

BOOK REVIEW

WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN WELFARE TRAP

BY CATHERINE PELISSIER KINGFISHER

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, x and 201pp., including appendices & bibliography. Price \$34.95 including GST (softcover).

This book explores the social construction of meaning and identity through the roles people find themselves playing in life. In particular, the author studies the social construction of the meaning of welfare recipient. The book is of particular interest to New Zealand as it struggles with its ongoing socio-political-economic realignment. As New Zealand has restructured its economy towards the free market model, it has concurrently redefined its social services network. Social benefits have become viewed more as a burden charitably borne by the better off rather than as a fundamental social obligation. This reconceptualisation is in line with the overall focus on market exchange and contract, and, as this book vividly illustrates, has substantial implications for New Zealand's fundamental ethos of care and equal respect between persons regardless of economic or cultural background.¹

Kingfisher's account of women's experiences in the American welfare system and of the women's construction of the meaning of those experiences illustrates, as she points out, the genius of the American system in dividing and setting against each other those at the lower ends of the socio-economic scale. This division and opposition works to ensure the continued peaceful dominance of those at the higher end of that scale. The author studies two groups of women, those receiving "welfare" and those dispensing it. She discovers that the two groups of women have nearly identical educational, social, and working backgrounds. Both groups perceive themselves as trapped by the welfare system yet each group perceives the other as personal adversaries and as a major cause of their currently unsatisfactory situation in life.

In the recipient group, Kingfisher finds that the women are trapped by a lack of support from their children's father and by the inadequacies of bridging benefits. Benefits are low, to encourage "beneficiaries" to enter

¹ See Kelsey, J. *The New Zealand experiment: A World Model for Structural Adjustment?* (1995) 19-21.

the work force and become “self-sufficient.” The strategy is to assure a level of discomfort that will prompt the women to accept the low rates of pay currently offered by the jobs for which they are qualified. This discomfort is not only fiscal, but enhanced by the social stigma attached to being a “beneficiary.” Yet, the paid employment within this group’s grasp are low-waged jobs with minimal, if any, benefits. Further, the bridging benefits — i.e. the benefits intended to ease the transition of low income people into the paid work force — are set at such a low level that solo women with children cannot afford adequate childcare, transport, medical care and housing on the wages they are able to earn in the private sector. Thus, they find themselves falling behind on bills and forced *out* of work in order to adequately provide for their children. Other primary reasons for leaving were worries which the mothers had as to the safety of children entrusted to the cheapest of childcare and as to their and their children’s healthcare (worries which Kingfisher finds substantiated by the facts). Kingfisher found that the women in the recipient group tended to hold their bureaucratic case workers as responsible for, or even as authors of, these systemic shortfalls, and as those who could, if only willing, provide adequate levels of assistance.

The structural situation, combined with the American social ethos that people on welfare are there because of personal inadequacies, is tremendously destructive to these women’s sense of self.² Kingfisher explores how the women fight back and attempt to construct identities that reaffirm their status as valuable human beings. However, Kingfisher discovered that in so doing the women often unwittingly reaffirm the hegemony that disvalues their lives and contributions in the first place. Rarely do the women focus on the overall social structure that depends on a pool of reserve labour, ready to toil for any wage. Rather, they accept the negative social construction of many beneficiaries as lazy, dishonest, and unmotivated, but explain how they are different. According to Kingfisher, in so differentiating themselves from the stereotype, they reinforce it, and reinforce the focus of blame for poverty on the individual

² Kingfisher also briefly considers the negative social construction of these female welfare recipients in concurrence with the feminisation of poverty. A solo father raising five children with the aid of a socially provided benefit is viewed with admiration and as entitled to help with his difficult situation. A solo mother in the same situation is viewed as morally unsavory and lazy. Further, the solo father has a much higher chance of landing a job with a living wage — “men’s work” — than does the solo mother, who will likely be relegated to much lower paying “women’s work.” These factors, combined with the relative rarity of men assuming solo childrearing responsibilities, assure that the beneficiary roles are heavily feminised.

rather than on the social system which requires poor people. The women also accept the ideology of education as the way out, again acknowledging the legitimacy of social blame, focusing on their perceived personal inadequacies and away from the social structure. Kingfisher also found that while some beneficiaries rationalise episodic dishonesty with the welfare system as forced upon them by the very irrational counterincentives built into it, others prove their otherness from the dishonest stereotype by super rule-adherence and by reporting any irregularities in the situations of their beneficiary peers. All women in the beneficiary group engaged in some sort of positive counter construction of their individual social identities, but most also participated in the social construction of a negative identity for beneficiaries as a group.

Interestingly, Kingfisher's study found that the women functioning as front office bureaucrats in the benefits office were nearly identical in social (i.e. class) background, education attainment, and level of economic precariousness to the beneficiaries. Both groups of women came from primarily working-class backgrounds, often with some postsecondary education and with similar employment histories — that is, with employment histories in primarily low paid "women's work." Kingfisher found three things differentiating the two groups. The bureaucratic group had not, as a rule, been left with sole responsibility for the care of children. The bureaucratic group had obtained government employment with the attendant socially responsible level of benefits and wages. And, perhaps due to their relative economic fortune, the bureaucratic group had no history of resorting to employment in extralegal jobs. Nonetheless, the bureaucratic women also felt trapped by the welfare system. Kingfisher found that this group of women had admittedly unrealistic case loads, no workplace dignity or respect, and high levels of stress-related illnesses. In so many words, they reported themselves to be miserable. Nonetheless, economic fear and the realisation that only their current jobs³ separated them from their "clients" kept the women working in a system they resented deeply. While there were differing views of how to cope with the job, there were no illusions voiced as to the women's freedom to choose another. The other jobs for which they were qualified, and which many had held prior to working for the state, paid much less with few if any benefits. Opting out of the bureaucracy would mean accepting a palpable risk of becoming a beneficiary.

The front office bureaucrats also engaged in the social construction of stereotypes of beneficiaries, as either deserving (not to blame for their

³ See the discussion of the feminisation of poverty, *supra* note 1.

situation) or undeserving (at fault for their economic straits). Kingfisher notes that the main difference in the perceptions of the two groups is that, while the bureaucrats felt a sense of commonality with the “deserving” beneficiaries, recognising their similarities in situation and powerlessness, the beneficiaries did not perceive any common interest with the bureaucrats. Rather, they often considered the bureaucrats as their oppressors, not as co-oppressed. Likewise, even while recognizing a commonality of interest and situation, the front-line bureaucrats, each personally responsible for deciding the eligibility of large numbers of beneficiaries to various social programs, perceived the beneficiaries as taking money from or deceiving (as the case may be) the bureaucrats in their personal capacity. Thus the bureaucrats often *did* view and treat the beneficiaries as adversaries to be managed and controlled. Ultimately both groups worked to fulfill the cynical adage that the genius of the American system is dividing the oppressed against themselves.

Kingfisher’s goal is explicit and modest: to record and analyse the women’s social construction of themselves and their group, and of the “opposing” group and individuals. She skillfully attains this goal. She cheers when that construction is counterhegemonic and is concerned when the construction reinforces the reigning hegemony. Signs of recognized commonality of interests of the two groups against the market patriarchy are also greeted with satisfaction and hope.

What Kingfisher does not do is explain why the social meaning constructed by the participants in the welfare state — i.e. the general negative stereotype with the self-differentiation or deserving client differentiation — is incorrect. She does not make the case for the relative “betterness” of her preferred counterhegemonic construction. The superiority of welfare as fundamental right rather than as charity is broadly assumed, not proven. In a sense, the book is aimed at those already opposed to the conception of welfare as charity, and, perhaps, at facilitating the recognition of “comembership” between women, especially between economically vulnerable women with little education. However, *any* woman reading the book would in all honesty realise that there, but for a few lucky accidents of fate, goes she. And, more pointedly, there, but for sustained luck, goes she at some point in the future. Nonetheless, Kingfisher’s excellent book would have been even more powerful if she had taken the time to expand on what she asserts (albeit with appropriate references) as accepted givens: the artificially low pay status of most jobs classified as “women’s” work; the informal but very effective barriers to women’s access to better paying “men’s” work; the inequity of stigmatizing women who need financial assistance to care for their children while leaving unscathed the father who has abdicated his equal share of responsibility;

the market model's requirement of an impoverished class desperate to perform low wage labour; the intentional insufficiency of benefits; and the profound economic vulnerability of any mother regardless of employment status or education, though doubly profound for those with less education. Many of these points come across anecdotally; but to reach the other side — those who accept the construction of welfare as charity to market failures, with the attendant value judgments on people as the authors of their own poverty — a more detailed and rigorous exposition would be required.

In New Zealand, one need not wonder about the fluidity of the socially constructed reality of recipients of certain types of state aid or about the necessity of an impoverished class for a successful "market" economy. New Zealanders have seen the state benefits of those lower on the socio-economic scale cut to "encourage" them to accept the lower-waged jobs made possible through the Employments Contracts Act. From a society where comembership was recognized by law, New Zealand has gone to a system of division of the lower paid set against themselves. Out with compulsory unions and cooperation; in with cut-throat competition between the labourers. New Zealand society has seen its most vulnerable members, the Maori and Pacific Islanders, bear the brunt of the attendant restructuring towards "efficiency."⁴ At the same time, the idea that the victims of this restructuring are at fault and are social parasites has gained currency. That is, the social construction of lower income state beneficiaries has gone from less fortunate comember to market outsider grudgingly given charity. The many state benefits received by the "employed" are viewed as the rights of comembers, but, as in America, the "unemployed" have been evicted from the social club. These developments can only exacerbate the growing ethno-economic division in New Zealand, the same division which New Zealanders rightly decry in America.⁵

⁴ See Kelsey, J, *supra* note 1 at 262 (Maori unemployment rates rose from 10.8% in 1987 to 25.8% in 1992 and remained at 16.1 % in 1995; Pacific Islander unemployment rates went from 6.1% to 28.8% and remained at 17% for the same time frame; while the Pakeha unemployment rate went from 3.1% to 8.1% and dropped to 4.4% during the same periods).

⁵ Compare "Belated but Welcome" *New Zealand Herald*, January 16, 1997, A10 (editorial welcoming the belated award of Congressional Medals of honour to 7 African-Americans and decrying the racial socio-economic disparities in America) with articles revealing similar problems in New Zealand social background. See, e.g., "Racial problems loom" *New Zealand Herald*, Jan 17, 1997 A3 (wide discrepancies between the economic situations of Pakeha and Maori detailed in briefing report to the Minister of Maori Development) "Maori VC case angers MP" *New Zealand Herald*, January 20 1997, A1 (alleging racism in the failure to award a Victoria Cross to a Maori World War II hero).

Kingfisher's book is thus instructive to New Zealand as to the ultimate alienation to which denial of social comembership leads. Small wonder that there is has been a rise in violent, senseless crime coincidentally paralleling the change in New Zealand's construction of its social reality — its rejection of a previously recognized commonality of interests and identities.⁶ Readers of Kingfisher's book should ask themselves if the American construction of social reality against which the women and children in her study struggle is the social reality they want to construct for New Zealand. If they do so, and are given pause, the book will have been a great success.

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⁶ Numbers of reported crimes of violence remained at a relatively stable for a five year period, ranging both up and down from 27, 479 crimes of violence reported in 1988 to 29, 899 crimes of violence reported in 1992. Statistics New Zealand, *New Zealand Now, Crime Tables*, (1996) 10. In 1991, welfare benefits were slashed and the social construction of those on welfare was changed from less fortunate comember to social parasite. Russell, M *New Zealand from Fortress to Free Market: REVOLUTION* (1996) 219-28; Kelsey J, supra note 1 at 212-14. One must wonder if it is only coincidentally that from 1992 to 1995 numbers of reported violent crime rates skyrocketed, nearly doubling from the 29,899 violent crimes reported in 1992 to 45,454 crimes of violence reported in 1995. Crimes Tables, supra 10. The rate of offenses of disorder also rose 60% between 1992 and 1995 after a period of relative stability. Statistics New Zealand, *New Zealand Now, Crime* (1996) 13. The statistics reveal sharp rises of many other catagories of crime during this period of benefit cutting and social redefinition.

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