The States Matter

"Welfare Reform: The Institutional Dimension" by Lawrence M. Mead, in *Focus* (special issue, 2002), 1180 Observatory Dr., 3412 Social Science Bldg., Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wis. 53706.

When the 1996 welfare reform law turned over to the states much of the responsibility for figuring out how to assist the needy and get them into jobs, it was only to be expected that the states would vary in how well they did. Among states closely studied so far, Mead, a professor of politics at New York University, sees a larger pattern, reflecting the states' diverse political cultures.

Political scientist Daniel Elazar offered a useful picture of those cultures in his 1966 book *American Federalism: A View from the States*. In predominantly "moralistic" states, there was a high-minded emphasis on the public interest and strong government. "This culture prevailed in northern New England, the upper Midwest, and parts of the West and Northwest." In predominantly "individualistic" states, in the Mid-Atlantic states and the lower Midwest, government was viewed as an instrument for "advancing the private interests of groups and citizens," with policy determined through compromise. In "traditionalistic" states, found mainly in the South and Southwest, "government played a more limited role, chiefly to defend society against fundamental changes."

Recent studies of welfare reform in the states roughly bear out Elazar's analysis, Mead contends. He puts eight—Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Kansas, Utah, Oregon, Washington, and Tennessee—in the high-achieving, generally "moralistic," category. All took "more or less" the same approach. Wisconsin, whose reform efforts began in the mid-1980s, led the way. Democratic legislators in the Badger State gave up the notion of welfare as an entitlement based on need alone, Mead notes, while Republicans agreed to "massive expansions of the bureaucracy and [child care and other] support services." The full-blown "Wisconsin Works" program "combines the most severe work tests [for receiving aid] in the nation with unusually generous support services for the entire working poor population. The combination has driven the cash welfare rolls down by about 90 percent and work levels up from already high levels"—to 65 percent in 1998.

In New York and five other generally "individualistic" states—California, Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Ohio—changes were made to comply with federal requirements, but consensus was lacking for "fundamental" reform.

Six "traditionalistic" southern states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas—never before "had to frame a serious welfare policy." They simply kept benefit levels low. Since 1996 they have begun—but only slowly—to encourage work within welfare.

Though the states' diverse political cultures have deep roots in the ethnic and religious characteristics of their original settlers, Mead, like Elazar before him, believes that the "moralistic" approach is favored in the long run, thanks to rising education levels and other factors. Among those other factors today: welfare reform itself.

Share the Wealth!

"America's Lost Egalitarian Tradition" by Sean Wilentz, in *Daedalus* (Winter 2002), Norton's Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Equality in America comes in many flavors—equality of opportunity, equality of races, equality of sexes, to name just three. But one variety seldom mentioned these days is equality of wealth, laments Wilentz, a historian at Princeton University.

When the nation was founded, Americans disagreed about many things, but not, in general, he says, about what Thomas Jefferson called the "numberless instances of wretchedness" that stemmed from gross inequalities of property. As Noah Webster, the staunch Connecticut Federalist, said in support of the Constitution in 1787, "a general and tolerably equal distribution of landed property is the whole basis of national freedom" and "the very soul of a republic."

The actual distribution of property then did not live up to that egalitarian ideal, of course. On the eve of the Revolution, by one recent analysis, the richest one percent of Americans held more than 10 percent of the nation's total wealth. Even so, the inequality of wealth in that era was much less than it was in Great Britain and Europe—and much less than it would be in later periods in the United States.

"Because the vast preponderance of American wealth came from the land, because American land was plentiful, and because ownership of the land was widely distributed" (compared with the Old World), observes Wilentz, Americans then could imagine their country as a kind of utopia. All wealth was created by human labor, they believed, and, while perfect equality would always be beyond reach, great disparities of wealth could be avoided as long as government did not interfere.

"Though not unchallenged, and though open to conflicting interpretations," Wilentz writes, "the conceptual basics of the egalitarian tradition lasted for a century after the Revolution." In the latter decades of the 19th century, however, large new business corporations and trusts emerged, along with "an all-too-conspicuous American plutocracy," and economic thinking changed. The labor theory of value was inadequate as a basis for understanding the corporate economy. By the 1920s, many Americans had come to regard not only the huge corporations but gross inequality of wealth as "a perfectly natural result of market forces."

Yet, Wilentz says, "the American egalitarian impulse" survived, albeit in dramatically different form: "Now government became the instrument, and not the enemy, of equality." And the Progressives, New Dealers, and Great Society liberals showed that this "reinvented proactive egalitarianism" could work to reverse the trends toward gross inequality of wealth. "After 1940," he says, "economic inequality abated, to the point where, by 1980, [it] was roughly the same as it had been in the 1770s." But then came Ronald Reagan and the conservatives, throwing latter-day egalitarians on the defensive. "By the early 1990s . . . inequality of wealth distribution returned to the levels of the 1920s."

Slavery's Long Shadow

"Slavery and the Black Family" by James Q. Wilson, in *The Public Interest*, 1112 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Did slavery weaken the black family? W. E. B. Du Bois, author of *The Negro American Family* (1908), was sure that it did, and so was E. Franklin Frazier, author of *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939). After all, slavery denied slaves the right to marry, denied them the fruits of their own labor, and casually put family members on the auction block. But when Daniel Patrick Moynihan summarized such arguments in his famous 1965 paper, "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action," the "roof fell in on him, and a revisionist historical movement began," notes Wilson, the distinguished political scientist now teaching at Pepperdine University.

In the eyes of the revisionists, slavery was not to blame for the high rate of single-parent families among blacks; contemporary racism and joblessness were. In *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976), historian Herbert Gutman, relying largely on genealogies he had constructed, argued that the black family emerged from slavery in good