LATINOS, RACE, AND THE U.S. WELFARE STATE

A Review Symposium

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RACIALIZING POVERTY AND POOR RELIEF

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Here is a dazzling book, one that offers a rich genealogy for reflection about our current preoccupations. Open up any newspaper. Switch on any television news program. What you will read and hear is a cacophony of voices, many of them discordant, on how to fix, fund, and perhaps shrink the federal government's spending on those insurance programs first created in the 1930s by the New Deal welfare state. Equally factious are the debates on immigration policy that some hope will resolve how the republic will meet its future labor needs and how it will placate its rising Latino voting public. Will we deport eleven million workers? Will we construct electrified fences to protect our southern border from "illegal" invasion? Will we offer unauthorized immigrants a path to citizenship? Stay tuned. And while racial politics are clearly at the covert center of these polemics, the discussion of race is rarely overt probably because some now pronounce us a post-racial society.

In *Three Worlds of Relief*—a hefty, extremely thoughtful, exhaustively researched, and beautifully-written tome—Cybelle Fox, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, takes us back to a similarly contentious time, to the first quarter of the twentieth century when equally heated words were voiced about the birthing of local welfare policies to alleviate the poverty and human suffering that disproportionately fell on Blacks and immigrants. She offers an amazing survey of how African Americans in the South, Mexicans in the Southwest, and European immigrants in the North were treated by employers, politicians, and social workers, as these groups together crafted local relief for the poor that eventually was supplemented and supplanted by federal New Deal social insurance programs.

In 1930, there were approximately fourteen million immigrants living and working in the United States. Then, as now, they represented roughly 12% of the country's total population. Slightly over half of these immigrants were of Southern and Eastern European origin (54%), with another 1.4 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans. 90% of all European immigrants lived in the North, 87% of Mexicans resided in the Southwest, and 69% of African Americans were located in the South. How poor relief and welfare were developed and administered in each of these regions was the complicated product of an interplay between labor markets and

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politics, calibrated in each of these regions by the differing concentration of immigrants and Blacks. Before the 1930s, federalism played little role in how these local power structures determined which indigents would be fed and cloaked, which would be deported, and which would be protected from federal immigration authorities, whatever their nativity. Such local control, which combined with a host of racist attitudes and Jim Crow laws, virtually guaranteed that where poor relief existed, Blacks and Mexicans were mostly shut out. Blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants, according to Cybelle Fox, inhabited *Three Worlds of Relief*. None of these geographic spaces entirely confined or defined these groups; the culture and structure of domination in each region was rather distinct, as were their political economies. What was stunningly uniform were the exclusionary practices its White, native-born elites meted out to Mexicans and Blacks.

Insisting that the best optic to understand poor relief in this period is not the distorting Black-White racial divide, which all too often narrows its analytic focus to just the North and the South, Fox embraces a much more complicated polychromatic understanding of race that simultaneously juxtaposes Whites, Blacks, and Browns to grapple with the numerically significant Mexican experience. Fox wants to understand whether and how poor immigrants were offered assistance on arrival and how these newcomers and Blacks fared during the beginning of the twentieth century, during the Great Depression, and most particularly, during the genesis and evolution of federal New Deal relief programs. Over time, how important was citizenship and an immigrant's legal status for gaining access to local and federal safety nets? The answers Fox offers to these questions are not particularly pretty; rarely are they about any sense of equality or fair play for all American citizens. Instead, the opposite was true.

On the eve of the Great Depression African Americans numbered twelve million, representing about 10% of the nation's total population. Most of them were largely concentrated in the rural South. Men labored mainly as tenant farmers and share croppers, many bound to the land by debt peonage, while women worked outside the home (45%) mostly as domestics and household servants (62%) but also alongside their kinsmen in the fields (25%). Landowners went to great lengths to keep their Black workers immobile, creating paternalistic relationships of reciprocity and deference, offering them credit, old age protection, legal intercession, and protection against the arbitrary racial violence that so characterized African American life in the South. Regulated by harsh Jim Crow laws, continually denigrated by the one-drop rule of hypodescent, and politically disenfranchised by poll taxes, literacy tests, and White primaries, they lived in utter poverty, under abysmal living conditions in areas dominated by conservative Democrats governing by one-party rule. This legacy haunted African Americans in the South, resulting in the lowest levels of poor relief of any group in the country. Southern planters resisted poor relief for their sharecroppers and tenant farmers, offering them instead year-round acts of paternalistic charity to deepen their dependence, to thwart any sense of independence, and to keep them tightly tethered to the land.

In 1930, Mexicans were largely congregated in rural areas of the Southwest (87%) working mainly as itinerant agricultural wage laborers unfettered by peonage arrangements or paternalistic loyalties. While only 18% of all Mexican women worked outside the home, most were employed in Anglo households performing domestic and personal service (44%), or toiling in the fields (14%). Southern landlords indebted their Black sharecroppers so that they could continually rely on a settled workforce. In the Southwest seasonal sojourners were preferred because the workers themselves had to bear the costs of their own domestic reproduction. As one

California farmer bluntly put it, when the harvest was done, "I will kick them out. . . . My obligation is ended" (p. 41). And if they refused to go, a simple missive to immigration authorities would hasten their departure.

Unlike Southern planters who feared the possible destabilizing effects local poor relief would have on their tenants, farmers in the Southwest viewed such charity positively. For when Mexicans migrated into cities at the end of the harvest and sought poor relief during the winter, they were likely to remain in the area, available to pick the next year's crops without farmers having to foot recruitment costs. The director of Colorado's Catholic Charities summarized the conflicting interests relief agencies and employers had with this arrangement: "Why the citizens at large, the Community Chest, the churches, the tax-payers, should have to care for the employees of the sugar companies, the railroads, and mines, between seasons of labor, is not clear to the students of economics or justice" (p. 70). These subsidies were the topic of bitter debates that only bred intensifying resentments toward Mexicans in the 1920s. Part of this heightened animosity was due to the increasing number of Mexicans moving north seeking work after the Mexican Revolution. But it was also rooted in racial fears, which in time produced an assessment of Mexicans as a caste of undeserving poor.

Since 1848 Mexicans had been considered White by law. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed that year ending the U.S.-Mexico War declared as citizens those Mexicans who chose to remain in recently annexed territories of the United States. But except for a few Mexicans of the elite and professional classes, the majority were treated as non-Whites, deemed of inferior mixed blood, segregated and denied services in many public places, and politically disenfranchised by the same means used to exclude Blacks in the South.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century social workers were very optimistic that Mexican immigrants would quickly assimilate and become Americanized. By the early 1920s that assessment had changed due to the low levels of naturalization, which coincidentally was not entirely their fault. In many places they were deemed non-White and thus ineligible for citizenship. In the 1920s, social workers increasing began to express concern about the "Mexican Problem" and through a set of negative stereotypes justified denying them poor relief because of their putative chronic charity dependence. With cherry-picked statistics and very little fact, social workers set out to convince local and national audiences that this dependence was rooted in Mexican biology and culture. Aping eugenicist arguments taught to them by their professors, social workers claimed that Mexicans were biologically inferior because they were a degenerate race of *mestizos* (a mix of Spanish and Indian), because their women were abundantly fertile and gave birth to too many kids, and because they were particularly susceptible to infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. As for the cultural reasons that bred welfare dependence, one social worker explained: the Mexican is "heavy lipped, sleepy eyed . . . reclining in the sun, too lazy to seek the shade . . . behind those dull eyes lies the tragedy of a nation, that his idleness is due to lack of mental development—the result of years of oppression—that his contentment with so little is but the heritage of generations who have been forced to adapt themselves to bitter poverty and insupportable tyranny" (p. 77).

In most southwestern cities the proportion of Mexicans actually on charity relief mirrored their numbers in the total population, yet relief agencies continued to feed the stereotype that Mexicans were inordinately dependent, diseased, delinquent, illiterate, and inassimilable. Their professional associations continually lobbied Congress to restrict the number of Mexicans allowed entry into the United States, but to little avail. Success finally came shortly after the stock market crash of 1929, when,

by working in tandem with immigration officials, social workers identified those Mexicans who merely had asked for food baskets and clothing, declared them dependent, and urged their deportation.

Sweeping up Mexicans and their Mexican American citizen children alike, in workplaces, in parks, and public squares throughout the Southwest between 1930 and 1932, the intent of these forced deportations and encouraged "voluntary" repatriations was clear: to rid the republic of competitors for unskilled, low-wage work Americans could perform. While social workers doggedly resisted such draconian actions with European immigrants living in the North, in the Southwest such deportations became possible because few Mexican Americans were politically enfranchised and because of the cooperation between federal immigration authorities and charity agencies. "[T]he welfare office quite literally turned into an immigration bureau or became an extralegal arm of the Immigration Service," explains Cybelle Fox of this collaboration, "expelling those immigration laws could not touch" (p. 124).

While Blacks and Mexicans largely got raw deals from local and later federal relief agencies, European immigrants got fair deals, indeed, all too often, they got great deals. In the North they were consistently greeted as brethren, as White co-ethnics, and mostly protected as equals in good times and in bad. The bulk of Eastern and Southern European immigrant men worked in manufacturing and mechanical industries, while very few of their wives worked outside the home (8%). These immigrants initially flocked to those cities where they had kinship and friendship ties, to places that previously had welcomed their countrymen. They were deemed "White on arrival" and suffered none of the racial disqualifications Mexicans faced to gain citizenship. Quickly these European immigrants experienced upward mobility and significant socioeconomic gains, witnessed far fewer restrictions to political participation, and many more pressures for rapid and complete Americanization. Elected officials eagerly courted them, carefully counted their votes, and accordingly invested more money in public relief than occurred elsewhere. Ironically, in a number of southwestern cities a higher proportion of local budgets was devoted to poor relief, but these monies were reserved almost exclusively for Whites. When European immigrants faced hardships in the North, relief agencies came to their rescue. And unlike in the Southwest where social workers and immigration officials worked in tandem to deport ethnic Mexicans during the depression, in the North, relief personnel resisted attempts by immigration officers to repatriate European immigrants living in similar circumstances, often by illegal means.

It was not until the darkest days of the Depression and the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in March of 1933, that the federal government finally intervened with billions of dollars of emergency aid for cities and states. The largest program, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, distributed $500 million to the states for direct assistance and work relief. "There shall be no discrimination based on race, religion, color, non-citizenship, political affiliation or because of membership in any special or selected group," Roosevelt's directives stipulated (p. 190). Blacks, Mexicans and European immigrants quickly received federal relief. These groups were a very small percentage of all beneficiaries, totaling only 4.9% of all Blacks, 3.4% of Mexicans, and 2.3% of Whites. These rising numbers, which for Blacks rose from almost nothing to nearly 5%, instantly provoked stereotypes that resembled those used to deny Mexicans assistance in previous decades. Blacks now were increasingly labeled "shiftless, lazy, indolent and irresponsible" (p. 192). Antipathy toward Blacks and Mexicans on relief intensified from predictable groups, from social workers, White public opinion, and growers in the South and Southwest who wanted workers off relief rolls to assure they had workers during harvests. Poor

Whites expressed fears of status degeneration in relationship to unemployed Blacks and Mexicans on relief, prompting social workers to disproportionately cut aid levels to Blacks and Mexicans and by keeping Mexican non-citizens from participating in Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs. European immigrant saw little of such discrimination because in the places where they lived the authorities honored government directives against discrimination based on race, color or citizenship, something southerners and southwesterners routinely defied, and which Blacks and Mexicans were too politically impotent to contest.

On August 14, 1935, FDR signed into law the Social Security Act, which promised citizens protection against the "loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age" (p. 250). Right from the program's start two limitations excluded the majority of Blacks and Mexicans from its benefits. All agricultural and domestic workers were barred from Social Security and Unemployment Insurance. What they qualified for were more restricted means-tested assistance programs—Aid to Dependent Children and Old Age Assistance—that were intentionally set at very low levels by local elites so that they offered little succor to Blacks and Mexicans barred from Social Security. In the Southwest local administrators further limited eligibility to citizens, again reducing Mexican access. The experience of European immigrants was just the opposite, largely congregated in the industries covered by the Act, in the long run they enjoyed more benefits than even native-born Whites. For European immigrants Social Security "functioned more like a highly redistributive relief program but without the means test and without the stigma" (p. 251). By 1940, 64% of European immigrants were employed in occupations covered by Social Security, in comparison to only 35% of Blacks and 40% of Mexicans.

As Cybelle Fox explains in her conclusions, what developed increasingly during the New Deal was a redistributive welfare state that doled out benefits largely on the basis of race, citizenship, and nativity. In this period, a much more conservative civic nationalism emerged, one that required loyalty, patriotism, and immigrant naturalization to fully warrant inclusion. With their low levels of naturalization then as now, Mexicans remained of suspect loyalty.

This enormously stimulating book suffers from a number of blind spots. Blacks are treated as a monolithic group, as if they were all African American citizens, when in fact, Black Caribbean immigrant communities sprouted up in a number of American cities during the 1920s and 1930s. The rigorous differentiation among White European immigrants presented in this tome lacks an equally nuanced analysis of similarities and differences between Black immigrants and African Americans, which would have allowed us to see if relief agencies saw Black immigrants as charity worthy as White European immigrants.

Also missing in this discussion of American attitudes toward Mexicans in the Southwest is any analysis of the violence that so disrupted Mexico during its revolution between 1910 and 1917 and the conservative counter-revolt, known as the Cristero Rebellion, which ravaged the country between 1926 and 1929. Fox implies that in the 1920s social workers and charity agencies became much more convinced about Mexican charity dependence and thus the necessity to limit relief. The largest movement of Mexicans into the Southwest occurred at precisely the moment when the countryside of northern Mexico was most disrupted by the Revolution and counter-revolt, yet none of these facts enter the narrative.

Dividing the continental United States into three geographic spaces—the North, the South, and the Southwest—also has it limitations. The political economy of Texas in the 1920s and 1930s more closely resembled the South in its rather uniform treatment of Blacks and Mexicans, a fact which itself often precipitated intense

conflicts and competition between Blacks and Mexicans. Similarly, California is rarely incorporated into regional definitions of the Southwest. Yet most of the data in this book on Mexicans comes from California. It is in this state that we see some of the most intense nativism, which in this book establishes the model for how Mexicans were understood and treated by social workers, relief agencies, and the local administrators of Social Security and other New Deal social insurance programs.

In the narrative arc of *Three Worlds of Relief*, the main intermediaries between local governments and the indigent were social workers. As this book so clearly and so persuasively argues, social workers had it in their capacity to make life for poor Blacks and Mexicans so brutal, and yet so reassuring for White European immigrants. But we learn relatively little about who these social workers were, how they were trained, and what the dominant ideologies of the profession were at the various schools that graduated them as caring professionals.

But these are minor reservations for an otherwise superlative book, one destined to become a classic because of how Cybelle Fox has outlined the emergence of the welfare state, and the complex ways in which race, citizenship, and nativity were used to stratify it.

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