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Perceptions of Poverty: Symbols in the Eye of the Political Economy

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Introduction

The argument presented in this article asserts that in order to understand poverty, knowledge about poverty must be socially and historically constructed; just as critically, the thoughts and attitudes of people regarding poverty (the poor), wealth (the rich) and perceptions regarding the meanings of these words must be obtained and assessed. Perceptions will turn on and be affected by social context, which is the basis of the societal based construction of reality. What people think, how these thoughts are expressed, received, amplified, and then are transformed into well-honed political weapons in the ongoing wars of competing ideologies regarding the poor has historically been part of social reality. This reality is examined in-depth using two images, the Great Depression “Migrant Mother” and the 1980s “Welfare Queen” illustrating that most of our perceptions and knowledge about poverty is based on and manipulated by political ideology.

The lack of scholarly examination or general curiosity regarding poverty ideology and what people think about poverty has led to academic “blindness” and contributed to a significant distance between the viewpoints of academics and “ordinary people.” There still seems to be no overwhelming recognition of this perceptual gap, which has been and continues to be costly for progressives in terms of losing battles in

ideological arenas involving “wars of words and images” in the United States and other countries as well.¹ As others have argued (Lakoff 2004: 73; Frank 2004), it simply is not enough to get the facts out assuming that if you get enough facts out to the public, people will make rational conclusions (i.e., they will vote and act in their own personal and economic interests). The following article advocates a first step in reclaiming perceptions of poverty from the “eye of the political economy” through a contextualized study of images, symbols and their historical and social constructions.

From “Migrant Mother” to “Welfare Queen”: Ideological Warfare

Examining the circumstances and conditions surrounding the creation of images enriches our understanding of how particular icons and knowledge come into being, including the social, cultural and political layers involved in the expression and transmission of meaning, which is essential to the study of perceptions. The two examples chosen in this study represent very different images and yet they share a common power to convey enduring and evocative meanings; these meanings were successfully exploited for political and ideological purposes.

The photograph of the “Migrant Mother” taken by Dorothea Lange in 1936 in Nipomo, California symbolized the plight of destitute migrant workers (pea-pickers) and became an

icon of the Great Depression Era. While the iconographic image is well-known, less well-understood are the roots of why and how the photograph came into being, which are at the core of the construction of social knowledge. The background and evolution of the development of the “migrant mother” image is of significant historical and political interest. By the time of Roosevelt’s inauguration in March of 1933, iron production had dropped to 1896 levels. Protesting farmers were killing their livestock, dumping fresh milk and burning grain for fuel because of the collapse in farm prices. Unemployment stood at about 25%, and the failure of five thousand banks wiped out nine million savings accounts. Governors across the U.S. were declaring bank holidays, and Republicans lost congressional seats in 1930. However, it was in 1932, 1934, and 1936 that voter anger finished the Republican Era, as the nation’s powerful governing force, reflecting the connection of political realignment with the depth of economic depression. With the failure of the banking system, consumer confidence evaporated and the economy was depressed, but as early as the 1890s and 1900s rising and falling corporate stock market valuations were indicators, as well as the cause, of America’s ensuing economic collapse. All of these factors contributed to the transformation of the GOP into a minority based party situated in the northern countryside, small towns and suburbs, while the driving force of the Democratic economic coalition took over the mantle of leadership of heavy industry and corporate finance ((Phillips 2002: 68-69).

The social context was influenced by the rise of liberalism emerging in late nineteenth-century Europe, as an alternative to the unbri-dled laissez-faire individualism and capitalism

of the industrial age (O’Connor 2001). In the liberal view, several well-known ideological commitments were evident: 1) the deeply held belief that the state must be involved in the regulation of industrial capitalism and accompanying concentrations of wealth and poverty; 2) an assertion of the necessity for the protection of the public good. Populist movements in the 1930s reflected the new liberal ideologies, such as Huey Long and his “Share the Wealth” Clubs that claimed seven million members. The ramifications in the political arena were significant; historians have cited FDR’s 1935 speech on unjust transmissions of inherited wealth and economic power as partly a response to these early populist grass root efforts. As early as 1925, wealth in America was becoming more and more concentrated leading to the formation of caste-like groups. Additionally, books by authors like Ferdinand Lundberg, publishing in 1937, *America’s Sixty Families*, charged that the U.S. was controlled and dominated by approximately sixty rich families supported by another ninety families of lesser wealth (Phillips 2002: 68-72). The ideological stage was set in the Progressive-era milieu to “de-pauperize thinking about poverty”; this involves taking poverty out of the arena of the individual morals and behavior and transforming it into a social issue (O’Connor 2001: 1-22). This effort by Progressives cut to the core of hotly debated issues, then as now, regarding the root causes of poverty and inequality.

Within these political and historical contexts, an opportune time had come for addressing poverty as a social problem. In order to assist these efforts, the Roosevelt Administration decided to document the poverty and social suffering that was occurring among agricul-

tural workers; in political terms, the Roosevelt administration wanted to publicly advertise relief programs and the various government activities implemented to address the economic crises America was undergoing. This is the reason that Lange was photographing migratory farm laborers for the Resettlement Administration, which would later become the Farm Security Administration.

Lange gave this personal account of her encounter with the woman, Florence Owens Thompson, whose picture became symbolic of the hardship and destitution of the depression:

*I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age that she was thirty-two. She said that she and her children had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her seven children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures may help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it."*²

The resulting picture has frequently been called the most "haunting symbol of the depression,"³ evoking an image, which made the picture and the photographer, Dorothea Lange, famous. It spoke to Americans symbolically of inequality, destitution and helplessness; it is a picture situated in temporal and spatial context, which was used to appeal to a shared

human experience and empathy. The image conveyed was one of suffering in the face of overwhelming poverty and in the shadow of unimaginable wealth. In political terms, "Migrant Mother" was an extraordinarily effective symbol for the Roosevelt administration that would emphasize full employment through government and public works programs, as a means to economic recovery, and aiding the initiation of the tentative beginnings of a welfare state through the 1930s created Aid to Families with Dependent Children.⁴ However, the immediate and overwhelming popularity of the photographs in the press did not alleviate the economic problems for Florence O. Thompson nor solve her family's financial dependence on unstable seasonal agricultural work.⁵

Governmental support of public social programs represented a point of departure among scholars and ideologues who asserted that poverty and inequality resulted from the consequences of moral behavior versus the view that the unregulated rapacity of the unbridled free market had to be mediated through governmental control. In the 1930s, the locus of inequality was politically situated in social and structural factors. However, there was interest not only in the economic effects of inequality, but also in the cultural and social ways of dealing with poverty. Scholars became interested in community studies not as a way to break from the view of the Progressive political economy, but as a way to highlight issues of class, the dangers of unregulated laissez-faire capitalism and individualism, as well as the desperate need for social reform (O'Connor 2001: 55).

Almost fifty years later, corporate crises in profitability beginning in the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in neoliberal policies of privatiza-

tion and rollbacks of welfare programs, health care, education and other public assistance associated with the New Deal and the War on Poverty (Maskovsky 2001: 479). Carefully manipulated buzz words, such as “wasteful big government,” “competition,” “efficiency,” and other market-based ideological rhetoric sprang up in support of a private-sector model of economic restructuring, which would blatantly favor corporate interests over the public good. Ronald Reagan was swept, into office by the tidal wave of middle-class insecurity and fundamental market and societal restructuring, in the 1980s on the tails of the backlash against welfare, rising crime, perceived judicial permissiveness, and inner-city riots. The political stage had been set earlier by conservatives like Goldwater, who asserted in 1960 that welfare transformed individuals into animals; later, Nixon played the welfare card asserting that a too generous welfare system was leading women to turn down wage work to live lazy and dependent lives (Francis Fox Piven 2001: 142-143). At the same time, corporate welfare continued to grow, as the relentless drive for corporate profitability found a willing partnership with politicians hungry for funds to operate political campaigns.

However, it was Reagan who fabricated the story of the so-called “Welfare Queen” driving a “Welfare Cadillac”. He cited the case of a Chicago “Welfare Queen” who had taken \$150,000 from the government, using 80 aliases, 30 addresses, a dozen social security cards, and four fictional dead husbands. The country was inflamed, and Reagan indignantly met rising middle-class anger (particularly that of whites) with promises to cut welfare. While journalists futilely attempted to check the veracity of the welfare abuse story without success,

Reagan’s efforts at class warfare worked brilliantly, as the country was diverted from ongoing Savings and Loan Scandals and bulging corporate welfare.⁶ At the same time, feelings of disgust were fueled against women who typified the “undeserving poor” portrayed as lazy, immoral and involved in illicit sexual activity, while stealing honest tax payers hard-earned dollars. All of these meanings were wrapped up in the construction of the term “welfare queens;” the additional unsaid but clearly conveyed nuance of race was thrown in for good measure. The strategy highlighted welfare queens, as promiscuous women and inadequate mothers, blaming them for their poverty and for their nontraditional female headed households (Mullings 2001: 45) illustrating a curious mixture of class, race and patriarchal ideologies.

The image of the welfare queen became a cognitive frame through which meaning was constructed, conveyed and with constant media and think tank spin, symbolized a devastating critique of big and wasteful government, sexually active out of control women, women on welfare (particularly African-American women), and government “hand-outs” through social programs in general. The construction of this message, its framing and use as a political weapon was wildly successful, as has been argued regarding the image of “a welfare mother with a large family, pregnant once again (portraying) the poor as promiscuous and lazy...has done more to set back the struggle against poverty than have all efforts of reactionary politicians” (Harrington 1984; Mullings 2001). The image resonated throughout America; everyone in the country knew what the term meant, and it was agreed that “welfare queens” had to be excised from the welfare

rolls. Facts regarding the actual conditions of women on welfare, their paltry assistance checks, the overall small percent of the total federal budget actually involved in welfare programs, true stories and statistics about poverty and suffering presented by numerous scholars never changed the perception of the majority of American people regarding welfare. This resulted in the culmination of the “end of welfare as we know it” under President Clinton in 1996.

Spinning images and icons: the theater of poverty knowledge

It has long been argued that language is our guide to social reality (Sapir 1929), and over the past fifty years the radical right wing conservative party has transformed that social reality through the use of language via investment in think tanks, talk radio, media, and in articulate spokespeople. They have been successful in creating frames (cognitive structures that shape how we see the world) to control the ideological arena (Lakoff 2004). Long years of relentless campaigning against welfare has been like a “theater which changed the way many Americans thought about welfare, and even changed the way recipients thought about welfare (Piven 2001: 144). It is to this stage upon which the campaigns for or against welfare will be critically examined. In the battle of ideologies, the Migrant Mother icon of the Great Depression and the Welfare Queen of the Reagan Era may at first glance appear to have little in common; however, a more careful analysis reveals the connections between these two apocryphal images.

Both images were used by political parties and ideologues to fuel American passions in order to manipulate support for their own

agenda in turbulent social contexts. These “merchants of ideas” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) sold their ideas in the everyday life arena via language and ideological messages, which in turn tapped into and shaped perceptions. Perceptions are interpreted by people with subjective meaning in a coherent world that originates in thoughts and actions and is maintained as real by these thoughts and actions. Into this everyday life of meanings comes the power of language to mark the boundaries of life in society: “my house, the car I drive to work, the web of human relationships in which I participate and in a world which I share with others in an intersubjective way” (Crossley 1996). We have our own “thought world,” which we carry around with us, and it functions to measure, evaluate and assist us in comprehending and interpreting our own macrocosm (Whorf 1941). Thus language has long been designated as the most important symbolic system of society reflecting a vast range of meanings and transmitted from generation to generation. In order to ascertain how perceptions are received and sent, language is a critical and essential factor in understanding the experiences and meanings used in everyday life.

We exist in a world filled with signs, symbols, and representations of meanings throughout our entire lives. How does the repository of meanings including knowledge of everyday life, which is shared and possessed differently within groups and individuals, become activated through language? More clearly, how are people reached and pulled into a particular ideological world view? In examining the images of “Migrant Mother” and “Welfare Queen,” how did these symbols tap into our deepest feelings of empathy and on the other hand disgust?

Metaphorically, both images connected to

common national fears and concerns through the frames of gender, class and race played out on the stage of public opinion and political demagoguery. In the iconography of the migrant worker with her children, the “good mother,” hardworking but poor, evokes a collective repository of meanings about gender and class. The symbol activates our empathy and stimulates our nurturing response to reach out and assist her. Yet, as previously asserted, the picture was actually part of a coherent strategy to appeal to voters and to convey the need for social programs as part of the New Deal politics. Thus we can situate the photograph, as part of symbolic domination in the theater of ideas, where some images are more highly valued and carry more authority than others; such ideas and images can be manipulated to serve the interests of particular groups - i. e., the power to make others accept and act upon particular representations of the world is a powerful aspect of this domination (Gal 2001: 424), which in these politically divisive times may be called “spin.” “Spin” is nothing more than a form of control and domination through various forms of media. We see “spin” in action when we examine the mythical welfare queen image. The moral vision of the radical right wing politician constructed a frame through which we saw the world in the same way as the politicians. The image of a “bad mother” morally and sexually corrupt invoking racial and sexist overtones, who was stealing hard-working tax-payers money was constructed to make certain that Americans accepted the image and perhaps more importantly, that people would be passionately inflamed by the image to act, i.e., vote for Reagan and other conservative politicians.

However, in both cases, fictitious elements of

the images were glossed over in order to support a much more important covert political agenda, i.e., 1) the photograph of the “Migrant Mother” symbolized the support of New Deal and liberal ideology through government regulation of business in order to advance the public good over corporate interests; and 2) the image of the “Welfare Queen” represented the rejection of liberal ideology and New Deal programs through the dismantling of welfare programs and a return to “free market” or laissez-faire capitalism, where corporate interests are protected and advanced by government over the interests of the public. Therefore, the images situated fifty years apart may appear unrelated but actually represent two sides of the proverbial coin; and furthermore, both were part of an ideological strategy, which powerfully shaped the political discourse of each respective time period, conveying messages that resonated among the American people tapping into their deepest moral values.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the migrant mother and the welfare queen, we may recognize and strip away gender myths, class bias and racism revealing the bare bones of political manipulation and use of images to wage ideological warfare. By scrutinizing these examples, the buried message hidden in the images are revealed, and we must acknowledge the fact that knowledge about and perceptions of poverty are inherently and fundamentally political in nature. Such an analysis brings about the recognition that we are still fighting the same battles but on a different ideological terrain situated in shifting historical contexts.

Thus it is clear that poverty knowledge can be used as a political force (O'Connor 2001: 291-

295). However, in order to construct this knowledge and implement its use in the war of ideas in the political arena, we must first understand what ordinary people are thinking about poverty, their perceptions of who is poor and the perceived reasons for their poverty. After we have collected these perceptions through research and contributed to knowledge about poverty, we will then be equipped to use this information and fully engage in the battle over ideologies and to wage an effective and collective struggle. The purpose of the ideological war for Progressives has historically been and continues to be the removal of the focus of the "poverty problem" from the individual to the root causes and systemic enabling of poverty and inequality. The desired goal, as clearly illustrated by this article, can be brought about through the effective manipulation and understanding of how language, symbols and images are used, as powerful tools, to accomplish political goals.

Notes:

1 For example, according to a 2004 Report issued by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Japan's new dual system of regular workers and nonregular, short-contract, casual workers was cited as a structural cause of growing inequality in the country. This is partly due to the growing numbers of *freeters*, estimated at over four million aged 14-34, excluding students and housewives. The word *freeter* is a combination of the English word *free* and the German word *arbeiter*, meaning worker; in Japanese, *arubaito* is commonly used to refer to part-time, unstable, low salary work. Young high-school graduates are considered at the bottom of the food chain in Japan's highly competitive job market, and many workers are treated as

disposable employees requiring no company investment or training. The ever-increasing dualism of two groups of workers concentrated among young people of short-term employment experience, low education and in general, having little human capital is creating an entire generation of unskilled "nomadic" workers. The image of *freeters* as *free workers* rather than low-paid and low-skilled workers is fostered and manipulated by Japan's new exploitative corporate culture.

2 Dorothea Lange, "The Assignment I'll Never Forget: Migrant Mother," in *Popular Photography Magazine*, February 1960.

3 *Democrat and Chronicle Newspaper*, August 25, 1983.

4 However, the programs implemented still stigmatized welfare assistance for the poor separating them from the non-stigmatized welfare and social security programs.

5 Thompson was not at all like the iconic portrayal of helplessness that the picture conveyed. She was active in farm labor struggles and worked as a union organizer. Thus, she eventually regretted that she had ever allowed Lange to make the photographs because she felt she was represented in a stereotypical way. {On-line}. Available: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awpnp6//migrant_mother.html.

6 George H.W. Bush would later bail out the Savings and Loan Companies with \$500 billion of taxpayer money.

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