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The Road to Free-Market Family Policy

Abstract: This essay investigates and ultimately rejects the claim that the United States' comparatively heavily reliance on markets over government to provide the resources that families need is a natural outgrowth of the country's longstanding veneration of capitalism. In tracing the nation's economic ideology over time, it demonstrates that, at least until the end of the twentieth century, the constant in US history has not been the expectation of a free-market economy, but rather a commitment to ensuring that the economy, however structured, will enable families to thrive. The dramatic recent shift in economic ideology, when the prevailing commitment to government regulation was superseded by a commitment to free markets, this essay shows, was neither inevitable nor the spontaneous evolution of longstanding free-market ideology. To the contrary, that shift was grounded on the empirically unfounded claim that government support undermined the wellbeing of families. That claim was at least in part developed and popularized by a network of institutions funded by wealthy libertarians seeking to promote an anti-government agenda, and which used racist tropes to increase the resonance of its anti-government message.

Keywords: TANF, families, free market, welfare state, family policy, neoliberalism, capitalism

I. Introduction

In the last few decades, scholars have demonstrated that the United States is an outlier when it comes to how families are expected to gain the resources they need to support their members' wellbeing (Esping-Andersen 1990; Esping-Andersen 2009; Buhr and Stoy 2015). In contrast to other wealthy democracies, the United States relies far more on the market and far less on government to ensure that families get the conditions, goods, and services their members need to thrive. For example, the United States remains the only wealthy country—and one of only eight countries worldwide—that doesn't provide paid parental leave to new parents (WORLD Policy Analysis Center 2020). It is also one of the few that does not provide a regular child-benefit check to parents to help defray the significant costs of raising children (Shaefer, et al. 2018). And the universal daycare and prekindergarten that so many wealthy democracies have established to ensure that young children have access to high-quality care? Outside of a few states with universal pre-K (Rock 2019), and the four in ten children from low-income families who manage to get places in the Head Start program (Covert 2013), parents must pay for these services out of their own pockets. US parents also don't have the laws that let them limit their work hours or give them rights to paid vacation or part-time

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work that parents in many other countries have (OECD 2016). Parents instead are supposed to negotiate all these things privately.

The cause of the US policy preference for markets over government has long been a matter of dispute by scholars. To explain America's exceptionalism on this issue, some have pointed to structural features of the American system of government (Harris, Owen, and Gould 2012; Robertson 1989; Skocpol 1995; Tani 2016; Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol 1988; Teles 2013), others have focused on particular events in the nation's history (Amenta 1998; Hacker 2002; Schickler & Caughey 2011), and still others have targeted America's unique history of racism (Brown 2018; Davies and Derthick 1997; Katznelson 2013; Quadagno 1994; Williams 2003). Another group, however, consisting of academics (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001, 239, 242; Dobbin 1994; Esping-Andersen 1990, 15-16, 30; Lipset and Marks 2000), and more often politicians and public intellectuals,[1] suggest that the US reliance on markets and paid work over government derives from the country's unique, longstanding economic ideology supporting free enterprise, a claim I will call the "market-veneration hypothesis."

This essay considers the plausibility of the market-veneration hypothesis as an explanation for the current paucity of US government support for families.[2] More specifically, it investigates the extent to which Americans' economic ideology has, during the course of the nation's history, been rooted in the expectation that families will and should rely on the market alone to meet their members' needs, as the market-veneration hypothesis suggests. No scholar has yet traced the extent to which this expectation has manifested over the course of the nation's history. With that said, several eminent scholars have detailed Americans' economic ideology vis-à-vis market and government in more limited eras (e.g., Cott 1977; Kessler-Harris 2001, 2003; Ryan 1981; Sellers 1991; Stanley 1996). My contribution in this essay is to stitch together these historians' work into a larger picture that captures Americans' economic ideology over time in order to assess the validity of the market-veneration hypothesis. An essay like this one, which seeks to trace economic ideology over the course of two and a half centuries, will necessarily sacrifice detail in particular eras. It is hoped that the longer-term perspective on US economic ideology that this investigation yields will compensate for the loss of granularity in specific eras.

To be clear, this essay addresses the American mythology regarding how families should get the resources they need, rather than the reality of how families actually met their needs for economic resources. This mythology is, of course, a matter of discursive fiction and therefore was and is always subject to contestation. Despite this, as I show, at particular stages of US history, certain expectations

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[1] For politicians, see, for example, Trump (2019, n.p.) ("America was founded on liberty and independence—not government coercion, domination, and control . . . . Tonight we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country!"); Pence 2010, n.p. ("To restore American exceptionalism, we must end all this Keynesian spending and get back to the practice of free market economics. . . .The free market is what made America's economy the greatest in the world, and we cannot falter in our willingness to defend it."), and Cruz (2013, n.p.) ("Far better that we get back to our founding principles . . . –a robust, free enterprise system that encourages small businesses to grow and to prosper, that encourages people . . . to work hard and get a promotion and climb that ladder, to pay their own rent, to pay for their own food for their kids, to work and to advance."). For public intellectuals, see, for example, West (2010, n.p.) (critical founding principle of the US "is market freedom. With some exceptions, everyone must be free to sell anything to anyone at any time or place at any mutually agreeable price. Government must define and enforce contracts."), and Ponnuru and Lowry (2010, n.p.) ("Lincoln captured the genius of American life when he said, 'The man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him.' That sentiment is at the heart of the American economic gospel.").

[2] See also Prasad (2016, 194) (noting need for more research on theories that stress a "national culture" explanation for the US' weak welfare state).

about the ways families were expected to obtain resources supplanted others in public discussions—in the statements of politicians, legislators, and political activists, and the writings of journalists and public intellectuals—and these expectations shifted significantly over the course of US history.[3] And while this essay concerns ideas about economic provision rather than the reality, the stakes of this contest of ideas were and are real and large. After all, as President Bill Clinton put it in 1995, "America [itself] is an idea. . . . This country is an idea" (Clinton 1995, n.p.).

In brief, my tracing of this history undercuts the market-veneration hypothesis. Aside from recent decades, the expectation that families should rely on markets alone prevailed only during a limited period in the nineteenth century. Markets and wage work in that earlier era, though, were not seen as intrinsically part of the American way, as some scholars, pundits, and politicians assert today; instead, they were seen explicitly as a means to an end—the end being to ensure that families received the resources they needed to flourish. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, it became clear that markets alone were not serving this end, Americans called for the government to enforce the promise that the market would facilitate families' wellbeing. Eventually, the understanding that the government had an important role to play in ensuring that families received the economic resources they needed became integrated into the nation's social contract. Indeed, as this history reveals, the constant in US conceptions regarding how families should meet their needs for resources hasn't been an unwavering commitment to market provision, but rather a commitment to ensuring that the economy, however structured, serves the interests of American families. The dominant belief in "free-market family ideology" today, which posits that market provision alone best serves US families, accords with that tradition insofar as it claims to support families' wellbeing. Nevertheless, I show, the rise of this ideology was neither inevitable nor a spontaneous outgrowth from the nation's respect for markets. Instead, the upsurge of this belief system was at least in part the product of a well-funded, albeit thinly sourced, information campaign by a network of institutions funded by wealthy libertarians who sought to undermine belief in government.

Part II begins by tracing America's economic ideology back to the household economy in which most Americans lived before the nineteenth century. During this long era, agrarian independence rather than market provision was the expected norm. In fact, families producing the resources they needed on their own farms was seen as intrinsic to the American way. Part III turns to the first third of the nineteenth century and traces the rise of a pro-market set of ideas that historians came to call the "ideology of separate spheres." This pro-market constellation of ideas was not grounded on the notion that markets were intrinsically American, but rather on the view that market participation would guarantee families the resources to support their thriving. Part IV shows that, toward the end of the nineteenth century, reformers used the considerable gap between separate spheres ideology's promised wellbeing of families and the reality of many families' dire economic situations to call for government action to regulate markets. Ultimately, the view that government had an integral role in families' economic provisioning became a key plank in America's social contract during the twentieth century, beginning with the New Deal. Finally, Part V turns to the dramatic transformation in economic expectations that took place in the last third of the twentieth century, when free-market family ideology was used to justify the rollback of the US welfare state. This rising ideology rested on the claim that government action hindered families' wellbeing, a claim with little valid empirical support. I show that this shift in ideology was catalyzed by a network of well-funded right-wing think

[3] For other scholarship describing shifts in conceptualizations over time, see, for example, Self (2012) (tracing shifting conceptualizations of the meaning of family in late 20th century), and Rodgers (2011) (tracing shifting political ideologies at the end of the twentieth century).

tanks and foundations, whose mission was to develop and amplify anti-government arguments, and that used racist tropes to increase their resonance.

II. The Agrarian Household Economy

US families weren't always expected to fend for themselves on the market. A large reason for this is that, from the inception of the United States until well into the nineteenth century, markets and market forces played only a bit part in most Americans' lives. Until then, except in the nation's seaboard towns, the great majority of families lived on landlocked farmsteads. Because the US system of roads and highways largely wasn't built until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these Americans had little access to trade and little contact with the cash economy or the distribution web that we now call "the market" (Sellers 1991, 4–5). Unlike now, most early American farms weren't geared to selling crops or livestock to others. Instead, their purpose was simply to meet the needs of those living on the farmstead. Almost all these Americans' material goods came from their farms, supplemented by goods bartered with their neighbors. Economists call this system for obtaining necessary resources a "household economy," in contrast to the "market economy" we live in today, in which we buy most of the things we need. In the household economy, families had little need for money, except to pay comparatively low taxes and acquire luxuries like tea or coffee, which they earned by selling a few products at the village or a country store (ibid., 14–15).

This agrarian way of life was central to early Americans' economic ideology, which linked families' self-sufficiency with virtue. As Thomas Jefferson explained in his *Notes on the State of Virginia,*

> Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . . Corruption of morals [marks] those, who, not looking . . . to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, [and instead] depend . . . on [the] casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. (Jefferson 1781, 172)

The economic self-sufficiency the farmstead provided was considered uniquely American. America's founders had explicitly rejected the feudal society model, in which serfs were beholden to the aristocracy on whose land they resided. John Smith had barely landed at Jamestown after the turn of the seventeenth century when he observed that in America, "every man may be master and owner of his owne labour and land" (Smith 1616, 332). A functioning democracy, early Americans believed, required the economic independence that came with men owning their own land and therefore being able to meet their families' needs on their own, with help from neither government nor the market, so that they could be independent to vote in accord with their own conscience. The abundance and fertility of the nation's lands (seized from Native peoples) during the next two centuries reinforced the notion that this form of economic autonomy was both possible and valuable for all (Foner 1995, xii–xiii). In truth, of course, these ideals were largely confined to free white men, since white women were subject to men's authority, as were enslaved African Americans to their white owners.

Despite those who today claim that Americans always valued market work, work for pay was viewed as at odds with the economic independence that early Americans esteemed. It was also considered vaguely dishonorable and unmanly because it put the worker in a state of dependence on another. Indeed, the term "master-servant relationship" is sometimes still used in the legal arena to describe the employer-employee relationship, which harks back to early Americans associating employment with the hierarchical relations seen to exist between masters and their household servants (ibid., xii). To the extent that wage work was considered justifiable and honorable at all, it was as a stepping stone for a man to buy his own farm and therefore to attain self-sufficiency. As one commentator put it in 1793, "a prudent man[, through wage work,] in a few years may lay up enough to purchase a farm in one of the newly settled towns [and] maintain a family with ease" (Appleby 1984, 44; Merrill 1995, 322–23).

The goal of producing resources in the household economy wasn't to accumulate as much as possible, as is often the goal in a market economy. Surpluses couldn't be sold easily, and most produce from the farm wouldn't keep that long, anyway. Instead, the goal of resource production was simple subsistence, meaning freedom from want. The goods produced on the farmstead sheltered, clothed, and filled the bellies of those who lived in the household. After these needs were met, the purpose of work had been accomplished and production stopped (at least when it came to men; for women, tasked with reproduction and domestic labor, work was often ceaseless). Families' long-term economic goals were not to amass wealth in order to accumulate goods, to provide their children advantages that would help them advance, to save for retirement, or to gift an inheritance to their descendants, as they are for many of us today. Rather, the object was simply to pass land on to their children and to maintain their way of life (Sellers 1991, 15). This ideology saw little role for provision by either government or market. Instead, as historian Charles Sellers put it, "Dreading taxes and meeting most of their social needs through their own institutions of family and church, they jealously resisted any enlargement of public functions or expense as threatening patriarchal independence" (ibid., 32).

The household economy associated with this agrarian ideology produced far more economic equality among American citizens in the United States than existed in European countries of the time, as well as far more than would come to exist in our market economy—although it was equality at the level of a bare-bones material existence. Most families lived in two-room cabins with perhaps a sleeping loft, wore homespun clothes, and owned only a minimal amount of furniture and few personal belongings (Blumin 1989). Despite that, America's vast and fertile lands meant that most could eke out a relatively secure, even if very basic, economic existence. The result was that free Americans' well-being before the rise of the market economy, as measured by physical height and life expectancy, was the highest in the developed world—surpassing even that of the British aristocracy (Fogel 1986).

None of this is to say that the agrarian economic ideology remained uncontested. Along the US seaboard, the water provided access to trade that spurred development of a market economy. Here, merchants, planters, and large landowners developed a market economy focused on hard work and the pursuit of wealth, although its artisans and mechanics retained a preindustrial ethic more akin to artisanship than capitalism. Nevertheless, until well into the nineteenth century, the vast majority of Americans didn't embrace this market ethic (Sellers 1991).

III. Free-Market Capitalism on the Promise of Thriving Families

Americans' way of life changed radically during the nineteenth century. In this century, the country constructed roads, canals, and then railroads, which increasingly carried Americans away from agrarian life. Urbanization was spurred on by the fact that land, which had been so plentiful early in the nation's history, became scarcer as the population rose (Sellers 1991, 17). And rise it did: the nation's population ballooned from five million in 1800 to 76 million in 1900—more than a fifteenfold increase—much of it from a huge influx of European immigrants (Laurie 1989; US Census Bureau 1990). When the century began, there were only a few major towns in America, and only one in twenty

Americans lived in a town at all. A century later, there were thirty-eight good-sized cities, and almost half of Americans—eight in twenty—lived in a town or city. As this urbanization occurred, most American families shifted from a household economy to a market economy, increasingly abandoning farming for market life in towns (Blumin 1989).

As industrial capitalism developed in this century, wage work came to dominate the market system (Katz 1996). By 1860, almost 60 percent of the labor force was employed by others (Matthaei 1982). After the Civil War ended, formerly enslaved Black people joined this workforce. By 1873, the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor could proclaim that wage labor had become "a system more widely diffused than any form of religion, or of government, or indeed, of any language" (Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor 1873, 440).

These great economic transformations could not have happened without great changes in the way Americans thought about themselves and their economic goals. Americans' veneration of agrarian economic independence needed to be overcome, and the market economy and wage work had to be recast as worthwhile. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have observed, capitalism is a system that requires a robust conceptual apparatus to support it: the notion that it is legitimate for some people to get rich from the labor of others is not an obvious one (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 14-16). And as Max Weber noted, convincing people that it is virtuous to spend your life working hard to amass wealth for others, rather than just hard enough to make ends meet for one's self and one's family, also requires a persuasive ideology (Weber 1930, 19-22). Put bluntly, the market economy needed a sales job. The sales pitch came to be founded on a set of ideas that historians later identified as the ideology of "separate spheres" or "domesticity."[4] This way of seeing the world began in the Northeast, but spread widely across the United States (Cott 1977; Ryan 1981).[5] And it was based on the promise that the market economy would ensure that families received the resources they needed to thrive.

The term "separate spheres" referred to the separation this emerging body of thought drew between the spheres of work and family (Cott 1977). In the household economy, work and home on the farmstead had been viewed as an undivided realm that functioned, in historian Alice Kessler-Harris's words, "as a business, a school, a training institution, a church, and often as a welfare institution (Kessler-Harris 2003, 4). The husband controlled this realm, with the assistance of his wife, although the divide between men's and women's roles was less distinct than it would be later (Boydston 1990; Ryan 1981). In the picture that separate spheres doctrine painted of the world, work was now something that happened outside of the home, rather than within it, and it was performed by men. That realm stood separate from and in contrast to the domestic realm, now supervised by women, who oversaw the home and the raising of children (Cott 1997; Ryan 1981). (Of course, this demarcation between the work and domestic realms overlooked the considerable amount of unpaid labor that women of this era performed in the home.)

[4] Although separate spheres ideology helped Americans rationalize the rise of capitalism, it was not an ideology that developed simply for this purpose. Indeed, some of the earliest movement toward this ideology emerged in the late eighteenth century, well before any significant transition to market capitalism began, and was only in part connected with the rise of market society.

[5] The ideology of domesticity was neither universally nor passively accepted. For example, urban working-class women resisted its demarcation between private and public, and the strictures it placed on women (Cott 1977; Santana 2016; Stansell 1986). For a discussion of the ambivalent reception of Black families to the ideology, see, for example, Gray (2013), Horton and Horton (1979), Jones 2009, and Sterling (1997).

Separate spheres ideology recast the market world and wage work as honorable, and as fully consistent with American ideals. The bright line that domesticity drew between the realms of home and work helped repackage wage work as a manly endeavor by locating it in the male work world, away from its patriarchal master-servant associations in the household. This reconceptualization of the wage contract borrowed heavily from the developing field of modern economics. As Adam Smith explained in *The Wealth of Nations*, "Every man lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant" (Smith 1776, 22). In other words, a worker shouldn't properly be seen as a servant, but rather as an entrepreneur, who freely enters into a relationship of equality with his employer.

Why should American men choose to give up the economic autonomy and security they had on the farm and submit themselves to the dictates of employers, as well as to work the far longer work hours required in industry of the time? Separate spheres ideology provided a clear answer: for the sake of their families' well-being. Men's reward for their toil in the workplace was a warm hearth and comfortable home to return to, as well as a happy wife and well-raised children to greet them at the door (Stanley 1998). One New Hampshire pastor put it this way in 1827:

> It is at home, where man . . . seeks a refuge from the vexations and embarrassments of business, an enchanting repose from exertion, a relaxation from care by the interchange of affection: where some of his finest sympathies, tastes, and moral and religious feelings are formed and nourished;—where is the treasury of pure disinterested love, such as is seldom found in the busy walks of a selfish and calculating world. Nothing can be more desirable, than to make one's domestic abode the highest object of his attachment and satisfaction. (Burroughs 1827, 18–19)

Separate spheres doctrine portrayed the domestic realm as a place where warmth and happiness could flourish. As a buy-in for women, wives and mothers would have the necessary time and resources to oversee this realm and to raise children (Cott 1977).[6] And the price of the warmth and happiness of this realm was men's wage work. As South Carolina Senator Henry Wilson declared decades later, in speaking to men newly freed from slavery at the end of the Civil War: "Freedom does not mean that you are not to work. It means that when you do work you shall have pay for it, to carry home to your wives and the children of your love" (Child 1866, 260).

While the ideology of domesticity certainly offered material rewards, the central lure was the thriving families it promised. The idea that family life was the reward for the drudgery of wage labor was clearly distilled in a poem published in the *National Labor Tribune* in 1874:

> Though coarse his fare, and scant his means of life,
> Thought of his children and loving wife
> Makes rich amend for all his toil and strife.
> As fades the last ray of setting sun,
> His home is reached, his daily task is done;
> His young ones watching at the open door
> He sees with joy, and hastens on the more.
> Within the housewife, partner of his weal,

[6] While separate spheres doctrine limited women's role in society, in some ways it represented a gain for women. In the household economy, the man was the master of the undifferentiated sphere of home and work. In the market economy, women at least had their own sphere of authority in the domestic realm. This may be the reason so many women actively helped craft the separate spheres narrative (Cott 1977; Lerner 1969).

> Prepares with busy hand the evening meal. . . .
> Arrived within, she greats him with a smile
> And sweet caress—the welcome home.
> (Stanley, 1998, 165)

The market economy wasn't considered an inevitable or inextricable feature. Nor was it seen as virtuous in itself, regardless of its effects. Instead, it was considered valuable as a means to an important end: flourishing families.

Separate spheres ideology, as it developed, said little to nothing about the role of government; it assumed that the market itself would support thriving families without any action needed on the part of the state. Yet at the same time that separate spheres ideology gained ascendance early in the nineteenth century, a complementary ideology regarding the role of government was also taking hold. Before the nineteenth century, early Americans largely held a broad vision about the role of government in furthering citizens' happiness and the public well-being, a vision that was a holdover from the colonial era (Novak 1996; Scheiber 1997; Tomlins 1993; Trattner 1974). Yet the early part of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a competing, narrower view of the state's proper role, sounded most loudly by lawyers and judges (Sellers 1991). In this ascending view, private property rights trumped the government's "police power," particularly when it came to regulating the economy for the general welfare (Horwitz 1977). This left government largely geared toward keeping the peace and ensuring citizens' security.

Support for this minimalist conception of government was furthered, as historian Joyce Appleby points out, by the close association that Americans of that era made between a strong government and the interest of elites. The Jeffersonian revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century defeated Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Party, which had championed a strong federal government run by elites. In American minds, this historic conflict cemented the link between minimalist government and the interests of the common people (Appleby 1984). As Thomas Jefferson stated in 1801, the best government is "a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread that it has earned" (Jefferson 1801).

This minimalist view of government was combined with free-market ideology in the views of Herbert Spencer, an English social theorist whose views gained wide sway among Americans toward the middle of the nineteenth century (Katz 1996, 188). Spencer drew on Charles Darwin's work to argue that leaving families to sink or swim in the market was a painful but necessary part of weeding out the weak in order to foster the "survival of the fittest" (a term that Spencer, not Darwin, coined) (Spencer 1852, 379). While both the narrow and broad visions of the government's role won skirmishes in the ongoing battle between them, the narrower view of government, with its laissez-faire approach to the economy, increasingly gained the upper hand by the middle of the nineteenth century (Scheiber 1997).

IV. The Rise of Welfare State Ideology

Despite the rosy promises of separate spheres ideology, working-class families increasingly found themselves in dire straits as the nineteenth century progressed. In the last decades of the century, the revolution in manufacturing that accompanied industrialization meant that unskilled workers could be easily replaced. The result was that working-class laborers had little market power and earned less wages than would support a family (Atack, Bateman, and Margo 2004; Katz 1983). To make matters worse, workers were routinely laid off when demand softened. A laborer who worked four days a week through three seasons of the year was doing comparatively well. Furthermore, boom-and-bust business cycles intensified as the market economy expanded; in the bust years, cities were overwhelmed by the poor and unemployed (Gallman 2000; Haines 1981).

Although poverty had existed in America's earlier centuries, the ranks of the poor had largely consisted of women with young children, or those too young, too old, or too sick to work. As industrial capitalism progressed, however, grinding poverty became an established fact of working-class life (Stansell 1986). Men's wages weren't enough to support their families even when they were employed. During work interruptions, families had few, if any, savings to turn to. In the household economy, these families would have had home production to fall back on during lean times, giving them shelter and a garden plot or farm animals to rely on for food. When wages stopped coming into an urban household, though, it was reduced to abject poverty (Katz 1983). Squalid tenement rentals sprang up to house working-class families, including many of the nation's burgeoning immigrant population (Riis 1890). Three or more people often slept in the same bed, families shared one or two rooms, and tenants often had to walk down several flights of stairs to share a tap and privy in the backyard. In these conditions, cleanliness was impossible, and sickness was a constant presence (ibid; Stansell 1986).

For working-class families, life was not the neat split between the spheres of productive work and happy home promised by separate spheres ideology. Men working in the factories labored exceedingly long hours—eleven to thirteen hours a day, six days a week—leaving them too exhausted to enjoy themselves when they got home. And given job insecurity, they spent much of their time searching for work when they weren't working (Margo 2000, 229–31). The situation was no better for their wives who, because they couldn't pay for most goods and services, were left to fill the gap through home production and management. That means they spent their days ceaselessly laundering, sewing, and mending their families' few clothes, cleaning, shopping, cooking, fetching water, tending to children, and hawking and scavenging in the street. Few could afford to shop for more than a day's worth of food, or had a refrigerator or icebox to store it in even if they could (Cott 1977; Stansell 1986). Roughly one-third of free African American women worked outside the home just to meet basic needs—generally as maids or in commercial laundries (Licht 1995). Most other working-class wives were left to earn money in their homes to make ends meet, taking in boarders, laundry, or piecework (Blewett 1983; Blumin 1989). These extra hours of labor, on top of the long ones necessary to maintain their own household, meant constant exhaustion (Boydston 1999; Haines 1981).

Given the endless quest to make ends meet, working-class mothers had little time and energy for the nurturing or supervision of children that separate spheres ideology had promised. What's more, economic need made children's labor necessary for the family's survival. In cities, children as young as six or seven were sent to scavenge for wood, ashes, spilled food, and anything that could be sold to junk dealers. Older children were sent out to work for wages (Licht 1995; Stansell 1986). An 1860 study of Philadelphia industrial workers found that three-quarters of those in the lowest-paid group relied on the wages of their children (Haines 1981). Across all American families, the 1890 US Census showed that almost one out of every five American children between the ages of ten and fifteen worked for pay (Trattner 1970). Child labor was particularly common among Black and foreign-born children, whose fathers held the lowest-paying jobs (Margo 2000). Many of these children worked long hours in dangerous jobs—in mills with dangerous machinery or in coal mines (Department of Commerce 1924).

Separate spheres ideology had sold Americans on the market economy by touting the benefits it would bring their families**.** As the nineteenth century progressed, though, it became clear that, for a broad group of American families, the market was failing to deliver on its promise. For the first two-thirds of the century, the poor were often blamed for their poverty, their poor circumstances attributed to vice or their unwillingness to work (Katz 1996; Pimpare 2004). This view was fed by the free-market economic principles that began to permeate American thought in the 1830s (Pimpare 2004). By the last decades of the century, however, attributing the plight of the poor and working class to individual failings became more difficult, as the hardships of the working class became more widespread and, in the turbulent business cycles of the end of the century, more visibly connected with the operation of market forces (Katz 1996).

Faced with similar misery, many reformers in Europe turned to Marxist ideology to call for change. But political ideas are never constructed out of whole cloth—they are instead constructed out of narratives circulating in a society. In the United States, Marxist ideology never took sufficient hold to become fertile ground for resisting unbridled capitalism; American thinking was far more in line with Locke's ideal of free property than with Marx (Davis 2000; Lipset and Marks 2000). Instead, Americans turned to an ideological doctrine close at hand: separate spheres ideology.

As it had first developed, separate spheres doctrine did not conflict with the doctrine of laissez-faire government: the working of the market itself was supposed to support the domestic realm. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have pointed out, however, capitalist ideology may not only legitimate the accumulation process, but also constrain it, as people measure the discrepancy between the promise offered by the ideology and the way they experience its effects (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). And so it was towards the end of the nineteenth century: The ideology of separate spheres had legitimated the rough and tumble world of capitalism by promising a domestic realm that delivered the resources that enabled families to thrive. As it became increasingly clear that capitalism by itself would not deliver on this promise, reformers argued that government had a responsibility to regulate the market to achieve this result. Separate spheres ideology therefore became a potent narrative deployed by reformers seeking market regulation (Stanley 1996).

In 1869, the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor became the first government agency to conduct a serious investigation of the effects of the wage system on families. In the process, the bureau compared the actual lives of Boston working-class families against the promise of domesticity: "[U]nder a proper organization of society," the bureau asserted, the working man "would accrue such recompense of his daily toil, as would secure the family comfort from his earnings alone" (Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor 1870, 182). The reality, however, demonstrated the radical shortcomings of the current system. The historian Amy Dru Stanley summarized the investigation's findings:

> "No cheerful smile greets a returning father whose six days' earnings pay for but five days' meat." Rather, poverty destroyed domesticity. It "kills love and all affection, all pride of home . . . nay, emasculates home of all its quickening powers." On returning home, the "hapless father, seeking rest and comfort after toil, and finding neither, takes to the loafing spots of the streets . . .and the high road of ruin is opened before him." The bureau's most striking tenement images were of wives "toiling at wash-tub and iron board" for other families and of men whose wages left them destitute of home life." (Stanley 1998, 151, quoting Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor 1870)

Not only did the bureau conclude that workers' current wages weren't supporting their families adequately, it found the reverse to be true: the market system had absorbed entire families, changing "homes into houses" (Stanley 1998, 151–52). To deliver on the market's promise to support families, the bureau called for legislation to ensure workingmen a living wage (Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor 1870, 158–64, 197). State labor bureaus in other states soon followed suit, calling for legislation to protect the domestic sphere from encroachment by market forces (MacLaury 2004; Stanley 1998).

In 1883, these state investigations spurred a federal congressional inquiry on the effects of the industrial system on working-class families. The investigating committee spent two days in the New York City tenement districts asking questions about the family life of wage laborers (Stanley 1998). One machinist told the committee that most workers, after working ten hours a day, "were pretty well played out when they come home, and the first thing they think of is having something to eat, and sitting down, and resting, and then of striking a bed." He continued, "instead of a pleasant house [the worker's reality] is every day expecting to lose his job . . . his wages being pulled down . . . [;] staring starvation in the face makes him feel sad, and the head of the house being sad, of course with whole family are the same, so the house looks like a dull prison instead of a home" (ibid., at 156; US Congress 1885, 755–59). The gap between capitalism's promise for families and its actual delivery was clearly articulated.

About the same time, an emerging group of political economists, including Henry Carter Adams of the University of Michigan, joined the call for government regulation. In response to laissez-faire thinkers like Herbert Spencer, Carter argued that unregulated market competition rewarded not the fittest, but simply those willing to fight the dirtiest—employers who refused to pay workers a wage that could support their families and who required workers to labor exceptionally long hours. Regulation, these economists argued, was needed to restore the moral basis of competition (Adams 1887). As Sydney Fine summarized these pro-regulation arguments, the goal was for the state to "harmonize public and private activity, to determine . . . the proper bounds of each" (Fine 1967, 211). Or, as Richard Ely framed the point in his draft statement of purpose for American Economic Association, the group founded by these economists: "While we recognize the necessity of individual initiative in industrial life, we hold that the doctrine of laissez-faire is unsafe in politics and unsound in morals; and that it suggests an inadequate explanation of the relations between the state and the citizens" (Ely 1886, 7).

During this same period, advocates for workers' rights attacked the proliferation of sweated labor, in which manufacturers farmed out piecework production for meager pay to workers who both lived and worked in tenements, on the ground that this labor system subverted the proper demarcation between home and workplace. In one of the most influential examples, in 1881, labor union leader Samuel Gompers published a series of essays entitled "The Curse of Tenement-House Cigar Manufacture" (Gompers 1985 [1881]). The exposé described the wretchedness of families involved in the cigar-making trade in terms of "the rooms in which people live and work, are born and die" (ibid., 172). In Gompers's account, these families began work before sunrise and worked far into the night, a labor from which only infants were exempt. Mothers nursed babies while making wrappers and rolling cigars. Meals relied on food that did not require cooking so that mothers need not stop their work. Tobacco was everywhere in the two or three small rooms in which these families lived, drying on the floor, spread over the stove, stored in cans in the bedrooms, and piled next to the beds. Even then, the pay for the entire families' labor provided only a meager subsistence (ibid.). Gompers argued for government regulation based on the unhealthy overlap between the work and family realms:

"These rooms did not represent refuges from the market of labor; rather, inside them 'husbands, wives, and children sit unceasingly at their work' and family bonds were eroded. The 'shop' has completely taken over the living quarters" (ibid., 210).[7]

Beginning early in the twentieth century, the country began to codify these calls for government to enforce the promise that the market economy would deliver for families. State legislatures laid the first bricks in the welfare state in passing "mothers' pensions," which provided cash benefits to widows with children, and potentially to other mothers without husbands at home.[8] Significantly, the payments were considered honorable subsidies that supported the valuable labor rendered by mothers in the home. In fact, the payments were called "pensions" precisely to recognize both the dignity of the care work that mothers performed and the public responsibility for supporting this work (Gordon 1994). In the words of one pension activist, "We cannot afford to let a mother . . . be classed as a pauper, a dependent. She must be given value received by her nation, and stand as one honored. . . . If our public mind is maternal, loving and generous, wanting to save and develop all, our Government will express this sentiment" (Skocpol 1992, xxi, 465–66). These pensions signaled recognition that government had an important role to play in supporting families and in cushioning the domestic realm from the harmful effects of market forces. Forty states passed such pension laws between 1911 and 1920 (Leff 1973). By the early 1930s, six more states had been added to the list (Skocpol 1992). During this era, the federal government also stepped in to restrain the effects of markets on families through passing the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916, which limited child labor, although the Supreme Court later struck down the act.[9]

In 1914, the political reformer Florence Kelley summed up the wave of regulation that was beginning to swell:

> Originally, the typical home was a farm which furnished subsistence, and the children received within the family group industrial, religious and moral training. Our departure from this early ideal under the pressure of modern industry is conspicuous. The paradoxical tendency of the family to disintegrate under the pressure of the same industry which affords it infinite material enrichment offers the key to a complex, varied legislative movement going forward in all the civilized nations. Seemingly incoherent, this movement is a ramified effort to safeguard the family. (Kelley 1914, 4)

Put simply, the United States was committing to the principle that it was government's responsibility to ensure that the market economy functioned in a manner that supported families' well-being.

In 1933, reeling from the Great Depression, America entered the New Deal era. At this point, the principle that the federal government had the responsibility to ensure that families were safeguarded from the risks of the market economy became a cornerstone of the nation's social contract. The most far-reaching of the legislation built on welfare-state ideology was the Social Security Act of 1935. This

[7] Likewise, the 1890 publication of Jacob Riis's best-selling book, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, through its flash-picture photos, graphically communicated to middle- and upper-class society the wretched conditions of working-class families living in slums and tenements, and the plight of working-class children in these households (Riis 1890).

[8] Civil War pensions, for service in the war, have been described as an earlier example of the US welfare state (Skocpol 1992). The widows' pensions programs, though, were the first redistribution policies focused more generally on supporting families.

[9] Hammer v. Dagenhart, 247 U.S. 251 (1918).

act created the program we today call "Social Security" to provide resources to a family after the retirement of its breadwinner, as well as Unemployment Insurance to support a family if the breadwinner became unemployed. It also created Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) (later Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC), a successor to states' mothers' pension programs, which provided support to mothers and their children on the death or absence of the breadwinner. Aid to Dependent Children Act, Pub. L. No. 74-271, 49 Stat. 620 (1935) (see Kelley 1914). The ideological goal of these reforms was to smooth the rough edges of the market system when it came to families, ensuring that the market economy's predictable risks and costs weren't entirely borne by individual families, but instead were broadly shared across the citizenry (Gordon 1994).

Other New Deal legislation sought to ensure that market forces didn't unduly encroach on family life. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 installed a statutory minimum wage to make sure that workers at the low end of the income ladder earned wages that could support their families, and sought to limit work hours by ensuring time-and-a-half overtime pay. Congress also bolstered workers' ability to bring a fair share of pay home by empowering them to bargain collectively through the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (Rosenfeld 2014). And to further buffer the boundaries between family and market, Congress prohibited children from accepting certain dangerous jobs, such as those in manufacturing and mining, as well as from working during periods that would interfere with their schooling (Forsythe 1939).

It would be easy to overstate the government's commitment to supporting families during this era. US social insurance programs, even at their prime, were relatively weak compared to other countries (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001). And these programs long offered far more support to middle-class families than to poor and working-class families, particularly as the nation moved further from the New Deal era (Mettler 2011). Furthermore, given that the welfare state was modeled on separate spheres ideology, it embedded gender stereotypes of a male breadwinner and a female caregiver within the law (Kessler-Harris 2001). This left women vulnerable and failed to protect the many American families who didn't comport with this picture of family life (Gordon 1994). Finally, the New Deal was stained by racism—agricultural and domestic workers were deliberately excluded from the Social Security program in order to force African American and Latino workers to accept low-wage jobs. In addition, strong federal standards for ADC eligibility were omitted to ensure that states could exclude Black and Latina women so that they would have to remain in market jobs (Gordon 1994; Kessler-Harris 2001; Quadagno 1994).

Despite these flaws, the New Deal installed critically important principles in the nation's social contract with its citizens: government is obligated to ensure that the market economy benefits families generally, at the same time that individual families are buffered from the harms that market forces can cause them. While these principles transformed the role of government in the economic system, like the economic ideologies that preceded them, the end goal of the economy was still seen as the wellbeing of US families. It was only toward the end of the twentieth century that the view that government should regulate the economy for the benefit of families was undermined.

V. The Ascendance of Free-Market Family Ideology

Until the last few decades of the twentieth century, the promise that government would support families in obtaining the resources they needed to thrive was considered a fundamental part of the nation's social contract. In fact, in the early 1970s, it looked like the government would move still further in buffering families from harmful market forces. In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson's

War on Poverty had called for using government to create a society "where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled" (Johnson 1964, n.p.). The anti-poverty programs adopted in that era included Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps, all of which were built on the premise that government should ensure that families received the resources they needed. In the following years, it seemed likely that the United States would pass both a guaranteed income plan and a universal childcare program as well. Nevertheless, as this section shows, by the turn of the twenty-first century, the social contract provision giving government a role in family provisioning had been undermined by the ascendancy of free-market family ideology.

A. The Rise of Free-Market Family Ideology

Beginning in the 1960s, the relationship between the spheres of work and family experienced a sea change almost as momentous as the one that had taken place during the rise of the market economy in the previous century. In the late twentieth century, though, it was not men leaving home for paid work, but rather women. Sometimes because of economic necessity and sometimes because of choice, women began to enter the paid work force in increasingly larger numbers and to stay there even after having children. In 1960, only 18 percent of women with children under six worked paid jobs. By 1979, that figure was 43 percent, and rapidly rising (Reich 1984, 17). (By 2018, the percentage of working mothers with young children grew to 65 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019, n.p.).) The New Deal welfare model had long ignored the fact that many, and disproportionately African American, women had long worked outside the home. With white women's increased entry into the paid workforce in the last third of the twentieth century, the contradictions between this model and the lived reality of American families could no longer remain unrecognized.

Economic and political pressures increased the need to revise the existing welfare state. Between 1960 and 1974 alone, the number of families served by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program more than tripled, to almost 11 million (Patterson 2009). A combination of factors contributed to the rising rolls, including Supreme Court decisions that expanded the number of families eligible for benefits,[10] growing unemployment due to changes in the economy, and the rise of single-mother families, itself a phenomenon spurred by economic shifts. Because AFDC was a combined federal/state benefit program, this expansion placed an increasing burden on state budgets. Local and state politicians began to politicize the issue, complaining that the added burden was breaking state budgets and arguing that something needed to be done (Katz 1996).

By the end of the 1960s, the combination of mothers' increased entry into the workforce and the rising cost of welfare programs made clear that the US welfare state needed updating (Edin and Shaefer 2015). Consistent with the view that government had a fundamental role in buffering families from the market, two major pieces of reform legislation began to make their way through Congress: the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), a proposal to ensure a guaranteed minimum income to every family, and the Child Care Development Act (CCDA), a plan to set up a national network of government-funded childcare centers. Passing even one of these laws would have put the United States on a path toward creating a far more robust welfare state. And, in fact, both came very close to passage.

The FAP was newly elected president Richard Nixon's own proposal to correct the problems of the existing welfare system. Nixon's issue with AFDC wasn't that government was helping families, as

[10] See, for example, King v. Smith, 392 U.S. 309, 333 (1968); Shapiro v. Thompson, 394 U.S. 618, 641–42 (1969); Townsend v. Swank, 404 U.S. 282, 286 (1971).

Republicans and even some Democrats would soon begin to assert, but that it was doing so in the wrong ways: it subsidized families only when a man wasn't at home, and therefore encouraged the break-up of families. And it discouraged adults from working by decreasing benefits when income was earned. In a speech announcing his reform plan, Nixon critiqued the centralization of power and bureaucracy associated with the federal government, but defended "the continuing capacity of government to master the challenges we face," as well as government's ability to "care[] for those in need" (Nixon 1969, n.p.). Nixon's solution was to subsidize all families who fell below a particular income, even those that included a man, and it phased out benefits slowly as a family's earned income rose, rather than cut them off immediately when any wages were earned (ibid.). He called the FAP, probably correctly, the most significant piece of legislation since the Social Security Act of 1935 (ibid.). The law would have increased the number of Americans who received government subsidies by 10 million and cut the nation's poverty rate by 60 percent (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991).

The FAP wasn't considered particularly controversial at the time. The accepted wisdom was that some form of a guaranteed income program would inevitably be adopted in the United States—the real question was simply whether the program would take a more minimal form like Nixon's or a more comprehensive form like progressives proposed (Samuelson 1968). Nixon's plan almost made it into law. It passed the House of Representatives in both 1970 and 1971 by large, bipartisan majorities (Steensland 2008). Commentators expected it to pass the more liberal Senate as well. However, due to discontent on both the right and the left, the guaranteed income measure never came to a vote in that chamber. Conservatives were concerned that it might deter the poor from accepting low-paying jobs. Liberals, meanwhile, wanted to pass a guaranteed income plan that would benefit more than just poor families (ibid.).

During this same period, the second piece of legislation that sought to update the welfare state, the CCDA, was also making its way through Congress. The CCDA bill sought to accommodate the growing number of working mothers by setting up federally funded childcare centers across the country. The bill's preamble stated its ambitious mission:

> It is the purpose of this Act to provide every child with a fair and full opportunity to reach his full potential by establishing and expanding comprehensive child development programs and services designed to assure the sound and coordinated development of these programs, to recognize and build upon the experience and success gained through Head Start and similar efforts, to furnish child development services for those children who need them most, with special emphasis on preschool programs for economically disadvantaged children, and for children of working mothers and single parent families.

Under the plan, daycare would have been made available to families of all incomes for a sliding-scale fee. Furthermore, the centers would have provided nutritious meals and medical care for enrolled children.

Enacting the CCDA would have sent the message that, although the American family was changing and more mothers were working, government still had its back. The US welfare state would have therefore scrapped its outmoded separate spheres ideology without abandoning the tenet that government had a vital role to play in ensuring families got the resources they needed to do well. During this same time period, policymakers across industrialized Western countries were similarly updating their welfare-state models to adapt to the realities of two-earner families, discarding old programs built on outmoded expectations, and introducing new programs to help working families, including paid parental leave and universal daycare (Gornick and Meyers 2003; O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999).

The United States came close to taking this route. The CCDA passed both houses of Congress in 1971 with bipartisan support (Rosenthal 1971). Nixon, however, ultimately vetoed the bill. His reasons for doing so are still debated. Some say it was an attempt to mollify conservatives angry at him for scheduling a diplomatic trip to China. Others suggest he feared that passage of the CCDA would weaken support for his Family Assistance Plan, which contained its own childcare proposal. Still others link the veto to his quarrel with specific provisions of the legislation, or to an internecine battle between two Nixon aides fighting for power (Karch 2013; Morgan 2001; Roth 1976).

Whatever the reason, Nixon's veto statement, drafted by his conservative aide, Patrick Buchanan, introduced the ideological foundation of the free-market family ideology that would come to dominate in the next quarter century. That statement decried the "family-weakening implications of the system" that the CCDA created. While it specifically recognized "the needs . . . for day care, to enable mothers, particularly those at the lowest income levels, to take full-time jobs," the government's provision of this day care would, the statement said, make the CCDA "the most radical piece of legislation to emerge from the Ninety-second Congress" (Nixon 1971, 46058). The federal government's role "wherever possible should be one of assisting parents to purchase needed day care services in the private, open market." For the government itself to provide such day care risked diminishing "both parental authority and parental involvement with children." The correct way for the government to meet the need for daycare was instead to "support increased tax deductions" for parents with children enrolled in these programs (ibid.).

Scholars have often described the political shift that occurred during this era in terms of disputes over women's societal roles. In their accounts, conservatives began to claim the mantle of family protection against the liberals and feminists, who were seeking to upend public policy predicated on women's proper place being in the home (e.g., Self 2012). Certainly, these scholars are right that some of the massive political realignment of the next decades turned on disagreements over women's role in the family. But this narrative doesn't pay sufficient attention to the emerging disagreements over the *government's* role with respect to families. As Nixon's veto statement made clear, the problem with the CCDA wasn't that it prompted women to leave home for paid work; conservatives accepted the reality that many women worked for pay, and were particularly approving of mothers working when it came to poor women. The problem with the CCDA was the role it envisioned for government: The statement cast government action—even action intended to support families—as harmful to families' well-being. Government support (apart from tax deductions), in this view didn't shore up families—it took them over. Collective action to help families was cast as un-American, favoring "communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach" (Nixon 1971, 46059). This view ignored the facts that the CCDA didn't require any families to put their children in government daycare centers, that providing daycare for poor families was considered fine despite being "communal," and that the country had been providing public education for school-aged children for more than a century.

A decade later, Ronald Reagan was to give voice to a similar sentiment: "[G]overnment is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem" (Reagan 1981). This was a remarkable departure from Nixon's statement introducing the FAP a dozen years before with the words, "What I am proposing is that the Federal Government build a foundation under the income of every American family with dependent children that cannot care for itself—and wherever in America that family may live" (Nixon 1969, n.p.).

Moving government action from the helpful to the harmful column for families was not the only development in Nixon's veto statement that would set the stage for things to come. The statement also shone a new, rosy spotlight on the "private, open market." Getting mothers off the welfare rolls and into full-time jobs was the way things should work, the statement posited, because families should get what they needed through market transactions. The historian Daniel T. Rodgers described the rising esteem in which the market came to be held during this era: "In an age when words took on magical properties, no word flew higher or assumed a great aura of enchantment than 'market.'" President Reagan was to put it similarly in 1982: "'You know, there really is something magic about the marketplace when it's free to operate'" (Reagan 1982).

The reigning view for most of the twentieth century that market pressures could be destructive to families and that it was the government's role to buffer families from these forces was being turned on its head. Government action was increasingly associated with damage to families. Meanwhile, government leaving families to fend for themselves against market forces was increasingly seen as healthy and normal. In this new world of distrust for government action but respect for the market, free-market advocates argued, not fully coherently, that tax breaks for market work were a more pro-market, less interventionist means to support families than either a guaranteed income plan like Nixon's FAP or a public system of daycare like the CCDA (Friedman 1962).

Consistent with the rising free-market family ideology, in the wake of the FAP's and CCDA's defeats, in 1975, Congress passed the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), providing a tax credit to low-income working families. Tax Reduction Act of 1975, Pub. L. No. 94-12, § 501, 89 Stat. 47. In subsequent years, that break was expanded, becoming one of the major ways that the federal government supports families today (Isaacs et al. 2015). Meanwhile, particularly during Ronald Reagan's first term, Congress and the administration began to shrink the country's existing safety net by making sharp cuts to AFDC eligibility and benefits, and drastically cutting spending on other programs like Medicaid and housing support. Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Pub. L. No. 97-35, 95 Stat. 357. The number of states that subsidized a working mother with three children whose wages put her 50 percent below the US poverty line decreased by almost half, from forty-seven states to twenty-four. The number of states supplementing the wages of that same working mother if her earnings equaled the poverty line decreased from thirty-three to one (Katz 1996). The nation was pulling away from its commitment to ensuring that all families with children had the basics regardless of market earnings.

Charles Murray's tremendously influential 1984 book, *Losing Ground*, delivered another powerful blow to the view that government's job was to protect families from market forces. Two decades before, a government report written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan had, despite significant flaws, correctly recognized that rising unemployment was causing urban Black families to fracture and called for a government jobs program to address the issue (Moynihan 1965).[11] Murray now asserted that the causation was actually the reverse: fractured families and rising social problems were *caused* by government action, and the proper solution was to subject families entirely to market forces (Murray 1984).

[11] The Moynihan Report's genuine insights were eclipsed by its racist characterization of African American families as a "tangle of pathologies," and its derogatory descriptions of African American single mothers. Critics justifiably asserted that these depictions were a classic case of blaming the victim (Ryan 2010).

In essence, Murray's argument fell into two parts. The vast bulk of his evidence was connected with the first part, which showed that government spending on social welfare programs had risen rapidly in the late 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the War on Poverty, at the same time that both the poverty rate and a range of social problems also increased. These problems including rising rates of nonmarital children, single-mother families, unemployment among young Black men, and both property crimes and violent crimes (Murray 1984). Most of the increased government spending in this era involved Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, rather than the AFDC benefits and food stamps that Murray's argument depended on, but he didn't bother to break these numbers out separately.

As any social science student learns, correlation doesn't prove causation. The fact that government spending on the poor had increased during the same era in which social problems increased didn't show that the government spending *caused* these problems. To prove causation, Murray turned to the second part of his argument, which rested on a thought experiment about the choices that a hypothetical couple—Phyllis and Harold—would supposedly confront given welfare-program incentives in different eras. The couple was pregnant, unmarried, with low education, and was deciding how to approach their situation under two different policy regimes: the less generous AFDC benefit rates of 1960, before the War on Poverty, or the more generous AFDC benefit rates of 1970. Murray asserted that under the earlier benefits schedule, the couple's best alternative would be to marry and for both to work for pay. In the presence of 1970 benefit amounts, though, Murray contended, the couple's incentives would change drastically: Phyllis would do better to reject marriage to Harold, since it would deprive her of AFDC benefits. Meanwhile, Harold would have no incentive to work full-time because the couple would receive more from Phyllis' AFDC benefits. The result, according to Murray, was that the couple would become "dependent" on government benefits, ultimately becoming even poorer than if they'd never had access to these benefits in the first place. Decisions by millions of adults just like Phyllis and Harold, Murray claimed, were how increased government benefits led to more, rather than less, poverty and to rising rates of social problems (Murray 1984).

In the aftermath of *Losing Ground*, academics and other critics, using a far larger evidence base and much sounder methodology, largely decimated Murray's claims. The increasing unemployment rates of the era, as well as the drop in wages at the lower end of the wage spectrum for men, they showed, better accounted for the growing market-income poverty rate than did the rise in government benefits. And these economic shifts better explained the rise of the social problems that Murray identified (Danziger, Sheldon, and Gottschalk 1985; Greenstein 1985). Furthermore, contrary to Murray's thought experiment claiming that welfare benefits disincentivized Phyllis and Harold to work, scholars showed that in 1970, minimum-wage work was far more profitable than AFDC benefits in most states (in many states, twice as profitable), although such areas had seen the rise of the same social problems that Murray had attributed to generous government benefits (Greenstein 1985).

Researchers also debunked Murray's claims that poor families developed welfare "dependency." A 1988 *Science* article synthesized scores of family poverty studies, finding "this evidence suggests that the welfare system does not foster reliance on welfare so much as it acts as insurance against temporary misfortune" (Duncan, Hill, and Hoffman 1988, 470). Most recipients turned to AFDC after a divorce or separation or the birth of a child, and stayed on it for fewer than two years (Bane and Ellwood 1986; Bane and Ellwood 1994; O'Neill, Bassi, and Wolf 1987). And those who did stay on ADFC long-term did so not because welfare made them dependent, but because of persistently low earnings and other characteristics, like disabilities, that were unrelated to government benefits (Duncan, Hill, and Hoffman 1988).

Furthermore, scholars disproved Murray's claims that AFDC benefit levels led to the rise of fragile-family structures. Harvard Professors David Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane released a landmark comparative study of state AFDC programs showing that nonmarital birth rates shot up and divorce rates increased even during periods in which state benefits declined. They concluded that "welfare simply does not appear to be the underlying cause of the dramatic changes in family structure of the past few decades" (Ellwood and Bane 1985, 143).

Rather than contributing to social problems, critics showed that Murray missed the real good that welfare programs had accomplished. A large part of the money used to fight the War on Poverty that Murray decried was spent on Medicaid, which cut infant mortality in half between 1965 and 1980. Another large chunk of these funds went to Medicare, which reversed the growing mortality of men over sixty-five and increased life expectancy at birth by more than four years. The introduction of food stamps significantly reduced the nutrition gap between low-income Americans and the rest of the country. And the AFDC benefits on which Murray focused his criticism had done precisely what they were supposed to do: help relieve the poverty of the families who received them (Danziger, Sheldon, and Gottschalk 1985).

Despite the unsoundness of Murray's arguments and evidence base, *Losing Ground* immediately exercised a profound influence at the highest levels of government (Greenfield 1985). A *New York Times* editorial put it this way:

> This year's budget-cutters' bible seems to be '*Losing Ground*,' Charles Murray's book appraising social policy in the last 30 years. The Reagan budget coming tomorrow is likely to propose deep reductions in education, child nutrition and housing assistance, and elimination of programs like the Job Corps, revenue sharing and urban development grants. In agency after agency, officials cite the Murray book as a philosophical base for these proposals, for it concludes that social-welfare programs, far from relieving poverty, increase it and should be stopped. (*New York Times* 1985, n.p.)

In his 1986 State of the Union Address, President Reagan echoed Murray's call, asserting that welfare programs had created "a spider web of dependency" that fostered a dysfunctional culture in which the "breakdown of the family . . . reached crisis proportions." And he committed himself to "revis[ing] or replac[ing] programs enacted in the name of compassion that degrade the moral worth of work, encourage family breakups, and drive entire communities into a bleak and heartless dependency" (Reagan 1986, n.p.).

The 1986 report issued by President Reagan's White House Working Group on the Family, headed by Gary Bauer, solidified the new free-market family ideology. Government action, no matter how well intended, it asserted, undermined families' wellbeing. Federal spending to address poverty among children in the 1960s and 1970s, it claimed, caused children's "delinquency rates [to] double[]. Their Standardized Aptitude Test (SAT) scores plummeted. Drug and alcohol abuse skyrocketed" (White House Working Group on the Family 1986, 21). Never mind that crime and drug use were increasing in the prosperous white suburbs of New York and Los Angeles, as well as in Harlem and Watts, and that the overall drop in SAT scores had little to do with the scores of poor children (Jencks 1985).

Strengthening families required, the Bauer report declared, not help from government, but instead "turning back to the households of this land the autonomy that once was theirs, in a society stable and secure, where the family can generate and nurture what no government can ever produce—Americans who will responsibly exercise their freedom and, if necessary, defend its families" (White House Working Group on the Family 1986, 3.) According to the report, once liberated from an overweening government, American families could again engage with the institution that truly nurtured it: the market. "[D]emocratic capitalism through 'its devotion to human freedom, its creation of wealth, and its demand for personal responsibility—made the modern family possible.'" Meanwhile, "the family which is tied together with love is the source of all productivity and growth" (ibid., 3, 10).

In this construction, government no longer partnered with families to help ensure they got the resources they needed; instead, it undercut their autonomy. Meanwhile, families and the unregulated market created a virtuous cycle in which one improved the health of the other. Although Republicans embraced free-market family ideology with more enthusiasm than their Democratic counterparts, Democrats also accepted it. In 1993, President Bill Clinton stated that Murray "did the country a great service. I mean, he and I have often disagreed, but I think his analysis is essentially right" (Clinton 1993, n.p.).

The victory of free-market family ideology in US policy culminated in the welfare overhaul of 1996. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was so named because it was supposed to promote personal responsibility and paid work over government dependence. Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2260 (1996). As Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA), an enthusiastic PRWORA sponsor, later put it, we needed to recognize that "[w]hen government steps in and imposes a bureaucratic solution," it weakens rather than strengthens families (Santorum 2005, 68). To roll back government involvement, the legislation repealed more than three dozen federal anti-poverty programs that had entitled poor families to benefits, replacing them with just five block grants to states whose amounts would remain fixed no matter the economic circumstances. PRWORA therefore effectively ended the long-standing promise that the federal government would have the backs of the poorest American families (Katz 1996). In the words of then-New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a reform opponent, the bill was "the first step in dismantling the social contract that has been in place in the United States since at least the 1930s" (*New York Times* 1996).

Despite its claimed aspirations to strengthen families, what welfare reform actually accomplished was to greatly increase the misery of America's poorest families. The year it passed, sixty-eight of one hundred poor families with children received AFDC benefits. By 2017, only twenty-three of one hundred poor families with children received government benefits. Furthermore, because TANF benefit rates are so low, subsidies today do much less to relieve the misery of the nation's poorest children than AFDC used to. AFDC had lifted more than 2.7 million children out of deep poverty in 1995, the year before PRWORA passed. In 2015, TANF lifted only 349,000 children out of deep poverty (Floyd, Burnside, and Schott 2018).

Until the current pandemic prompted the government to take some radical, albeit temporary measures to support families,[12] the one significant piece of legislation since PRWORA to depart from free-

[12] The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), mandated that parents received two weeks of partially paid sick leave to care for family members subject to quarantine, or to care for a child whose school or child care provider is closed or unavailable because of the pandemic. It also authorized an additional 10 weeks of partially paid family leave for parents whose children's school or child care provider was unavailable for reasons related to COVID-19. Pub. L. No. 116-127, 134 Stat. 177-218 (2020). The Department of Labor, however, issued rules giving broad latitude to employers with fewer than 50 workers to decline such leaves. Doing so effectively exempted 75% of U.S. employees from the right to such leaves (Cochrane, Miller, and Tankersley 2020). Congress also passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), which provided payments of $1,200 per adult for individuals whose income was less than $99,000 and

market family ideology was the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA 1993). The FMLA provides for twelve weeks of caretaking leave on the birth or adoption of a child or to care for family members with serious health issues. But even this law reflects the far-reaching effects of free-market family ideology. The twelve weeks of leave that the FMLA put in place is unpaid, and, even then, only about half the workforce has access to it. And even this minimal set of protections triggered significant political opposition. The proposed legislation lingered in Congress for nine years before it was passed. After Congress finally passed it in 1991 and 1992, it was vetoed both times by George H. W. Bush on the ground that he "strongly objected . . . to the federal government mandating leave policies for America's employers and work force." Instead, he asserted, the issue should be left to private negotiation between employees and employers (Bush 1990, n.p.). The legislation was finally signed into law by President Clinton in 1993.

B. *Forces Enabling the Rise of Free-Market Family Ideology*

The rise of free-market family ideology, and its call for removing government from the family-market relationship, were prompted by very different forces than those that catalyzed the rise of welfare-state ideology a century before. That earlier ideological shift had been prompted by Americans seeking to close the gap between the existing ideology's promise that the market would deliver to families and the flawed realization of that promise. During the era in which free-market family ideology arose, need still existed for government action to safeguard the economic wellbeing of families from market forces, particularly given the increased unemployment of the 1970s, the increased wage insecurity beginning in the 1970s, and the drop in real wages for non-professional workers in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the fact that rising numbers of mothers were working paid jobs called for broadening government's role still further to ensure that children received high-quality daycare. Given these circumstances militating in favor of expanding the welfare state, what forces prompted the shift toward free-market family ideology?

I suggest that two forces in the last third of the twentieth century played critical roles in the rise of free-market family ideology. The first of these forces was institutional, in the development of an exceedingly well-funded right-wing network dedicated to amplifying anti-government messages. The second force was ideological, in the form of a rising strand of US racism that associated welfare benefits with Black families. These two forces became intertwined as actors from the right-wing network used racially coded tropes to argue against the worth of both recipients of government benefits and the government programs themselves. Ultimately, acceptance of these arguments undermined support for the welfare state.

1. Libertarian Think Tanks and Foundations

A network created by wealthy conservatives seeking to popularize anti-government ideology played a large role in promulgating free-market family ideology. As Jane Mayer described, in the late 1960s and 1970s, wealthy libertarians and business interests became concerned that they were losing the war of ideas to pro-government liberals. Lewis Powell, later Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, declared that the American economic system was "under broad attack," not by a few "extremists of the left," but rather by "perfectly respectable elements of society." (Powell 1971, 2). Powell contended that the

$500 per child under 17 years old—or up to $3,400 for a family of four. Pub. L. No. 116-136, 134 Stat. 281 (2020). And as this essay went to press, Congress was passing a new round of relief payments of $600 per person for income-eligible families.

only way to fight back was for conservatives to "capture public opinion, . . . exerting influence over the institutions that shape it" (Mayer 2016, 117; Powell 1971). Charles Koch put the same idea more simply in 1978: "Ideas do not spread by themselves; they spread only through people. Which means we need a movement" (Mueller et al. 1978, 34).

To address this problem, in the 1970s, Koch and other wealthy conservatives founded and invested heavily in a string of foundations and think tanks, including the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research in order to further principles of small government (Mayer 2016; Rich 2005). Although these organizations are often presented in counterpoint to centrist think-tanks like the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute, those centrist think tanks sought to provide "objective" advice to policymakers (even if their policy recommendations were often liberal). In contrast, these new think tanks saw their goal specifically in terms of promoting conservative ideas. Their central message: "government rather than business was America's problem" (Mayer 2016, 139). Furthermore, although the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute saw their job as largely done once they'd produced their research, the right-wing network viewed selling their ideas publicly as every bit as important, and focused their efforts accordingly (Rich 2005). As Paul Weyrich, co-founder of the Heritage Foundation, stated, "It is a war of ideology, it's a war of ideas, it's a war about our way of life. And it has to be fought with the same intensity, I think, and dedication as you would fight a shooting war" (Hunter 1992, 64).

Charles Murray's book, *Losing Ground*, the chief popularizer of free-market family ideology, was, from its inception to its blockbuster success, one of the networks' biggest accomplishments. Murray was an unknown academic employed in a dead-end job with a private firm before a job application displaying his anti-government leanings caught someone's attention at the Heritage Foundation. Heritage then helped him place an op-ed criticizing welfare programs in *The Wall Street Journal*. After this, the right-wing Olin Foundation—which also provided the funding that made Law and Economics a standard law school course, as well as the start-up money for the Federalist Society organizations at law schools across the country—suggested he turn his op-ed into a book and funded the generous grant that allowed him to work full-time on it. Once it was released, the network helped him publicize the book's message widely ((Jencks 1985; Mayer 2016). As Murray put it, "'It was a classic case of philanthropic entrepreneurship'" (Mayer 2016, 176 (quoting Murray 1982)). Other research reports from this network trumpeted Murray's free-market family themes, and repeatedly treated central claims of free-market family ideology as fact (Feulner 1998; Rector 1992, 1).

2. Racism

Inextricably intertwined with the shift from welfare-state ideology to free-market family ideology was a uniquely American strand of racism. Until the 1960s, poverty wasn't generally associated with race. Certainly many Blacks were poor, but so were many whites: Americans had long absorbed images of white poverty, including in Appalachia during the War on Poverty and in the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. Beginning in the 1960s, though, a perceived link between race and government benefits began to develop (Collins 1998, Edsall and Edsall 1991). This racialization was partly due to the expansion of the welfare rolls in the 1960s, which considerably increased the proportion of African American families receiving AFDC benefits—a result of courts striking down racist rules denying benefits to Black families, and of economic shifts significantly increasing the rate of African American unemployment. Black families never comprised the majority of recipients of AFDC but, because of their poor economic situations, itself a product of racism, they received a disproportionate share of benefits compared to their numbers in the population (Katz 1996). The fact that most white widows had been shifted out of the ADC/AFDC program into the Social Security program a generation before also made it easier to see the mothers receiving AFDC benefits as both African American and morally deficient (Gordon 1994; Hancock 2004).

With the shift in the perceived race of mothers receiving benefits came a massive shift in the perception of these mothers' worthiness for benefits, and ultimately the worthiness of welfare programs themselves. In 1935, Arkansas Congressman Claude Fuller's sentimental speech in favor of passing ADC had evoked a white and deserving mother:

> I can see the careworn and dejected widow shout with joy upon returning from the neighbor's washtub after having received assurance of financial aid for her children. I see her with the youngest child upon her knee and the others clustered by her, kissing the tears of joy from her pale cheek as she explains they can now obtain clothes and books, go to Sunday school, and attend the public school. (Gordon 1994, 254–55)

But as welfare came to be associated with Black mothers, politicians and pundits increasingly depicted recipients in terms of what political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock has termed the "public identity" of the "welfare queen." These mothers were not described as performing the important task of childrearing, but rather as milking the government for benefits. And just as the term "inner city" functioned to denote a certain type of (Black) individual so suffused with pathological behaviors that it was difficult to see them as equal citizens, the invocation of the welfare queen trope signified a Black woman so marked by pathology that disgust was the appropriate sentiment (Hancock 2004). Unlike the white widow described by Congressman Fuller, these mothers were not portrayed as altruistically serving their children's best interests by staying home to care for them; they were depicted as simply too lazy to work. In fact, in this conceptualization, they had baby after baby in order to avoid paid work—"brood mares," as Sen. Russell Long (D-LA) characterized them during Senate hearings in the early 1970s (Baldwin 2010, 4; Edstrom 1967).

Elite actors began to invoke the welfare-queen trope to oppose the AFDC program. Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential nominee in 1964, stated, "I don't like to see my taxes paid for children born out of wedlock. I'm tired of professional chiselers walking up and down the streets who don't work and have no intention of working" (Goldwater 1961, 54). A decade later, Ronald Reagan used the stereotype to oppose AFDC during his run for president when he described a woman who used multiple names to collect welfare, drove around in a Cadillac, and scammed the government out of benefits in order to buy herself luxury goods (*New York Times* 1976).

The conservatives who funded the right-wing networks may or may not have personally held racist beliefs, but the foundations, think tanks, and projects they funded repeatedly invoked racist stereotypes to further their anti-government message. Charles Murray stated explicitly that his theory of a culture of dependency did not depend on the race of families receiving welfare benefits, but the rest of his book made it clear that the disadvantaged people he described were "in general," "blacks" (Murray 1984, 55). By the same token, the Heritage Foundation invoked racially coded stereotypes when it argued that welfare benefits "break[] down the habits and norms that lead to self-reliance, [and] generate[] a pattern of increasing intergenerational dependence" (Sheffield and Rector 2014, n.p.). While Heritage elsewhere strongly pronounced the importance of mothers staying home to raise children and advocated that they receive tax benefits to allow them to do so (in tension with their free-market message) (Feulner 1998), it also pronounced that the "behavioral poverty" of *some* poor mothers, who demonstrated "eroded work ethic and dependency, lack of educational aspiration and achievement, inability or unwillingness to control one's children, increased single parenthood and illegitimacy," made it incumbent for government to prod them into paid work for the benefit of both themselves and their families (Rector 1992, 1).

Ultimately, this racist framing of the AFDC program played a significant role in the US movement toward policy that comported with free-market family ideology. Political scientists have found that voter stereotypes of Black laziness and sexual irresponsibility were the most powerful predictors of support for welfare reform (Gilens 1996; Soss et al. 2003). After welfare reform became law, states with higher percentages of African Americans receiving benefits adopted tougher work requirements, lower time limits, and stiffer sanctions for program violations (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2008).

VI. Conclusion

Contrary to those who suggest that the current US preference for markets over government stems from Americans' longstanding veneration of the free market, this essay has shown that Americans' conceptions of how families should obtain the resources they need have shifted considerably over the course of the nation's history. In contrast to the market-veneration hypothesis, for much of the nation's history, the reigning view was that government should assist families in ensuring that markets provide necessary resources. Insofar as there has been a constant in US economic ideology, it is that the economy should support the wellbeing of families. Accordingly, to the extent that laws modeled on the current free-market family ideology are not delivering on meeting the needs of families' wellbeing—as they are not in the United States today (Eichner 2020)—an opportunity exists for reformers to argue for a return to more active government regulation. To succeed in challenging free-market family ideology, however, reformers must contend with the large megaphone advocating this ideology offered by right-wing advocacy organizations and with racist opposition to welfare-state programs.

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