

Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

In this beautifully written and meticulously researched study, historian Annelise Orleck has accomplished what few scholars have managed: the history of a local, grassroots movement led by poor Black women, interwoven with analyses of national politics and a critique of federal and state social welfare policies that will oblige critics on the both the left and the right to re-assess the War on Poverty. In this compelling narrative, replete with high drama, Orleck punctures holes in deprecating myths about 'welfare queens' and the 'culture of poverty' and instead reveals how welfare mothers created and ran one of the most successful anti-poverty programs in the nation.

White supremacy and the debilitating poverty of the southern sharecropping system combined with the expansion of the World War II defence industry and especially the emergence of Las Vegas as a gambling mecca in the post-war years to fuel the westward migration of Southern Blacks. However, Black women's dreams of the 'promised land' in the 'Mississippi of the West', as Las Vegas was appropriately named by its African American newcomers, quickly crumbled. Black migrants faced western-style Jim Crow housing and job discrimination, becoming trapped in low-wage, literally back-breaking jobs as hotel maids, cooks and kitchen helpers in Las Vegas' expanding tourist industry. Even union membership proved no panacea, for corrupt union officials too often made 'deals' with management (e.g. union pension funds helped build some of Vegas's largest Strip hotels) that did little to mitigate the worst workplace conditions. But the union also offered low-income Black women some of their first political experiences in cross-race alliances and grassroots activism.

Orleck does not shy away from the ill-fated personal choices that some women made; however, she convincingly demonstrates that the major causes of their impoverishment and welfare dependency were not personal failings or the 'culture of poverty', but resulted from structural barriers as well as the discriminatory (and sometimes illegal) practices of employers and public officials. For example, while Ruby Duncan, the book's main heroine, bore seven children in several failed marriages, her placement on a hotel blacklist (after she complained about being forced to work overtime without compensation) followed by an incapacitating workplace injury as a kitchen aid (never-mind workers' compensation which she was eligible for but did not receive) landed her on the welfare rolls, a poverty-trap nearly as formidable as Southern sharecropping. Not only were Nevada's public assistance grants among the lowest in the nation, but by the late 1960s, 47 percent of its welfare recipients were employed, the highest rate in the country. Indeed, Nevada held the distinction of being "the least-taxed state in the nation" (89) and in 1955 was the last state in the country to accept Aid to Dependent Children (more commonly known as 'welfare'). The ultimate blow came in 1971 when Nevada,

which spent less than 2 percent of its GNP on social services (even less than Mississippi), decided to cut its welfare rolls in half without notice to recipients. In response, scores of destitute mothers launched a march and sit-down strike at Caesar's Palace, a key tourist attraction, and on the Las Vegas 'Strip'. The women also forged an interracial alliance among local supporters and attracted Hollywood celebrities to their cause. After a federal judge ruled that Nevada's cutbacks were illegal, the poor received federal funds that the state had previously blocked in order to guarantee a low-wage and subservient labour force for the tourist industry. (One state official even suggested that a welfare mother—who was white—take a job as a prostitute!)

Drawing upon federal financing as well as private foundation grants, low-income Black women established a wide range of social services including a day care center, job training programs, a health clinic, low-income housing and economic development projects. Even more remarkably, the women ran the programs themselves. They also deployed ingenious if unconventional lobbying strategies and entered electoral politics. Duncan even attracted the attention of President Jimmy Carter who hoped their organization, Operation Life, might become a model for well-run, cost-efficient and successful welfare programs.

Orleck reveals how a national conservative backlash, driven almost exclusively by partisan Republican politics and ideology, undermined the efforts of Duncan and her cohorts. Cutbacks of federal aid during the Reagan-Bush years are well-known, but Orleck also uncovered more insidious attacks on social welfare programs. For example, Duncan was investigated for over five years on alleged financial mismanagement (a common form of harassment that decimated scores of anti-poverty programs nationwide). Although a federal judge finally threw out the charges, Operation Life was ineligible during the investigation to apply for most federal funds. In another more devastating attack, Nevada, with backing from Washington, implemented new licensing standards making the low-income women ineligible to run the very programs they had set-up and operated for two decades. Republican appointees replaced the women in Operation Life's few remaining services and today the Elks Club occupies their building. As Orleck persuasively argues, the War on Poverty did not simply fail as conventional wisdom insists; rather, some of its most successful programs were deliberately eviscerated.

Orleck's captivating account of the collective accomplishments of those too-often demonized by mainstream society—welfare mothers—offers crucial lessons about government programs and federal responsibility for the poor. Her study reminds us that impoverished residents in particular should be included in formulating solutions to poverty, a lesson that might well be applied to Hurricane Katrina survivors. We marvel at the women's ability to accomplish so much with so little; yet Orleck does not romanticize the decades of hardship that took their toll on low-income women and their families. One cannot help but wonder what dreams were deferred, what talents remained undeveloped in lives so circumscribed

by poverty, inferior education and race and sex discrimination at nearly every turn. In the wake of President Clinton's so-called "welfare reform," which Orleck notes ended FDR's "belief that a civilized society provides a safety net for its poorest and most vulnerable", and in light of increasing privatization of functions once deemed the responsibility of government, policy-makers, politicians and activists would do well to acquaint themselves with the history of a federally subsidized program that worked (305). For these and so many more reasons, Orleck's first-rate study is a must-read, not just for scholars, but for all those concerned with gender equality as well as racial and economic justice.

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Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

*Soul Power* is an intriguing book, and contributes to a broader historical understanding of the U.S. New Left which does not privilege white student activism and posits a critique of empire as formative rather than a late development. It functions as a series of case studies: a 1960 delegation to Cuba which shaped the perspectives of three figures key to Black Power (Harold Cruse, LeRoi Jones, Robert F. Williams); the cultural activism of the Local 1199 union of hospital workers in New York city from the late 1950s on; the development of first Newsreel and then Third World Newsreel as radical film collectives; Angela Davis' praxis as a black Marxist; the L.A. Rebellion of black and African filmmakers in the 1970s, many of whom (Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima) remain important figures today.

Cynthia Young posits that each of these instances or institutions contribute to the development of a 'United States Third World Left', parallel to but distinct from various other movements like the white student left and the Black Power movement. This is a challenging proposition, since Third-Worldism in Young's account is notably nonracialized—several of the groups she studies are white-led, like 1199 and Newsreel, so what matters is not experience or even standpoint but discourse.

Some of these investigations are more innovative than others. Those focusing on institutions like 1199 and the filmmakers, which have rarely been integrated into the larger 'movement', underline the importance of cultural work, and the New Left's complex web of residual and emerging formations. Conversely, Young's treatments of familiar figures like Angela Davis or Robert F. Williams act mainly as ballast for her larger argument, rather than making original claims. In large part, this is due to her reliance on a few published works by