In their book, Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford F. Schram contend that welfare reform embodies a philosophy of “neoliberal paternalism.” It seeks to use welfare (and also rising incarceration of black men) to turn the poor into more disciplined citizens and workers. However, reform also means the denial of aid to many needy families and the subjection of the poor to authoritarian governance. Above all, it is tainted by racism. It must be replaced, the authors believe, with a more just and humane policy.

Although *Disciplining the Poor* attacks my views, I am still impressed with it. The authors write well, know welfare thoroughly, and use a wide range of research methods. They combine historical background, well-explained quantitative analyses, and field interviews with local welfare officials in Florida. Work like this gives a hands-on feel for what social policy means “on the ground.” Such realism is often lacking in the all-statistical research that dominates social science today.1 Of the many critiques prompted by welfare reform, this is one of the most impressive.2

I agree with the authors that the “disciplinary turn” in poverty governance was a reaction against the perceived excesses of the 1960s. In that era, order broke down in American cities as welfare, crime, and other social problems soared. Paternalism reflected the conviction—correct in my view—that permissive public policies were partly to blame. To restore order requires enforcing civilities—such as work for the employable—in which nearly all Americans believe, including blacks.

**Is Paternalism Reactionary?**

The authors misconstrue what paternalism means, however, and they overstate its ambitions. They say correctly that it means a redefinition of the welfare state, not a reduction. Government is not abandoning the poor but seeking to discipline them. However, the authors still call paternalism “neoliberal” and treat it as antigovernment. Supposedly, it embodies a market vision of society. It serves the interests of business by forcing recipients to take low-wage jobs. It also contracts out some welfare functions to private vendors, which again suggests a preference for the market over the state. To the authors, paternalism is part of the war on social rights that conservatives have carried on for more than a century.

In fact, paternalism says nothing about how large government should be. The goal is not to cut back benefits for ordinary citizens. Rather, it is to ensure that recipients fulfill the obligations that citizenship also entails, above all by working for a living.3 Enforcing work might imply either a smaller or a larger government than we have. By driving up work levels, paternalism curbs the welfare rolls, but doing this also costs new money in child care and wage subsidies. Overall, welfare reform raised social spending rather than reducing it.4 And those who work gain the standing to demand more help from government than they had before. Reform’s success helped justify the expansion of health care for low-income children in 1997 and the enactment of Obamacare in 2010. “Welfare” may be unpopular, but Congress can never do enough for the “working poor” or “working families.”

The authors also present paternalism as aloof and superior, a technology that elites use to manage the poor without truly caring about them. In fact, paternalism seeks merely to avoid entitlement, the policy of awarding benefits based on economic need while ignoring claimants’ lifestyle, as welfare used to do. The idea is simply that employable recipients must face the same demands to work as people outside government. Welfare still struggles to implement the work test fully. In some liberal states like California and New York, much of the caseload can still get cash aid without working, and Food Stamps—a non-cash program without strong work tests—continues to grow.

Advocates say the poor are oppressed, denied freedom or opportunity in some way. Accordingly, government must expand in order to push back social barriers. In that tradition, the authors treat paternalism as a new oppression, a way to force the poor to labor in menial jobs. It is the same argument about welfare “regulating” the low-skilled labor force that Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward made more than 40 years ago.5 Conservatives, for their part, see government as the barrier to the poor, and so they would cut it back. Both Left and Right think the answer to poverty must be freedom in some form. Paternalism says, rather, that the answer is obligation—enforcing the capacities the poor must observe to honor society and get ahead.

**Is Paternalism Racist?**

The critical edge of this book is more about race than reaction, however. The authors find that paternalism is “fundamentally entwined with race” (p. 138), and this discredits it. At the national level, they say, change was driven mainly by demands to strengthen work requirements, not racism. Yet states with heavily black caseloads instituted more severe policies—shorter time limits and tougher work tests—than others. And within Florida, counties that were more conservative and where blacks had longer spells on welfare were more likely to sanction them (cut their welfare for infringing rules). The academic Left has long argued that devolving welfare to localities tends inherently to make it more restrictive.6 More important,
the authors find this pattern “stereotype consistent” (p. 175). Local elites, they think, are mistreating blacks due to their own racist attitudes toward them.

The new policies were demanding. But in what sense are they racist? Racism implies the belief that one race is inherently superior to another. Jim Crow implied that view, as blacks were discriminated against in overt ways. Formal policies, such as differential access to public accommodations, consigned them second-class citizenship regardless of personal attributes. Today that is no longer true. Government is race blind, except (as in affirmative action) where it favors blacks. Thus, evidence for bias is no longer identity neutral. That is, there are no indisputable, impersonal facts “out there” that attest to discrimination regardless of what one assumes about the people involved. There are no more dual water fountains, one for each race, such as used to stand in southern towns.7

Instead, to find racism, one must appeal to identity. One must posit some more personal, less visible, behavior where whites hurt blacks because of who they perceive blacks to be. That is what the authors think stereotypes represent. If welfare officials believe hostile images of blacks and act accordingly, that is enough to make them racists and thus to discredit the paternalist project. This goes too far. Merely to say hurtful things about a group does not make one a racist. Equal rights require that whites accord blacks equal treatment in public matters, not that they shield blacks from all criticism. Generalizations about blacks, even if negative, become racist only if they are false to the facts and motivated by ill will. The authors’ own research suggests otherwise.

In the eyes of staff, the authors find, black recipients carry negative “markers,” such as having more children, having been on welfare before, or missing appointments without reason, compared to other groups. One cannot call these images false. Statistics show that, at least on average, blacks do rely on welfare more than other groups.8 Case managers would be unlikely to invent racial calumnies since as the authors admit, many are themselves black or former recipients. In how they treat black recipients, black case managers are no less influenced by antiblack images than are whites. In response, staff of all races treat blacks more severely, on average, than whites or Hispanics.

Are these motivations negative? Welfare rights advocates have long alleged that welfare officials wrongly deny benefits to blacks out of racist hostility to them, even when procedures are formally fair.9 Again, this is an appeal to identity, not hard facts. It is analysis by innuendo. We seldom know the intentions behind negative actions. The authors’ interviews, however, suggest that negative outcomes for blacks are driven by the work policies of agencies, not by discretion run riot. Other research supports this finding.10 Nor are staffs being driven to sanction recipients to satisfy performance targets set by managers. Rather, they sanction out of frustration, as a last resort, because they have few other means for getting their clients to work, as they are supposed to do. That does not accord with the aloof and racist judgments that the authors attribute to state and local policymakers in much of their analysis.

What to Do?

The authors dismiss stereotypes as mere tokens of the society’s “cultural constructions of blackness” (p. 301). But unpleasant though they are, stereotypes reflect a real social problem that must be faced. In the end, social policy stands or falls on results, not intentions. The point is not to get into heaven. It is not to say only nice things about those we seek to help. It is not to do the orthodox right thing that feels good and draws the applause of the bien-pensant. Rather, it is to do actual good for the less fortunate, whatever that takes and whether or not it feels good.

However it was motivated, welfare reform did achieve positive change. It drove most welfare mothers off cash aid and into jobs, with most of them emerging better-off. To do this was difficult, often unpleasant. It flew in the face of the American addiction to freedom as the solution to all problems. It was far from a complete success, as many more mothers who left welfare remained poor or insecure. Poor mothers still need more help to keep working and move ahead. Nonetheless, reform did open the door to a better future for them.11 If nothing else, workers are simply much easier to help—both politically and practically—than nonworkers.

Soss, Fording, and Schram want to do something much nicer, but less effective. They say that they accept the end of entitlement, but they would replace work with a broader participation requirement. Recipients should be able to “build capabilities through an inclusive process of enable-ment,” rather than having to take jobs immediately (p. 304). That sounds like a return to the Great Society, where training and education programs were offered to the poor without work expectations. That was well intentioned but achieved little. It was only when government clearly demanded work that work levels rose. While an excellent economy and new benefits also helped, the work text was essential for breaking the mold of the old welfare. Not freedom but obligation generated positive social change. Similar efforts to combine “help and hassle” have appeared in charter schools and in programs for youth, ex-offenders, child support defaulters, and the homeless.12

The real answer to stereotypes is not to deny or suppress them. It is to ameliorate the patterns of crime and nonwork that give force to them. If black work levels rise while crime falls, antiblack images should recede, becoming no more threatening than the jibes that white ethnic groups toss at another on Columbus or St. Patrick’s Day. Welfare reform was a giant step down that road.
Nearly 50 years after Civil Rights, it is time for the current authors and other academics to be less protective of blacks. Let us discuss racial stereotypes more, not less, openly. When blacks and their advocates stand still for that, we will be closer, not further, from an integrated society.

Notes
1 Mead 2010.
2 Critics include Collins and Mayer (2010), King (1999), Mink (1998), Newman (1999), Schram (2000), and Stone (2008), among others.
3 Mead 1986.
4 In the late 1990s, spending fell on cash welfare due to reform but rose in Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Food Stamps, which were seen as supports for reform. Spending on the three programs together rose, and fell only slightly adjusting for inflation. Meanwhile, spending on child and health care to promote reform soared. So overall, welfare reform cost more money than it saved. Calculated from US Congress 2004, pp. 7.31, 7.59, 13.41, 15.9, 15.24.
5 Piven and Cloward 1971.
7 Mead 2003.
8 In 2009, whites accounted for 80% of the US population, blacks 13%, and Hispanics 16% (US Census 2011). The corresponding shares of the welfare caseload (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) in fiscal 2009 were 35%, 34%, and 24% (US Congress 2011). Thus, blacks were the most dependent relative to their share of the population.
9 Lipsky 1980.
10 Lurie 2006; Riccucci 2005.
11 For contrasting assessments of the effects of welfare reform, see Mead 2007 and Parrott and Sherman 2007.
12 Mead 1997.

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Only RUB 220.84/month. Neoliberalism and the Welfare State. STUDY. Flashcards. Taylor-Gooby, 'The Divisive Welfare State' summary. Recent UK governments pursuing social policy agenda that aggravates and subsequently exploits social divisions in order to make permanent cuts to the welfare state without damaging electability. Part of a long-term neoliberal project to reduce the proportion of GDP spent on all welfare recipients in UK. (2016). 4 strategies identified by Taylor-Gooby in 'The Divisive Welfare State' to advance long-term neoliberal project. 1. Tax reforms increasing gap between rich and poor. Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race. By Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford F. Schram. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 368p. $75.00 cloth, $25.00 paper. It is more than 15 years since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act was passed in 1996, famously described by then-President Bill Clinton as â€œthe end of welfare as we know it.â€ In this symposium, a diverse group of political scientists working on welfare issues have been asked to critically assess the book's account and to comment more broadly on the importance of the â€œgovernance of povertyâ€ to the future of American politics.â€ Jeffrey C. Isaac, Editor. Discover the world's research. The American welfare state was created in 1935 and continued to develop through 1973. Since then, over a prolonged period, the capitalist class has been steadily dismantling the entire welfare state. Between the mid 1970â€™s to the present (2017) labor laws, welfare rights and benefits and the construction of and subsidies for affordable housing have been gutted. â€œWorkfareâ€™ (under President â€œBillâ€™ Clinton) ended welfare for the poor and displaced workers. Meanwhile the shift to regressive taxation and the steadily declining real wages have increased corporate profits to an astronomical degree. W Neoliberalism is most closely associated with Thomas Hayek and Milton Friedman, and the policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Neoliberals advocate three main policies to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society: privatization, deregulation and low taxation. Some examples of Neoliberal Policies include: Lowering taxes on income, especially high income earners. When Thatcher came to power in 1997 she reduced income tax on the very highest earners from 83% to 60%. Lowering Corporation tax â€“ The government reduced the main corporation tax from 28% in 2010 to ju