Title: A Reappraisal of the War on Poverty


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Lesson Description: This lesson offers a reappraisal of the War on Poverty. Using recent scholarship on the subject, it examines the War on Poverty in the larger context of President Johnson’s Great Society, as well as the legacy of the War on Poverty in the 1970s and early 1980s. The main argument of this lesson is that while the War on Poverty was based on a conservative vision of poverty, it nonetheless created radical opportunities for poor people and had a long-lasting effect. Focusing on the War on Poverty and its legacy allows teachers and students to highlight continuities in activism between the Civil Right Movement and the War on Poverty, as well as the Welfare Rights Movement. It provides a more nuanced vision of the 1970s and the 1980s, showing that several programs from the War on Poverty and the Great Society survived during these two decades, despite the conservative antiwelfare rhetoric of the time. Finally, this lesson introduces students to groups of activists who are often less visible in the traditional narrative of activism in the 1960s: low-income women, African-American women, and single mothers on welfare.

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Section I: The intellectual origins of the war on poverty: the contested causes and meanings of poverty.

Argument:
In this section, the students examine the intellectual origins of the war on poverty to understand how the concept of a culture of poverty influenced the Economic Opportunity Act and the programs that emerged from the act. This section highlights how our idea of poverty, and the way we talk about it, is constructed and that it rests on assumptions that are often taken for granted rather than challenged. The aim is to show students that the notion of a culture of poverty was contested from the beginning. The argument is that the War on Poverty, because it rested on the concept of a culture of poverty, was a conservative program, especially because it analyzed poverty as a lack of opportunity rather than as a result of structural economic inequalities (Katz 1989; Quadagno 1994). It also rested on a gendered vision of work and the family. Influenced by Daniel Patrick and his argument about African-American poverty, the War on Poverty sought to restore male breadwinning among the poor. At the same time, showing how the culture of poverty also rested on the ideas of participation of the poor demonstrates that it had radical possibilities that were translated into the Economic Opportunity Act with the idea of “maximum feasible participation of the poor” and the Community Action Programs.

Secondary Sources:
For this section, teachers can use Michael Katz, The Underserving Poor, because Katz explores the intellectual foundations of the War on Poverty, and Jill Quadagno, The Color of Welfare for her discussion on the equal opportunity welfare regime.

Primary Sources:

- Video: extract of the The Poverty Tours (April-May 1964) 1964) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VvZ_vKuY-M&t=523s
  This video shows how President Johnson promoted his War on Poverty. In this video, Johnson tried to appeal to white voters by visiting the Appalachian states, industrial cities like Pittsburgh, PA, and also rural areas where there were a lot of poor white people. It shows that, though the War on Poverty is often thought as a program that targeted black poverty in inner cities, Johnson also had white people and rural poverty in mind.

- Extract from Michael Harrington’s The Other America: http://web.mit.edu/21h.102/www/Primary%20source%20collections/Civil%20Rights/Other_America.htm
  This extract shows students how poverty was perceived and discussed at the time. It introduces them to the idea that poor people lack political organizations of their own. It also shows who the poor people were perceived to be: African-Americans in the cities, as well as poor white people in rural area.

- Extract from the Moynihan Report, especially in Chapter 4, the sections on “The Tangle of Pathology” and “Matriarchy”.
  https://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan%27s%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf
  This source can help the students trace where some of the stereotypes on the black family come from. The aim is to encourage the students to criticize the arguments made by Moynihan and to articulate alternative causes for African-American poverty.
Section II: The Economic Opportunity Act: though a limited program, it catalyzed political activism.

Argument: In this section, the teacher first introduces the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) and shows how the ideas of blocked opportunity and community participation, discussed in the first section, influenced the EOA. The argument about the EOA is that, though the EOA was limited from the start, its stipulation that the poor have “maximum feasible participation” had radical possibilities for the poor because it gave them control of federal money through the Community Action Programs, encouraged their political organization, and it had the potential to challenge local power structures, especially in the South.

The second part of this section discusses the example of the Child Development Group of Mississippi. This section takes the CDGM as an example to illustrate what a Community Action Program was, how it encouraged the political participation of low-income black people, especially black women, and how it provided jobs to black people. The argument is that the CFGM was part of the Civil Rights Movement. In making this argument, we want to challenge the traditional chronology of the Civil Rights Movement, especially the traditional view that sees 1964-1965 as the decline in the Movement. We also want to encourage students to think about how state policies and programs also created avenues for African-Americans to fight for racial equality and economic justice. The example of the CDGM also highlights how many local politicians opposed the CAPs because it challenged their power and, in the case of the CDGM, aimed to end segregation. Finally, the example of CDGM allows us to underline the political participation of black women in the Civil Rights Movement.

Secondary Sources:
For this section, teachers can rely on the introduction to Orleck and Harzirjian’s edited volume The War On Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1980 for their discussion on the implementation of the War on Poverty. They can also refer to Quadagno and Fobes’s article “The Welfare State and the Cultural Reproduction of Gender: Making Good Girls and Boys in the Job Corps” to show how the War on Poverty was at first more concerned with providing job training for men than for women and how Job Corps reproduced a gendered division of labor. Finally, they can make use of Crystal Sanders’s A chance for change: Head Start and Mississippi's black freedom struggle to discuss the CDGM and argue that the CDGM was part of the Civil Rights Movement.

Primary Sources:

This text explains the goals of the Economic Opportunity Act and it shows how the EOA was based on the idea of blocked opportunities. It also underlines how programs like Job Corps were mainly targeted at unemployed men rather than women. Finally, the end of the speech mentions other anti-poverty measures proposed by Johnson. It shows students that the EOA was part of a more capacious series of measures to fight poverty.

This source can be used to show the students some of the criticisms that were made against Johnson and the War on Poverty. In this report, SNCC criticizes Johnson for not spending enough money to fight poverty. This report also illustrates that SNCC was highly critical of Johnson and his anti-poverty efforts. It will help the teacher underline the debates that existed within the black community on the War on Poverty.

- Extracts from oral interviews of Margaret Kibbee and Dorsey White
  http://ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00021415/00001/citation?search=dorsey+%3dwhite
  http://ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00020237/00001/citation?search=food+%3dstamp

These oral interviews show the links between the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty programs in Mississippi. Margaret Kibbee talks about her work for Legal Services and how they would help with Civil Rights Movement projects like voter registration. She also talks about how legal services helped mothers on welfare. Dorsey White discusses his role in the Head Start program. These interviews are directly related to the discussion of CDGM and show how the War on Poverty programs encouraged black people’s activism.

**Section III: Rethinking the War on Poverty beyond the Economic Opportunity Act: the legacy of the War on Poverty.**

**Argument:** The final section starts with the example of Operation Life as an illustration of the long history of the War on Poverty. The aim with this example is to show students that the War on Poverty was not limited to the Economic of Opportunity Act but that the EOA was part of a more important series of antipoverty measures. Operation Life also highlights how the anti-poverty programs created under Johnson’s administration did not end during Nixon’s and Reagan’s administrations, despite severe cuts in the 1980s. Moreover, it provides students with another example of black women’s activism, which shows them that women’s mobilizations in the 1970s were not limited to white middle-class feminists. The example of Operation Life can thus expand their vision of the women’s movement and mobilizations of the 1970s.

In the second part of this section, the teacher gives examples of other antipoverty programs like Medicare and Medicaid and the Supplemental Security Income, and they invite students to think about which anti-poverty and welfare programs were reduced and which ones were not. This discussion highlights the fact that programs serving white middle-class people were not threatened while programs that were perceived to serve poor people and minorities were cut down. Finally, this section ends with the argument that there was a disjunction between the public political discourse of politicians like Nixon and Reagan and the public policies they enacted. Although Reagan drastically cut the funding for welfare programs and other antipoverty measures, he never thought of reducing Social Security, for instance. The point of this discussion is to show how the overly negative public discourse on welfare was developed by Reagan even though he did not dismantle many of the programs created during Johnson’s War on Poverty. In fact, many of these programs continue to be widely accepted today.

**Secondary Sources:**

Teachers can rely on Orleck’s *Storming Caesars Palace* for their discussion on Operation Life. Her study of Operation Life informed this section’s argument on understanding the War on Poverty as part of a larger series of anti-poverty measures. Her book and the volume she edited with Harzirjian’s, *The War On Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1980*, also demonstrate how many War on Poverty programs still exist today and how there was a disjunction between the public and political discourse on welfare and anti-poverty programs.
and the actual enduring legacy of these programs. Orleck and Harzirjian also underline the necessity to reappraise the War on Poverty. Finally, teachers can also rely on Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America by Julilly Kohler-Hausmann to discuss which social programs were reduced and which ones were not.

Primary Sources:

- Videos- Interviews of Ruby Duncan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZu7oTChbCYYw&list=PLKzL_9a6Zmc6LCGFbGuwDHdIWUpZRxg_dJ&index=12
  These videos give students a chance to see who Ruby Duncan was and to hear her explain her story. The series of interviews also provides a long history of the War on Poverty. It challenges stereotypes about poor black mothers on welfare, and it also highlights women’s activism.


These two sources are to be put in conservation with each other because they illustrate the debate on welfare and welfare recipients at the end of the 1970s. President Reagan’s speech provides an example of the negative discourse on welfare and of the stigmatization of the “welfare queen”. The New York Times article shows how Reagan’s characterization of welfare recipients as frauds is based on gross exaggeration and erroneous facts. With these two sources, the teacher invites the students to study how stereotypes on welfare recipients were constructed. Regan’s speech and the New York Times’ rebuttal can also spark a conversation on how President Trump constantly misrepresents undocumented immigrants as criminals and show students how stereotypes like the “welfare queen” – or in Trump’s case the “illegal immigrant” – are constructed and baseless.

Bibliography


