Along the "American Way": The New Deal's Work Relief Programs for the Unemployed

William W. Bremer

The Journal of American History, Vol. 62, No. 3. (Dec., 1975), pp. 636-652.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8723%28197512%2962%3A3%3C636%3AAT%22WTN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0

The Journal of American History is currently published by Organization of American Historians.

Along the "American Way": The New Deal's Work Relief Programs for the Unemployed

WILLIAM W. BREMER

BECAUSE historians have accepted economic innovation as the standard by which to measure the New Deal's accomplishments, New Deal historiography has tended to discount the importance that reformers of the 1930s attached to the psychological effects of many federal programs.[1] Among American social work reformers, for example, stock manipulations and monopolistic business arrangements held less social significance than the traumatic psychic dislocation caused by simple joblessness. Unemployed, a man lost his "self-respect . . . ambition and pride," testified settlement headworker Lillian D. Wald.[2] New Deal administrator Harry L. Hopkins noted, "a workless man has little status at home and less with his friends," a condition which reinforces his own sense of failure. Finally, Hopkins observed, "Those who are forced to accept charity, no matter how unwillingly, are first pitied, then disdained" by society in general.[3]

William W. Bremer is assistant professor of history in Lawrence University.

[1] Many historians stress the idea that the New Deal attacked economic problems head-on by giving more economic power to labor and government and less to business and by initiating limited experiments in income redistribution and deficit spending. See William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), 338-39; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York, 1955), 316-18, 325; Robert H. Bremner, "Poverty in Perspective," John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, Everett Walters, eds., *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1966), 275-76. Other historians have concluded that the New Deal did not curb business' powers markedly, did not redistribute wealth, and did not spend at a rate needed to propel the nation out of the Great Depression. See Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1968), 264, 273, 278; Paul K. Conkin, *FDR and the Origins of the Welfare State* (New York, 1967), 23, 50-52, 69-81.

[2] Lillian D. Wald, *Windows on Henry Street* (Boston, 1934), 231.

[3] Harry L. Hopkins, "They'd Rather Work," *Collier's*, XCVI (Nov. 16, 1935), 7; Harry L. Hopkins, *Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York, 1936), 109.

The antidote for joblessness was not charity but work. United by this belief and led by a group of New York reformers, American social workers campaigned for work relief programs at the local, state, and federal levels of government.[4] William Matthews, who founded New York City's Emergency Work Bureau in 1930, Homer Folks, who directed the legislative fight for the state's Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) in 1931, and Hopkins, who served as executive secretary and chairman of TERA before heading the New Deal's Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Civil Works Administration (CWA), and Works Progress Administration (WPA), espoused the idea that work conserved morale. "It was a habit [the unemployed] liked, and from which they chiefly drew their self-respect," Hopkins explained.[5] In addition to being psychologically valuable in itself, because it focused a person's productive energies and mental talents, work restored his social prestige, raised him in the esteem of his family and friends, and revitalized his self-confidence. "Give a man a dole and you save his body and destroy his spirit," Hopkins once proclaimed; "give him a job and pay him an assured wage, and you save both the body and the spirit."[6]

As Hopkins' statement suggests, the implementation of work relief programs during the Great Depression exemplified the New Dealers' concern with the psychological impact of their policies and programs. If general economic recovery and the physical well-being of the unemployed had been their overriding concerns, then New Dealers might have appropriately supported massive deficit expenditures for direct relief to give jobless people money to support the economy and themselves. New Deal administrators and their social work consultants, however, specifically rejected direct relief, because it threatened to undermine morale.[7] "The receipt of relief without work by an able-bodied person is inevitably humiliating, terribly distressing," argued Folks, "and idleness coupled with dependence [upon public charity] is a thoroughly abnormal experience and

[4] Joanna C. Colcord, William C. Koplovitz, and Russell H. Kurtz, *Emergency Work Relief: As Carried Out in Twenty-Six American Communities, 1930-1931, with Suggestions for Setting Up a Program* (New York, 1932), 15-18; Joanna C. Colcord, "Social Work and the First Federal Relief Programs," *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work* (New York, 1943), 382-94. See also William W. Bremer, "New York City's Family of Social Servants and the Politics of Welfare: A Prelude to the New Deal, 1928-1933" (doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1973), 140-69, 280-82.

[5] Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, 109.

[6] Harry L. Hopkins, untitled address, March 14, 1936, United Neighborhood Houses Papers (Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota).

[7] See Harry L. Hopkins, "Federal Emergency Relief," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, I (Dec. 31, 1934), 211.

strongly tends to demoralization."[8] Work relief preserved "the initiative, the virility, the independence and sense of responsibility in the American people," according to Matthews.[9] Work relief was seen as an "American Way" to achieve these psychological goals, because it made public assistance something earned by work, not granted by charity, and because it thereby infused symbols of respectability into the stream of relief.[10] By employing people in jobs that utilized their skills, by compensating them according to the value of their labor, and by guaranteeing them regular incomes that would insure personal autonomy, work relief drew too upon American traditions of self-help and individual initiative. Thus, it also exemplified the New Dealers' acceptance and reinforcement of traditional cultural norms.

Specifically, the New Dealers' conception of work relief derived from values inherent in a capitalistic ethos and incorporated many of the practices of private employment. Therefore, despite the New Dealers' emphasis on psychological concerns, the history of work relief serves as a case study for their acceptance of capitalism and their proclivity to innovate within the confines of the capitalistic order. In the case of work relief, the New Dealers' desire to preserve the morale of the unemployed eventually collided with their assumption that they must maintain the capitalistic system, on which work relief depended for many of its distinguishing features. If work programs had precisely duplicated conditions of employment in private industry and fully satisfied the psychological needs of the unemployed, then the government would have entered into direct competition with private employers, possibly forcing more severe economic contractions and perhaps undermining the nation's private enterprise system. In addition, the unemployed might have become permanently dependent upon government for work. New Dealers responded to their dilemma by keeping work relief employment less attractive than private employment, thereby protecting private employers against public competition and assuring clear incentives to direct the unemployed back into private industry.

Primarily, however, New Dealers sought to make work relief more attractive than conventional forms of direct relief, which Matthews con-

[8] Homer Folks, "Planning Work Relief," address, June 25, 1931, Homer Folks Papers (Columbia School of Social Work Library). During 1935, the New Deal discontinued federal grants to the states for direct relief. According to Harry Hopkins, New Dealers were "overjoyed to get out of the depressing business of direct relief." Hopkins, "They'd Rather Work," 7. See also Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939* (New York, 1940), 150-51.

[9] William H. Matthews, "Relief Can Be Too Cheap," *Survey*, LXXI (Jan. 1935), 6.

[10] Don D. Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," *Survey Midmonthly*, LXXV (June 1939), 167.

demned as "so unpleasant, so disagreeable, in fact so insulting to decent people that they stay away from the places where it is given."[11] First, the unemployed were subjected to means tests to prove their destitution, a procedure that Hopkins described as fostering the "wholesale degradation of [their] finest sensibilities."[12] Second, direct relief was given in kind, so that others prescribed what the unemployed should eat and wear. Finally, relief investigators intervened in the lives of the unemployed, telling them "where and how they should live . . . [and] how they should order their relationships within the family group, with their relatives, neighbors and friends."[13] Viewed as charity, direct relief bore a stigma derived from traditional assumptions that workless people were personally responsible for their misfortunes and incapable of managing their own affairs.

For two reasons—because the Depression was a disaster that clearly transcended the individual's control and because the vast majority of its human casualties had been self-supporting before 1929—social workers hoped to transform traditional attitudes toward the jobless. To do so, they portrayed jobless persons as victims of untoward circumstances. Matthews depicted them as victimized by "a material progress which has failed to bring a sustained adequacy of life to all those able and willing to work."[14] Moreover, Hopkins declared, "Three or four million heads of families don't turn into tramps and cheats overnight, nor do they lose the habits and standards of a lifetime. . . ."[15] The victims of society's economic collapse, social workers argued, were not moral degenerates nor mental misfits, but normally hard-working and self-sufficient, average Americans. "They don't drink any more than the rest of us," Hopkins claimed, "they don't lie any more, they're no lazier than the rest of us. . . ."[16]

Contending that the unemployed were normal Americans who still valued individual initiative and self-help as personal virtues of the highest order, social workers expressed both the insights that they had gained from working with the jobless and their justification for creating morale-main-

[11] William H. Matthews to Paul Kellogg, Feb. 5, 1932, Survey Papers (Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota).

[12] Harry L. Hopkins, "The War on Distress," Howard Zinn, ed., *New Deal Thought* (Indianapolis, 1966), 152.

[13] Brown, *Public Relief*, 223.

[14] William H. Matthews, *Adventures in Giving* (New York, 1939), 230.

[15] Hopkins, "They'd Rather Work," 7.

[16] Quoted by Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York, 1948), 84. During the 1930s, social work generated a series of studies showing "that the unemployed were like everybody else," that they were "virtuous and wronged," and that their suffering derived, in part, from "thwarted middle-classness." William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, 1973), 145-48, 156-59.

taining work relief programs. The gist of their thinking was that it was unnecessary to alter the attitudes or behavior of normally productive people who avoided charity as the final, degrading proof of personal failure. Rather than further demean relief recipients, public welfare policies would have to be "more considerate of the spirit, the condition, the feelings of the people who come for relief," Folks explained.[17] And because America's unemployed themselves seemed to equate work with personal worth, the idea that every American possessed "a right to work" and a corresponding "right to a job" assumed a place at the forefront of New Deal welfare policies.[18] Providing a justification for work relief in the abstract, however, was only the first step toward establishing it as a program that could meet the psychological needs of the unemployed. Indeed, the social workers' major task was to assure the jobless that they were not charity cases obliged to accept the treatment traditionally accorded individuals who could not or would not fend for themselves.

In an effort to achieve this objective, social workers demanded that the unemployed be freed from the restrictions on personal freedom that accompanied conventional relief systems. Work relief recipients were to be paid wages. "Earning wages conserves morale," Folks argued; "it is a normal experience; it is constructive."[19] Moreover, wages were to be paid in cash rather than in kind, freeing families from constraints upon choice and stimulating their sense of self-sufficiency. As Matthews explained, cash "allow[s] people to shop where they want, holding up their heads and paying their own bills."[20] With the implementation of such policies, social workers believed, work relief would be set on a footing clearly different from that supporting other relief programs, making it possible for the unemployed to retain personal rights and privileges usually reserved for employed persons.

Social workers also demanded that work relief reinforce the sense of personal worth that the unemployed associated with normal employment. Employment on work projects, therefore, was to be offered before the jobless became destitute, in order to avoid the debilitating effects of advanced deprivation as well as the implication that work relief was a masked substitute for charity.[21] Men were to be assigned to projects for which they

[17] Homer Folks, "Home Relief in New York City: A Look Forward and Backward," Dec. 11, 1933, Henry Street Papers (Columbia University Library).

[18] Hopkins, "The War on Distress," 153-54, 158.

[19] Folks, "Planning Work Relief," Folks Papers.

[20] Matthews to Robert F. Wagner, May 13, 1932, William H. Matthews Papers (New York Public Library).

[21] Colcord, Koplovitz, and Kurtz, *Emergency Work Relief*, 142; Matthews to Robert Fechner, April 10, 1933, Matthews Papers.

were physically and mentally suited. They were to be paid wages sufficient to preclude the need for additional relief and at rates that complemented the value of their labor in the normal employment market.[22] Continued employment on work projects was to be conditional upon satisfactory job performance, because this was a fundamental requisite for private employment. "The sooner work relief can be given as nearly as possible the same status as that of work under regular conditions of hiring and discharging," Matthews suggested, "the sooner it will command the respect . . . of the worker . . . [and] the sooner will the indifferent and lazy be sifted out of it. . . ."[23] Finally, work projects had to be useful—useful in the sense that work relief recipients felt that their efforts were well spent, and useful in the sense that other people respected them as contributors to the betterment of the community.[24] If work relief approximated the normal employment experience, social workers contended, then the unemployed would be able to view themselves as productive, responsible members of society, even though their work was supported by public funds.

The thrust of the social workers' demands was to maximize work relief's work aspects and to minimize its relief aspects as much as possible. Every provision that advanced a sense of personal worth and responsibility—cash wages, appropriate work assignments, business-like standards, and useful projects—was considered a step away from the stigma of charity and forward in the direction of conserving morale. Ideally, social workers themselves would "drop out of the picture," Hopkins once suggested, since the highly motivated, able-bodied unemployed did not need their services.[25] Thus social workers hoped to set in motion a program that would carry out their design of psychological uplift without requiring their direct intervention into the lives of the unemployed.

New Deal relief administrators frequently invoked the social workers' work relief ideal as their justification for federal work programs.[26] But the

[22] [New York] State Charities Aid Association and [New York] Department of Social Welfare, "Work as a Means of Unemployment Relief" [June 1931], Herbert H. Lehman Papers (Columbia University Library); Welfare Council of New York City, Committee on the Emergency Financing of Social Work, "Report," July 8, 1932, *ibid.*

[23] William H. Matthews, "These Past Five Years," *Survey Midmonthly*, LXXIV (March 1938), 72.

[24] Welfare Council of New York City, Vocational Guidance and Family Service Sections, "Report to the Coordinating Committee on Agreements Reached at Three Joint Conferences on Work Relief," revised, Sept. 21, 1932, Henry Street Papers.

[25] Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, 114.

[26] See Corrington Gill, *Wasted Manpower: The Challenge of Unemployment* (New York, 1939), 160-61. Hopkins' published speeches and writings consistently drew upon the work relief ideal when describing New Deal policies, as did the writings of Josephine Brown, Arthur Burns, and Jacob Baker.

New Deal came close to achieving that ideal for only a few months during the winter of 1933-1934. In November 1933, confronted by the likelihood that millions of Americans would remain unemployed throughout his first winter as President, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order that enabled relief administrators to create a work program of their own design. Hopkins and his colleagues boldly ignored the established machinery of relief, inviting two million Americans to apply for jobs with CWA without being subjected to means tests and investigations. Moreover, they paid workers the prevailing wage rates of private industry, adopted an hours schedule that resembled the normal working week, and organized self-help and production-for-use projects that utilized developed skills and produced basic consumer goods.[27] In effect, by avoiding relief procedures and by risking competition with private employers, CWA officials offered "real" jobs for work relief. Within weeks after CWA began, however, the President announced its termination.

In general, political pressures figured importantly in determining the fate of New Deal work programs. Recalcitrant taxpayers and budget-minded politicians refused to support costly expenditures for wages, materials, and equipment. Businessmen resisted government competition for surplus labor, contracts, and sales, while their workers feared that work relief would undermine private industry's jobs and wages.[28] New Dealers had to contend with the political reality that the primary concern of privately employed Americans was to maintain their own economic positions. In the case of CWA, however, such adverse political pressures seem to have been ineffective, since the popularity of work relief was at a high peak. When the New Deal reversed course and abandoned CWA, demonstrations were organized to protest Roosevelt's decision, letters poured into the White House and Congress, congressional hearings were called, and a bill was introduced in Congress to extend the life of the program indefinitely.[29] More important, an effective conservative coalition had not yet formed in Congress, business was still on the defensive, and what organized political pressure the New Deal did confront came from the left, which

[27] William Hodson, "A Review of Public Relief—Federal, State, and Local—As It Affects New York City," (Nov. 1933), Henry Street Papers; Hopkins, "The War on Distress," 151-58; Jacob Baker, "Work Relief: The Program Broadens," *New York Times Magazine* (Nov. 11, 1934), 6, 17. FERA also supported self-help and production-for-use projects during 1934.

[28] Nels Anderson, "The War for the Wage," *Survey*, LXXI (June 1935), 164-65; Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 168.

[29] Russell Kurtz, "An End to Civil Works," *Survey*, LXX (Feb. 1934), 35; Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, 50-57; Searle F. Charles, *Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression* (Syracuse, 1963), 46-65.

applauded CWA and urged its continuance.[30] Nonetheless, Roosevelt stuck to his decision to kill the program.

The President's motives were clear: he was influenced by a budget-conscious concern with the cost of CWA, and he feared that the program might "become a habit with the country."[31] But why did Hopkins and other social workers in the administration support this decision? Because they considered CWA an extraordinary measure, introduced temporarily to meet an emergency. "[I]t must be assumed in this office and everywhere else," Hopkins told his staff early in December 1933, "that Civil Works was set up purely as an emergency measure; that there is no implication in this of any permanent policy in the government." The most that might be expected was "a continuance of this thing through the middle of March, on a descending scale after that and out by the middle of May or the 1st of June [1934]."[32] From its beginning, therefore, New Dealers refused to champion CWA as permanent federal policy, and their refusal suggests that the work relief ideal probably violated their own cautious conception of the "American Way."[33] Perhaps their conservative assumptions and beliefs even thwarted later opportunities to free work relief permanently from the constraints of tradition. As late as February 1934, after Roosevelt announced his intention to terminate CWA, Hopkins might have used the public outcry that greeted that announcement to try to change the President's mind. Instead he and his associates retreated quietly to the policies and practices of FERA.

In keeping with traditional relief practices and in contrast to the abandoned CWA policies, both FERA and WPA—which together spanned the critical years from 1933 to 1939—required means tests and investigations to determine eligibility for public assistance.[34] Consequently, throughout the 1930s, social workers continued to be the primary agents through

[30] James T. Patterson, "A Conservative Coalition Forms in Congress, 1933-1939," *Journal of American History*, LII (March 1966), 767; Leuchtenburg, *Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 91-94; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1958), 273-77; Charles, *Minister of Relief*, 60-61.

[31] Quoted in Leuchtenburg, *Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 122.

[32] [FERA-CWA Staff, Minutes] Meeting of Wednesday—December 6th [1933], Harry L. Hopkins Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park).

[33] Robert Sherwood, who sees CWA as "a clean sweep for the Hopkins theories of work relief," suggests that Hopkins and other New Deal relief administrators obeyed the President's order to terminate CWA "with utmost reluctance and deep disappointment." Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, 53, 56. Searle Charles, however, argues more convincingly that "Hopkins and other leading administration officials opposed the suggested expansion of CWA." Charles, *Minister of Relief*, 61.

[34] Necessity prompted the use of means tests and investigations: faced by a volume of unemployment that greatly exceeded the capacity of their program budgets, officials required such devices to insure an allocation of relief moneys to those who needed them

whom work relief was administered. They were called upon to study every aspect of a family's financial situation and were privy to the most intimate details of family life. During the period of FERA, for example, a "budgetary deficiency" approach was used to ascertain appropriate earnings: a family's existing income, if any, was subtracted from a budgeted estimate of its needs, and the difference between those figures became the amount to be earned through work relief.[35] Nor did social workers "drop out of the picture" when standardized earnings replaced budgetary allowances, as happened under WPA, because supplementary relief was still required by the many families whose needs exceeded WPA earnings, and these families remained dependent upon direct relief and the supervision of social workers.[36]

In addition to being bound by traditional relief procedures, FERA and WPA conformed to an unwritten, conservative rule that prohibited government interference with an ongoing capitalistic economy. "Policy from the first was not to compete with private business," Hopkins explained.[37] New Dealers banned construction projects that might take business away from private contractors as well as projects that would involve the government in the production, distribution, or sale of goods and services normally provided by private employers. Projects were restricted to work that "would not otherwise be done," and job assignments had to exclude such fields as manufacturing, merchandizing, and marketing.[38] Within these limits, New Dealers did make a concerted effort to provide work appropriate to the varying skills of the unemployed. In general, however, relief officials were pledged to pioneer a new realm of employment beyond the frontiers of private enterprise.

most. Hopkins, "They'd Rather Work," 7; Brown, *Public Relief*, 158. Under FERA and CWA, some labor unions, professional societies, and veterans' organizations were allowed to "certify" the need of members, thus circumventing means tests and investigations. Later, WPA dropped "follow-up" investigations, but more than 95 percent of its workers were certified through standard relief procedures. Harry L. Hopkins, "F. E. R. A.," *Congressional Digest*, XIV (Jan. 1935), 16; Russell Kurtz, "How the Wheels are Turning," *Survey*, LXXI (Aug. 1935), 227-28; Brown, *Public Relief*, 160-61, 167; Gill, *Wasted Manpower*, 198.

[35] Russell H. Kurtz, "Two Months of the New Deal in Federal Relief," *Survey*, LXIX (Aug. 1933), 286, 289; Arthur E. Burns and Edward A. Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs* (Washington, 1941), 26, 38.

[36] Matthews, "These Past Five Years," 71. Gertrude Springer noted that WPA earnings were based upon a generalized assumption "that all families have the average of 4.1 children, that everyone has average good health, [and] that accidents don't happen. . . ." Gertrude Springer, "You Can't Eat Morale," *Survey*, LXXII (March 1936), 77.

[37] Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, 163.

[38] Harry L. Hopkins, "Social Planning for the Future," *Social Service Review*, VIII (Sept. 1934), 403; Hopkins, "The War on Distress," 157-58.

Furthermore, their ability to make the new frontier of public employment habitable was severely limited by a policy of noncompetitive earnings, designed to keep the government from vying with private business for the labor of the American worker. Indeed, the New Deal was committed to maintain incentives to guide relief recipients back to the settled world of private enterprise, and inferior earnings served as a most effective incentive. Yet relief wages had to be sufficient to sustain not only the bodies but also the morale of the unemployed, who were accustomed to hourly rates paid by private business.[39] The morale-maintaining capacity of high wages was stressed when CWA began paying workers at rates that conformed to the value of their labor in the general employment market. Copying CWA's pattern, WPA classified workers as unskilled, skilled, or professional, adopted a graduated wage scale for each of these categories, and paid workers the prevailing local hourly rates for the type of work they did.[40] These measures were intended to preserve occupational integrity and to emphasize the differing status accorded different kinds of work by a capitalistic economy.[41]

The New Dealers' determination to keep relief jobs and incomes noncompetitive, however, led them to impose maximums on monthly earnings at each level. This policy limited the number of hours a person could work at his prevailing wage, thereby assuring that he could not earn as much as his counterpart in private industry.[42] "I ask you," Hopkins demanded rhetorically, "is it reasonable to suppose that an American worker . . . will reject private employment to remain in such a situation?"[43] By instituting graduated wage scales and prevailing wage rates, on the one hand, and by limiting work hours and total earnings, on the other, work relief administrators essayed a delicate and precarious balancing act. The evolution of the New Dealers' wage-hour formula for keeping relief wages high and relief incomes low, therefore, clearly illustrated their commitment both to make work relief a morale-maintaining program and to protect capitalistic enterprise against public competition.

[39] Baker, "Work Relief," 6; Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 169; Burns and Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs*, 61.

[40] "Employment Conditions and Unemployment Relief," *Monthly Labor Review*, XXXVIII (Feb. 1934), 312-14; Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, 164-65; "Wage Rates," *Survey*, LXXI (June 1935), 176-77; Burns and Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs*, 61-62.

[41] Ewan Clague and Saya S. Schwartz, "Real Jobs—Or Relief?" *Survey Graphic*, XXIV (June 1935), 293-95; Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 167-69.

[42] Gill, *Wasted Manpower*, 161; Baker, "Work Relief," 6.

[43] Harry L. Hopkins, "Employment in America," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, III (Dec. 1, 1936), 106.

Clearly, FERA and WPA provided work, but was it "real" work a was it free of the stigma of charity? The political left attacked New De work programs as hypocritical reforms intended to save capitalism rath than the unemployed, while the right charged them with destroying Ame ican traditions of self-reliant individualism.[44] Neither of these politic factions, however, assessed work relief with as much insight as soci workers outside the New Deal, who understood the work relief ideal a closely observed various programs operating in cities and states across t nation. In their estimation, the New Deal failed on both counts: its wo programs neither offered "real" work that complemented the aspiratio of the unemployed nor eliminated the stigma of charity that undermin feelings of personal worth.

The social workers pointed out that, by retaining conventional reli checks on the unemployed, New Deal work programs departed significan ly from the work relief ideal. The stringent application of means tests d layed assistance until destitution set in, which exposed the jobless to t demoralizing effects of advanced deprivation.[45] Moreover, it scarce seemed plausible that the unemployed could avoid perceiving themselv as "charity" cases, since they were subjected to tests, investigations, an supervision traditionally applied to paupers and other unemployables. Fundamentally, the critics observed, the New Deal did not offer emplo ment in lieu of relief, because it did not guarantee work and jobs as righ afforded every American regardless of need.[47]

Even after a person was accepted for work relief, social workers con plained, he was scarcely assured a job that utilized his physical and ment abilities. Since relief administrators could not establish jobs in competitio with private enterprise, the occupations of individuals such as druggist assembly-line workers, and securities analysts were not sustained by wor programs. Moreover, the New Deal's categories of work were "jerry built" classifications. Bank tellers, real estate agents, insurance salesmer and other businessmen joined physicians, dentists, lawyers, and teachers i the professional category, which qualified them for jobs writing guid books, serving as nurses' aids, teaching immigrants the English language

[44] Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thoug in the Depression Years* (New York, 1973), 85-86; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 317-1

[45] Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 168.

[46] Matthews, "These Past Five Years," 71-72.

[47] Gertrude Springer and Ruth A. Lerrigo, "Social Work in the Public Scene," *Surve* LXXII (June 1936), 166-67; Dorothy C. Kahn, "Conserving Human Values in Publ Welfare Programs," *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work, 1941* (Ne York, 1941), 309, 312-13, 317-18.

and supervising children's playground activities. The unskilled category amounted to a hodgepodge of individuals for whom manual labor was the only common denominator. As a result, barbers, shoemakers, and tailors, along with semi- and unskilled workers such as machine operatives, teamsters, and janitors, were directed to construction projects.[48] Indeed, much of the occupational dislocation that its critics associated with work relief derived from the New Deal's emphasis upon construction.[49] The "very nature [of] the work . . . was outside the workers' experience, if they had any other than that of common laborers," according to a student of WPA's program in Illinois.[50] In fact, a Pennsylvania study disclosed that 61 percent of WPA work assignments were different from the workers' usual occupations.[51]

Social workers belabored the New Deal by questioning the ability of its work programs to maintain morale. Did not inappropriate, unwieldy classifications and arbitrary work assignments destroy subtle distinctions associated with American conceptions of job status? Was not a wheelwright demeaned when he was classified as an unskilled worker and assigned a job as a cement finisher? Did not a sales manager lose respect among his peers when he became a playground supervisor?[52] Why not continue CWA's innovative policy, turning the productive abilities of the unemployed to the advantage of the unemployed by allowing them to provide themselves with essential goods and services? Such a policy would psychologically benefit dentists, barbers, tailors, and others who could pursue their regular work. Even machine operatives might be put to work in idle factories, producing goods needed by the unemployed.[53]

Social workers also criticized WPA's wage-hour formula. Paying men high hourly wages while severely limiting their hours of work, they ob-

[48] Grace Adams, *Workers on Relief* (New Haven, 1939), 310-13, 327-28, 330-33.

[49] Construction work made up 75 to 80 percent of all WPA projects. See Harry L. Hopkins, Radio Address, *Cong. Digest*, XVII (June-July 1938), 177; Harry L. Hopkins, "The WPA Looks Forward: A Statement and a Forecast," *Survey Midmonthly*, LXXIV (June 1938), 198.

[50] Maxine Davis, "On WPA, or Else . . . ," *Survey Graphic*, XXVII (March 1938), 166.

[51] Howard M. Teaf, Jr., "Work Relief and the Workers," *Survey Midmonthly*, LXXIV (June 1938), 199. Teaf also found that 70 percent of all project workers were classified and placed in jobs as unskilled laborers, even though only 17 percent had classified themselves as unskilled workers when they applied for work relief. *Ibid.* In New York City, however, two thirds of all WPA employees were placed in jobs that complemented their normal occupations. Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 168.

[52] In her examination of questions like these, New York social worker-psychologist Grace Adams reached the conclusion that work relief recipients often felt that their skills were unwanted and that the work they did was of little value. Adams, *Workers on Relief*, 273-85.

[53] Anderson, "The War for the Wage," 164-65.

served, imposed idleness upon workers who earned their maximum allotments after only a few days of employment. A highly paid mechanic, for example, earned his WPA "security wage" in one week, leaving him with three workless weeks each month.[54] If it was work that maintained morale, critics argued, then such a policy denied people the morale-sustaining value of regular employment. In addition, skills were not conserved by men who were inactive for long periods of time. The policy encouraged inefficiency, because interrupting a worker's routine made him less productive on the job, and because staggered work schedules undermined continuity on work projects.[55]

In addition to questioning the quality of work provided by the New Deal, social work critics charged that work relief programs were economically inadequate. At no time did they employ more than one third of the nation's jobless people.[56] The vast majority remained dependent upon direct relief, which, after August 1935, was provided by states and localities without the assistance of the federal government. In addition, initially high earning levels collapsed under the pressure of insufficient funding. Within three to four months after the beginning of CWA and WPA, monthly work relief incomes had fallen to the same level as direct relief, which meant that the man who worked for his relief received no more than the man who did not.[57] Moreover, 75 to 80 percent of the workers were employed as unskilled laborers and paid on the lowest wage scale.[58] This fact made the idea of graduated incomes to emphasize job status seem ludicrous, especially since many workers were not pursuing their normal occupations or earning incomes that supported their normal way of living. "The wage paid for [work relief] should be the same for all, irrespective of individual former standards of living or of former occupations . . . ," Matthews protested.[59] Finally, in an economy already characterized by depressed wage levels and straitened personal incomes, the New Deal's policy of noncompetitive earnings relegated work relief

[54] Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 168.

[55] Davis, "On WPA, or Else . . . ," 165; Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 168-69.

[56] Burns and Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs*, 40, 47, 74; Brown, *Public Relief*, 169-70; Gertrude Springer, "Border Lines and Gaps," *Survey*, LXXI (Nov. 1935), 332-33.

[57] Joanna C. Colcord and Russell H. Kurtz, "Demobilization of CWA," *Survey*, LXX (March 1934), 91; Gertrude Springer, "X Equals?" *Survey Graphic*, XXIII (May 1934), 249-50; Beulah Amidon, "WPA—Wages and Workers," *Survey Graphic*, XXIV (Oct. 1935), 494.

[58] "With the WPA," *Survey*, LXXII (May 1936), 147; "WPA, RA, Drought," *Survey*, LXXII (Sept. 1936), 272; Springer, "You Can't Eat Morale," 77.

[59] William H. Matthews, "The Relief Issue: An Inside View," *New York Times Magazine* (Jan. 15, 1939), 20.

recipients to the cellar of subsistence living, which was a fact sufficient in itself to cause doubt that work relief did much to maintain morale.[60]

By the late 1930s, social work leaders like Matthews had become totally disillusioned with New Deal work programs. In his autobiography, New York's pioneer of work relief noted the continuing presence of an "army of the unemployed" still managed by an "army of welfare workers," in spite of the New Deal's promises both to return American workers to regular jobs and to eliminate the stigma of charity. Matthews also believed that, after years of being shuffled from one relief program to another, "many [of the unemployed had] lost the desire to plan and manage their own lives" and had "accepted the role of dependency on government." As he viewed the situation, the New Deal had created a ubiquitous relief "mechanism" that stood "in the way of natural human relations." Between an unemployed man and his work relief earnings stood need tests and investigations that violated his privacy, "made work" that frequently did not utilize his skills, and a wage-hour formula that seldom gave him a decent income on which to live.[61] Matthews articulated the views of many other social work observers, who concluded that the New Deal's complex policies and complicated techniques, in effect, denied many citizens the right to useful public employment at a respectable wage.[62]

It may well be impossible to determine whether or not the New Deal served the psychological needs and maintained the morale of those who were employed in its work relief programs. As a contemporary student of WPA observed, "A clear estimate of the spiritual benefits received from WPA by those whom it supports is [not] easily come by, for it is . . . difficult to weigh such qualities as self-respect, morale, and the maintenance of skills."[63] Nonetheless, it is obvious that New Dealers made a gallant attempt to sustain the unemployed psychologically. Even at poverty levels of support, jobs and cash wages did infuse the stream of relief with morale-preserving symbols of respectability. As Hopkins put it, "the unemployed themselves want work," and the New Deal did create jobs.[64]

[60] Springer, "You Can't Eat Morale," 76; "Relief Must Go On," *Survey Midmonthly*, LXXIV (April 1938), 112. "We let a man on work relief work only as many hours as are necessary to keep himself alive and clothed," New Deal relief administrator Baker once admitted. Baker, "Work Relief," 6.

[61] Matthews, *Adventures in Giving*, 222-31, 238, 243. See also Matthews, "The Relief Issue," 8, 20.

[62] See Kahn, "Conserving Human Values," 309, 317-18.

[63] Adams, *Workers on Relief*, viii.

[64] Hopkins, "Federal Emergency Relief," 211. The appeal that work relief had among the unemployed was indicated by a public opinion poll, which revealed that four out of five people on relief preferred work relief to direct cash relief. See Gertrude Springer, "This Business of Relief," *Survey Midmonthly*, LXXIV (Feb. 1938), 36.

In addition, New Dealers pointed to hundreds of new or refurbished buildings, thousands of miles of freshly paved roads, and countless paintings, plays, and books that demonstrated how productive those jobs had been.

Work relief as applied by the New Deal was, however, a gravely flawed conception. Derived from private industry's experience with rewards systems that manipulated the terms of work to enhance employee morale, work relief remained bound to the conservative assumptions of its business exemplar.[65] It treated the unemployed within the confines of a work-centered culture, emphasizing job status at a time when jobs were dear and the status associated with them a luxury. It reinforced private enterprise's values of self-reliance and individual initiative, values belied by an industrial depression that cost people their jobs regardless of personal merit. And it was expected to achieve the impossible result of eliminating the stigma of charity without simultaneously deterring people from seeking private employment. Taken together, these points reveal the upshot of the work relief ideal: its rewards method of maintaining morale derived from a model of private employment, but that method could not be perfected in public employment without inhibiting the movement of people back into private industry. As a WPA adviser noted in 1939, private employers used a rewards system, because "high morale inevitably leads to enthusiasm for the employing organization and a desire to remain with it"; and that likelihood was antithetical to the New Dealers' commitment to return workers to regular employment.[66]

Could the New Deal have done more to make work relief suitable to the needs of the unemployed? When accounting for the economic conservatism of many New Deal policies and programs, historians often stress the political obstacles that existed independent of New Deal authority and that inhibited major structural changes. They emphasize that the electorate never gave Roosevelt a mandate to transform America. And, as time passed, conservative opposition to the New Deal grew in intensity and influence, forcing New Dealers to seek political expedients that precluded radical innovations.[67] Yet historical arguments that New Dealers accom-

[65] Social workers closely followed innovations in business theory and practice. See Paul Kellogg, "Shapers of Things," *Survey Graphic*, XXVII (Jan. 1938), 16-21; "Profits from Well-Being," *Survey*, LXIII (Oct. 1929), 105. The businessman's approach was central to work relief because it suggested that the collective problem of individual demoralization could be ameliorated through institutional expedients. See Beulah Amidon, "Ivorydale: A Payroll That Floats," *Survey Graphic*, XIX (April 1930), 18-22, 56-57, 61, 64.

[66] Lescohier, "The Hybrid WPA," 169.

[67] Carl N. Degler, ed., *The New Deal* (Chicago, 1970), 23; Jerold S. Auerbach, "New Deal, Old Deal, or Raw Deal: Some Thoughts on New Left Historiography," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXV (Feb. 1969), 21, 27; Otis L. Graham, Jr., ed., *The New Deal: The Critical Issues* (Boston, 1971), 174-75, 177-78.

plished as much as could be expected overlook economically radical and, more importantly, psychologically meaningful programs like CWA, which were achieved and then rejected because of the New Dealers' own cautious conservatism. Although CWA demonstrated the viability of doing without means tests, investigations, budgetary allowances, and noncompetitive work projects, New Dealers willingly cancelled the possibility of making it permanent. Finally, in 1943, when war had solved the problem of mass unemployment, they abandoned work relief altogether.

In trying both to maintain the morale of the unemployed and to avoid competition with private enterprise, New Dealers tried "to live by contrasting rules of the game," which sociologist Robert S. Lynd found to be "one of the most characteristic aspects of our American culture" in 1939.[68] Despite their investment in work relief, New Dealers simply believed that private business was still America's most important institution and that people must "get on" eventually on their own—as did the "Middletown" Americans of their time.[69] "Our aim," Hopkins revealed, is "to supply to industry as many physically strong, mentally alert, skilled workers as we can." Moreover, work programs were never intended to be "a replica of the outside business world," where, New Dealers believed, the unemployed must eventually establish their dignity again.[70] As a consequence, they used work relief as a psychological weapon to fight a delaying action against demoralization and despair, while following an "American Way" that directed the unemployed back into jobs in private industry.

New Dealers never accepted work relief as a permanent national policy. Instead of guaranteeing a "right to work" by instituting programs to offer employment to people who experienced joblessness during good times as well as bad, they developed an unemployment insurance system to preclude the need to assist temporarily unemployed, able-bodied citizens at public expense. For work relief, the stigma of public dependency endured. Perhaps New Dealers even realized that their own intention to provide the unemployed with incentives to return to private employment reinforced the stigma of being "on relief," even when that relief aid was earned. They may have also feared, as did their President, the possibility of foster-

[68] Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge For What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton, 1939), 59.

[69] For an analysis of commonly held American beliefs about unemployment and relief during the Great Depression, see Lynd, *Knowledge For What?* 59-62; Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937), 406-15. See also Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1970).

[70] Hopkins, "Employment in America," 107.

ing dependency by creating an expectation among able-bodied people that the federal government would always provide jobs. Clearly, work relief did not conform fully to the American tradition of self-help, as its critics observed repeatedly. Nor did its New Deal designers ever expect it to fulfill the economic and social aspirations of Americans. It remained more relief than work, more charity than employment.