

Lost Ground: Welfare Reform, Poverty and Beyond

Randy Albeda and Ann Withorn, eds.
Cambridge: South End Press, 2002

Reviewed by Norma Buydens

In the preface to *Lost Ground*, Barbara Ehrenreich announces the volume's purpose: to expose the "racism and misogyny" (vii) behind the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* of 1996 – the latest American federal welfare reform – in time for the 2002 debate over its reauthorization. Ehrenreich writes of the "coded messages" stigmatizing welfare recipients as promiscuous African American single mothers, the renewal of the term "illegitimacy" for nonmarital births, and claims that African American men have been "cuckolded" by female-headed welfare families (vii-viii). But PRWORA is also "class warfare" in its punitive requirements that any work offered must be accepted by single mothers on welfare, even if "dangerous, abusive or poorly paid" (ix) and too low paying to take families out of poverty:

To the extent that welfare served as a shield, however inadequate, against the worst forms of workplace exploitation, welfare was and remains a class issue. Racism and misogyny helped blind many to this fact six years ago when welfare reform was passed, but we cannot let that happen again. (x)

The book, titled as an answer to neoliberal stereotyping in Charles Murray's 1984 *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980*, is intended by editors Randy Albeda and Ann Withorn as a space for "well-known progressive writers and activists" to respond to PRWORA with "ways for shifting the ground upon which to respond to poverty" (1).

Does *Lost Ground* succeed in its purpose? Not quite. The scholars and activist contributors—social historian Linda Gordon, activist lawyer Lucie E. White, critical race sociologist Kenneth J. Neubeck, black feminist activist Linda Burnham, urban activist sociologist James Jennings, economist Sanford F. Schram, political scientist Joe Soss, poverty activist Mimi Abramovitz, and feminist activist Gwendolyn Mink, among others—are extremely well-regarded. The volume's description of PRWORA's legislative history and practical application is sound and detailed. But there is something missing, something needed for *Lost Ground* to be a viable weapon.

Rather than defend the image of poor people, *Lost Ground* should be holding the U.S. government accountable for its second-class treatment of citizens. While Sanford Schram and Joe Soss, in "Success Stories: Welfare

Reform, Policy Discourse, and the Politics of Research,” understand that the current situation is based on an ideological framework which poverty advocacy fails to meaningfully confront because “researchers expended great effort identifying the typical duration of participation” and “focused on work effort ... and poor people’s behaviors” “[t]o distinguish myths from realities,” they do not supply the structural questions they claim are essential to the investigation into welfare.

In the context of a bad law such as PRWORA, someone needs to announce that “the emperor has no clothes.” But no one does in *Lost Ground*. Gwendolyn Mink’s “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” the only article to adopt a consistently angry tone, comes closest to scrutinizing the state for its harmful doing. Mink attacks the use of welfare to implement patriarchal ideology by requiring father-headship of families and punishing childbearing outside of marriage.

In many ways, Mink has the easiest argument to prove. The Act states baldly in its purposive sections that “marriage is the foundation of a successful society” and “the purpose of welfare must be ... to ‘end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting ... marriage’, ‘prevent and reduce ... out-of-wedlock pregnancies’ and ‘encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families’” (98, quoting U.S. Public Law 104-193, Title I). Childbearing and the right to raise one’s own children are individual human rights, not to be attacked on grounds of gender or racial discrimination. They are also rights of “national, ethnical, racial or religious groups,” the groups protected under the Genocide Convention.

A useful book, *Lost Ground* contains invaluable information for women (especially mothers), minorities, and the poor, and for those who care about these citizen groups. Regrettably, however, it does not fulfill its own important mandate.

A Question of David: A Disabled Mother’s Journey Through Adoption, Family and Life

Denise Sherer Jacobson
Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1999

Reviewed by Shelley M. Park

In *A Question of David*, Denise Sherer Jacobson recounts the events and emotions surrounding the adoption of her son, David. David is classified as a “special needs” baby because of his potential cerebral palsy. While it is never clear to the reader whether David has been misdiagnosed (he becomes an active