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Literature: American Prison Texts

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### Public Vituperation of Deviant Figures in the Neoliberal State

*“Everything measured. A man twists a tuft of your hair out for no reason other than you are naked before him and he is bored with nakedness... He says this is the soul, finally, after the breath has gone. The soul: less than \$4,000 worth of crack - 21 grams - all that moves you through this world”*

*-Reginald Dwayne Betts, “At the End of Life, a Secret”*

As neoliberal ideologies rose in the United States, individuals, such as politicians, harnessed existing American mythologies to advance neoliberal policies. The racially driven portrayal of ‘problem populations’ in the media and the villainization of deviant figures, such as the “welfare queen”, resulted in growing resentment towards individuals seeking welfare. The depiction of marginalized groups as undeserving of aid justified punitive policies that slowly dissipated the welfare state. The lineage of mythological figures reveals the racialized history of resentment towards marginalized groups, particularly the BIPOC community.

After the Great Depression, the United States saw the rise of the welfare state and Keynesian economics. New Deal programs of the 1930s greatly increased the size of the federal government and led to the rise of a welfare state - a system where the government aims to promote the economic and well-being of its citizens through grants, pensions, and benefits. Various programs offered direct aid to families in need and created a strong social safety net. A

key program of the New Deal was the Social Security Act of 1935, which focused on public assistance, unemployment compensation, and old-age insurance. From the 1930s to the 1960s, capitalism was suppressed by a robust welfare state. During this period, the social safety net grew, protecting low-income Americans until they could support themselves.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as Keynesian policies started to deteriorate, neoliberal ideologies rose to the forefront of American politics. Politicians turned to individuals, such as economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek and economist Milton Friedman, for answers on how to combat the growing levels of inflation and unemployment. Intellectuals, such as Hayek and Friedman, became leading figures of the neoliberalist movement. Neoliberal principles - free market trade, reduction in government regulation, and privatization - challenged the aims of the welfare state as neoliberal oriented policies became imposed on the American public. Unlike thinkers such as John Rawls who formulated how to set up a society in a way that benefits the least advantaged, Milton Friedman tirelessly argued for free markets, a complement of neoliberal ideology that dominated the politics of the late 20th century. The initial lure of neoliberal principles resulted in an “overarching philosophy of free markets” in which the issues of the 1970s - “stagnation, worsening industrial relations, the breakdown of anti-poverty and welfare strategies -” were not included (Stedman).

Under neoliberalism in the U.S. and the majority of the world, “Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve” (Monbiot). Is this what people deserved if the villainization of stigmatized groups facilitated the implementation of neoliberal policy? The

eradication of the social safety net and the welfare state, a byproduct of the policies passed during this era, was achieved through the portrayal of recipients of welfare as benefiting from hard-working Americans.

The media portrayal of recipients of welfare and government aid during the era of post-welfare reform demonstrates the continued importance of race and ethnicity and systematic racism in the United States. BIPOC Americans were overrepresented and racially stereotyped in media coverage of the poor. Four racialized figures - the “welfare queen”, the African-American teenage mother, the lower-class ‘deadbeat dad’, and the elderly immigrant “coalesced into a new controlling image of the issue by offering vivid incarnations of ‘dependency’ and its corrosive consequences” (Wacquant 84). The media characterized individuals inclined towards laziness as profiting from the welfare system.

Various political entities mobilized the mythologies that have existed since the era of slavery in service of their programs. Although the “penalization of poverty [was not] a deliberate ‘plan’ proposed by malevolent and omnipotent rulers”, individuals, such as politicians, advanced their agendas by harnessing the stigmatizing power of race (Wacquant xx). However, the accumulation of all these deliberate efforts served to dismantle the welfare state and make it less generous. Politicians opportunistically drew on these figures to garner political support and advance neoliberal aims. For example, amid the stigmatization of welfare as a “dependency” system for single African American mothers, then-President Clinton gained political support from fellow politicians and American citizens by signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996 (Newkirk- The Atlantic). In addition to gathering support, political elites created a “garish theater of civic morality” around themselves and closed the “legitimacy

deficit they suffer when they discard the established government mission of social and economic protection” when they publicly vilify deviant figures, such as the ghetto “street thug” or “welfare mother” (Wacquant). Therefore, politicians exploited and intensified existing American ideologies to build neoliberal apparatuses without fear of retribution.

The intensification of American mythologies by politicians and the media resulted in a series of policy changes made possible by the rising animosity towards marginalized groups. This animosity turned the “ghetto poor into social leeches, if not veritable ‘enemies’ of American society” (Wacquant 83). The immediate connection between welfare programs and race in the eyes of the public rendered categorical assistance programs vulnerable. The rising resentment towards welfare programs, increased demand for “restrictive welfare measures centered on deterrence and compulsion” (Wacquant 83). In 1980, U.S. states were given the option to require those applying for welfare to participate in workfare programs; Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) - in addition to other targeted poverty programs - experienced a reduction in funding under the discretion of President Regan. Under the Ronald Reagan administration and Margaret Thatcher, a series of neoliberal policies were also implemented. The frequent portrayal of marginalized groups as villains of the state justified the passage of neoliberal policies aimed to reduce welfare programs.

During a campaign speech in Chicago in 1976, Regan detailed the discovery of “a woman who holds the record. She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Society Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare” (Brockell). Reagan’s reference of this nameless woman, who became infamously known as the “welfare queen”, continued for the next four years and into his 1980

presidential campaign. The welfare queen, “a wily and fecund black matriarch who shirks employment, cheats the public aid bureaucracy, and spends her assistance check high on drugs and liquor, leaving her many children in appealing neglect”, was used to stigmatize the entire welfare system (Wacquant 84). An examination of the “welfare queen” reveals how the state interacts with women at the bottom of the social state. Although various forms of resources are provided to women, it is heavily stigmatized and those who accept it receive intense backlash.

When the figure of the “welfare queen” entered the national stage, the American public was “primed for a face to be attached to the perceived waste, fraud, and abuse they saw as enabled by indulgent government programs and absent accountability” (Black/Sprague). The widespread acceptance that welfare benefits cause dependency resulted in misconceptions regarding welfare programs. Reforms following President Clinton’s declaration for the end of “welfare as we know it”, did not end the racial image of the “welfare queen”. Instead, reforms were made to prevent “wilful idleness and criminal behavior” (Black/Sprague). The United States witnessed the retraction of the welfare, maternal state and the establishment of a paternal, punishing state, both underscored by the stigmatizing power of race.

Although President Regan was the first to mention the “welfare queen”, this mythological figure originates from a long, racialized history of resentment towards BIPOC individuals. These resentments have existed since the era of slavery and persist to this day. Although slavery was abolished by the 13th amendment, anti-blackness resides at the core of this country. Anti-blackness legitimized sharecropping, the Jim Crow South, the dissipation of the welfare state with the passage of neoliberal policies, and the contemporary prison system (DuVernay).

The social formation was continuously reconstituted, but the primary ideology that gave rise to racism has remained an ever-present force.

Ideologies of anti-blackness underwrote the dissipation of the welfare state and the rise of the contemporary penal complex, which is an evolution in institutions that have historically been used to control BIPOC Americans in the United States. During the same period of the portrayal of low-income BIPOC Americans as undeserving poor, “the spread of blackened images of crime - even as the share of African Americans in the offending population was decreasing - fed mounting animosity toward criminals and fostered (white) support for expansive prison political narrowly” intended to punish those who commit crimes (Wacquant 83/84). The problem population was racially stereotyped and depicted in a negative light. The public vituperation of deviant figures and the portrayal of marginalized groups justified the rise of punitive measures adopted by the U.S. regarding welfare and the prison system.

Mythological figures, such as the “welfare queen” and the ghetto “street thug” continue to affect public policy in America on the social and penal front. Ending the influence of fabricated figures over public policy will necessitate recognizing the origin of them and how racial stereotypes of them continue to persist. It is necessary to design policies around real people rather than fictitious representations of them.

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