted a “sagacious old lady” who bridled at the insolence of those she called the “indignant poor.” 31 Her scornful phrase captures the idea nicely—disbelief that poor people would be anything but grateful for the largesse that has been bestowed upon them. For them to make demands was beyond the pale, and still is.

That’s another constant, the condescension that has governed American efforts at relief, rooted consciously or not in the belief that it must be moral failings that explain why people find themselves in need, and the attendant assumption that the reformer, the bureaucrat, the policymaker, and the social worker know best what poor people require and how they
should behave. But just as it is with those who are not poor, poor people have varied histories and complex needs—bread we all need to survive, but to be fully human we need roses, too. We might allow recipients to rebut the pervasive presumption that they need to be taught the values of work, responsibility, and independence, especially given that evidence is rarely offered to support the claim that “pathologies” are widespread. I’m not stupid, I’m just poor. People don’t seem to get the difference.

There is a danger even in writing of “the poor,” for it suggests, at the very least, that poor people have more in common than not, that they share interests, beliefs, wants, complaints, or a common culture. In the past, the experience of need and of interacting with public and private relief agencies has been described by the objects of welfare policies in similar ways—so similarly, in fact, that contrary to conventional historical wisdom, the story of the American welfare state may not be the story of progress we’ve become familiar with, but a story of stasis, as I’ll show.35 But there is much variation in that experience, too, which we lose sight of if we treat poor and welfare-reliant Americans as an undifferentiated mass. I’ll go so far as to argue that there has never been an American welfare state—instead, there have been many American welfare states, which vary depending upon who you are, when you live, and where you live. The welfare state has been a markedly different experience for women, for blacks in the South, for veterans, for middle-class whites in the North, for men, for children. And it has been different for different women, for different children, and so on.35

There has been yet another stubborn myth, another constant, that welfare, far from being a solution to poverty, is actually a cause of it. Charity reformer Frederic Almy made the claim this way in 1900:

It is hardly too much to say that people do not beg because they are poor, but that they are poor because they beg, and that as long as they beg they will stay poor. For centuries the stream of charity has been steadily flowing, and the flood of poverty has been growing; and we have not stopped to consider that it might be merely cause and effect.34

The evidence for this, too, is negligible, but in words usually attributed to George Orwell, “We have now sunk to a depth where the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.” So, to risk stating the obvious, welfare and the welfare state, for all their imperfections, do more good than harm. That public aid can reduce want is clear—there is a direct and well-documented connection between how much a nation spends on relief and the basic well-being of its citizens.36 But it does more. Welfare removes older or other less productive workers from the labor market, and thereby increases the availability of jobs and wages for those who remain. It socializes the costs of caring for and educating the workforce, a burden that would otherwise be borne solely by businesses in need of healthy, educated laborers. It redistributes wealth and income, fostering equity, fairness, and even faith in democratic processes; it may, as a result, also reduce class conflict.37 There is even a relationship between welfare and incarceration: if money is not spent on relief, pensions, jobs, job training, and education, it will, all else being equal, be spent on police, prisons, and repression.37 And there is little evidence that the welfare state appreciably reduces productivity or economic growth—in fact, it may be quite the reverse.38

Even so, a defense of the welfare state must be undertaken with caution. We might keep in mind not only the manner in which programs and policies that purportedly help poor and working people have instead sought to control—and succeeded in controlling—behavior regarding marriage, reproduction, and work or have degenerated into pools of political patronage. But we should also not ascribe virtue to poor people merely because they are in need—this would merely be a form of historical patronizing. Not all poor people are or have been heroic, and there is no nobility in poverty. There are those among the poor who are lazy, base, and corrupt, just as there are among the nonpoor, of course. Still, the scales have been so tilted toward one end of this spectrum that we might seek to reclaim some bit of truth from the sophists who insist, because it benefits them, that shared sacrifice and collective action is harmful, that poverty is natural, or that immorality is at the root of need. One welfare recipient in the early 1970s offers her perspective on why such myths endure:

Myths are needed to justify the welfare system, a system that cheats the very people it is supposed to help. Myths are needed to discourage eligible, low-paid workers from applying for aid. Myths are needed to divert taxpayer frustrations away from the country’s big welfare recipients—the rich and the military—and onto the defenseless, powerless poor. In short, myths are needed to hide the real welfare crisis.39
As New Yorker writer A.J. Liebling showed when he examined the sensational relief fraud case of the “Lady in Mink” in 1947, the mass media bear a portion of the blame. The politician and the ideologue seek to demonize recipients and delegitimize government assistance programs, while the press seek sensational stories to sell advertising. The truth of the individual case, much less the larger truth of who receives relief and why, is immaterial to both of these powerful players. This is how the image of Ronald Reagan’s “welfare queen” persists, despite the fact that she was a caricature crafted by a speechwriter. Propaganda, stereotypes, and myth govern our thinking about poverty and poor relief much more than the facts do. By current, official measures, for example, more than one-third of poor Americans are children under eighteen years old, more than 10 percent are over age sixty-five, and nearly 40 percent of the adult poor are disabled—that is, most poor people are “deserving” or “involuntarily” poor due to old age, youth, or infirmity. Yet when we hear talk of welfare, it is still the welfare queen or the Lady in Mink whose image comes to mind, merely two more in a long line of demons that demagogues have used to whip up opposition to relief from the working and middle classes, obscuring the fact that the majority of Americans would benefit from dependable programs of health and welfare. It’s an old story.

The different kind of story I’ll tell here will not unfold chronologically. Because part of the goal is to reveal how similar the experience of poverty has been throughout American history, I move quickly back and forth across eras. This is not a complete history, either, and little effort has been made to make it one. It is instead thematic: an attempt to highlight the constants in our relief policy, to suggest how the traditional narrative that places the birth of the American welfare state in the Progressive and New Deal eras obscures more than it reveals about the much longer legacy of relief practice, and to answer a few ostensibly simple questions: What was it like to live in a poorhouse, and what brought people to choose to enter these awful refuges? Why did families surrender their children to an orphanage or an “orphan train”? What was it like to “tramp” the country and ride the rails in search of work in the age of industrialization? What is it like today to depend upon a food pantry to meet your family’s needs or to wait in a two-hour line at a soup kitchen, in full view of a scornful public, and then be rushed through a meal so that the throng behind you can get their turn?

What is the experience of offering a cashier your food stamps and feeling the gaze of those behind you as they survey your purchases and judge the appropriateness of your choices? What tricks have poor people used to retain their dignity in the face of such disdain? Has that changed? What does it feel like to apply for welfare, and why do men and women choose to subject themselves to the process? And how much worse has it been for those ineligible for aid or unwilling to ask for help, and how have their experiences changed over time?

The pages that follow seek to describe poverty and welfare from the perspective of poor and welfare-reliant Americans, focusing on how they have created community (Chapter 1), secured shelter (Chapter 2), found food (Chapter 3), searched for work (Chapter 4), cared for children (Chapter 5), battled for dignity and respect (Chapter 6), experienced repression and control (Chapter 7), lost hope (Chapter 8), and fought back (Chapter 9). The epilogue offers a review of how we measure poverty; this may be where some readers would like to begin.

I’ve done my best to create spaces for the voices of those who have been subject to public and private programs of relief to come through, and have often allowed such speech to go on at length. In that way, this is an unusual kind of history, one filled to overflowing with extended quotation. One anonymous Eskimo girl said in 1973:

My grandmother told me that the white man never listens to anyone, but he expects everyone to listen to him. So, we listen. I take her complaint, and others like it, seriously. This is, in part, an exercise in listening, and, if I succeed, it’s by acting as facilitator and tour guide—providing context and analysis when necessary and remaining silent when possible, allowing the men, women, and children here to take the microphone and speak for themselves, to tell their own stories, to sound out joys and sorrows and vent their rage and righteous indignation. Perhaps the least we can do, given the shelves fairly groaning under the weight of books about poverty by eminent Americans, is to make a small space for those seldom given voice. And to take them as seriously as we take the pronouncements of presidents, charity reformers, bureaucrats, think tank policy analysts, and scholars. This book, then, is built upon a simple conceit: we have told the history of welfare and poverty by focusing
upon the activities of Great Men and Women (like Jane Addams, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson) and upon key moments of policy innovation (the state-level reforms of the Progressive Era and the national-level interventions of the New Deal and the Great Society). As political scientist Jacob Hacker declared, "To write about social welfare policy is to write about why people support and design policies that have specific real-world effects." But what if, instead of asking how and why has policy changed over time, as we have done for so long, we ask: how has the experience of being poor and in need of assistance changed (or not changed) over time? By doing that, and by allowing the objects of policy to evaluate it, by making room for them to describe their own experience and then taking that "life knowledge" seriously, we see a different story emerging, and a new kind of American welfare state history may be revealed.44

This can’t help but be a distorted narrative. One distortion comes from the fact that only those voices that have survived in the historical record can be included. There can be no testimony here from those who never kept a diary, were never interviewed by a WPA worker or an anthropologist, never became part of a government agency or private charity’s case file, who never wrote a song or a poem or a letter to the editor. More to the point, my decisions about what to include of the accounts I have gathered are, inescapably, biased, although they are intended to be not just revealing but representative. Perhaps this is best thought of not as the culmination of a project, but as the beginning of one, especially given that I have relied here mostly upon previously published letters, diaries, journals, and interviews. The narrative is also distorted, much like its inspiration, Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States, by the nature of the project itself.45 I set out consciously to offer a history of American poverty and welfare unlike the traditional ones. So, just as Zinn tells the story of Columbus’s arrival in the Bahamas through the eyes of the Arawak Indians, showing us the communities destroyed and the families slaughtered by the Great Discoverer, I’ll let the residents of Five Points, our most notorious slum, give us a glimpse into the dense, close-knit, and often joyous communities they formed there, or allow women on welfare to explain how their supposed “dependence” has made it possible for them to raise their children and behave, as they have seen it, responsibly. I highlight ways in which the familiar narrative can be upended or revealed more fully, but I do offer some of that narrative in order to set the stage or to argue against it. The reader should not need any prior knowledge of American welfare state history, although A People’s History of Poverty in America might serve as both companion and counterpoint to any one of the fine traditional histories in print.46

To the extent that the book achieves any of its goals, it is in part due to those who have read and commented critically on it. My thanks to Mimi Abramovitz, Jocelyn Boryczka, Lauren Fitzgerald, Andy Hsiao, Joseph Luders, Furaha Norton, Sanford Schram, and the anonymous reviewers for The New Press. Thanks are due also to Hart Schwartz and Paul Adam for research and proofreading assistance; to Mary Ann Linahan and the Pollock Library for gracious assistance with voluminous interlibrary loan requests; to Mort Lowengrub for research funding and release time; and to Frances Fox Piven, Tim Cornell, and Joie Jacobsen, just because.

A last caveat: like so many of the histories that have come before, this one is filtered through the eyes and experience of a white, male academic from a middle-class background. That’s important to acknowledge, since I pay so much attention throughout this book to the blindness of the affluent to the lived experience of poor and marginalized Americans, and take them to task for that lack of empathy. I’ll assert that I’m better equipped than were the women of the Children’s Potted Plant Society, but how much better will have to be for the reader to decide.