

Sebastian Sarasa

**Katherine S. Newman and Elisabeth S. Jacobs,
Who Cares? Public Ambivalence and Government
Activism from the New Deal to the Second Gilded
Age. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,
2010, 248 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/33654)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, novembre-dicembre 2010

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Katherine S. Newman and Elisabeth S. Jacobs, *Who Cares? Public Ambivalence and Government Activism from the New Deal to the Second Gilded Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, 248 pp.

doi: 10.2383/33654

Who cares? is an analysis of three historic changes in twentieth-century US social policy: Franklin Delano Roosevelt's *New Deal*, Lyndon B. Johnson's *Great Society* and Ronald Reagan's policies that initiated a long period of cutbacks. The book describes how political leaders negotiated with ordinary citizens; and it confronts the sector of US liberal public opinion that seeks a return to a "common good" perspective in social policy and wishes "to *catalyze* or *recapture* popular sentiment in the 'brother's keeper' direction when it was in danger of listing the opposite way" as it is supposed to happen during the New Deal and Great Society eras. What most deserves the reader's attention is Newman and Jacobs's thesis that those presidents acted as "political leaders [who] often moved boldly into a policy vacuum or forged on against growing antagonism" [p. 5]. As the authors assert in their introduction, the main thesis defended in this book is that "the essence of leadership is not registering the popular will and transforming it into policy but setting a course and sticking to one's guns in the face of growing resistance. This is the real story of the New Deal, The Great Society, and the conservative triumph in the age of inequality."

Chapter 1 is about the New Deal reform. The Great Depression forged the New Deal conducted by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). He had to deal with public opinion that was strongly against *doles* and unenthusiastic about the federal programs of public works to help the unemployed. The unemployment rate had risen from 3.2% in 1929 to 24.9% by 1933, when the government approved the Federal Emergency Relief Act to develop public works during two years. Leftists complained about the program's tepidity, as they judged it to be, and asked for larger and more radical measures. However, conservatives criticized what they considered as overspending on relief, and some employers rejected the high wages the government paid the relieved workers as a distortion of natural market rates. But what was the opinion of ordinary Americans? Were they massively in favour of Roosevelt's initiative? The answer is no. The majority thought the government should reduce its spending on relief, as Newman and Jacobs show, using more rigorous modern statistical tools. In fact, workers benefiting from the public works program were viewed by most people as second-class citizens, deserving neither the right to strike nor the right to belong to a union.

The other great step towards a modern welfare state made by FDR's administration, the retirement system, gained wide popular support; but it was still a long way from resembling the universal retirement systems already implemented in some European countries that the Government explicitly rejected. The US retirement system focused on the pension eligibility of only *deserving* retired workers, thus denying social protection to most women, Afro-Americans and immigrants who had not acquired citizenship.

FDR therefore implemented the New Deal only after negotiating with interest groups and social movements and was far from being supported by popular benevolence. He finally prevailed over his critics, although he had to compromise with the opposition over the definition of the common good, effectively excluding some groups from social protection.

Chapter 2 is about the War on Poverty programs conducted by Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) and by Richard Nixon. The authors assert the important contribution Nixon's Republican administration made. Social policy spending under Nixon rose at a higher annual rate than under Kennedy and Johnson's administrations, and Nixon's proposed Family Assistance Plan, although unsuccessful in receiving the approval of Congress, "was closer to a Nordic-style income subsidy program than anything we have seen since" [p. 57]. This proposal was not a government response to any upsurge of popular sentiments of solidarity, but rather an effort to incorporate working poor white citizens into the welfare benefits scheme in order to reduce the reluctance of taxpayers towards welfare programs focused mainly on Afro-Americans.

None of the Great Society programs (War on Poverty, Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start) launched by LBJ were the result of any huge public push for social reform. The most popular programs, health assistance for the aged and investment in child education, garnered only mild support. Furthermore, public opinion in favour of federal health care began to lose ground from the moment LBJ announced his project. And the antipoverty programs received less than tenuous support; opinion polls estimated that only 8% of the people thought that antipoverty programs were a public policy priority in the mid-1960s. Even such modest support for a redistributive policy dropped over time. In sum, the measures adopted by Johnson and Nixon were not so much about chasing votes, but rather owed their origins to the efforts of social reformers and elite policymakers. Social policies were designed and implemented as long as the elite policymakers rose to the challenges of poverty in an affluent society, and were not enthusiastically endorsed by public opinion.

Redistributive policies were not fully supported by ordinary citizens. However, were citizens enthusiastic about welfare state retrenchment? When the conservative leaders got the federal government determined to roll back the liberal legacy, how supported were they by public opinion? In chapter 3 Newman and Jacobs tackle this issue and once more they show that social policy reforms were implemented with limited support from citizens.

The authors, based on different historians' work, assert that the effects of the OPEC crisis on American families exacerbated taxpayers' reluctance to fund, and fuelled the arguments of the rich and the business community against welfare. They adopt the thesis of authors such as Katz [1989] that the conservative revolution was propelled by think tanks, foundations and politicians from both parties, Republican and Democrat, and some mass media who disseminated a "growing body of intellectual justification for both a reduction of domestic social spending and the alteration of the tax system to the distribution advantage of those in the highest income brackets." Those public opinion creators constructed the 'perception' of a generalized public opinion against welfare. In fact, "public opinion did not drive welfare reform efforts. Rather, reform drove public opinion" at a time when Democratic Party allegiances were being eroded because of the

racial tensions that split the coalition between minorities and the working class. Hence, the economic and social instability of the 1970s onwards encouraged hostility between taxpaying constituents (mainly white southerners and suburbanites) and non-taxpaying constituents (inner-city blacks). Therefore, the Gilded Age, as Newman and Jacobs call the last quarter of twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, has been characterized by a dramatic increase in inequality.

US public opinion has not become more tolerant of inequality than it was before, however. When Saphiro & Young [1989] published a state of the art report about public opinion and the welfare state, they concluded that, though less than in other European nations, US public opinion had remained stable in its support for social welfare policies from the 1970s to the early 1980s even during the Reagan administration's cutbacks. More recent research has shown that social policies have been solidly supported by mass opinion in spite of the hostile climate against welfare state at the end of the Twentieth and beginning of the Twentyfirst centuries [Brooks and Manza 2007]. Newman and Jacobs cite other evidence to show how "American tolerance for economic inequality has actually *decreased* across time, not increased" [p. 126] and even younger cohorts are nowadays less tolerant of inequality than their grandparents. And attitudes towards poverty prevention and wealth redistribution have remained relatively constant over time. Hence, the conservative revolution cannot be explained by any radical change in the values and moral norms of ordinary Americans, but rather by the active role of various leaders, elites and other agents involved in the construction of public opinion. Such agents have been successful in their confrontation with the nowadays weaker elites taking up a stance against poverty and inequality.

In Chapter 4 Newman and Jacobs provide a theoretical context for their arguments with reference to the classical confrontation between the Aristotelian and Platonic views on political decisions. Should policy-makers follow the natural wisdom of crowds? Or is policy-making the (exclusive) prerogative of enlightened elites? The authors' answer is that "politicians play a circular game of follow-the-leader, alternating between following popular opinion and leading in new directions." Their analysis of three eras of reform shows that the American public has maintained a core of stable preferences for nearly three-quarters of a century, but that such preferences do not favour the "brother's keeper" formula; American public opinion has been ambivalent about public support for the poor, and programs oriented towards self-help have had greater public support than subsidies. All three eras share a common motivating force for change: the willingness of elites to go beyond the limits of what the public opinion polls indicated Americans were prepared to accept.

Newman and Jacobs conclude with a short piece of advice to President Obama: "To move quickly and decisively to enact his most ambitious plans as early in his tenure as possible."

References

Brooks, C., and Manza, J.

2007 *Why Welfare State Persists? The Importance of Public Opinion in Democracies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Katz, M.B.

1989 *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*. New York: Pantheon.

Shapiro, R.Y. and Young, J.T.

1989 "Public Opinion and the Welfare State: The United States in Comparative Perspective." *Political Science Quarterly* 104: 59-89.

Sebastian Sarasa

University Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain