

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 14

6-2008

Stephen James on The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America by Felicia Kornbluh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 287pp.

Stephen James
RMIT University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Politics Commons](#), [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [Social Welfare Commons](#), and the [Social Welfare Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

James, Stephen (2008) "Stephen James on The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America by Felicia Kornbluh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 287pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss1/14>



All Rights Reserved.

This Book Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

Stephen James on The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America by Felicia Kornbluh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 287pp.

Abstract

A review of:

The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America by Felicia Kornbluh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 287pp.

Keywords

Human rights, Equality, United States, Welfare

Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America by Felicia Kornbluh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 287pp.

Historian Felicity Kornbluh's work illuminates important social and economic aspects of the unfinished struggle for equality in the USA, especially regarding poor, African American women. Her work narrates the various successes in the 1960s and 1970s of welfare activists and recipients (with the support of allies from universities, churches, the social work sector and law clinics) in obtaining more substantial welfare funds and benefits in kind. The successes came as a result of a spectrum of activities from "fair hearing" reviews in ad hoc welfare tribunals, demonstrations and lobbying activities, suits against local welfare officials and even constitutional litigation.

Kornbluh argues that welfare recipients' pursuits of their rights were inextricably linked with the pursuit of equality, in particular of full citizenship within the American consumer society. It "joined welfare with rights, bids for material well-being with those for political recognition, dignity and respect" (17). In her view, the movement also raised issues of gender inequality, stereotyping and middle class respectability, paternalism and moralistic judgements in relation to the lives of welfare recipients/activists who challenged conventional strictures.

At its height, the main welfare rights groups, such as New York City's Citywide, and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), could claim tens of thousands of members. But by the end of the 1970s the movement was on its last legs. The battle was lost, and even "the war" for welfare rights had taken grievous blows. How and why did this happen? Toward the end of the 1960s, Kornbluh concludes, political, economic, fiscal, class and race-based factors conspired against it. While New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay began as somewhat generous in his views of welfare provision, he, like Governor Rockefeller and President Nixon, retreated from welfare "guarantees" when they provoked their white, middle and working class constituents. Of course, the fact that by the early 1970s New York City was lurching towards bankruptcy did not help the cause of welfare rights as the city tried to pay for its disproportionate burden.

With the success of the welfare rights movement in increasing benefits, with its push for access to store credit, and with a desperate turn to more direct (even violent) action, the provocations to the white middle class and working poor became acute. Welfare continued to be a popular target for social conservatives espousing the values of the nuclear family, sexual respectability, the work ethic and thrift, and for the even more vociferous attacks of libertarian neo-conservatives in the Republican Party. And all of these attacks were touched by the politics of racial identity. Neither major party, let alone New York City's administration, had the courage to withstand these forces. Benefits were cut, eligibility was tightened, and coercive "workfare" (96-100, 147) was introduced at local, state and federal levels.

I have some criticisms of Kornbluh's excellent work. She does not systematically address the role of the state in welfare provision, and its relationship to debates over "American exceptionalism." Also, she does not give a sufficiently methodical account of the nature and workings of welfare bureaucracies at each level of government in the USA. Further, given the role of federal and

state non-cooperation in the erosion of New York City 's welfare system, some further discussion of the potential role of federalism to obstruct efficient and just welfare provision is warranted. Additionally, Kornbluh does not really discuss how and why recipients came to be on welfare. Though her book implicitly criticizes inequalities resulting from market distortions (e.g. in relation to unemployment), she does not tackle head-on the question of how far social justice can be achieved within a robust capitalist state with a modest and fragmented welfare system (and this is despite the fact that some of the recipients themselves became staunch critics of capitalism). Finally, Kornbluh does not delineate sufficiently plainly and methodically her normative conception of citizenship.

Nevertheless, *The Battle for Welfare Rights* is an extremely well researched, lucid, nuanced and engaging social and political history. It makes a significant contribution to the understanding of race, class and gender relations in the context of welfare provision in the USA . It is also a useful addition to literature discussing the role of social movements (especially African American and women's movements) in relation to the often weak protection of economic and social rights in the USA . It will be welcomed by historians, sociologists, political scientists, and human rights scholars with an interest in national settings.

Dr Stephen James
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia
June 2008