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# History Matters: Racialized Motherhoods and Neoliberalism

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Neoliberal political reasoning is remaking the state's democratic character and its governing rules to reflect those of the market. The most prominent legislative example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, dictates work requirements, time limits, and monitoring and sanctioning of clients. Through such policies, the primary aims of government assistance changed from aiding needy citizens to transforming individuals into paid workers, regardless of continued poverty or care obligations. Although scholarship of related policy and governance tools has grown, less study has centered on understanding the historic events and ways in which race-based, gendered, and poverty narratives facilitated adoption of such austere policies. This article compares circumstances of African American and White mothers in the United States from the Revolutionary War to the postwelfare era. It describes what neoliberalism is, discusses the role of ideological discourses in policy and governance, presents the history and historical racialized portrayals of White and African American motherhood during this period, and analyzes the differential impact of ideological discourses using a lens of intersectionality. The conclusion discusses how discriminatory discourses subvert a democratic ethos for all and suggests ways for social workers to contest the impacts of neoliberalism.

KEY WORDS: *African American; discourse; motherhood; neoliberalism; social welfare history*

**B**rown (2015) stated that neoliberalism is a stealth revolution, and covert neoliberalism is undoing democracy's primary notions of "rule by the people for the people" (p. 19). Neoliberal political reasoning is remaking the state's democratic character and its governing rules to reflect those of the market (Brown, 2015; Lemke, 2002). In such a nation, the civil, political, and social rights of citizenship are reworked as contracts (Somers, 2008). The ideas of a public good are transformed into economic individual interests (Stone, 2012). Political problems worthy of public debate are recast as individual issues resolved by administrative decision making (Brown, 2015).

In the United States, the most significant policy to exemplify these principles is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) of 1996 (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). What had been a citizenship right of economic assistance under Aid to Families with Dependent Children of 1962 (AFDC) was now bound by contract, requiring paid work to "earn" benefits. It shifted the focus of poverty from structural issues of economy, education, racism, and sexism to individually attributed problems (Somers, 2008). TANF thus reframed

what had been a hard-won social entitlement to in-house administrative decisions by myriad smaller state and county governmental units (Somers & Block, 2005).

TANF represents a seismic shift in democratic governance. Brown (2015) maintained that although neoliberal laws and policies are evidence of this conversion, the "soft" powers of discourse and language have been especially effective in transforming U.S. democratic culture. Neoliberalism leverages a nation's history and cultural discourses to embed its marketized governing logic (Harvey, 2005). It is not surprising that early U.S. neoliberal policy was fashioned at the intersection of discriminatory discourses of poverty, gender, and race.

In this article, I first define neoliberalism, its policy, and its citizen constructions, and then I discuss the nature and function of ideological discourses, presenting those of poverty, gender, and race. I next present the racialized portrayals of White and African American motherhood from the Revolutionary War to postwelfare eras, analyzing the differential impact of ideological discourses using a lens of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016). I conclude by discussing what history reveals regarding the use

of discriminatory discourses to subvert a democratic ethos and suggest ways for social workers to contest the stealth neoliberal revolution.

### NEOLIBERALISM DEFINED

The U.S. Great Depression of the 1930s led to a worldwide economic crisis. In 1936, John Maynard Keynes (1936) developed an economic model stipulating that governments should intervene in markets to encourage and protect consumer demand rather than protect the supply-side interests of owners and capitalists. Such principles were implemented in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and by other governments around the world. Backlash was swift. In 1938, an international conference of influential market economists formulated a competing theory called neoliberalism. Within a decade, this international movement had established "foundations, institutes, research centers, journals and public-relations-agencies to support and spread neoliberal thinking" (Stark, 2018, p. 41). Although minimally influential during the prosperous 1950s and 1960s, neoliberalism emerged as a governing principle during the economic downturn of the 1970s, promoting policies to free the market by decreasing government regulations and downsizing welfare state protections (Harvey, 2005). Today, neoliberal philosophy is visible in the design and administration of public policies and social services (Soss et al., 2011) as well as in cultural ideologies and popular theories of human psychology (Foucault, 2008; Garrett, 2018).

At the social policy level, neoliberalism promotes privatization of public services as a response to a climate of financial austerity. Meanwhile, government responsibility is devolved to lower administrative units at which programs and rules are created. Due to the resulting uptake of business models and cost-saving pressures, social services organizations use "managerialism" that molds workers to be productive and efficient (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2018). Time-limited and stingy, TANF benefits are contingent on work. Thus, aims of public assistance have changed from providing aid to needy citizens to transforming recipients, mostly mothers, into paid workers, regardless of ongoing poverty or care obligations (Soss et al., 2011).

At the individual level, neoliberalism is a philosophy that individual life should reflect the model of the market (Brown, 2015). "Governance" in this sense extends beyond the reach of government

discipline to that of self-discipline (Lemke, 2002). A ploy of neoliberalism has been to completely devolve government's responsibility to the individual; the rational market actor is the only legitimate identity (Brown, 2015). Life's decisions should not consider humanitarian values or social relationships or obligations but rather reflect the stance of self-interested entrepreneurs, assessing the best return on every social encounter, modeling relationships on contracts of exchange (Rubin, 2012; Somers, 2008).

In this thin human prototype, poor mothers, such as those receiving TANF, are positioned in an untenable situation. Social relationships and obligations, such as the work of parenting, are not valued and are rendered invisible (Nadasen, 2012). As life is constituted within the frame of immediate individual economic exchange, broader social and systemic forces are not acknowledged. The profound impact of history and its events and cultural influences is ignored.

### HISTORY MATTERS

To interrogate the issue, I engage the opposite impulses of neoliberalism: Rather than minimizing the time frame of consideration, I expand it. Rather than seeing only contractual exchanges of the market, I consider noncontractual relationships. Rather than assuming that only the dynamics within exchanges matter, I acknowledge larger social forces of events and ideologies. Although this review cannot be expansive, I analyze major narratives and political-economic conditions that led to TANF by examining intersecting ideologies of African American and White mothers in the context of U.S. history from the Revolutionary War to the postwelfare era.

### IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE

*Ideologies* are systems of ideas usually associated with group interests and can include a class, a social identity group, an institution, or a state. Comprising beliefs about how the world should be, ideologies are used to legitimize or oppose other points of view (van Dijk, 2000). Ideology is conveyed through discourse—written and spoken language, visual representation, and other cultural signs and symbols. Newspapers, news media, Facebook postings, tweets, and popular culture produce, maintain, and reproduce ideological discourse. Prevalent discourses imparted by the powerful greatly influ-

ence popular views (Garrett, 2018; van Dijk, 2000). Gramsci's (1971) idea, *hegemony*, describes cultural discourses that are widely accepted despite benefiting only a dominant group (Hall, 2016). These discourses are embedded in legal and administrative state structures (Althusser, 1971).

Discourse of today is unavoidably influenced by that of the past because it occurs within historical, political, and economic events (Foucault, 1983). Hall (2016) contended that all discourse is historical; each new articulation of ideology must work amid past representations and arguments. There are no completely new ideologies, just revisions; old narrative strains are summoned and given renewed life in later adaptations.

### **INTERSECTIONALITY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The lens of intersectionality considers the confluence and interaction of several axes of social division that result in social inequality (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Whereas all U.S. poor mothers' oppression operates on the axes of gender and economic class, the oppression of African American mothers relies on a third discourse of race.

### **POWERFUL DISCOURSES OF TANF: POVERTY, GENDER, AND RACE**

#### **Poverty Ideas and Welfare Revolution**

Somers and Block (2005) argued that the welfare reform of 1996, of which TANF was the centerpiece, was a welfare *revolution*. The justifying ideology of TANF was driven by entrenched ideas about poverty in the United States: Humans are only motivated by biological drives of food and reproduction. Providing assistance to the poor merely incentivizes them not to work. Furthermore, the authors maintained that these ideas are difficult to dispel; even with compelling evidence to the contrary, they have become a matter of accepted common sense.

#### **Feminist Theory**

Abramovitz (2018) argued that socialist feminism best represents poor women's position vis-à-vis the state: It "locates the oppression of women in the ways that the power relations of capitalism (class domination), and patriarchy (male domination) together structure ideology, the social relations of gender and class, and the overall organization of society" (p. 18). Mothering includes physical and emotional care, intellectual engagement, and

the marshaling of financial support (Ladd-Taylor, 1995). Even if mothers do not perform these duties, someone must; society needs the "daily and generational reproduction of the population . . . to produce and reproduce people in social, cultural, and material ways" (Bezanson, 2010, p. 107). Despite mothers' assistive labor to the U.S. economy at little cost, it is rarely recognized (Abramovitz, 2018). In this "family ethic" ideology, poor women are only positioned in the private sphere of the home with a male breadwinner or in the low-wage workforce (Abramovitz, 2018).

#### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) applies a critical theory lens to race relations. Central tenets conclude that race is a stratifying social construction whose impacts have been embedded in U.S. social institutions and daily life. Equal treatment is not enough to achieve justice within such historically discriminatory systems and institutions. According to CRT, the dominant group can cast and recast racial-ethnic minority groups based on their present interests, and political change occurs only when the dominant and minority groups' interests coincide (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). "Whiteness" also affords unearned benefits, such as status, ability to attain and dispose of property, and ability to exclude, making it the ultimate property (Kolivoski, Weaver, & Constance-Huggins, 2014).

#### **TWO AMERICAN MOTHERHOODS: RACIALIZED PORTRAYALS IN U.S. HISTORICAL DISCOURSE**

Amid these discourses and events, the lives of mothers have unfolded. Despite oppressive circumstances, African American mothers have engaged in "self-definition and self-valuation" (Collins, 2000), and have been active agents of their communities' lives. However, family assistance policy design has responded to dominant social constructions of White and African American mothers, leading to differential levels of recognition and reward (Abramovitz, 2018; Gordon, 1994). I present White women as a foil to highlight how the axis of race has affected life for African American mothers over 250 years of history.

#### **Revolutionary War: Antebellum Era**

Following the American Revolution, "Republican Motherhood," that of raising virtuous citizens, was considered a foundation of democracy (Kerber,

1980). This early endorsement only applied to White mothers. As primarily slaves in the colonies and in the South through the Civil War, African American parents endured barbaric physical and psychic conditions. The fundamental premises of parenting—to care and protect—were threatened: More than half of African American infants died, and more than one-third of children were sold away from their parents (Tadman, 1989). Instead, as evident in popular depictions, African American women had to care for White children. Collins (2000) stated the resulting Mammy construct was created by White society to “justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service” (p. 72). Although their parenting only became visible with White children (Roberts, 1994), African Americans still managed to foster family and kinship relationships for protection and support (Gutman, 1976). Women nurtured groups for psychic protection and for a countervailing value system. They also developed a distinct Christian church (Collier-Thomas, 2010).

Antebellum White women’s mothering was shaped by the creed of the “cult of true womanhood.” “True women” showed piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, and claimed civic importance through virtuous volunteering (Kerber, 1997; Welter, 1966). African American mothers were not free to protect their purity. Their fertility, controlled by White men, was part of the capitalist profit-making system (Roberts, 1994). The Jezebel image emerged to excuse sexual assaults by White men and present slave fertility as evidence of natural appetites rather than forced sexual and economic exploitation (Collins, 2000).

At the genesis of the United States, White women negotiated a civic identity as “mother” of the “family ethic” ideology. However, multiple tenets of CRT are applicable, such as Whites’ portrayal of African Americans in a way that benefited their interests. Both narratives of Mammy and Jezebel interlocked race and gender into powerful tropes to legitimize labor and sexual exploitation. Whiteness as unearned privilege is doubly profound here; by law “the ultimate property of Whiteness” were African Americans themselves.

### Industrial Revolution: Reconstruction Era

The Industrial Revolution began before the Civil War and grew exponentially during the second half

of the 19th century (Stearns, 2013). The influx of European immigrants during the Industrial Revolution led to a swell of poor White mothers. Social Darwinism sanctioned stingy assistance (Hofstadter, 1992; Lubove, 1965). Poor parents increasingly placed their children in orphanages, and eugenics endorsed the proposition that pauperism was inherited and therefore some poor mothers should not bear children (Abramovitz, 2018). The cult of true womanhood segued into a “separate spheres” ideology wherein White middle-class women inhabited the private sphere of caregiving and domestic work, and men, the public one of paid work and politics (Kerber, 1997).

Emancipation for African Americans ended forced family separation and offered the potential for civil rights. The short-lived Freedman’s Bureau, instituted by President Abraham Lincoln, helped reunite African American family members, arranged for their education, and served as advocates in court (Faulkner, 2004). African American women volunteers, unlike their White counterparts, challenged hegemonies related to “perceptions of race, equal rights, free labor, and dependency, drawing on their personal investment on the outcome of Reconstruction” (Faulkner, 2004, p. 67). Frances Ellen Watkins Harper spoke throughout the South about mothers’ dual role as caregivers and racial equality activists (Faulkner, 2004). In 1872, the bureau was disbanded and federal troops removed. Emergent Black Code laws obstructed the freedoms of African Americans, denying them employment other than previous agricultural and domestic work. To ensure their submission the Ku Klux Klan terrorized them. Ida B. Wells penned editorials on lynching and inequality during a life-long campaign to resist African American disenfranchisement (Hine, 1993).

The dominant family ethic was in full force channeling White women into positions of domesticity or low-wage work (Abramovitz, 2018). African Americans were encouraged to form families, assigning them economic responsibility for family needs. Meanwhile, the growing Ku Klux Klan disrupted this effort; African Americans were terrorized and kept from voting or striving for economic progress (Schiele, 2014).

### Progressive Era

In the Progressive Era (1890–1920), social reformers moved motherhood into the public limelight.

Reformers like Jane Addams, Julia Lathrop, and Edith Abbott, in tandem with women's clubs such as the Mothers' Congress (Skocpol, 1992), claimed the importance of municipal housekeeping (Ryndbrandt, 1999). Elevating the political clout of "mother," they enacted mothers' pensions in most states, better factory working conditions, maximum work hour laws, the Townsend–Sheppard Act for mother and infant health, the juvenile court system, and laws challenging child labor (Chambers, 1963; Ladd-Taylor, 1995; Skocpol, 1992).

However, White maternalists did not fully embrace African Americans, rarely discussing them in professional venues (Lide, 1973). African American mothers were provided smaller mothers' pension benefits (Mink, 1995). Yet, the National Association of Colored Women, with leaders such as Mary Church Terrell, developed parallel systems of uplift and protection. Such women's clubs applied an Afrocentral paradigm of self-help, mutual aid, race pride, and social debt. Carlton-LaNey (1999) stated that by 1920, they "had established homes for elderly people, schools, hospitals, sanitariums, orphanages, settlement houses, [and] libraries" (p. 316).

White women leveraged gender differences to gain resources for poor mothers but considered less the needs of African Americans, illustrating the CRT tenet that the dominant group only seeks change when it benefits them. African American women demonstrated incredible agency, building on the power of social commitment through organizing African Americans to provide significant support for their entire community.

### Great Depression

Although women won the right to vote in 1920, this achievement was minimized by the needs of soldiers returning from World War I (Chambers, 1963). The 1929 depression led to the New Deal's Social Security Act of 1935 (SSA) that contained federal support of mothering work in Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). Unfortunately, it codified unequal benefits between paid and unpaid work. Working men were awarded generous entitlements in social insurance; women were saddled with demonstrations of need and morality for meager assistance (Gordon, 1994).

Despite African American women's extensive paid work, they were effectually written out of the protection and benefit of social insurance through

the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers (Quadagno, 1994). Although 27 percent of White working people were thereby omitted, a full 65 percent of African Americans were affected (DeWitt, 2010). Furthermore, many African American mothers were thwarted from receiving ADC as states were responsible for developing their own program rules. Southern public welfare boards devised eligibility rules and tactics to force women of color into low-wage work (Quadagno, 1994).

Positioning men as citizens and women as supplicants oppressed all women, resonating with a feminist analysis of exploited domestic work. Black men were grossly underpaid, and African American women were forced into low-wage labor. The CRT tenet of dominant group interests (cheap labor) overriding those of the minority group is blatant. The lack of a public narrative of African American women as hardworking is deafening.

### Cold War Era

The 1940s–1960s witnessed a pronatalist turn: Family sizes increased as did the percentage of couples who had children (May, 2008). Mothering became central to the American cultural landscape. The ubiquitous Dr. Benjamin Spock gave advice on the care of babies and children to White mothers who made parenting a career. Popular psychology argued that working women were unnatural, were neurotic, and were psychologically harming boys, especially with overbearing, yet uncaring, parenting (Feldstein, 2000). May's (2008) "domestic containment" captures this era's rigid cultural positioning of White mothers.

The National Council of Negro Women unified many clubs to address equal rights in military, education, women's, and children's issues. Mary McLeod Bethune and Dorothy Height were among notable leaders (Feldstein, 2000; Height, 2003). Such efforts were needed because African Americans still did not have equal social services. For example, the majority of White pregnant teenagers went to maternity homes and returned home without child care duties. There were no maternity homes for African American girls. Supported by the community, single African American mothers kept 96 percent of their infants (Solinger, 2000). Black mothers were also portrayed as too domineering and emasculating (Feldstein, 2000). As the Cold War waned, Assistant Secretary of Labor Patrick Moynihan (1965) wrote the widely read *The Negro Family: The Case for Na-*

*tional Action*. Confronted by obvious social inequities, he asserted that African American poverty was primarily due to a matriarchal family structure, rather than societal issues, reinforcing Black mother blaming. Concerned that the SSA social protections would diminish the male role in American society, social scientists and policymakers trained their critical gaze on the familiar target of women, especially African American ones (Feldstein, 2000).

The Cold War era demonstrates the impact of discourses on both sets of women. For White women, the constraining discourse of domestic containment amplified the family ethic of marriage to a breadwinner. For African American women, derision for not following the family ethic was intensified by the racialized narratives of Black mothers. The CRT principle of the ability of the dominant group to set the narrative and construct the racial-ethnic minority group is prominent.

### Civil Rights Movement

White women eagerly read Betty Friedan's (1963) book *The Feminine Mystique*. Unhappy caretaking mothers found a voice encouraging them to engage in work, education, and outside involvement. Although White women entered the workplace in droves, the Equal Rights Amendment fell three states short of being ratified. This wave of feminism has been critiqued as mostly a White women's movement that did not seek or incorporate the issues of women of color.

During the civil rights movement, mothers of color previously excluded from public assistance gained access due to landmark Supreme Court decisions that struck down "man-in-the-house" and "substitute father" eligibility rules (*King v. Smith*, 1968) plus termination of benefits without due process (*Goldberg v. Kelly*, 1970). Effectively barred from ADC since 1935, African American mothers considered this benefit a long-deferred civil right (Quadagno, 1994). This fueled the National Welfare Rights Organization, which consisted of 75 welfare rights organizations in 1966 and had 32,000 members by 1969 (Morrissey, 1990). Primarily mothers of color, members of these groups organized large-scale public demonstrations and smaller-scale targeted actions. Their efforts shed light on discriminatory policies and influenced fairer benefit disbursement. Yet, as welfare rolls grew into the early 1970s, so did a backlash against poor mothers of color. The image of

the matriarch emerged (Collins, 2000), advancing a virulent stereotype that African American mothers were masculine, aggressive, uncaring, and potentially dangerous—raising maladapted children who performed poorly in school and life. Of this controlling image, Collins (2000) stated that "the matriarch represented a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant" (p. 75).

This era demonstrated the ironies of history: Although White women gained some economic liberty, the aim of constitutional equality proved unattainable. Yet, African American mothers successfully organized to gain equal social rights of public assistance. Their limited incorporation into the women's movement highlights the CRT tenet of the dominant group supporting minority groups' interests only when coinciding with theirs. However, this era also demonstrated the cumulative effect of discourses: the matriarch-evoked older narratives but with added masculinity, danger, and nonconformity.

### Welfare Retrenchment Era

As Ronald Reagan took office as U.S. president in 1981, heralding an era of full-blown neoliberalism, socially conservative groups such as the Eagle Forum and Moral Majority lauded traditional gender roles to position White women in the home. This was nostalgia, given that mothers were already established in the workforce; by 1985, more than half of mothers with children under six worked outside the home (Guilder, 1986). An analysis of 1970s–1980s conservative discourse found that free market proponents wanted mothers in the labor force (Mayer, 2008). By 1994, the "Contract with America" of congressional Republican leaders endorsed enforcement of paid work and "moral" behavior as a centerpiece act. The Personal Responsibility Act read:

Discourage illegitimacy and teen pregnancy by prohibiting welfare to minor mothers and denying increased AFDC for additional children while on welfare, cut spending for welfare programs, and enact a tough two-years-and-out provision with work requirements to promote individual responsibility. ("The Republican 'Contract with America,'" 1994, para. 11)

The focus on teenage mothers evoked a trope of the African American woman welfare recipient (Collins, 2000; Weinstein, 1998). Although scapegoats in the welfare reform discourse, teenage mothers composed only 2.4 percent of all parents receiving AFDC (Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, 2004). The welfare mother was constructed to negate the legal claim to welfare state benefits. Collins (2000) stated it was a new version of the antebellum Jezebel. Unlike the matriarch, she was not aggressive enough. Collins (2000) wrote, “The welfare mother’s accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring” (p. 79). Reagan’s infamous term “welfare queen” added cunningness (Gilman, 2014) to the portrait: willing to engage in fraud and even bear more children to get a better return on investment.

As neoliberalism took hold with TANF, the racialized rhetoric increased through coded language to construct African American mothers as they had never been—not working. Furthermore, the welfare queen portrayal created a subject who would require a neoliberal TANF policy of monitored work. CRT’s tenet of the power of the dominant group to construct the minority group is on full display. However, White mothers are also exposed to these policies: Any women applying for public assistance are assessed and disciplined. Thus, the patriarchy of the family ethic is at an apex.

### Postwelfare Era

Since the passage of TANF, the new era has been a neoliberal one. Mothers must be self-sufficient or develop capacities to be so (Mead, 1997). TANF policies of time limits and work requirements as well as more Earned Income Tax Credits and child care assistance signal that single mothers are solely constructed as paid workers. The discourse of welfare reform has submerged the act of parenting as a citizenship-worthy activity (Toft, 2010). Given that racial discourses have been a less-than-covert rationale for welfare reform, it is not surprising that devolved TANF policy allows a legal means to discriminate in aid administration. As the percentage of a state’s African American recipients increases, so, too, does the adoption of punitive TANF policies (for example, time limit length, family cap rules, and sanctioning procedures) (Soss et al., 2011).

The proportion of African American TANF recipients dropped from 37.1 percent to 34.1 percent compared with that of White recipients, which dropped from 35.6 percent to 35.4 percent from 1998 to 2009. A “disconnected” group that is neither employed nor a TANF recipient has grown to about 20 percent of poor single mothers (Loprest & Nichols, 2011). These mothers are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, provide care for an ill family member, or have mental illness or a drug addiction (Blank & Kovak, 2007). Although in 1995, AFDC lifted 58 percent of children out of deep poverty and was accessed by 68 of 100 poor families, today TANF only lifts 14 percent out of deep poverty, accessed by only 23 of 100 families (Floyd, 2020). TANF obligations extend past work expectations to parenting: Poor mothers are exposed to public institutions for monitoring (schools, hospitals, building inspectors, child protection), which limit family privacy rights (Bridges, 2017).

Contemporary neoliberalism encourages women of both races to depend on men for income or to engage in low-wage work. Mothering does not register as work because women are disciplined for not constantly engaging in paid work. The cumulative tropes that African American mothers are unfit lead to high scrutiny. The public assistance system is so punitive and surveilling that, paradoxically, African American mothers and other poor mothers may not seek TANF to support and protect their family.

### DISCUSSION

These histories lay bare important truths to help understand present circumstances. African American mothers have historically been active agents in constructing a positive life for themselves, their community, and the nation at large. They have also consistently experienced more draconian social policies, exploitive economic conditions, and pernicious social discourses. The soft power of discourse has compromised the recognition of African American mothers for hundreds of years.

It is no coincidence that neoliberalism gained momentum after Reagan first deployed the welfare queen fiction in 1980. Since that time, parenting has disappeared from the political discourse as worthy of receiving benefits for all mothers. Rendering parenting work as invisible has allowed two democratic transgressions: elimination of national

responsibility for the well-being of poor children and coercion of poor parents (mostly mothers) into the low-wage workforce. (The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's second highest priority on its 1996 legislative agenda was the passage of welfare reform [Ridzi, 2009].) "Welfare reform" had thus successfully rescinded what had been a social right of citizenship since the SSA.

The result is at once tragic, ironic, and growing—discriminatory discourses that marginalize the political humanity and participation of one group and usher in a depoliticized management governance that has the capacity to mute all citizens' voices. As of March 2020, 15 states had pending or approved waivers to require paid work to receive Medicaid (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020).

Moreover, society itself does the work of neoliberalism, circulating antidemocratic narratives that affect all levels of governance from policy design to individual discipline. This is where social workers must play a new role: First, we must resist these discourses by knowing the social and political histories of the populations with whom we work to challenge unjust portrayals. We must reflect on how the methods and impacts of neoliberalism are present in our workplaces. We may need to form solidarity groups to question unjust agency decisions.

Second, social workers must launch and nurture democratic narratives. We must understand politics as enacted not only on the public stage, but also among us. Action should include facilitating the active political participation of service users, registering them to vote and encouraging participation on governance boards. Social workers must launch democratic counternarratives in virtual and real-time mediums as well as in conversations with coworkers. We ourselves should join advocacy groups that work to prevent the social problems that lead people to need our services.

Once out of social work educational programs, social workers will rarely encounter social welfare history in continuing education. This is unfortunate; history teaches that the world, political conditions, and cultural discourses can change. The forces that affect social work practice can only be challenged through the conscious political will to resist them. For all social workers, reading history into the present is an essential first defense against becoming the unknowing administrators of social injustice. The second is to consciously cast social problems as political issues that affect us all. **SW**

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Original manuscript received November 27, 2018

Final revision received June 17, 2019

Editorial decision July 9, 2019

Accepted July 9, 2019

Advance Access Publication July 17, 2020