

Introduction

In 1996, after nearly three decades of gridlock, the stalemate over public assistance in the United States was dramatically broken when President Bill Clinton agreed to sign the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The 1996 law ended “welfare as we knew it,” in Clinton’s words, by repealing the sixty-one-year-old cash-assistance program to low-income families with children, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The old policy was replaced with a block grant program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), that gave states substantial discretion over the use of funds even as it imposed strict time limits and work requirements on recipients. A whole new world of “get-tough” welfare reform was initiated.¹ Access to assistance was tightened, and welfare shifted from an income support program to a behavior modification regime. Lawmakers created new rules designed to get low-income single mothers to augment their child-rearing work with paid employment outside the home.² Some families were helped; others found the reforms innocuous because they were already ready to move on from welfare to work. A large number confronted new bureaucratic complexities and the hardships of trying to survive without public assistance while working a low-wage job.³ Still others fell through the cracks, leaving welfare, not working, relying more on family and friends, and hoping that charity and handouts could prevent them from succumbing to the oppressive weight of grinding poverty. Welfare reform has proven to be a milestone, though not the one that social justice advocates had hoped for back in the 1960s when the campaign for welfare rights had begun.⁴

In fact, the 1996 legislation could be said to represent several milestones, including the culmination of major changes in the relationship between welfare scholarship and politics.⁵ During the 1960s, much of the best welfare scholarship was done in collaboration with social movements to create pressure from the bottom up to promote social change. Gradually, such

work became marginal, displaced by a scientific, technocratic social science that worked in service of the managers who fine-tune social policies.⁶ While conservative critics of welfare, such as Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead, championed their political views in books and articles, the center of gravity for most social welfare research shifted to highly refined statistical analyses that sought to avoid being seen as political. From the 1960s to the 1990s, as corporate-sponsored campaigns to repudiate the welfare state ascended, conservative social welfare scholarship became increasingly vocal and explicitly political.⁷ By contrast, liberal social welfare scholarship in this changed political climate increasingly adopted a depoliticized idiom and became limited in its political influence by being assimilated into the expert discourses of the bureaucracy.⁸ In the process, the voices of dissent that opposed the deleterious effects of welfare reform were increasingly isolated.

Critical scholarship on social justice issues has long been vulnerable to marginalization. Nonetheless, there have always been some scholars who have sought to ground their scholarship in ongoing struggles for social justice, especially so in social welfare scholarship. In the 1960s, for example, practitioners of a politically engaged scholarship worked to connect theory and practice and to facilitate an informed challenge to the structures of power, the inequities of the political economy, and the deficiencies of social policy in the United States. This scholarship was best represented by the work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. Their scholarship and activism reinforced each other as they worked on both fronts with others to push for social change. Piven and Cloward wrote sophisticated analyses that blended political economy, historical research, and strategic theorizing; they also worked directly with other activists to found the National Welfare Rights Organization and push for a guaranteed income policy that would eliminate poverty in the United States. While the guaranteed income narrowly missed getting enacted, the political agitation for welfare rights proved to be part of a larger set of social forces that led to the expansion of some social welfare policies and the development of others. Over the next few decades, billions of dollars in increased expenditures would be redistributed to low-income families and individuals. Piven and Cloward's role in all of this demonstrated how social science could inform social-policy politics in ways that helped energize a movement for a more just form of social provision. Their scholarship constituted a "praxis for the poor."

The phrase "praxis for the poor," I think, captures an important dimension of Piven and Cloward's work. By praxis, I mean theoretically informed

practice.⁹ This Greek term was perhaps most famously championed by Karl Marx, who developed his own theory of praxis.¹⁰ One theory of praxis holds that the ultimate truth of things cannot be known in advance, that theory cannot dictate practice, that knowledge arises within the context of struggle and is therefore historically and contextually contingent, and that the relationship of theory to practice is ultimately dialogical: theory takes ongoing struggle as its premise and works to help create the capacity for critical reflection within it. The ultimate test of theoretical work, then, lies more with the degree to which it is “true” to a particular struggle than with some idealized notion of what the world is or ought to be like.¹¹ Throughout their careers, Piven and Cloward have produced work that is entirely consistent with this theory of praxis. Social scientists should revisit their efforts and learn anew from them, not so much to uncritically accept their analyses as to develop new forms of critical social science that can help challenge the configurations of power that manifest themselves today.

In the essays that follow, I seek to do just that. The purpose of this book is to elucidate relationships between theory and practice, scholarship and politics, and social science and social welfare. The chapters that follow divide neatly into these two parts. The first four chapters, which develop the main themes of my perspective, offer a critical reflection on Piven and Cloward’s work as a model of the relationship of scholarship to politics and, more critically, as a source of tools for building a better future for social science in social welfare. The last four chapters are animated by the spirit of Piven and Cloward’s approach. In these later chapters, I seek to enact my own “praxis for the poor,” building on the work of Piven and Cloward but focusing on the struggles of the current period.

In the first chapter, I take up the question of whether welfare scholarship has a role to play in mass politics and, if so, what forms this role should take. Specifically, I question ascendant notions of how to connect with the mass public that emphasize making theory and research, ideas and analysis, more “accessible.” While the advantages of accessible language are widely known, the limitations and pitfalls of this popular strategy too frequently go unnoticed. After critically examining two contemporary examples of the “mass readership” strategy, I suggest that Piven and Cloward’s work offers a different and better model. Rather than watering down their analysis or moderating their politics in order to enhance their mass appeal, Piven and Cloward have shown how highly sophisticated and openly critical scholarship can be inspired by, directed at, and useful for political action on the ground.

In chapter 2, I look to the past to consider Jane Addams as a protean but underappreciated model of how to connect theory to practice. Early twentieth century Progressive reformers such as Addams understood that there had to be a conscious effort to make research an explicit part of political struggle. Addams in particular was someone who distinctively understood the relationship of research to struggles for social justice. Addams gave priority to practice over theory, even as she sensitively theorized what was needed to realize democratic aspirations. She allowed research to grow out of the real problems confronted by persons living in poverty. Addams insisted that the primary goal of her poverty research should not be to advance the refinement of “sociological investigation” but rather to promote “constructive work” that could help push the progressive agenda to address the injustices of poverty.¹² Addams emphasized a “bottom-up” approach that started with the people, their hopes and dreams, their struggles and problems, and worked up from there to contextualize their situation and help create leverage for change. Practice had priority over theory; social science grew out of people’s struggles. Addams’s approach transgressed the boundaries between politics and social science, and worked in ways that did not reify distinctions within social science. The research was grounded in ongoing struggle and approached the subject of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon. Addams and her colleagues used a variety of techniques, combining qualitative analysis with quantitative analysis, survey research with mapmaking, theoretical inquiry punctuated by empirical considerations.

Addams’s life work offers a basis for imagining what a more politically engaged and methodologically diverse social science can be today. It suggests how research grounded in struggle forgoes rigid technicism and overspecialization in favor of the technical and tactical flexibilities needed to facilitate political change. Starting first in the community rather than in the academy is an important part of the critical insight Addams affords. And it is one that takes us farther than perhaps most social scientists are prepared to go today in trying to improve their craft. I conclude this chapter by suggesting how Addams’s work anticipated insights that are being developed today by feminists, critical theorists, and even postmodernists. I suggest how Addams’s efforts enable us to think seriously about the politics of scholarship and the possibilities for a better future of social science in social welfare.

The distinctive way that Piven and Cloward combined social science and politics bears many similarities to Addams’s model. There are, how-

ever, differences as well. Piven and Cloward have emphasized the importance of a politics of dissent; Addams ultimately sought to get beyond conflict. Addams hoped the privileged would come to identify with the oppressed; Piven and Cloward emphasized that resistance to oppression by the oppressed was an important element of any equation for social justice. The dissensus politics that Piven and Cloward emphasized is an important missing ingredient in Addams's work.

It is in the third chapter that I examine Piven and Cloward's efforts to combine welfare scholarship with the struggle for welfare rights beginning in the 1960s. I examine how their theoretical work informed their activism, and vice versa. I suggest how their "praxis for the poor" can be understood as engendering what I call a "radical incrementalism."¹³ Radical incrementalism involves accepting the strategic indeterminacy that arises from political contingency.¹⁴ This means, as Piven and Cloward consistently emphasized in their own work, that political actors must work with what is available and figure out what can be done given the circumstances as they are presented. Like Marx's historical materialism, such a "praxis for the poor" accepts that social structures constrain what human agency can do at any one point in time. Like the pragmatism of John Dewey and Jane Addams, Piven and Cloward's "praxis for the poor" worked from immediate circumstances to realize a better future.

Radical incrementalism has implications not just for activism but also for the role of research within activism. Scholar-activists working in the radical-incrementalist mode orient their investigations toward what can be extracted from prevailing structures of power as they are constituted at a given point in history. Within a particular social order, they ask what can be won and how political action might be used to win it. In chapter 3, I suggest that such radical incrementalism also offers a particular model of politically engaged scholarship that is missing and very much needed in the relationship between social science and social policy today.

Social science, like social action, is context dependent. Social science is never disembodied or decontextualized, regardless of what social scientists might want to believe. It is already tied to structures of power, and therefore it is already implicated in politics. The relationship of social science to social context therefore implies the necessity of explicitly politicizing social science and highlighting how it is already implicated in power relations whether social scientists are willing to admit it or not. Social scientists therefore have no choice but to be political; they only choose whether to ignore the politics already embedded in their work or to struggle with it

explicitly. Research that avoids explicitly confronting politics too often gets co-opted by it. Radical incrementalism, however, implies more than just challenging the dominant technocratic paradigm for doing research on social welfare issues.¹⁵ It is not enough, for instance, to counter the quantitative modeling that has dominated so much of welfare research since the 1960s. It is not enough, say, to just add more politically engaged qualitative work to the mix of welfare scholarship. Instead, the only effective counter to the forces of depoliticization at work in social science is to contest politics from the very beginning by making it an explicit part of one's analysis, from topic selection, to perspective, to mode of analysis, interpretation, and so on. The necessity of not just adding politics but explicitly embedding research in politics means doing away with another precious distinction. Rather than segregating theoretical analyses of what should be from empirical examination of what is, empirical research needs to be grounded in theory. Empirical work can then be more effective at promoting alternative perspectives for understanding why things are the way they are and what should be done about them.

I pursue this issue further in chapter 4, where I focus on recent arguments in the field about the relationship between social welfare research and politics. I suggest that there is a tendency to deploy narrow notions of scholarly research in ways that end up reinforcing, rather than challenging, power. Such narrow definitions of research led to false accusations that Piven and Cloward and other explicitly political scholars were “against research” when in fact they simply embraced alternative models of research. I conclude that a growing technicism in social welfare research needs to be countered with research efforts that are more directly tied to ongoing political struggle. Rather than join the social scientists who ignore Piven and Cloward, or dismiss them for emphasizing the interplay of politics and social science, I seek to build on their model.

Chapters 5 through 8 do not argue for a particular version of a Piven and Cloward inspired future of social science in social welfare. Instead, these chapters enact that vision through a series of performances. Ranging across a variety of approaches, these performances do not emulate the methodology or even the theoretical orientation of Piven and Cloward in all respects. Instead, what these chapters share in common is that each is animated by Piven and Cloward's commitment to forge dynamic relationships between theory and practice, scholarship and politics, and social science and social welfare.

While arguments in the academy often revolve around issues of methodology and theoretical orientation, I suggest here that the more critical questions lie elsewhere. I do recognize that politics is involved in competing methodological approaches and theoretical orientations.¹⁶ And I do accept wholeheartedly that there are political implications in emphasizing particular approaches to understanding specific subjects such as welfare and poverty. There are, to be sure, political implications to which side we choose in disputes over the advantages of quantitative and qualitative research, or between theorists who emphasize the importance of social structure versus those who stress the significance of the choices individuals make, or even in arcane debates between modernists who stress the priority of human consciousness for animating our actions versus postmodernists who emphasize the overriding significance of discourse, modes of representation, and the structures of intelligibility. In fact, that is why I try to choose carefully, picking from each approach and orientation what can best help inform my radical incrementalism, given where people in need find themselves now and what issues of welfare and poverty they confront demand the most attention. My radical incrementalism, grounded in the struggles of our time and the problems those struggles confront, determines my methodological approaches and theoretical orientations more than the other way around.¹⁷

My methodological agnosticism is therefore consistent with Piven and Cloward's animating spirit to appreciate the importance of context and accept the overriding significance of political contingency. Given the contingencies of politics, methodological flexibility is essential in order to adjust to what needs to be studied and how this should be done in different circumstances. My choice of topics is also consistent with giving priority to the role of context and the play of contingency.

Social welfare struggle in the current period, for instance, is one in which race plays a latent role that needs to be explicitly scrutinized. Therefore, two of the four chapters in the second half of the book focus on the racial dimensions of welfare politics today. Chapter 5 examines the significance of the racial composition of the welfare population in affecting the likelihood that states will take an aggressive approach to the new "get-tough" welfare reforms that have swept across the country. This chapter uses conventional quantitative analysis to address the overlooked if highly charged topic of racial bias in welfare policymaking. Chapter 6 examines the complicated politics that arise once we try to make the racial

dimensions of welfare explicit. Important strategic issues come up in the context of race and welfare. This chapter itself employs quantitative, narrative, and visual forms of analysis to examine different dimensions of the problem of representing race in welfare.

The remaining two chapters broaden the analysis of welfare in the current period. Chapter 7 examines the political process by which welfare reform has been prematurely constructed to be the success it may well not be at all. This chapter employs a social constructionist perspective to critique the interrelationships among politics, research, and the mass media in reporting on welfare reform. Chapter 8 looks to the future to examine the relationship of welfare reform to globalization. Building on the work of Piven and Cloward, this chapter adds the consideration of poststructuralists to think through the ways in which welfare reform is helping create compliant subjects for a new world order.

My methodologically diverse performances on these different topics are united in one important respect. All reflect my commitment to build on Piven and Cloward's emphasis on grounding social science in social struggle in order to help realize more socially just forms of social welfare. In fact, it is important to note that the chapters of the book overall are organized around the three themes of social welfare, social struggle, and social science and how the three are related in important ways. I hope to demonstrate that a better future for social science in social welfare is to be formed in a more politically self-conscious research that is explicitly tied to ongoing political struggle, locally and globally. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether the approach offered here works for them. My hope is that they will find enough merit in what is offered to join in helping to realize a better future for social science in social welfare.