

# **RACE, IMMIGRATION, AND PATTERNS OF INCORPORATION IN THE EARLY AMERICAN WELFARE STATE**

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Thanks to the work of numerous scholars, it is now well understood that African Americans were incorporated into the early twentieth-century welfare state—as it was then constituted—on a decidedly unequal basis. If African Americans were not altogether excluded by design from some programs, government officials were frequently less generous in determining the scope and extent of the benefits received by them compared to those received by Whites.

Relatively less is known about the experience of other groups, especially immigrants of all backgrounds. This is one of the most important gaps in our knowledge that is addressed by Cybelle Fox in her impressive study, *Three Worlds of Relief*.

Drawing on her prodigious research in both primary and secondary sources, Fox compares and contrasts the experience of African Americans, Mexicans (which is meant to indicate both Mexicans and Mexican Americans), and European immigrants, and she finds that the three groups had very different experiences with government relief and welfare systems in the United States from the Progressive Era through the New Deal.

The roughly ten to twelve million African Americans living in the United States before the New Deal tended to receive very little in the way of public benefits. Many of them were instead the less visible beneficiaries of paternalistically motivated—if stingy and irregular—perquisites from planter landlords whose ultimate interest was maintaining the economic dependency of their tenants or sharecroppers. African Americans did begin to receive unprecedented amounts of public assistance with the arrival of the New Deal, though they received less than their rightful share. Fox reminds us that the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from Old Age Insurance (OAI) left many African Americans out of what would become the most politically popular program to come out of the Social Security Act. Instead, they

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were hired for jobs through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA), and they were permitted to participate in more stigmatized government programs, such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), and Old Age Assistance (OAA). The wages and benefits they received from these programs were badly needed and greatly valued, but they were often lower than what Whites received—and almost certainly out of proportion to actual need.

Fox breaks important new ground in looking at how the roughly one to two million Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the United States fared in the relief and welfare system. Before the New Deal, they had access to limited amounts of relief in the communities where they lived—mainly communities in which spending on relief was relatively low and came largely from private sources. During the New Deal, Mexican Americans received some help from the WPA, FERA, and to a lesser extent the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). States and localities also provided Mexicans and Mexican Americans with general assistance. But occupational restrictions also tended to leave Mexicans and Mexican Americans out of OAI, and non-citizens were shut out of Old Age Assistance (OAA) through restrictions imposed by states where they tended to reside. Moreover, the wages and benefits they received from almost all government sources typically flowed through the hands of local officials and were generally lower than or unequal to what Whites received. Often, help came at a high price. The status of Mexicans as aliens, real or imagined, did not just result in a denial of their participation in relief or welfare programs. It was not highly unusual for Mexicans to suffer actual deportation and repatriation, sometimes through active cooperation between social workers and immigration officials.

The contrast with the experience of the twelve some-odd million European immigrants who lived in the United States the early decades of the twentieth century could scarcely be greater. Fox finds that they were the most strongly incorporated of all three groups, even the approximately six million southern and eastern Europe immigrants who were regarded as racially inferior to native-born Whites and immigrants from northwestern and western Europe. This finding fits well with Stanley Lieberson's broader conclusions in *A Piece of the Pie* (mainly the argument that early conditions faced by southern and eastern European immigrants were less harsh than early conditions faced by African Americans), but her focus is new and important, as are her contributions. Fox shows that European immigrants were advantageously positioned in myriad ways. Before the New Deal, they lived in the cities that spent the most generously on relief and relied heavily on public funds when doing so. During the New Deal era, European immigrants appeared to reap at least their fair share of wages and benefits from all kinds of government programs—sometimes even if they were not citizens. In fact, according to Fox's analysis of Census data, southern and eastern Europeans appear more likely to have worked in OAI-covered occupations than African Americans and Mexicans, and perhaps more likely than other European immigrants and native-born Whites as well. Fortuitously, southern and eastern European immigrants were also closer to retirement age than other groups. Most strikingly, they faced expulsion and deportation infrequently, and they were even sometimes encouraged to naturalize when citizenship restrictions threatened their participation in government programs. This rarely happened with Mexicans.

Hence, if there was anything like social citizenship in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century, it was European immigrants who enjoyed it, not Mexicans or African Americans.

But what explains the racial and ethnic patterning of incorporation? Fox proposes a synthetic perspective that is anchored in the straightforward but powerful

observation that the three groups during the early part of the twentieth century lived in very different parts of the country and were bound up in very different systems of racial inequality, labor relations, and electoral politics. Politically disenfranchised and racially segregated, African Americans lived mainly in the rural South under various types of debt peonage to planters. African American women were most frequently employed in domestic work and African American men most frequently in the agricultural sector. Mexicans were primarily concentrated in the rural areas of the Southwest, where they worked seasonally as low-wage migrant laborers for agricultural growers. They were less politically disenfranchised than African Americans, but still unable to achieve significant representation in elective office. Most southern and eastern European immigrants—roughly nine in ten—lived in the North or Midwest, where they resided in a populous city and worked in a growing industry that would become highly unionized during the New Deal and Second World War. They were electorally active, and their votes were essential to the political machines that dominated the cities where they lived and worked. In short, people in the United States did not all live in the same social, economic, and political world. There were “three worlds” in the United States during the early twentieth century, and African Americans, Mexicans, and European immigrants lived in different ones.

Fox argues that the way that race, labor, and politics intersected in each world profoundly shaped perceptions of whether a group was capable of assimilation and whether it was dependent on government support as well as the way each group was treated in the provision of relief and welfare.

African Americans had long been seen as incapable of assimilation, but they were not widely perceived as heavily dependent on government assistance before the New Deal. This perception was largely accurate. But these perceptions began to shift with the flow of federal assistance that began during the New Deal. The assistance was racially unequal because local officials in the South often had the authority to define the scope and generosity of government assistance, and they were loath to provide support to African Americans in amounts that would enable them to escape their economic subservience to the planter elite, who dominated the political system in large part because African Americans had been excluded from it. Still, resentment against African Americans appears to have grown in tandem with the expansion of federal aid and the corresponding threat to planter dominance, and stereotypes of Black dependence intensified accordingly.

Before the New Deal, relief officials and social workers actually held out hope, for a moment at least, that Mexicans were capable of assimilation. In fact, Mexicans were encouraged in southern California to make use of relief as a step on a path toward integration into the mainstream, and growers favored the provision of relief because it was a cheap way of maintaining their labor supply. But the employment of Mexicans as primarily low-wage, seasonally employed migrant workers eventually took a toll. Fox argues that it hampered their long-term economic mobility and fueled the belief that they did not have a permanent stake in the country—all of which led social workers and others responsible for designing and administering relief and welfare programs to abandon their earlier hopes. The low rate of naturalization among Mexicans started to seem less like a challenge to overcome than evidence that nothing could really be done. Social workers began to insist that relief was a subsidy to the agricultural industry, and they increasingly asserted that Mexicans had become dependent on government support, even if it was readily ascertainable that they were actually less likely to use relief than European immigrants. Mexicans eventually became widely viewed as a drain on public resources, which eventually encouraged local officials to provide less relief and welfare and also paved

the way for subsequent campaigns of deportation and repatriation. The shift in perception and treatment started in southern California before the depression, but it spread nationwide, and it would pervade the local administration of relief and welfare programs during the New Deal as well.

The world inhabited by southern and eastern European immigrants profoundly shaped how they were perceived and treated as well. European immigrants were a key part of the industrial working-class in the big cities of the North and Midwest, where they benefitted from their employment in core industries and their participation in machine politics. This led to a degree of economic mobility and political integration that was responsible in no small measure for the reputation that they enjoyed among social workers, who refused to accept the widespread notion that southern and eastern European were racially inferior to the “old” immigrants or native-born Whites. Instead, social workers—along with subsequent generations of relief officials working in local settings—perceived European immigrants as capable of assimilation, defended them against charges of dependency, worked to ease their access, and sometimes took steps to exempt or shield them from (or help them to engineer workarounds of) citizenship requirements. The specific world of race, labor, and politics inhabited by southern and eastern European immigrants meant that local control of relief and welfare did not hurt them and sometimes helped them, quite in contrast to the experience of African Americans and Mexicans.

Fox’s study is a worthy achievement. Granular and nuanced, it fills what had been a large gap in our knowledge about the experience of Mexicans and European immigrants with the early American welfare state, and it accounts for observed differences across all three groups with a thoughtful thesis that other scholars will surely need to take seriously. Moreover, it is rich with scholarly and policy implications. One of the most important of them, Fox suggests, is that policy makers should remain highly skeptical of claims that European immigrants pulled themselves out of poverty entirely by their own bootstraps.

Like any other significant work of scholarship, *Three Worlds of Relief* will undoubtedly invite questions from generalists and specialists alike. Since it covers so much historical and geographical ground, those questions will also necessarily span a wide range of empirical and theoretical issues. For instance, how strong is the evidence that social workers in southern California really hoped, during the early 1920s at least, that Mexicans could be assimilated? How did they even come to have such hopes at all, given the self-reinforcing way that race, labor, and politics intersected in California and the Southwest? Does the fact that social workers abandoned their initial hopes so quickly and thoroughly suggest instead that Mexicans were more or less destined to become stereotyped as shiftless and dependent? More broadly, do the intersecting systems of race, labor, and politics within each world basically exert a deterministic influence on how racial and ethnic minorities are perceived and how they are incorporated into relief and welfare programs? Can social change come from within each world? Or does change only come exogenously, when federal intervention or other national forces induce economic and political elites to recalibrate their previous positions? What does the experience of African Americans living in the urban North imply for the “three worlds” thesis? To be sure, they were racially segregated in both work and residence, but they could and did cast votes, and they were not bound up in a system of unfree labor of the kind that prevailed in the South. Does the experience of northern African Americans fit the “three worlds” thesis easily, or does it require a qualification or modification of some kind? Lastly, can the fundamental insights of the “three worlds” framework be applied to more recent

times, when racial and ethnic minorities no longer live in such distinct worlds? Or is the scope of applicability historically circumscribed?

But these questions are well within the normal boundaries of scholarly debate. In fact, they are precisely the kinds of questions that one would expect to be raised about a major contribution to the field. *Three Worlds of Relief* is a valuable addition to the literature, and it very much deserves the attention of anyone interested in race, politics, and the development of the American welfare state.

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