The Wages of Motherhood

INEQUALITY IN THE WELFARE STATE, 1917–1942

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Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920

Cornell University Press

ITHACA AND LONDON
CHAPTER ONE

THE PROMISE OF MOTHERHOOD

Maternalist Social Policy

between the Wars

Miss Abbott focused her principal effort upon the neglected portion of the population. She befriended the mothers of the United States because she realized as few other sociologists did that they held the fate of the republic in their hands. With similar comprehension she strove for every conceivable advantage for children, appreciating the fact that democracy can survive only with the support of a loyal younger generation.

—The Washington Evening Star, June 21, 1930

Throughout the twentieth century, race, culture, and gender have run to the core of welfare policy and politics. "Welfare" began eighty years ago in state-level mothers' pension programs designed to mitigate the poverty of worthy mothers without husbands to depend on. In the Aid to Dependent Children program, the New Deal nationalized the mothers' pension concept, carrying into the modern welfare state its premises and prescriptions. Welfare asked society to honor women's side of the sexual division of labor while naturalizing that division. It supported poor, single women's mother-work while enforcing women's domesticity. It offered political tribute to motherhood while requiring poor women to earn their tribute through cultural assimilation. Welfare's premises were that the health of the polity depended on the quality of its children; that the preparation of the child for citizenship depended on the quality of home life; that mother care was the linchpin of the family; that cultural and individual differences among

mothers were differences of quality and not of kind; and that, therefore, the needs of poor mothers were not strictly economic but behavioral, moral, and cultural as well.

Welfare policy was forged between the world wars by educated, middle-class women reformers who worked simultaneously to soften racism and to win political recognition for women. Of northern European stock primarily, these reformers advanced social policies to offset both the social costs of capitalism for mothers and children and the political costs of diversity for the Anglo American order. Until the 1930s, the principal subjects of welfare policy activists were poor, usually southern and eastern European immigrants in cities such as Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Along with most of Anglo America, welfare activists understood the cultural practices and individual choices of immigrants in racial terms—terms given scientific validity by Teutonic and Nordic theories of racial hierarchy and backed up by the new science of intelligence testing. Moreover, like most Anglo Americans, they assigned social significance to the spread of unmanaged cultural difference. But where racist hereditarians insisted on the irreversibility of racialized cultural difference, welfare activists believed that culture was the product of environment and therefore amenable to change. During the New Deal, they applied this analysis to African Americans, hoping to win for African American women an equal share in women’s welfare state.

Prescribing democratic harmony through the social incorporation of immigrants and African Americans, the reformers drove a wedge into the politics of cultural and racial subordination and exclusion. Tying poverty to culture, they contested the strict separation of public affairs and private life. Pinning the health of the polity to the quality of motherhood, they called upon government to provide economic and educational assistance to poor women and their children. Thus the reformers deployed gender ideology against the strict proscriptions of laissez-faire capitalism, voluntarist trade unionism, and racial essentialism.¹

¹ Some class-premised policies for social provision were debated by progressives, labor, and business during the Progressive Era—in the National Civic Federation, in the American Association for Labor Legislation, and in the Progressive Party. The Progressive Party, for example, included a health plank on its platform in 1912, and Congress considered health provision along with other proposals for social insurance in 1915. But the ambivalence of business toward socializing risks other than those already borne in tort liability (workmen’s compensation), the interest of union labor

MATERNALIST SOCIAL POLICY AND WOMEN’S INEQUALITY IN THE WELFARE STATE

If welfare policy served cultural purposes, the primary concern of the middle-class, Anglo American social innovators I discuss in this book was the welfare of the child. The reformers measured child welfare by the home conditions and educational opportunities that either fostered or retarded the child’s healthy development. Central to the reformers’ definition of healthy development was the degree and speed of the child’s assimilation of the conventions of “American” society. The reformers identified mothers as crucial to child welfare, developing a policy template to inspire a “higher,” more “American” quality of motherhood.

Called “maternalists” because they targeted mothers in social policy and asserted the social and political significance of the maternal role, these policy activists—Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, Grace Abbott, Edith Abbott, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and many others—identified the public interest with private values and so charted women’s path into the state. For middle-class, Anglo American women, their place in the state included having the vote. For the most privileged among them, it included having a direct role in government—women claimed such policy arenas as the U.S. Children’s Bureau and U.S. Women’s Bureau. For the least privileged women—southern and eastern European immigrants and women of color—their relationship to the state was limited to their condition as subjects of maternalist social policy.

Women policy innovators drew from a broad tradition of maternalist thinking. It traced its roots from the republican ideology of gendered citizenships to the separate spheres ideology of the Victorian period to the mothers’ politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which asserted women’s political significance to “the race” and the nation. Maternalist thinking perme-
ated many women's organizations and crossed racial lines. All maternalists subscribed to the ideal of domestic motherhood, but they did not all share identical political instincts, nor did they reach identical political conclusions. Some Anglo American maternalists—in the National Congress of Mothers, for example—were politically conservative, resistant to the idea of government intervention into family and social affairs. African American maternalists, denied government solutions because of racism and disfranchisement, treated the domestic ideal less as a behavioral prescription for women outside their culture than as a means for women within it to claim respect and justice in Anglo American society.

The Anglo American maternalist reformers considered here played a distinctive role both within maternalism and within the politics of social reform. In directing their innovations toward women less fortunate than themselves and outside the Anglo-American mainstream, maternalist policy activists acted as the social mothers of poor women. In directing their claims toward the state, these maternalists were agents of Progressive Era reform.

"Progressive maternalists," to borrow Molly Ladd-Taylor's term, made three claims that helped change the political landscape. First, they articulated the public, political significance of woman's role, a significance that not only required women's enfranchisement but governmental recognition of its reciprocal obligations to female citizens. Second, they domesticated anxieties about cultural diversity by linking incentives to cultural conformity with their social innovations. Third, they insisted on the possibility of cultural conformity, even by people widely viewed as members of "lesser races," and thus they strengthened the emerging discourse of racial liberalism.

Progressive maternalist thinking was by no means uniformly "liberating." It called for the social mediation of women's poverty but defined the "needs" of poor, mostly immigrant, women in terms of the gender and cultural interests of the polity. It claimed social and political respect for women's work but confined women to a separate and dependent citizenship. And though it demanded the civic integration of southern and eastern European immigrants and people of color it required in exchange their assimilation to a common, dominant culture.

Progressive maternalists claimed universal political rights for women but did not write universalistic social policies for them. Rather, they crafted homogenizing policies to enhance the quality and conditions of motherhood among women of lower social rank. Maternalists derived their notion of woman's social responsibility from her biological assignment and measured woman's needs by her distance from the dominant culture's family configurations, home customs, and gender norms. Maternalists interwove woman's responsibility with woman's needs in social policies that affirmed the social and political significance of differences between women and men while also addressing cultural and class differences among women. Through separate, gendered provisions tailored to woman's social location, role, and responsibility, then, maternalists claimed policy equity for women in relation to men. But they also sought to establish as-
simulating, integrative policies intended to nurture similarity among women.

The problem with maternalist reform was not that it noticed, and responded to, social and political differences between women and men. Rather, the problem was that it required women to be different from men in the same way, by accepting their gender role assignment and by approximating a uniform cultural standard of motherhood and family life. Nor was the problem with maternalist cultural reform that it shared the secrets of the dominant class and culture with the "other" America; the problem was that it required the assimilation of those secrets as a precondition for equality. First to European immigrants, then to people of color, maternalis offered the tools of cultural conformity—literacy and language instruction, vocational training, civics lessons, health services—and they became important weapons for subordinated groups. But they also required individuals to earn equality and acquitted society of its responsibilities to treat people as created equal by respecting differences among them. For women, the principle subjects of maternalist social policy, the dual requirements of cultural and gender role conformity prescribed not only our separate incorporation into the welfare state but also our subordination within it.

The prescriptive premises of maternalist policy help explain women's persistent inequality in the welfare state. The progressive maternalist answer to the economic and political effects of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and masculine democracy on women's lives were child-centered, woman-directed, culturally remedial social policies: mothers' pensions, maternity policy, gendered schooling, protective labor standards. Maternalist prescriptions for women—principally domestic "American" motherhood—modemized gender inequality by politicizing and codifying social roles and relations. Maternalist prescriptions fastened worthy woman's citizenship to the maternal ideal, disparaged and regulated the role of paid labor in women's lives, and legitimated gender segregation in the labor market. Withholding the tools of independent citizenship from most poor women, maternalist prescriptions impaired women's ability to maintain a household outside of marriage and without assistance from the state. And withholding the presumption of equality from women in "lower" cultural castes, maternalist prescriptions inscribed debates about women and welfare with the idiom of culture and character.

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MATERNALIST REFORM

The maternals' social program arose from the politics of political reproduction. Industrialism, immigration, and emancipation simultaneously bred diversity and spread poverty within the citizenry. The movement of new peoples into the political community excited cultural anxieties among settled Americans. These anxieties fired popular and scientific racial ideologies that defined cultural differences as inherent, essential characteristics of groups, that ranked cultures on a hierarchy dominated by Anglo Saxons, and that treated poverty as an index of cultural inferiority. Many settled, "old-stock" Americans felt that cultural differentiation corrupted citizenship and degraded democracy. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the forces of exclusion mobilized to defend democracy against diversity through immigration restriction, segregation, disfranchisement, and compulsory monoculturalism. White, middle-class, women reformers countered the clamor for exclusion with an agenda for the social incorporation of new groups through cultural assimilation and the socialization of motherhood.

The reformers shared broad concerns about the quality of the citizenry and the future of democracy. In their writings and in their activities they explored the cultural conditions of poverty and the cultural impediments to good citizenship. Julia Lathrop, for example, warned of the tendency of immigrant men to become "in-

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* American thinking about race divided whites, counterposing "old-stock" settled Americans of English, Welsh, Scots, Irish, and German extraction to "new" immigrants from Italy, the Balkans, Slovakia, Lithuania, Russia, and so forth, most of whom were Jewish or Catholic. By attitude of late-nineteenth-century scientific racism, the former groups were assigned the inherent democratic character of Teutonic peoples.
termittent husbands" as a "masculine expediency . . . the face of non-employment or domestic complexity or both."9 Writing of the new immigrants serviced by Hull House, which she founded, Jane Addams lamented: "Their ideas and resources are cramped. The desire for higher social pleasure is extinct. They have no share in the traditions and social energy which make for progress. Too often their only place of meeting is a saloon, their only host a bartender, a local demagogue forms their public opinion." But where exclusionist politics took these observations as proof of inferiority and therefore as reasons to resist the incorporation of new peoples, Anglo American women reformers worked to nurture a higher quality of citizenship through education and social interaction.

The maternalists' faith in the nurturing potential of women produced a gendered angle of vision into industrial America's demographic crisis. The underlying assumption was that men and women inhabited separate, but equally significant, political spheres. The manly citizen waged war and engaged in productive labor; the woman citizen raised children and thereby promoted political reproduction. The reformers believed that all women shared the maternal vocation and that therefore all women controlled the future of the republic. Given that the "prize function of woman must ever be the perpetuation of the race," the reformers sought to create one motherhood from diversely situated women.8 Viewing woman's role as social and political as well as biological, the reformers proposed to nurture mothers in their maternal vocation in order to ensure in turn that children would be nurtured to worthy citizenship.

Industrial America's race challenge heightened the political significance of motherhood and socialized woman's work. The old-stock women reformers who took up this challenge accepted woman's gender assignment even while transforming it. They claimed political rights on the basis of woman's domestic role and values, bringing political visibility to woman's sphere, and they staked out a political role on the basis of women's common identity as nurturers and common gift for caring. "Woman's place is Home," wrote suffragist Rheta Childe Dorr. "But Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual home. Home is the community. The city full of people is the Family. The public school is the real Nursery. And badly do the Home and the Family and the Nursery need their mother. . . . Woman's place is Home, and she must not be forbidden to dwell there. . . . For women's work is race preservation, race improvement, and who opposes her, or interferes with her, simply fights nature, and nature never loses her battles."9

If the reformers pinned their case for political rights on the universality of the maternal vocation, they tied their claims for social innovations to the need to universalize the conditions of motherhood. The generic woman regenerated politics "in the service of the family."10 She brought a "gentler side" to city life and applied domestic skills to "civic housekeeping."11 She drew attention to the "inherent differences" between men and women and improved the polity through laws that recognized and rewarded those differences.12 But real women experienced gender differently, depending on class and culture, and accordingly—from the reformers' point of view—did not contribute equally to the task of political reproduction. Recognizing variation in women's gender experiences, reformers aimed to minimize differences among women, especially among women with children.

Staking woman's citizenship on her maternal role, Anglo American women reformers politicized their own domestic values of nurturing and caring. Staking future citizenship on the quality of motherhood, they directed their initiatives at mothers and through mothers to children. Mother-directed, maternalist reform worked to mitigate the effects of poverty on home life and thus to safeguard child welfare. For example, it countered poor mothers' need to work outside the home with income support for families that had lost

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their breadwinner. It taught poor mothers how better to manage family resources through household budgeting and more efficient food selection and preparation. These initiatives promoted domestic motherhood. They also provided venues for the cultural remediation of immigrant family life.

From the universality of the maternal vocation, progressive maternalists drew faith in the individual mother's ability to transcend her social and cultural station. From women's universal role as natural educators, they derived not only women's crucial role in creating the citizenry but an educational strategy for reforming mothers. Maternalists accordingly eschewed the dominant racial discourse and substituted the promise of assimilation for the ideology of subordination and exclusion. The maternalists' gendered perspective led them to contest the invidious racial distinctions that negated the possibility of universal motherhood. Although they generally accepted the view that “new” European immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, along with Latinos, Asians, and Africans, were socially inferior to Anglo Saxons, progressive maternalists rejected the claim that the inferiority was biological, inherent, and immutable. Instead, they traced the social position of groups to the cultures they practiced. A part of Anglo Saxon America, maternalists agreed that cultural diversity heralded the political and moral decay of the American democratic order. But cultural diversity, in the progressive maternalist view, could be managed: culture was neither fixed nor essential. The biological analysis of culture and race embraced by Jungists, nativists, and white supremacists supported segregation, separation, and subordination. The progressive maternalist analysis, by contrast, inspired efforts to bring new cultural groups into the “American” mainstream.

The maternalist commitment to assimilation expressed an emergent racial liberalism, one that stressed the possibility of becoming “American.” But the maternalist insistence on conformity—to woman's gender role and to an Americanized family life—exact a heavy toll for political and social incorporation: new immigrant women had to accept cultural interventions by maternalist policy administrators in exchange for the material benefits of those policies. The interventions did not always require immigrant mothers to eschew their cultures, but they did put policy administrators in charge of deciding what to salvage, modify, or expunge from immigrant traditions. Always, the index of maternalist cultural management was the child's welfare and upbringing as a citizen.

Child-centered mothers' policies made the mother the medium for political regeneration but did not invest her with rights and resources for her own sake. The mother's status as a citizen and as a beneficiary of maternalist policies was thus conditional, dependent on her willingness to approximate the maternalists' universal, maternal ideal.

**GENDER AND CULTURE IN WORLD WAR I**

The Anglo American, progressive maternalist policy leaders whose ideas and innovations are the focus of this study drew their inspiration from their work with immigrants in the settlement houses of New York and Chicago. They were social activists and social researchers legendary for their ardor in improving the lot of the urban poor: Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Grace Abbott, Edith Abbott, Mary Anderson, Lillian Wald. They worked with women's organizations—the National Consumers' League, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Congress of Mothers, to name a few—to attract political attention to their ideas and to win policy victories for their specific proposals. An early triumph came in 1912, with the creation of the U.S. Children's Bureau, the brainchild of Florence Kelley and Lillian Wald. The bureau was housed in the Department of Labor and headed by Julia Lathrop. A maternalist place in national government, the Children's Bureau used its investigative authority to monitor child welfare, to assess the progress of local maternalist reforms, and to formulate policy recommendations for mothers and children.

Though maternalist reform made steady progress between 1900 and 1916—judicial approval of protective labor legislation in 1908, wildfire adoption of mothers' aid programs by the states beginning in 1911, and the establishment of the Children's Bureau—World War I provided the definitive boost to the maternalist policy drive. Ironically, when wartime anxieties about the deterioration of
American manhood erupted, they catapulted maternalist Americanization initiatives to the forefront of social reform. Race-conscious monoculturalism, deeply inscribed in American political thinking after sixty years of emancipation and immigration, was inflamed by the wartime draft. For the first time, the American armed forces reflected the ethnic and racial diversity of American society: the army certified 357,000 Black soldiers, for example—some 13 percent of the draftees. This apparent democratization of the American military developed from the contradictions of caste and citizenship, not from widespread affirmation of the equality of male citizens. Though the soldier was the citizen par excellence, many whites objected to the idea that their sons might be drafted to fight and die while young African American men stayed at home. Draft boards were accordingly pressured to recruit universally and thus to create a heterogeneous army.

An army including Blacks and immigrants presented a dilemma for Anglo America. In the South, many whites feared the consequences of a combat-trained Black male population for the southern racial order. In the North, many old-stock whites worried that the presence of immigrants and their children in the army imperiled a competent and patriotic war effort. In both North and South, many Anglo Americans recoiled at the idea that military service would support legitimate claims to equality from people who were not really "American." Although segregation and discrimination limited the mobility of Blacks within the armed forces, for example, commentators predicted that "out of the war would come . . . a 'new negro,'" "pride of having been picked by the Army, exposed to social equality while in France, and mobilized by the ideals of freedom, democracy and equality for which he was asked to fight." These fears of social proximity and political equality were heightened and seemingly vindicated by the results of mass mental testing of the draftees. Indeed, for white supremacist and assimilationist alike, Army mental test results underscored the corrupting effects of diversity on democratic citizenship.

Though they arrived at different conclusions, commentators from across the political spectrum agreed that the "enlistment records . . . were at once a warning and a national disgrace." Army recruitment data showing high rates of illiteracy, mental deficiency, and ill-health among draftees suggested a decline in the quality of American manhood. More important, the army made culture and race the categories of analysis for its data and assigned scientific validity to its findings. Screening tests conducted for the army by hereditary scientist R.M. Yerkes attributed "low intelligence" among draftees to their race/ethnicity: according to Yerkes' data, the average mental age of Italians was 11.01 years, of Poles 10.74 years, of Blacks 10.41 years.

The highly publicized discovery of mass "feeble-mindedness" in Black and new immigrant America fired racial hostilities but did not halt the demographic diversification of the army. In fact, Blacks were inducted at higher rates than were whites, and even illiterate immigrants were called into service. Thus one observer complained: "Many of the draftees could not understand English, and yet they were, of course, compelled to drill in response to orders spoken in English. One officer is said to have placed a foreign-born and an American in line, so that when orders were given the American could tweak the trousers of his neighbor and thus convey the contents of the order." The army managed diversity—and allayed anxiety about America's defective warriors—by sifting, ranking, and segregating troops by race and culture. The mental tests were useful in this

15 Walter Wilson, "Old Jim Crow in Uniform," Crisis, February 1929, p. 44.
19 Walter Wilson, "Old Jim Crow in Uniform," p. 43
regard as they graded and grouped mental ability. Beyond the tests were such military personnel policies as racial segregation and combat restrictions for most Black and many new immigrant soldiers. Austro-Hungarian non-citizen recruits, for example, were assigned to menial labor and were barred from certain military theaters. Most Black recruits were classified in support roles, as stevedores and laborers: of the 200,000 Black soldiers sent to France, only 42,000 were combat troops. The army furthermore limited officer training for Blacks, resisted commissioning Black officers and excluded Blacks from artillery units, the air corps, and the navy. The few Black combat units that were assembled for war duty were deployed without combat training; and the four Black regiments in the ninety-third division of the American Expeditionary Force were farmed over to the French.21

Indeed, when ranking, separation, and subordination could not be accomplished by army policy alone, the United States sought international cooperation. Unsuccessfully, the army asked the British to take on the Black regiments of the 92nd division and thus to relieve it of all Black combat units.22 The army urged the French to impose American racial restrictions on the Black American troops under their command. French military authorities thus cautioned their units: “Although a citizen of the United States, the black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible. The black is constantly being censured for his want of intelligence and discretion, his lack of civic and professional conscience, and for his tendency toward undue familiarity.” The directive concluded:

> We must prevent the rise of any pronounced degree of intimacy between French officers and Black officers . . . we cannot deal with them on the same plane as with the white American officers without deeply wounding the latter. We must not eat with them, must not shake hands or seek to talk or meet with them outside of the requirements of military service. We must not commend too highly the black American troops, particularly in the presence of (white) Americans . . . [We must] make a point of keeping the native cantonment population from “spoiling” the Negroes. [White] Americans become greatly incensed at any public expression of intimacy between white and black men.23

Despite efforts of the American Army to export Jim Crow and race prejudice, African American soldiers in France were generally welcomed by host communities, which treated them as “white men with black skin.” The exposure of several hundred thousand Blacks to different white attitudes portended a change in the Black soldiers’ expectations of white America. The decision by the French government to decorate three African American regiments for bravery raised fears that Black soldiers would demand the freedom, equality, and recognition long associated with battlefield heroism.24

At the hub of old-stock America’s race anxiety was the clash between the masculine ideal of the citizen-soldier and the World War I reality of a culturally plural, polyglot army that included Black men considered to be inferior and immigrant men considered to be un-American. According to the American political tradition, martial sacrifice was the sine qua non of fearless, disinterested, and virtuous manly citizenship. In prerevolutionary America, martial sacrifice was so central to notions of manly virtue that it established a right to freedom: thus in some colonies, slaves who took prisoners in battle were rewarded with emancipation. Political education had been preoccupied with this ethic during the nineteenth century; schoolbooks treated American history as a sequence of military heroics.25 Public policy affirmed this ethic after the Civil

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21 Walter Wilson, "Old Jim Crow in Uniform—Part II," Crisis, March 1939, p. 73; Du Bois, "An Essay toward a History," pp. 63–87; Nalty, Strength for the Fight, pp. 108–109. The decision not to train Black combat troops before sending them to Europe—and the decision to assign most Blacks to labor battalions—was intended to mollify white Americans who worried that combat-ready Blacks would bring disorder to their communities. The Literary Digest reported on April 21, 1917, that “Among southern Congressmen . . . we find opposition to universal service on the ground that it would be inadvisable to give thousands of Negroes training in the use of arms.” See also, "The Houston Mutiny," Outlook, September 5, 1917; "The Houston Horror," Crisis, February 1918, pp. 187–188; "Where to Encamp the Negro Troops," Literary Digest, September 29, 1917, pp. 14–15; Mary White Ovington, The Walls Came Tumbling Down (New York, 1947), pp. 134–139.
22 Wilson, "Old Jim Crow in Uniform—Part II.
War, when the pension system for Union Army veterans tied America's first experiment with social provision to military service for the republic. Having sacrificed life, limb, and lungs in the trenches of Europe, would Black and immigrant veterans now assert equality?

The specter of feeble-minded troops and "rapist divisions" combined with the fear of immigrant radicalism to ensure that immigrant and Black men could not easily claim citizen equality after the war. Notwithstanding the performance of Black soldiers and the eager response of resident aliens to America's call to arms, homecoming Black and white ethnic veterans encountered an acrimonious race politics. For race essentialists, the army test data made the idea of equality laughable ("it is as absurd as it would be to insist that every laborer should receive a graduate fellowship") and spurred political eugenics through immigration restriction, forced sterilization, a carefully controlled franchise, and lynching. For many sectors of the Anglo American public, the enlistment records sharpened old prejudices and kindled new ones, not only in the South, where white supremacy ruled, but also in the North, where hundreds of thousands of Blacks had migrated by 1920 and where the majority of new immigrants had settled. Racism, monoculturalism, xenophobia, and violence greeted returning new immigrant and Black soldiers: seventy-six Blacks died by lynching in 1919; the Ku Klux Klan nationalized its activities and broadened its hateful creed to include Jews and Catholics, along with Blacks; "Americanization" became the watchword for the schools, industry, and the American Legion; and race riots erupted in Chicago, Washington, and other cities.

New immigrant and African American members of the American Expeditionary Force returned to a country intent on criminalizing their leisure habits (Prohibition), expelling the least "American" among them (deportation of anarchists), bleaching their cultures (Americanization), limiting their numbers (the National Origins Quota and eugenics), and fixing them to their place through terror and intimidation. In Georgia and Mississippi, whites lynched Black soldiers for appearing in public in uniform. In industrial communities, white workers harassed Black migrants. In Chicago, white mobs rioted against the expanding Black community. In Washington, D.C., white soldiers incited a three-day riot against Blacks for their "crimes against white women" and other "outrages" (including honors received from the French government). In factories, employers such as Henry Ford marshaled immigrants into melting pots and fished them out waving flags, wearing "American" clothes, and speaking English.

The federal government, too, disarmed the martial contributions of Black soldiers, in particular. In an act emblematic of white supremacy, the U.S. Army excluded African American troops from the victory parade in Paris. The Congress later tabled a proposal for universal military service, partly in deference to southern objections to the idea of a standing army that included armed or combat-trained Black troops. Beginning in 1919, the War Department severely curtailed new African American enlistments in the army. Thereafter, very few Black men could achieve the full manly citizenship associated with military service: by the end of the 1930s, Blacks accounted for less than 2 percent of the combined strength of the army and the National Guard.

In addition, the federal government was slow and stingy in...
awarding social benefits to veterans. During the nineteenth century, government had steadily developed rewards for veterans of wars. Veterans of the Revolutionary War and of the War of 1812 received land grants and cash bonuses. Needy veterans received pensions. During the 1830s, all veterans and their widows became categorically eligible for pensions. Union Army veterans enjoyed preference in the Homestead Act, received free prosthetics and incidental medical care at thirteen branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, experienced preference in federal employment; and collected pensions for the disabled and their dependents until 1890, when pensions were offered to aging and unemployable veterans, as well. Veterans of the Indian Wars and the Spanish American War and their dependents received similar compensation. Veterans of the first twentieth-century war, by contrast, had to engage in considerable political combat to indemnify their sacrifices and secure rewards for service. Reluctant to extend new benefits to World War I veterans qua veterans, the government’s policy towards World War I veterans created distinctions among soldiers—distinctions based in part on the nature of the soldier’s sacrifice, but also, in practice, on inequalities in political status and social relations.

To be sure, the federal government promised treatment and compensation to war-injured or war-disabled soldiers, but these benefits were not always adequate or reliable. Also, when the United States entered the war, Congress offered contributory life insurance to veterans and guaranteed hospitalization, vocational rehabilitation, and pension benefits to service-disabled soldiers. In a reaction against the corruption of the Civil War pension system by patronage politics, World War I veterans’ policy was both more strictly and more bureaucratically administered than its predecessors, which meant that legitimate benefits could be difficult to collect. The army medical records needed to prove injury or disability, for example, were typically sketchy and incomplete. Furthermore, "service-disability" was narrowly construed, so that veterans who had been exposed to diseases, trauma, or gasses during the war but whose illnesses did not develop until afterward, were not extended medical benefits until the mid-1920s. Even disabled veterans who met the policy’s criteria often found medical services difficult to obtain, for nonmilitary public hospital facilities were scarce generally and, in the South, Jim Crow hospital policies were enforced. Meanwhile, the ‘broadly accessible veterans’ pension system of the late nineteenth century was now directed only at the service-disabled.

Equally important, World War I veterans’ policy did not provide readjustment programs and benefits akin to the land grants and public jobs offered to nineteenth-century veterans. Readjustment bonuses to compensate veterans for enduring the risks of war and for missing out on wartime prosperity were refused by Congressional majorities. Readjustment training was likewise refused for the non-service-disabled. Despite the salience of education policy on the national agenda—as a result of the educational deficit revealed by the draft—no education or training provisions were developed for the healthy veterans. And though the service-disabled were promised vocational training, this training was channeled through business and trade schools and through colleges. Illiterate or “feeble-minded” disabled veterans who had not completed elementary school before the war—75 percent of all Black soldiers—thus were not beneficiaries of the program.

The leaner restrictions of World War I veterans’ policy owed in part to the fact that veteran’s pensions had been poisoned by the patronage politics of the Civil War pension system and in part to public resistance to the expansion of the federal role following the war, as well as to the political effects of later scandals in the Veterans Bureau under Warren Harding. But the relative stringiness

of the federal response to World War I veterans also reflected a decline of the martial ethic: the citizen-soldier was no longer presumed to be morally worthy. The decline of the martial ethic coincided with the rise of a culturally heterogeneous army, held in suspicion because of a diversity that had been "scientifically" correlated with a lower caliber of soldier. The outbreak of virulent racism, anti-radicalism, and jingoism in 1919 focused racial and cultural suspicions and gelled the view that not all soldiers were deserving veterans. Anglo American veterans' groups (the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars) affirmed the new cultural and racial ratcheting of martial citizenship in their anti-alien campaigns and hyperpatriotic crusades.

While many returning soldiers were greeted with parades, confetti, training, jobs, hospitalization, and pensions, many others were not. World War I veterans were admonished that patriotic virtue required selfless sacrifice, which meant risks without renumeration. Under pressure from the American Legion and VFW, Congress finally granted general bonus certificates to veterans in 1925, but the certificates could not be redeemed until 1945. Congress also extended veterans a preference in federal employment—a preference not easily put to use by poorly educated new immigrant veterans and not available at all to Black veterans in a segregated government. For the most part, then, able-bodied veterans were denied the rewards extended in one form or another to their predecessors. Yet, into the 1930s, they were denounced as "malingers," as "mercenaries of patriotism," and as a menace to citizenship.

The war did not inspire national interest in supporting and uplifting American manhood. In fact, it intensified suspicion of diversely situated men and reinforced opposition to social provision for "unfit" men. As American Federation of Labor chief Samuel Gompers explained before the war, social provision for men would reward "the weak, the defective, the ineffective, the ignorant, and the incorrigible"; it would validate "servile," "slavish," debased manhood by servicing it. This view resounded in many quarters after the war, producing calls for "the eventual elimination of the unfit stock which produced the unfit individual," as well as efforts to spread the ethic of manly independence and paternal responsibility.

Meanwhile, the domestic politics of the draft, of industrial mobilization, and of women's war effort actually strengthened materialist claims for social policies aimed at mothers and children, to whom the ethic of independence did not apply. Defining maternal dependency—on unfit, absent, or unassimilated men—as a problem of long-term social and political significance, materialists appealed to the state to mediate women's dependency. And, taking the position that the mental and physical deficiencies revealed by the draft were social rather than biological, materialist reformers pushed the goal of creating fit citizens through the uplift of mothers to the top of the reform agenda.

Joined by the National Conference on Child Labor, the National Conference on Social Work, the League of Women Voters, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Consumers' League, settlements, and local child welfare agencies, materialist leaders in government extracted from the army's draft experience evidence for more generous and more systematic social investment in motherhood and child health. Where hereditary scientists read the army data as confirming scientific racial typologies, progressive materialists read it as proof of the social and human costs of ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, and cultural isolation. Deciding "that something like half the unfitness was of a character that could have been prevented by treatment or training during youth," materialists sought to develop preventive policies.

While much of Anglo America pursued a punitive monoculturalism during the years following World War I, progressive Anglo
American maternalists worked to defend the culture by assimilating women and children within it. Reprising their prewar strategies—rooted in settlements, social work, and schools—for moral, physical, and mental uplift through social interaction and cultural remediation, maternalists called for government policies linking mother and state in the reproduction of American democracy.41

MATERNALIST REFORM AND THE WELFARE STATE

Springing from the maternalists' gender ideology, welfare politics and policy during the 1920s forwarded cultural reform. Whereas the assimilationist impulse propelled maternalist efforts throughout the Progressive Era, World War I drove assimilation to the core of maternalist efforts and raised those efforts to the arena of social policy.42 The wartime draft and wartime nationalism stoked concerns about the relationship of new immigrants and African Americans to the political community. The universal manhood draft carried with it the implication of manhood equality and thus threatened to unravel the racial organization of American society. Meanwhile, the draft screening scheme seemed to confirm the popular assumption that the quality of manhood varied by race and culture, vindicating prewar calls either to manage diversity or to expunge it.

Red-baiting, alien-baiting, and white supremacist campaigns waged on during the 1920s, alongside programs to compel Americanism among immigrants in industry. In women's sphere of social policy and the state, however, maternalists domesticated Americanization and worked to induce cultural conformity among mothers and children through education and conditional social benefits. Holding that “Americanization comes from within,” maternalists counseled that assimilation could best be achieved by example and interaction.43 They implemented this strategy in policies that piggybacked cultural reform onto social and educational provision.

As Frances Kellor, a settlement veteran and vice-chair of the Committee for Immigrants and of the National Americanization Committee, explained, the race problem was a problem of social adjustment, not evidence of immigrants' inability to conform: “Americans have perhaps too readily assumed that all immigrants can be assimilated with equal ease. We now realize . . . that some races, unfamiliar with our language, form of government, industrial organization, financial institutions, and standards of living require much more aggressive efforts toward assimilation.”44 Reformers like Kellor drew from wartime experience the lesson that “the real problem of reconstruction was not in industrial and financial fields, which had greatly prospered and expanded during the war; but . . . in the field of race relations which had greatly suffered during the war.”45 Others identified the home as a place for social adjustment and improved race relations. Edith Terry Bremer of the YWCA's International Institutes reasoned that “to men it may appear that America's great concern is over the immigrants who could be citizens and soldiers . . . (But) to America the 'immigration problem' is a great 'problem' of homes. . . . When it comes to homes, women and not men become the important factors.”46

Maternalists answered wartime cultural anxieties with policies aimed at bringing immigrant mothers into conformity with Anglo American standards of childrearing. Schooled in a tradition that tied cultural uplift to social reform, armed with new political weapons at the ballot box and in government, and left alone in women's sphere of public policy, progressive maternalists pursued a program of social protection—income subsidies, health, education, and schooling—that promised to safeguard society against unmediated diversity while protecting women and families against the degradations of poverty. The reformers' premise was that racial and cultural differences could be transcended and that good citizens could thereby be made. Recognizing “the inviolability of the relation of mother and child, [the state's] stake in the preservation of the home, and the unique social value of the service rendered by mothers,” maternalists monitored mothers' pension programs, won a  

federal maternity and infancy policy, and promoted school reform to uplift home life and train citizens, all to enhance democracy's future.47

The relationship between women and the state charted by maternalist reform in the second and third decades of the century yielded women's distinctive position in the modern American welfare state. Maternalists won affirmation of their assumptions and innovations during the New Deal, when mothers' pensions were grafted onto the work-based welfare state. The reformers extended their innovations into the New Deal when they carved out space in employment programs and labor policy to instill domesticity among mothers.

Maternalist social welfare initiatives between the wars tackled problems of poverty by focussing on dependent motherhood and sought solutions to dilemmas of cultural and racial diversity by regulating mothers. Although these initiatives produced social supports and cultural tools that benefited some women, the interweaving of culture, race, and gender during the formation of the welfare state hindered the development of social rights for women. Measuring woman's welfare against the quality of her motherhood, maternalist initiatives stopped short of valuing motherhood or the terms of mothers themselves. Measuring a mothers' quality by her proximity to an Anglo American, middle-class norm, maternalist policies bred a sticky racial liberalism that conditioned equality on similarity and hardened American ambivalence toward the possibility of difference among equals.


WAGES FOR MOTHERHOOD

 Mothers' Pensions and Cultural Reform

We are fighting to make the world safe for democracy; we must also fight to make our children fit to perpetuate this democracy.

—Dr. S. Josephine Baker, 1918

The wartime preoccupation with unassimilated new immigrants reinforced the belief that the social consequences of poverty were as much a product of home life as of economic condition. The seat of maternalist policy activism, the U.S. Children's Bureau took the lead in developing measures that would simultaneously answer the cultural anxieties of society and mute the economic hardship of needy families. The bureau's researchers repeated the method of army draft analysts, interpreting problems of infant mortality, delinquency, and truancy in terms of the racial and cultural composition of the communities studied. Meanwhile, studies by maternalist scholar-activists like Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott further associated these social problems with the structure of families and the quality of family habits, paying special attention to mothers' ability to fulfill family responsibilities.1 The fruits of maternalist social policy research were policies designed to improve motherhood through cultural reform. The beneficiary of these policies was the child, the conduit her mother, the social goal the fully Americanized citizen.

Child-centered maternal reform provided a principle for mothers' pensions. Like other maternalist policies, the pension program articulated the social and political stakes of woman's proper performance of her gender role by offering public support to needy