

The Birth of Modern Entitlement Programs: Reports From the Field and Implications for Welfare Policy

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One of the most controversial public policy debates of the present decade involves entitlement programs for the poor. Many of these programs originated during the widespread poverty of the Great Depression. The authors reconstruct what consumers experienced during the Great Depression through a primary analysis of observations of consumer behavior, which are preserved in archival reports, and a secondary analysis of letters expressing the consumers' plight that the consumers themselves authored and sent to various government officials. The four themes resulting from the analyses of these data are (1) consumption conditions, (2) labor as an expendable resource, (3) class and ethnic conflict, and (4) return to self-sufficient modes of production. The broader implications of these historic events for consumer researchers interested in current poverty issues and public policy are provided in the conclusion.

One of the most contentious public policy debates of our time involves rewriting the social contract on consumer entitlements (Gleckman 1995). Recent topics have included long-standing programs such as Medicare, farm subsidies, and Social Security. However, the most inimical debates focus on the so-called safety net for the poor, which includes welfare, Medicaid, and food stamps (Hill and Macan 1996).

Recently, House and Senate Republicans agreed to several welfare reform measures that would restrain federal spending and involvement and pass the responsibility and authority for such programs onto the states. These reforms include four provisions: (1) provide states with federal funds through block grants that fix the amounts allocated, (2) eliminate current federal eligibility criteria and enable the states to establish eligibility standards, (3) restrict the period of time that any adult can receive welfare, and (4) require welfare recipients to work within two years of receiving benefits (Katz 1995). These proposals are consistent with the conservative political environment of the 1990s that has advocated decreased dependency on and costs to the Federal Government through legislated community and personal responsibility (Thompson and Norris 1995).

Such value judgments are not new. Welfare policies in this country have their historical roots in the English Poor Laws of 1601, which categorized the poor as either "deserving" or "undeserving" and set assistance levels below the lowest attainable income an "able-bodied" person could

earn (see Cunningham 1993; Turner 1993). Relief efforts were community-based, and they were provided through charitable organizations.

These modest local programs met their greatest challenge following the stock market crash of 1929 (Bauman and Coode 1988). During the ensuing decade, which is widely referred to as the Great Depression, consumer security and rising middle-class affluence ended, and the nation became crippled financially, as well as socially (Gaughan and Hill 1995; Romer 1993). In an effort to address this national crisis, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt articulated a new social agenda for the Federal Government:

Among our objectives I place the security of the men, women, and children of the nation first.... This security for the individual and for the family concerns itself with three factors. People want decent homes to live in; they want to locate them where they can engage in productive work; and they want some safeguard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated in this manmade world of ours.... If, as our Constitution tells us, our Federal Government was established among other things to "promote the general welfare," it is our duty to provide for that security upon which welfare depends (Cohen 1985, pp. 136-38).

With these words, the modern entitlement programs were born.

Recently, the House Republicans put forth ten draft bills that make up their Contract With America (see Gillespie and Schellhas 1994). One aspect of this proposed legislation, the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA), eliminates benefits to 42% of current welfare recipients and reduces benefits to an additional 30% (Sawhill 1996). Its four main proposals—eliminating benefits, requiring work, capping welfare spending, and providing state flexibility—are the basis on which the current legislation before Congress was formed.

We examine this agenda through the use of qualitative archival data gathered during the Great Depression. These data were collected at the origin of our modern entitlement programs, during a unique time period when large portions

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of our society were unemployed and/or living in poverty. Their qualitative nature provides a rare opportunity to view the lived experience of these consumers and observe how a wide spectrum of the population coped with poor economic conditions. The resulting themes inform the current welfare debate and give support for a more proactive approach to poverty reduction than entitlement reduction.

The Great Depression and Consumer Society

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal buttressed a tottering urban-industrial capitalism and enabled it to weather the Great Depression. Nevertheless, the Great Depression altered the boundaries of the political economy and the role of consumers within it. The Depression allied the Federal Government with American workers by assuring them at least a minimal capacity—Social Security, for example—to participate in the free enterprise mass-consumption society (Bernstein 1987; Chandler 1962; Cohen 1990; McElvaine 1984).

Historians, economists, and others have offered many explanations for the 1929 debacle. President Herbert Hoover underscored the international dimensions of the Great Crash. Others stressed the weight of the post-World War I restructuring of the American economy and the emergence of new industries (appliances, chemicals, and processed food), while older industries (iron, textile, and lumber products) contracted. In any case, as summarized by Bernstein (1987, p. 30),

The crash created a massive disruption in the financial markets of the country, drastically devalued capital stocks, greatly depressed levels of disposable income, and, by virtue of the high unemployment and rapid deflation it generated, so biased the already unequal distribution of purchasing power as to virtually eliminate consumer and investor confidence. Idle plants and unemployed workers dampened entrepreneurial spirit and depressed the rate of net investment. At the same time reduced investment lowered effective demand by lessening employment and thereby [further] idling plants and employees.

The economic collapse triggered by the stock market crash of 1929 pummeled every sector of the American economy. Farm, mine, or textile family; ethnic or all-American citizen; rich, middle class, or poor, the Great Depression left its scar (Bird 1966). For example, economic calamity befell the nation's heartland, where Midwest farmers had already been battered during the 1920s by overproduction. Between 1929 and 1933, drought, dust storms, and plunging prices bankrupted farmers from the Dakotas to the Texas Panhandle (see Schwieder 1985). Farm income slumped from \$61 billion in 1929 to only \$2 billion in 1931 (McElvaine 1983; Poppendieck 1986). Many farmers lost everything. Sheriffs' sales dispossessed 60% of North Dakota farmers. A mob of hungry and frightened farmers gathered in 1931 in England, Ark., and threatened to raid the town's food stores unless Red Cross agents distributed provisions (Badger 1989; Romasco 1965; Shover 1965).

Unemployment ravaged America's urban working class (for a modern look at the effects of job loss, see Roberts 1991). Between 1929 and 1932 the median average weekly income in the nation's once booming automobile capital, Detroit, dropped 67%. Joblessness there soared. In 1931, fewer than 34% of Detroit's heads of household worked. A

mere fifth of Cleveland's breadwinners found employment, while 60% of Akron, Ohio's rubber, automobile, and other manufacturing workforce crowded soup kitchens and breadlines (Badger 1989).

For those at the bottom of America's socioeconomic ladder in 1931 and 1932—urban and rural blacks, coal miners, and the impoverished—whom social workers in the 1930s called *human flotsam* and whom people today refer to as the *underclass*, prospects were terribly bleak. African-Americans comprised a disproportionately greater number of those sheltered nightly in city police stations, packing giant flophouses, or living in the notorious Hoovervilles that sprang up along the banks of Philadelphia's Schuylkill River, in Seattle's flats, and in New York's Central Park. As conditions worsened in Chicago, beleaguered jobless ethnic workers lost faith that their lives would ever return to normal or that they would ever experience normal patterns of consumption (Badger 1989; Cohen 1990; Conroy 1965).

The Failure of Philanthropy

Romasco (1965), Trout (1971), Greenberg (1991), Argersinger (1988), and Cohen (1990) have all documented the crisis of voluntarism in the early 1930s. The Great Depression strained the delicate nineteenth century "safety net" of church, ethnic, and familial institutions that had presumably shielded America's working class from the brutish squalor engulfing London's nineteenth century *residuum* described by Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth (Himmelfarb 1991).¹ As depressions did in the past (i.e., 1873 and 1892), within six months, the Great Depression exhausted what social workers called the "first line of defense," namely, the small savings, insurance monies, and building and loan funds that buffered families when the economy soured. Once exhausted, rents fell in arrears, mortgages went unpaid, and lines of grocery credit lengthened. Jobless families eventually sought charity, and soup kitchens and breadlines sprang up and were run by neighborhood churches and political organizations.

Cohen's (1990) Chicago study emphasizes the ethnic face of local support often delivered by organizations such as Slovak Relief, the Polish Alliance, Jewish Charities, and other immigrant-rooted agencies. In Harlem, the Black church bore the brunt of charity giving through 1934 (Greenberg 1991). However, despite moral buttressing from Herbert Hoover's President's Emergency Committee on Employment or his President's Organization on Unemployment Relief, historic voluntarism proved unable to cope with the dimensions of this crisis (Romasco 1965). Huge united (charity) campaigns, modeled on the 1918 war bond drives, failed to shore up private philanthropy. As a result, distraught social workers and labor and political leaders appeared before congressional committees between 1932 and 1933 to express concern and frustration and request federal help (Bauman 1969). By 1931, as Philadelphia social worker Karl de Schweinitz testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Manufactures, the jobless in the Brotherly City breakfasted on cocoa and bread and scavenged for din-

¹Hill and Macan (1996) provide a modern parallel with the current system of health care and food distribution to the poor.

ner among rotting vegetables on the city docks (Coode and Bauman 1981).

These dire circumstances spawned the Federal Government's New Deal, which hewed to a progressive, pragmatic course, experimenting first with centralized planning and then with collectivism through such programs as the Tennessee Valley Authority and Resettlement Administration. Historians Romasco (1965), Hawley (1966), and Gelfand (1975) have stressed that New Deal central planning had been foreshadowed earlier by Hoover's endorsement in the 1920s of industries' associational movement, the National Association of Real Estate Board's backing of government mortgage insurance, and the Chamber of Commerce's plaudits for zoning and city and regional planning (Burgess 1994). Above all, however, the New Deal kept faith with capitalism and the "American Way." Most New Deal programs, such as Harry Hopkins's Works Progress Administration, fit the traditional American mold. Indeed, Hopkins's reporting venture, which produced the documents that form the primary basis for our inquiry, sought to learn how the Great Depression was eroding the family work ethic and other traditional values (Bremer 1975).

In the end, the Great Depression changed American consumers' beliefs in traditional institutions. After a decade of economic chaos, they no longer trusted that family, church, or ethnic club could adequately shelter them. Instead, they learned to rely on the Federal Government for economic support and employment opportunities. Increasingly, Americans came to view work relief, unemployment compensation, and surplus food and blankets as part of their birthright, as entitlements that would keep them invested in the world of consumption, despite temporary hardships. For these American consumers, government security became part of their heritage, part of the American meaning of citizenship that sustained them when war struck in 1941 (Cohen 1990; Coode and Bauman 1981).

The social survey that Hopkins launched in 1933 to help construct the modern American welfare system plumbed the depths of American despair and probed the nation's commitment to capitalism, private property, and the work ethic. The reports discussed subsequently afford a unique opportunity to interpret how citizens from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds coped with poverty at the beginning of the modern welfare state. These qualitative data show remarkable similarities with current conditions, and they supply a vantage point for evaluating and informing current welfare reform measures.

It is our hope that the data used here may open the door to other marketing and public policy researchers' use of historic documents. As a reviewer noted, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) data constitute one of the earliest and most extensive ethnographic portraits of American culture and were gathered at an epiphanic moment in American history. Few other marketing articles have used ethnographic data and/or historic documents to shed light on critical public policy issues. Because Hopkins's data permit consumers then present to speak of a time now past, these consumers can provide invaluable insights into the social and political sources of the current welfare system.

Through the Eyes of the Reporters

The Reporters and Their Reports

In 1933, Hopkins,² the newly appointed director of FERA, established a Division of Research, Statistics and Finance to gather and analyze quantitative data from reports filed by state and regional offices regarding the impact of the Depression on American industry and citizens. Once in operation, however, he perceived that something essential was missing from the resulting database and sought an interpretive key to assess the human pain experienced by a formerly productive but now underemployed population. Hopkins hoped that the collection of qualitative data would help him understand the tragedy of joblessness, its impact on people's lives, and the potential of federal relief to alleviate suffering.

To accomplish this mission, Hopkins initiated an interpretive investigation of depression-racked America. He hired 16 observers, whom he termed *reporters*, and charged them with exploring the enormity of the impact of the Great Depression on the lives of typical citizens. The first reporter hired was Lorena Hickok, and she was instructed

to go out around the country and look this thing over. I don't want statistics from you. I don't want the social worker angle. I just want your reactions, as an ordinary citizen. Go talk with preachers and teachers, businessmen, workers, farmers. Go talk with the unemployed, those who are on relief and those who aren't; and when you talk with them don't ever forget that but for the grace of God, you, I, and any of our friends might be in their shoes. Tell me what you see and hear. All of it. Don't ever pull your punches (Bauman and Coode 1988, p. 2).

The reporters had served previously as academics, journalists, and novelists, and they were recruited primarily from the New York and Washington, D.C., areas. All were given instructions similar to Hickok, but instead of covering the entire nation as she did, each was assigned a specific territory and a two-month time frame for his or her inquiry (see Appendix 1).

The outcome of their combined efforts was a set of individual reports, constituting an immense body of social data on the Great Depression. Their findings had an impact on national legislation, including the creation in 1935 of the Social Security Act and the Works Progress Administration. Schlesinger (1980, p. 3) stated that President Roosevelt believed this research project produced "the best history of the Depression" (for additional support for this statement, see also McElvaine 1984).

Method

Historic research is dependent on both the quality and quantity of documents preserved relevant to the time period under study (Reitzel and Lindemann 1982; Tuchman 1994). Our investigation focuses on a set of 122 documents written by a team of 16 observers near the midpoint of the Depres-

²In 1931, as head of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, Hopkins, a social worker by training, directed the early relief efforts of the state of New York for Roosevelt. As Bauman and Coode (1988, p. 10) note, "he contended that government relief stood the ground between radical revolution and the preservation of the American Way of Life."

sion.³ Because the documents were commissioned by the director of FERA, Hopkins, and were used in shaping social policy, they bear a dual significance as both artifacts of the Great Depression and political instruments affecting its course. Twenty-nine of these reports were written by the 15 short-term reporters; the remaining 93 reports were authored by Hickok (see Lowitt and Beasley 1981).

Because of the necessarily politicized nature of the reporters' tasks and to triangulate across data sources (Hansen and Macdonald 1995), we supplemented our analysis with an additional source of documentation on the lives of consumers during the Depression, namely, personal letters sent by consumers throughout the United States to various federal officials, especially President and Mrs. Roosevelt. These letters were drawn from a collection compiled by historian Robert McElvaine (1983, p. xi), which, as he notes, were grounded in the "belief that the social history of a people in a given historical period must begin with the testimony of the people themselves."

The letters were selected by McElvaine from the following manuscript collections:

1. Four collections from the National Archives, Washington, D.C.:
 - The President's Emergency Committee on Employment Central Files,
 - The President's Organization for Unemployment Relief General Correspondence,
 - FERA Central Files, and
 - The Civil Works Administration Administrative Correspondence Files,
2. The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.,
3. The Robert F. Wagner Papers, Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C., and
4. The Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library, New York.

The use of consumers' personal letters helps supplement a gap in the historical record. As McElvaine (1983) notes, biographies and extensive documentation are present regarding the lives and thoughts of politically prominent persons during the Great Depression, but the feelings and cognitions of the common folk were largely unrecorded by historians. Their personal letters provide significant evidence of what these people were experiencing—and expressing to public officials—during this time period. McElvaine selected 15,000 letters at random from the millions maintained in the archives cited previously. These were organized thematically in his study. We have drawn on these themes—and some representative letter texts—to supplement the reporters' writings.

Although the 122 reports served as our primary interpretive database, the letters were used to enrich the themes discerned by providing a multiviewed image. Although the reporters' words themselves are often eloquent and detailed, equally compelling are the poignant, often tragic renditions

of personal and familial economic ruin contained in the letters. It is perhaps through these, with their misspelled words and uneven grammar, that the voices of the Depression's consumers can be heard most clearly.

Using the constant comparative method (Miles and Huberman 1994), the 122 reports were read iteratively until a set of four themes was discerned that displayed stability across the entire collection of documents. These four themes also were found to resonate (McQuarrie and Mick 1992) with the letters archived from the same period of time. The four themes (1) consumption conditions, (2) labor as an expendable resource, (3) class and ethnic conflict, and (4) return to self-sufficient modes of production are discussed subsequently.

Consumption Conditions: Deprivation and Desperation

As McElvaine (1984) observes, perhaps one of the most difficult tasks for the present generation of social scientists and policymakers is to comprehend in experiential terms what it was like to live during the Depression. Many living Americans were born after World War II and have grown-up and lived their adult lives during an era of unparalleled prosperity. Furthermore, most social scientists and policymakers have middle-class origins, and, hence, they have never experienced poverty on a familial level (see Hill and Stamey 1990). In terms of both cultural and personal stocks of knowledge, social scientists and policymakers are ill-equipped to grasp the *dasein* (the "being there") of Depression-era consumers. This lack of experiential concordance is likely also to influence policymakers' comprehension of the mind-set of those Americans who *presently* live in poverty. Thus, what we attempt to do in this section is to re-create the experience of deprivation and desperation that permeated consumers' behaviors during the Depression. In particular, we rely on personal letters to give voice to the feelings of these people.

Consumer desperation often was rooted in the scarcity of income-producing jobs. Without money, goods and services could not be purchased. Property and savings that a family had spent a lifetime accumulating were lost in a few years or even months. When consumers continued to spend in a desperate effort to avoid deprivation, enormous debts were incurred. Banks foreclosed on thousands of homes, whose mortgages fell into default; renters were turned out of apartment after apartment by landlords when payments fell months in arrears. Debts mounted at grocery stores when consumers were unable to pay for food. Electric, gas, and water services were discontinued for many families. In desperation, a child wrote a letter to President Roosevelt, describing his family's plight:

February 1936

Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt.
Wash. D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

I'm a boy of 12 years.... My father hasn't worked for 5 months.... They won't give us anything. I don't know why. We haven't paid 4 months rent.... We are afraid that will be put out, been put out before, and don't want to happen again. We haven't paid the gas bill, and the electric bill, haven't paid grocery bill for 3 months. My father he staying home. All the time he's crying because he can't

³Hodder (1994, p. 393) notes that written documents are a special form of material culture artifact used by a variety of disciplines, including "history, art history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, technology, and modern material culture studies."

find work. I told him why are you crying daddy and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house. I feel sorry for him. That night I couldn't sleep. The next morning I wrote this letter to you in my room. Were American citizens and were born in Chicago, Ill. and I don't know why they don't help us. Please answer right away because we need it. Will starve. Thank you.

[Anonymous], Chicago, IL

Parents, unable to provide for their families, became hopeless. A former police officer in Latrobe, Pa., near Pittsburgh, wrote to Bruce McClure, one of Hopkins's reporters:

Latrobe, Pa.

Dear Sir:

I had been employed as Patrolman of the Borough until Jan. 8-34, then I was let go. Now I am faced with proposition of being set out of my home, because I cannot pay my rent. I have 10 day to get another house, no job, no means of paying rent. Can you be so kind as to advise me as to which would be the most human way to dispose of my self and family, as this is about the only thing that I see left to do. No home, no work, no money. They have shut the water supply from us. No means of sanitation. We cannot keep the children clean and tidy as they should be. They are all 6 in school but will soon haft to take them out if something is not done. I want work and money enough to support this family. I am getting relief to partly feed them but where is the shelter and water coming from and clothes.

Yours truly,

J. S. H.

Latrobe, Pa.

His plight was not exaggerated or atypical. Only four months later (August 7-12, 1934), Hickok reports from Pittsburgh:

The present relief allotment ... will not permit the purchase of soap or any sort of cleaning materials. In many cases, families who once lived comfortably in decent neighborhoods are crowded into quarters almost uninhabitable and alive with bed bugs. Mattresses and pillows have become so filthy and vermin infested that they've had to burn them and now sleep on newspapers spread out over the bed springs, with bundles of newspapers for pillows. Pennsylvania pays no rents, except one month in cheaper quarters, if a family has been evicted. The result is that ... families move about every six months—always into more crowded, less desirable quarters, in less desirable neighborhoods. You have the spectacle of a family with half grown children having started in a comfortable, detached house in the suburbs now living in one room in the slums—a room alive with bed bugs. The effect on the children is terrible.

Some families, having exhausted all commercial possibilities for housing, took up residence in any available shelter. Henry Francis filed the subsequent report on November 10, 1934, from Uniontown, Pa.: "A survey made by an investigator employed by the local relief organization disclosed 60 homeless resident individuals of the County living in coke ovens, 44 in dilapidated shanties, 3 in caves or dug-outs, 8 in stables or barns and many others in rooms on sufferance."

As the Depression wore on, even consumption items such as clothing, bedding, and furniture, which had a somewhat long life, became worn-out and unusable. Having no money to replace them, consumers often did without. Again, from Uniontown, Pa., Francis reports that

Thousands here are without adequate shoes, clothing and bedding.... Two and three adults and children ... with nothing to sleep on except wire spring bedsteads.... Children without shoes

are frequently met. They have no coats or sweaters and only summer underwear. I have not seen one man or woman or child with clothing sufficient to withstand freezing temperatures.

While finding home furnishings and apparel proved to be difficult over the course of the Depression, obtaining food—required on a daily basis—was the most daunting challenge for many families. Ironically, as thousands of farms failed and rich agricultural land lay dormant, many American consumers, adults as well as children, went hungry for extended periods of time (Poppendieck 1986). A desperate woman vented her anguish to the President:

Lawndale, California

Feb. 1-34.

Most Honorable President:

I am a mother of seven children and utterly heart broken, in that they are hungry, have only 65¢ in money. The father is in L.A. trying to find something to do—provisions all gone—at this writing—no meat, milk—sugar—in fact, about enough flour for bread two meals—and that's all....

We have a boy 17 yrs. old who is capable of holding a good position as a musician.... O, President, my heart is breaking, as I see him go from home with half enough to eat, and go all day without a bite of lunch.

Their father is 62 yrs. old—a preacher, a good carpenter—a saw-filer—but Industry won't hire a man this age, scarcely, even if they are strong in body, and he has no church to preach in—so—

O, surely there's a place for us in the world....

Very Sincerely,

Mrs. I. H.

Many Americans experienced food deprivation during the Depression, and though actual death from starvation was rare (Bauman and Coode 1988), malnutrition, especially among the children of the unemployed, was common. One of the primary reasons for malnutrition among the unemployed was the restrictiveness of relief allotments for food (see Biles 1991; Cochran 1968). Consumers were issued script by the government to be used to purchase groceries or had foodstuffs delivered to them (Brown 1940). However, the ingredients for balanced meals were frequently lacking, and those on relief had to settle for what they were issued.⁴ Vegetables, if available at all, might consist of canned tomatoes for several weeks (or months), and milk was often unavailable (Clague and Powell 1933). Diets often consisted of flour or cornmeal eaten repeatedly at every meal. Vitamin and protein deficiencies soon set in, as Martha Gellhorn reports on November 11, 1934, from Gastonia, N.C.:

Here is what doctors say: "It's no use telling mothers what to feed their children; they haven't the food to give...." "...I've just come from seeing some patients who have been living on corn bread and corn hominy for two weeks. I wonder how long it takes for pellagra to set in; just a question of days now...." "...There's not much use prescribing medicine; they haven't the money to buy it...."

In a society in which human beings were suffering from malnutrition, domestic animals fared even worse. During the course of the Depression, thousands of heads of live-

⁴Hickok (September 21, 1933) provides the following account of a Maine food order: "1 peck potatoes, corn meal, rolled oats, 2 quarts beans, pork fat, dried peas, 2 pounds rice, 1 quart molasses, 2 cans milk. This diet was to feed a family with several children for a week."

stock died or were destroyed because of prices or wages that were inadequate to purchase food (see U.S. House of Representatives 1932). Describing the horses belonging to once-prosperous farmers in South Dakota (November 11/12, 1933), Hickok writes,

It was awful. Horses so listless that they didn't seem to care whether we ran into them or not. Mares, dull-eyed, every rib showing, their backs sagging, great hollows behind their shoulders, followed by their scrawny colts. Sometimes they would come toward us with a sort of hopeful look, as if they thought we might be bringing them something to eat. The owners, without anything to feed them, have simply turned them loose ... hoping that a few of them will survive.

Another source of consumption deprivation was medical care. As is found among the poor and underemployed today, Depression-era consumers had little or no access to medical services and inadequate funds to purchase medicine. Many hospitals closed during the Depression, and families on relief were not provided access to medical treatment (Bauman 1969). Inadequate public health care facilities and consumer ignorance about disease transmission led to widespread epidemics of venereal disease. Syphilis, in particular, proved deadly to many (Jones 1993). Gellhorn writes from Gastonia, N.C. (November 11, 1934):

Every doctor says that syphilis is spreading unchecked and uncured. One doctor even said that it had assumed the proportions of an epidemic and wouldn't be stopped unless the government stepped in and treated it like small-pox. I have seen only three v.d. clinics. One of them was over a store—three rooms; run by the county doctor, a nurse, and a colored janitor who acted as an assistant. I am told by these clinic doctors that most of the patients come in when the disease is in the second or third (and incurable) stage. Congenital syphilis is a terrible problem and practically untreated; nature kills off these children pretty well.

One doctor whose clientele was entirely mill workers showed me 50 Wassermans, all four plus. Not one of those people is taking treatment. All of them have families. As you know, these people sleep four in a bed; with the smallest children in the same bed with the parents. But the treatment costs 25 cents a shot, and in that area the clinic is not allowed to accept relief orders for treatment.... Saw a family of four; everyone had syphilis. The boy was moronic and the girl also had t.b.

As was noted, tuberculosis and mental retardation (due to malnutrition and syphilis) were common afflictions of young children. Similarly, other contagious diseases such as pneumonia and diphtheria spread unchecked through populations weakened by poor nutrition and living in inadequately heated households. Because hospitals—like all other social institutions—were stressed by the weak economy, makeshift medical facilities often had to be relied on (see Boyer et al. 1990). Hickok reports from West Virginia (August 16–26, 1933) that

Diphtheria was beginning to break out in Logan and Mingo counties when I was there. In Logan county they have a little, makeshift detention home, where they take some of the children who are in the worst condition. The day I was there they had brought in a little girl desperately ill with diphtheria. In the afternoon they operated on her, putting a tube in her throat and Miss Sutherland and I stopped by there to see how she was getting along. They had her isolated in a building back of the home and later it occurred to me that it must have been the garage!

The abominable living conditions, the continual lack of adequate food and, above all, the seeming hopelessness that the future would bring about any improvement in their lives, drove many consumers to the edge of sanity or beyond (Elderton 1931). Mental illness became widespread (see Bird 1966). Gellhorn filed the subsequent report from Massachusetts (November 25, 1934):

I have been doing more case visiting here; about five families a day. And I find them all in the same shape—fear, fear driving them into a state of semi-collapse, cracking nerves and an overpowering terror of the future. These people are probably more intelligent and better educated than the unemployed I saw in the south.... The price of this intelligence is consciousness. I haven't been in one home that hasn't offered me the spectacle of a human being driven beyond his or her powers of endurance and sanity.

Louisa Wilson provides a similar account of a family she visited in Akron, Ohio (December 6, 1934):

In one family I visited, a wild-eyed young man was holding his children as his wife tried to get someone to pay their rent, so that they would have their water turned on again and not be evicted. "You can't expect a man to keep sane under these conditions," he told me. I didn't feel he was a sane man as he talked to me. He was a husky young man, with lots of initiative, crazy to work.

As with all the consequences of the Depression, the mental and emotional stress visited perhaps its most damaging effects on the children. Gellhorn, writing from Rhode Island (July 1934), evokes this devastation movingly, as well as presciently foreseeing the event that ultimately would bring the Depression to its conclusion: World War II.

The result on the children is this: malnutrition and then a neurotic condition produced by hearing and being a constant part of the parental fear. The child grows obsessed with the material problems of the home, and mentally shoulders them and the nervous system cracks. He speaks of little boys earning pocket money by perversion; little girls stealing in the five and ten cent store. You probably know all this anyhow; I don't want to howl doom, but it is really a horrible mess. And what can these young men and women do; what will these children grow up to? I should think it would be a cinch to run a war these days, with a good many of the world's young men having nothing better to do anyhow than get shot; at least be fed food a bit beforehand, and [kept] busy....

In Gellhorn's writing, we see the foreshadowing of many of the problems now common in urban ghettos—family disintegration, juvenile delinquency, and a general malaise resulting from the belief that conditions would not improve in the future (Hill and Stephens 1994).

Labor as an Expendable Resource

A truth often overlooked in both marketing and consumer research inquiries is that people are simultaneously *producers* of income and *consumers* of goods and services. If they do not produce, they cannot consume—that is, unless provided with financial resources from an outside source. During the Depression, approximately one in three American families was without a steady source of income for an extended period of time (Bauman and Coope 1988). At first, many families attempted to maintain their consumption standards by using savings and, then, once these were exhausted, by turning to indebtedness. All the while, family members searched in vain for paying employment.

One cause of the extraordinary rate of unemployment during the Great Depression was the dramatic decline in industrial output when lowered incomes led to decreased demand for consumer goods and services. A downward spiral of consumption and production led to fewer and fewer jobs available in the production sector. During the Depression this usually "invisible" or "naturalized" system of production-consumption resource exchange was vividly exposed. All sorts of implicit assumptions about what various categories of people were "worth" became blatantly visible. A host of subtle (and not so subtle) discriminatory practices calculated to increase or decrease the value of a person on the basis of his or her sex, age, color, and social class came into play. Within cultural circumstances, in which everyone suddenly found him- or herself "worth-less," every means of establishing a person's worth gained importance. For those who controlled the monetary resources—employers, the government—every means of deflating a worker's worth was exploited.

White-collar workers often accepted jobs at vastly reduced salaries (Gaughan and Hill 1995), happy to be employed at all. As Hazel Reavis notes from Homestead, Pa. (November 4, 1934), "In one home visited where the machine engineer father had been out of work for two years, the son, a graduate engineer from Carnegie Tech, was supporting the family shoveling sand for the Pennsylvania railroad."

Those unemployed white-collar workers who sought work confronted psychological and physical hazards that diminished their perceived value as marketable commodities. Thomas Steep reports from Chicago (November 11, 1934):

Chicago has three relief stations frequented by white collar men. Their difficulty in seeking jobs is to maintain a good personal appearance. Men who had been real estate salesmen, clerks, artists, cashiers, etc., explained that with shabby suits, frayed collars, worn shoes and perhaps with a couple of front teeth gone they had no chance in competition with more prosperous-looking applicants. Along with their indigent appearance goes a consciousness of inferiority, which works against them.

Discrimination against workers of all types who were 40 years of age or older was widespread. As Wayne Parrish, writing from New York City (November 11, 1934) states, "Men of 40 and 50 years of age are realizing very definitely that they are out for good and this results in a sense of futility." At the Elgin National Watch Company in Illinois, Steep (undated) reports, "The plant has been hiring young people in preference to taking back older employees who had been laid off." Hickok (January 1, 1935) urged Hopkins to "List among those made unemployable by the Depression ... men over 40, with half grown families.... They are through, and they are beginning to realize it.... 'A man over 40 might as well go out and shoot himself,' one of them said honestly." What these passages illuminate is the status of consumers as, themselves, commodities. Worth is equated with earnings, and after a certain age the person is worth nothing. Parallels exist with the current philosophy of large corporations, in which middle-aged, middle-managers are downsized out of a job only to be replaced by entry-level workers when the economic situation improves.

The extraordinary pressure placed on consumers to produce income during the Depression led to personal exploitation at both ends of the age spectrum. Child labor once again came into use, particularly in agriculture. Hickok's report

filed June 23, 1934, describes the use of child labor in the beet fields of Colorado:

I certainly did not enjoy seeing that 12 year old [girl] ... working her way up those rows, alternately hoeing and stooping to pull up weeds.... We stood in the yard of one Mexican beet-worker's shack and watched the family come home ... father and five children.... As he came trailing across the field, the youngest child didn't look over six years old.

Many children, explained Hickok, suffered from heart disease, due to their labor. Some had gone blind. "And on this sort of thing is built up one of the most powerful industries in the country. An industry that ... has gained \$166,000,000 in less than thirty years" (Hickok, June 23, 1934).

While Hispanic children were likely to be exploited as labor in the Southwest, the rural South relied on African-American youth to perform the same tasks. In a report filed from Charleston, S.C., on February 8, 1934, Hickok states, "A fruit grower calmly told me that he used Negro 'urchins' to help gather peaches ... because they could get around under the trees better than grownups."

Blacks, as a class—men, women, and children—were routinely treated as cheap commodity labor during the Depression. Black women, in particular, were required to work lengthy hours for extremely low wages to survive. "Charleston truck farmers want Negroes to work 10 hours a day in the fields for 25 cents a day" (Hickok, November 3, 1934, Baltimore). In general, Southern white farmers viewed Blacks as a collective labor force, to be worked under conditions closely approximating slavery. As one citizen of Moultrie, Ga. (January 23, 1934), related to Hickok:

A farmer considers every Nigger living in a house ... on his place employed, whether he is paying him anything or not. For a few weeks each year, perhaps, he will actually pay the head of the family 30 or 40 cents a day. But he works the [entire] family all year, and he won't take a Nigger who hasn't got a big family.

The view of African-Americans as cheap goods also extended to the use of black women as "free" nannies.

The [white] gentleman who presided ... thought that all [black] women who refused to take live-in housemaid jobs at \$3 a week should be cut off relief. Someone suggested that many of these women couldn't live-in because they had small children to look after.... "Well," he said, "...we've got to think of the taxpayer's money. And if we can institutionalize these children ... take care of them cheaper than we're doing now and put their mothers to work, I think we owe it to the taxpayers...." (Hickok, December 6, 1934, Washington, D.C.).

These passages, written by Hickok during a trip to Baltimore are strikingly reminiscent of current welfare reform proposals put forward in Congress that categorize many among the poor, especially black unmarried women, as "undeserving" (see Hill and Macan 1996).

In general, the Depression exposed the economic fault lines underneath the carefully constructed surface principles of democracy and equality. It made nakedly apparent the reality that not all men—and certainly not women and children—were created equal. Some American consumers by virtue of their race, ethnicity, age, or sex were worth more in the human marketplace than others, who were worth-less.

Even among young, white men, the conditions under which a person sold his labor were harsh. A report from

McClure during October 1934 illustrates how those who had to rely on the beneficence of local relief efforts for employment often fared:

I first called on A. C. Townsend, Chairman of the Relief Board and head of the Townsend Co., which manufactures bolts and nuts.... Public and private money was raised in the townships and the recipients compelled to work for food orders principally on private property and of course without any compensation provisions. A number of them suffered disabling accidents. These were idyllic conditions, according to Townsend, and he still regrets the day when State money was sent in with instructions that no one was to be forced to work for food.

Just as egregious were the all-too-common practices of mill and factory owners demanding double labor productivity per hour while paying substandard wages. Termed the *speed-up* in the Northeast and the *stretch-out* in the South, these work conditions would be viewed as intolerable by current standards. Consider the description offered by Gellhorn (July 1934) who observed factories in Rhode Island.

The NRA shorter hours have apparently been well counteracted by increased work loads and speeded machinery. I saw two gentlemen who ... claim that 40% of the state textile workers are employed part-time earning between \$5 and \$7 a week. They also claim that "the present system of stretched-out work loads and speeded machinery is taking ten years off the life of the worker." Which is a pompous way of saying what does seem to be the truth: that the men really cannot keep up with their work and stay sane and healthy; and that very definitely this rhythm of work, coupled with malnutrition (as who can eat well on \$5 a week) is breaking them down nervously.

Gellhorn (November 11, 1934, Gastonia) filed an even more disturbing description of the brutal conditions in the cotton mills of North Carolina:

They told me that during the summer 2 to 3 women a day fainted in the mill; and a man of 35 died, between his looms, of heart failure. Other cases: "When you get out, you're just trembling all over, and you can't hardly get rested for the next day" ... Their faces are proof of this statement; faces and bodies. The people who seem most physically hit by this are the young girls who are really in awful shape. I have watched them in some mills where the naked eye can tell that the work load is inhuman. They have no rest for 8 hours; in one mill they told me they couldn't get time to cross the room to the drinking fountain for water. They eat standing up, keeping their eyes on the machines. In another mill I found three women lying on the cement floor of the toilet, resting.

Desperate to earn income to survive, most workers accepted these conditions of employment; they had, after all, little recourse. Their meager earnings—obtained at a high cost in physical and mental health—were exploited, as well, by the mine, mill, and factory owners who controlled not only the means of production, but also the means of consumption:

B.F. Evans is a choice example of the die-hard [mine owner].... The men came up to me to complain about Evans taking too much back rent out of their last pay. They said he makes them pay \$11 a month for four rooms, no conveniences, back privies, etc. One man showed an envelope showing \$16 taken out for back rent and current rent. The [monthly] pay amounted to \$47.50. Men also complain about the company store charging too much. Gave prices for potatoes, bacon, pork shoulders, etc., charged by com-

pany store and then lower prices charged by independent store (Francis, November 10, 1934, Uniontown, Pa.).

The Koppel Steel Car Company ... withholds 50% of earned pay for back rent and from the remainder deducts water and insurance charges. On the payday before Christmas in 1932, large numbers of their workers were handed checks for from five to fifteen cents for the two-week period. At this time there was an influenza epidemic in town and the woman who is now acting supervisor in the county did a lot of volunteer visiting. When her own very small funds were exhausted, she called at the Company office for a contribution to purchase such simple items as aspirin, lemons and so on. She didn't get a nickel. Men called to work and reporting that they were too weak from hunger to go on were laid off.

If any family decides to leave, they are forced to sign notes for all back charges, and are mercilessly hounded. The Company encourages purchase of its houses by tenants, but any poor slob who has completed his payments gets no work. That all goes to those on whom the Company has a claim. In case of the death of a worker in debt, the Company manages to collect in full from the proceeds of his group insurance policy. One Italian had jumped off a bridge three days before I arrived. Coincident with his funeral, collection activities were reported (McClure, October 1934, Beaver County, Pa.).

Metaphorically, Depression-era laborers resembled the draft horses Hickok described in a report filed November 18, 1934, from Lincoln, Nebr.:

Relief people told me that a man will show up for work with a team of horses, that the horses will work pretty well during the forenoon, that they'd begin to sag in the early afternoon, were completely exhausted by night and didn't show up the next day. There have been cases where the horses actually dropped in the harness while at work on the roads. They've died. All that makes for a good deal of bitterness.

Man and beast, both were reduced to the barest elements of working to survive. And sometimes for both the price was too high.

Class and Ethnic Conflict

During the period covered by our study, one in three American households was without a regular source of income and over 40,000,000 people depended on the relief roles for the majority of the decade (see Gaughan and Hill 1995). Because of the intense competition for income-producing jobs of any kind, social class and ethnic rivalries—already present in American Society—deepened. Factory and mine owners were viewed as predatory capitalists by the unemployed laborers, who deemed plant closings to be willful acts of dispossession. In turn, workers on relief often were viewed as indolent layabouts by many middle- and upper-class taxpayers who resented federal and state income redistribution schemes that threatened their own all-too-precarious hold on respectability.

With material lifestyles and consumption expectations floundering in a sea of economic uncertainty, each cultural group scanned outward in search of the villains or scapegoats responsible for their plight. Letters written to the Roosevelts suggested that the poor often scorned the rich:

New York, December 3, 1936

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I do hope our dear President will come home very soon, and start to divide among the people of this country the billions of

dollars of the Duponts, Rockefellers, Morgans, and their kind. My children need so many little things that my husband and I are anxious to get our share...

Yours very truly,
Mrs. M. B.

Some among the rich denigrated the poor, as is reported by one of Hopkins's observers:

"We are developing an aristocratic leisure class of colored people in our Third Ward," the Secretary of the Washington [Pa.] Chamber of Commerce told me. "These people now are sending their food orders to the grocer with a request that the merchandise be delivered. The grocer delivers it. If he didn't they would trade elsewhere" (Francis, November 3, 1934, Washington, Pa.).

Those who had jobs—and incomes—often resented the entitlements given to the unemployed. There was deep-seated fear rooted in Anglo-American poor laws that short-term relief would corrupt its recipients into long-term economic burdens. Lincoln Colcord (December 14, 1934, Detroit area) reports that "All agree that relief must continue to be undesirable, and that the differential between relief standards and the standards under employment must be kept alive; otherwise there would be no incentive for relief clients to get back into employment."

The capitalist class, for the most part, remained staunch in its perspective that the needs of "all" would be served best by meeting its members' needs first. Economic prosperity would surely trickle down from high to low, as it always had:

The attitude taken in the sitting rooms of Logan's "best people" is: Why worry about other industry; there's enough coal in Logan to supply the entire world for a hundred years. Stop undermining our industry with your power development schemes and your economic fol-de-rols and we'll be alright. We'll take care of our [working] people; we don't say we'll try to make ladies and gentlemen out of them, but we'll give them work enough to supply their reasonable needs.... You've got to keep it up until general business makes our coal good again. Just concentrate on helping business (Francis, December 7, 1934, Williamson, W.Va.).

Although workers mounted strikes, none amounted to the bloody insurrection feared by the wealthy. Indeed, as the subsequent passage indicates, most of the interclass violence flowed—as prosperity was supposed to do—from top to bottom:

I have found more common sense in the mining camps and in the dark hovels of mountain ravines than I have in the homes and offices of the controlling class. In those homes and offices I have seen more firearms than in the poor shelters of the workers and heard more threatening talk. I have talked with lawyers, doctors and merchants who admitted sitting at their windows and firing upon striking workers and who expressed their willingness and determination to do so again should occasion arise (Francis, December 7, 1934, Williamson, W.Va.).

Racial and ethnic differences also were limned sharply during the Depression. Despite the rhetoric of a vast melting pot,⁵ immigrant groups in the 1930s lived in ethnic villages—small, homogenous clusters—each with its own pattern for survival. Recently arrived Western and Eastern

Europeans (e.g., German, Polish, Russian, Italian, Irish) first turned to nationality-based charities, churches, and other ethnic social institutions for economic support (Cohen 1990). But, when funds from these sources were exhausted, they increasingly relied on federal assistance. Hopkins's reporters were all drawn from White Anglo-Saxon Protestants and old-European stock. Although generally democratic in their views, a pejorative tone infused much of their writing and influenced their observations regarding the "worthiness" of some ethnic groups for economic aid, as can be discerned in Robert Washburn's (December 2, 1934, New Haven) report:

New Haven, apart from Yale, is perhaps an even lower grade town, economically, than Bridgeport. Each place has a high Sicilian population. The effect of this sort of relief, spotty and haphazard and confused, has been to exaggerate the tendencies found in this type of relief population elsewhere. A premium has been placed on lying and concealing, and these people follow the line of least resistance.

Most pronounced, however, both in the tone of the reporters' writing as well as in the relief practices they observed, was straightforward discrimination against racial minorities, especially Blacks and, to a lesser extent, Hispanics. At the outset of the Great Depression, a mere two generations separated African-American consumers from slavery. The majority of black families still lived in the South, where they subsisted—at or below poverty levels—as tenant farmers,⁶ manual laborers, or household servants (Biles 1991; Sundstrom 1992). From World War I to the 1920s, many African-American's migrated to the Northeast and upper Midwest to escape racial violence and work in the factories and stockyards at higher wages than were possible in the South. Largely excluded from the economic and consumption boom of the 1920s, this group of consumers entered the 1930s already in precarious financial condition. By the Depression's midpoint in 1934, the misery of African-American consumers rivaled that in many developing nations (Greenberg 1991).

Reavis, one of the reporters assigned to Pennsylvania, wrote on November 4, 1934 of the housing inhabited primarily by Blacks in the Homestead, Pa., area:

A bad slum area where perhaps 2,500 Negroes and the lowest type of European emigrant [sic] live in houses that menace the health of the whole community.... Water is brought in cans.... Outside latrines are not connected with the mains and are in use by whole communities of families. In one thirty foot square court, twenty five families living in the most complete misery are all on relief.... I went through block after block of houses in nauseating conditions of filth and congestion.

Similarly, Steep wrote of the abhorrent medical conditions that African-American consumers living in Chicago endured (November 1934):

⁶A letter from Hickok, (February 14, 1934, Raleigh, N.C.) aptly describes the tenant farmer's existence:

That's all the tenant farmer is ... a slave. The tenant lived on the landlord's farm in a house owned by the landlord. During the slack season, when there was no work, the farmer took care of him—"furnished" him, as they call it down here—either by buying his food and giving it to him, or by giving him credit at a store the [farmer] owned. The tenant never had any money—never could "buy himself out." The property owner was his lord and master, could impose any terms he liked.

⁵The first explicit use of this term was in Israel Zanwill's play, *The Melting Pot*, which debuted in 1908.

The unemployed Negro has no money for medical service at the incipency of his disease [tuberculosis]; moreover, he is compelled to double-up in already overcrowded houses which have no running water, are insufficiently ventilated and devoid of sunshine and which, in most cases, have only one unspeakably filthy toilet for several families. To put a tubercular Negro to bed in an overcrowded home ... surrounded by his kids and his wife, as is done in thousands of Negro homes, is certainly a grave situation.... Why does not the public health department care for such cases? [Because] there are not facilities for hospitalization.... The Municipal Tuberculosis Sanitarium has a waiting list of 800 Negro patients, but in the last year not one Negro has been accepted. The Cook County hospital receives only ... patients who are about to die.

Steep describes Chicago doling out medical assistance to African-Americans on a "quota" basis during (and before) the Depression. Although ostensibly operated in an egalitarian, democratic fashion, the federal relief system—like the surrounding American culture of which it was part and parcel—encoded and enforced racial and ethnic discriminatory practices. African-Americans and Hispanics were viewed and treated as both less-deserving and less-needing of consumption support than white consumers (see Boyer et al. 1990). In an almost ironic fashion, those racial minorities who began the Depression *having* less (because of discrimination) were deemed, therefore, to *need* less than those who were white and affluent.

The curious intermixing of racial and social class discrimination appears strongly in the writings of Hickok—Hopkins's principal reporter and one whose voice was particularly influential in policymaking.

I wonder if it's wise to carry on relief thousands of Negroes—who'd rather get a minimum subsistence from the Government without working for it ... at the expense of some of these white collar people.... If we were not carrying so many Negroes, I wonder if we couldn't solve the white collar problem ... by giving more adequate relief (April 13, 1934, Houston).

From San Antonio, Tex. (April 17, 1934), Hickok applies the same argument to Hispanic-Americans, as well:

If we continue to take on in San Antonio as many Mexicans as we now are—and in other parts of the South as many Negroes—it seems to me we are forcing white people, especially white collar people, who are very apt to give us trouble, down to Mexican and Negro standards of living.

Although Hickok hedged on whether varying standards of government support based on race and social class should be implemented as *policy*, she does note that in *practice* relief efforts were distributed in this fashion:

In Tucson [Ariz.] ... they divided their case load into four groups.... Into Class A went 60 families: engineers, teachers, lawyers, contractors.... They gave this group \$50 a month, 50 percent cash. It took care of them fairly adequately, rents, clothing and everything. They set up projects for them, manning their auxiliary staff with them.... Into Class B went 250 families, on a maximum of \$36 a month, 33 to 40 percent cash. It consisted of some white collar people ... and skilled labor.... Into Class C went 1,000 families, on a \$25 maximum, 30 percent cash. It consisted of white unskilled labor and Mexican and Spanish-American unskilled [workers] with standards of living higher than those of most Mexicans.... And into Class D went 1,490 families, on a \$10 maximum, all in [script]. These were the low class Mexican, Spanish-American and Indian families" (May 4, 1934, Phoenix, Ariz.).

Implicit in these discriminatory practices was the notion that those persons in Class D—whether in Tucson or elsewhere in the country—either would not mind or would not notice the inequitable treatment. Or perhaps it was assumed that those at the bottom of the scale would surely understand that their human needs as consumers were simply not as real or important as those persons in Class A. Nevertheless, many of these practices were detected and worked their deleterious effects on those least able to protest them:

Reidsville. Ga.

October 19th 1935

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt.
President of U.S.
Washington D.C.

Dear Mr. President

Would you please direct the people in charge of the relief work in Georgia to issue the provisions + other supplies to our suffering colored people. I am sorry to worry you with this Mr. President, but hard as it is to believe, the relief officials here are using up most every thing that you send for themself + their friends. They give out the relief supplies here on Wednesday ... and give us black folks ... nothing but a few cans of pickle meet and to white folks they give blankets, bolts of cloth and things like that. I don't want to take to much of your time Mr president but will give you just one example of how the relief is work down here. The widow Nancy Hendrics owns lands, stock holder in the Bank in this town and she is being supplied with Blankets cloth and gets a supply of cans good regular. This is only one case but I could tell you many.

Please help us mr President because we cant help our self and we know you is the president and a good Christian man.... Yours truly cant sign my name Mr President they will beat me up and run me away from here and this is my home.

[Anonymous]

The ethnic conflict expressed in this anonymous letter has parallels with current racist double standards. For example, consider the following essay, which was written in response to the highly publicized beating death of a six-year-old Black-Hispanic girl named Elisa Izquierdo:

It is hard to say what was more shocking about the death of Elisa Izquierdo—the endless savagery inflicted on her body and mind, or the stubborn inaction of the New York City agencies that were repeatedly informed of her peril.... In the death zones of America's postmodern ghetto, stripped of jobs and human services and sanitation, plagued by AIDS, tuberculosis, pediatric asthma and endemic clinical depression, largely abandoned by American physicians and devoid of the psychiatric services familiar in most middle-class communities, deaths like these are part of a predictable scenario....

Can it be, despite our frequent protestations to the contrary, that our society does not particularly value the essential human worth of certain groups of children? Virtually all the victims we are speaking of are very poor Black or Hispanic children. We have been told that our economy no longer has much need for people of their caste or color....

Elisa Izquierdo's mother killed only one child. The seemingly anesthetized behavior of the U.S. Congress may kill thousands. Now we are told we must "get tougher" with the poor. How much tougher can we get with children who already have so little? How cold is America prepared to be? (Kozol 1995, p. 96).

Public policymakers may find it difficult to respond to these questions, but it is clear that as a country we must come to grips with our failure to extend the opportunities of democracy and equality under the law to all consumers.

Return to Self-Sufficient Modes of Production

A predominant economic reality of the Depression era was the collapse of advanced forms of capitalism (McElvaine 1984). Banks, brokerage houses, stock exchanges, and savings institutions floundered; many failed (Bernstein 1987). The gross national product of the United States fell dramatically from a high of \$104 billion in 1929 to \$59 billion in 1932 (Boyer et al. 1990). For a time in many parts of the country, industrial modes of production—mines, foundries, mills, manufacturing concerns, transportation systems—were sharply curtailed or abandoned altogether (Bauman and Coode 1988).

On a local and regional level, many consumers responded to the absence or scarcity of industrial modes of production by returning to the self-production of essential goods and services. The thirties were a decade, indeed a historically unique period of time in the United States, that witnessed the actual *reversal* of the production-consumption progression that had been underway since the Industrial Revolution. The large scale was reduced to the small scale, the mass-produced to the individually-constructed, the national to the local, the modern to the primitive. Many Americans relearned to forage and scavenge; food, clothing, and shelter often were available where a person could find or create them. Writing from West Virginia on December 7, 1934, Francis describes the gardens used by local consumers to produce their own food:

Logan County has a dozen level spots, each about as big as the White House grounds. There isn't, so far as I could see, enough level arable land in the county to make one decent size farm. [Despite this], tiny gardens are cultivated behind the company houses and corn, planted and tended by human spiders, grows on hillsides so steep as to prevent an ordinary human from maintaining foothold. To these high corn patches, these "do-less" miners carry tools and water. They plough the land with their mine picks and raise good crops of corn.

Ironically, the colonial American inhabitants of West Virginia and Pennsylvania made their living in agriculture and hunting. With the advent of industrialization during the late 1800s, these Appalachian Mountain dwellers had abandoned their agrarian lifestyles and became coal miners, producing the anthracite and bituminous fuel for the burgeoning steel mills of Pittsburgh and Youngstown, Pa., which in turn shipped steel to the thriving automotive center of Detroit. The Depression collapsed this entire chain of industrial production and consumption. Thousands of coal miners became permanently unemployed as alternative fuels (e.g., petroleum) and machine-intensive modes of production came to replace human-mined coal (Sheppard 1991). Stranded in their rural mountains, these miners returned to atavistic means of survival, such as planting crops and eating the produce.

Furthermore, as company-owned mining towns collapsed and their indigent occupants were evicted for nonpayment of rent, new forms of shelter had to be found. Coal miners, together with their families, occasionally would transform abandoned coke ovens into dwellings. Others returned to a

preindustrial housing form, the handmade log cabin. Francis, reporting from West Virginia (December 7, 1934), described an encounter he experienced with one such modern homesteader:

I had made my way down a mountain side and climbed a mile or more over the dry creek bed up Dark Hollow to Bert Canterbury's log house. He built it himself four years ago, hewing the timber and dragging it, stick by stick, down the mountain. For floor boards he split ash logs into planks two inches thick with nothing but an axe, shaved them with the same tool, and pegged them down. A hand split shingle roof was made the same way. Dried mud fills the chinks between the log siding. A stone fireplace with a shotgun hanging above it is the outstanding feature of a somewhat forbidding interior.

Many persons, having lost their jobs in industry, turned to the self-production of goods and services for which there was a commercial market, often using considerable ingenuity in the process. Hickok, reporting from West Virginia during August 1933, comments that

[c]anning is now going on all over the state.... In Monongalia County (Morgantown), for instance, an investigator early in the summer had her women and children go out and pick wild berries, which she sold in Morgantown, thereby raising enough money to buy 1,800 pounds of sugar for their canning! Because of the shortage of jars, they are teaching many of the women to dry their corn and beans.

Hickok also visited a federally financed subsistence homesteading community in Dayton, Ohio. These communities represented a unique blend of Tolstoyian socialism and entrepreneurialism that was evidenced during the Depression. Convinced that the Great Depression had stranded large numbers of industrial workers, coal miners, and farmers of submarginal land, President Roosevelt and his agricultural policy advisors, Rexford Tugwell and M. L. Wilson, backed the idea of resettling this population on rural subsistence homesteads (see Sternsher 1964). Clustered in villages, the homesteads constituted back to the earth, cooperative communities where reinvigorated families could blend self-sufficient agriculture with light, craft-type manufacturing.

Over 100 subsistence homesteads, including Eleanor Roosevelt's "pet" Arthurdale, W. Va., community and Tugwell's Suburban Division's towns of Greenhills, and Greendale, Wisc. and Greenbelt, Md., were completed (Arnold 1970). However, the 441 people settled in these cooperative communities hardly approached their advocates' optimistic goal of 500,000.

Nevertheless, rural settlement represented a radical experiment in social and regional planning. In 1934, Hickok reported on a subsistence homestead for 35 families set up on 160 acres of federally purchased land. Each family worked a three-acre allotment, constructed its own house (at a cost of \$500), grew its own vegetables, and produced enough animal feed for "three goats or half a cow." Sharing the enthusiasm of her good friend Eleanor Roosevelt, Hickok observed that the homesteaders were healthy and comfortable, in sharp contrast to most of those she observed elsewhere:

We visited the family living in its new home—a neat, clean five room cottage. You should have seen the expression of contentment ... as she showed me around her new house, with its roomy fireplace, its wide, clear windows, rugs on the floor and a cover on the couch that she had woven on a hand loom. Outside, their

garden and feed crop were well started.... There was a big flock of chickens, all in grand condition, some ducks, a sow with four fat pigs, some rabbits, which they are raising for meat. It all looked wonderful (May 25, 1934).

Hickok's observations reflect, as well, the reporters' valuing of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial initiative. What must be kept in mind regarding the success of the homesteading movement—as regards current welfare policymaking efforts—is that consumers must first have the necessary resources (e.g., job skills and job availability) to make-do for themselves.

Discussion and Public Policy Implications

When the rickety financial structure of the 1920s collapsed at the start of the Great Depression, it carried with it the appended marketing and consumption systems (Modell 1985). As a result, for the first time in U.S. history, the Federal Government interjected itself into both the production and consumption sectors of the economy (Bauman and Coode 1988; Bernstein 1987), a repositioning that has endured 60 years since. Unfortunately, the ensuing entitlement programs designed to alleviate this situation, as well as their progeny, often have failed to move many among the long-term poor out of poverty (Hill and Macan 1996). Thus, in hopes of devising more effective long-term solutions, we employ the four themes described previously to inform the current welfare debate.

Consumption Conditions

The vestiges of the Great Depression's revelation of the downside of capitalism remain with us to the present day (see Crouse 1986). Income disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in this country has increased since the 1970s. Data show that the average gross income of families in the top one-fifth of society is now ten times as large as that of families in the lowest one-fifth, compared with a seven-fold discrepancy in 1973 (Burtless and Smeeding 1995). Poverty rates continue to rise, particularly among children and young adults, and approximately 35 million Americans presently are classified as poor (Shea 1995).

Recent marketing scholarship demonstrates that the consumer environment faced by these citizens is greatly constrained (Alwitt 1995; Andreasen 1993; Hill 1994). Furthermore, research by Edin (1993) finds that, after paying for housing and food, the typical welfare recipient has only \$10 available to fund 13 additional categories of needed or desired goods and services on a monthly basis. These products include telephone services, toiletries, over-the-counter drugs, transportation, child care, and diversion items such as cigarettes, alcohol, and videos.

Consistent with the reports filed by Hopkins's observers, consumption conditions such as these have a devastating impact on the lives and resulting health of people living in poverty. For example, Zuravin and Greif (1989) find that 79% of welfare mothers worry about their incomes all or most of the time, and, consequently, nearly half suffer from depression. Over one-quarter report that they are in only fair or poor physical health. Unfortunately, self-medication for these problems with alcohol or illegal drugs is more likely

to occur than is the receipt of prompt medical attention (see Sisco and Pearson 1994). Additionally, many poor children, because of a lack of adequate health insurance, are at greater risk for severe illnesses that end in hospitalization and/or death (Rosenbach 1993).

Labor as an Expendable Resource

For people living in poverty, the job market of the present decade has parallels with that of the Great Depression. As Hill and Stamey (1990) note, the well-paying, unionized manufacturing positions that were available in this country following World War II have been replaced over the last 20 years with low-level service jobs that often pay below poverty level wages to full-time employees. These occupations typically lack benefits, especially employer-subsidized health care, which results in less preventative treatment and more critical health problems. Handler and Hasenfeld (1995) conclude that these circumstances culminated in the decline of real wages and job opportunities, with employment no longer providing a sure route out of poverty. As evidence, they report that 43.1% of poor adults worked at least 50 weeks in 1989.

The economic consequences of such employment notwithstanding, these jobs also provide little intrinsic satisfaction and fail to enhance a person's self-esteem (for more on the impact of work on identity, see Snow and Anderson 1987). In combination with self-presentation problems due to limited funds for such purposes, opportunities for advancement to better occupations are remote, especially for adults with lower levels of education (Handler and Hasenfeld 1995). Thus, consistent with the observers' reports, "welfare versus work" still provides no real choice for the poor, because both options afford little chance of escape from destitution and negative self-esteem.

Ethnic and Class Conflict

The legislative responses by Congress to these conditions reflect many of the biases and stereotypes that were prevalent during the Great Depression. Government leaders, including President Clinton and House Speaker Gingrich, have proposed reform of the system of cash payments, medical insurance, and food vouchers to families living in poverty, which is an outgrowth of the "worthy versus unworthy" poor debate implicit in the accounts of the Depression-era reporters (see Hill and Macan 1996). Because the majority of poor families are headed by single women, many of whom are women of color (Shea 1995), the application of this principle to a traditionally "unworthy" subpopulation has meant that welfare payments in constant dollar terms have decreased significantly over time (Caputo 1993).

Such reforms aim to reduce average payments or remove people from the welfare system to lower aggregate spending on this unpopular federal and state budget item, rather than target a reduction in poverty as their primary goal (Berrick 1995). In the final analysis, they often fail to achieve either purpose and, consistent with the reforms enacted during the Great Depression, devalue Black, Hispanic, and female members of society (Gordon 1994). As a recent *Business Week* (1995) editorial commented, the better-educated, higher-income elite in this country generally support the "de-entitlement" of the poor through welfare reform, but, as also was true during the Depression, they are much more

likely to resist the loss of their own entitlements, such as college loans and mortgage deductions.

Return to Self-Sufficient Modes of Production

Investigations of the homeless and those living on welfare reveal patterns of self-sufficiency coincident with demoralization much akin to those found widespread during the 1930s. For example, Hill and Stamey (1990) discover that the homeless subpopulation studied was able to maintain some self-esteem and cope with their constricted consumer environment through active scavenging for goods and the construction of makeshift shelters. These "hidden" homeless lived predominantly outside the social welfare system, while exploiting available resources within their communities.

Edin (1993) finds that most poor households are forced to turn to additional income sources to fulfill their financial obligations. Many welfare mothers receive cash or food from family, friends, or churches. Others take out loans or receive grants to attend school. Another source of unearned money is child support paid directly to the mother. Many women have their boyfriends living with them to help provide for their families. Others generate income through off-the-books jobs and illegal activities, such as prostitution.

Conclusion

The relative deprivation, lack of employment opportunities, and resulting coping strategies of consumers during the Great Depression parallel the material lives of millions of Americans in the late 1990s. These parallels suggest that the current welfare reform measures passed by Congress, which are designed to reduce federal expenditures rather than eradicate poverty, may diminish further the quality of life of these citizens and erode their self-esteem. The data described here suggest that welfare reforms that enhance poor consumers' ability to obtain the goods and services necessary for survival through their own efforts might be appropriate (see Walden 1996). To this end, we endorse the following proposals:

1. Welfare recipients should be required to complete their high school education or take and pass a GED (general equivalency diploma) exam. This would guarantee them a minimum level of education and enhance their employability.
2. Welfare recipients should be required to attend (a) child care classes, (b) nutrition, diet, and food preparation classes, (c) money management and budgeting classes, and (d) home improvement classes (e.g., basic painting, faucet and toilet repair, caulking and weatherproofing). This would enhance their sense of autonomy and self-esteem, as well as their efficiency as consumers.
3. These classes would be funded, organized, and taught at the *community* level. They would be staffed by former welfare recipients and local community activists who have first-hand experience with the problems faced by the poor.
4. Welfare recipients, whose educations were completed, should be required to work at community service projects. These might include community-sponsored day care centers that provide for their children, boys and girls clubs to help prevent juvenile crime and allow them to supervise older children, and community housing projects that allow them to rehabilitate their communities. It is hoped that these activities would help them develop a greater sense of community involvement and pride.

5. Local and national companies should receive generous tax credits for contributing to these programs and hiring people who participate. This involvement by the wealthier classes of our society may help to eliminate some of the prejudices and negative stereotypes that have fostered current legislative reform efforts.

Appendix 1. Report Author By Site^a

| Author | Site |
|--|--|
| Ernestine Ball | New York State |
| Martha Bruere | New York State |
| Julian Claff | Camden, New Jersey; Philadelphia and Scranton, Pennsylvania |
| Lincoln Colcord; Louisa Wilson | Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cleveland and Akron, Ohio |
| Martha Gellhorn | New England, North and South Carolina |
| Lorena Hickok | Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, New York, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, Alabama, Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Arizona, New Mexico, Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, Ten- nessee, Mississippi, Colorado, Califor- nia, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Kansas, Maryland |
| David Maynard | Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana |
| Robert Collyer Washburn | Connecticut; Boston, Massachusetts |
| Edward J. Weber | Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri; Texas |
| Hazel Reavis; Henry Francis; Bruce McClure; Pierce Williams | Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Birmingham, Alabama, Youngstown, Ohio |
| Thomas Steep | Chicago, Illinois; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Gary, Indiana |
| Wayne Parrish | New York City |

^aAdapted from Bauman and Coode (1988).

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