

**Robin H. Rogers-Dillon.**

**The Welfare Experiments: Politics and Policy Evaluation.**

Stanford University Press, 2004, 272 pp.

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The 1996 US welfare reform is widely seen as one of the most radical social policy reforms of the late 20th century. Embedded in conservative ideas regarding welfare dependency and work incentives, this legislation terminated the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with a block grant program known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). As its name suggests, this federal legislation imposed time limits upon most individuals enrolled in state social assistance programs. According to TANF regulations, most beneficiaries cannot stay on welfare for more than two consecutive years, or for more than five years in total during their lifetime. For this reason, the 1996 reform ended the idea that social assistance represented a formal “entitlement.” (Weaver, 2000)

Much has been published about the political genesis of this far-reaching and controversial reform. In her book *The Welfare Experiments*, Robin H. Rogers-Dillon (City University of New York) argues that one of the most crucial factors that explain both the timing and the content of the 1996 reform is the multiplication of federally-approved welfare experiments during President Clinton’s first mandate. Related to the idea that the fifty states constitute “laboratories” for policy innovation, these initiatives gained much media exposure because they were viewed as attempts to “test” debated policy alternatives like time limits. According to Rogers-Dillon, the scientific rhetoric about experimentation and policy evaluation surrounding such initiatives masked the true political motives behind them. For many state decision-makers, policy experimentation and scientific evaluation provided a technocratic cover for their attempts to weaken the institutional legacy of AFDC and to promote an alternative model of social assistance that prominently featured time limits. But, as the author shows, the time limits that most welfare experiments of the mid-1990s promoted involved the termination of financial assistance *without* the allocation of public employment to deserving beneficiaries unable to find a job. This model of time limits contrasted with President Clinton’s welfare proposals, which would have created an obligation on the part of the public sector to find jobs for beneficiaries who unsuccessfully attempted to leave welfare rolls. By allowing states to implement modest yet highly visible programs that challenged its reform vision, the Clinton administration unintentionally helped conservative opponents, who used such programs to make a case for benefit termination time limits. Not waiting for social scientists and policy experts to draw lessons from state welfare experiments, conservatives claimed that the implementation of these programs showed that benefit termination represented a realistic policy alternative that could work across the country. Because media outlets seldom criticized that view, state welfare experiments became a Trojan horse for conservative measures that few policy-makers would have found acceptable a few years earlier. This is why Rogers-Dillon argues that apparently modest welfare experiments, far from creating room for detached policy evaluation, served as legitimizing tools for conservative ideas whose proponents did not wait for detailed assessments before claiming “success.” The in-depth analysis of Florida’s Family Transition Program provides ground to that claim while showing how administrative manipulations can make concrete policies diverge from

formal legislative regulations. Overall, the author rightly argues that her empirical analysis of welfare experiments underlines the absence of strict separation between politics and policy evaluation. According to her, social scientists interested in policy evaluation should not attempt to extract learning processes from the political context in which they are rooted. Policy evaluation is at least in part related to political struggles, and those involved in assessing the social and economic performances of social programs should constantly keep this inescapable reality in mind. This is especially true in the United States, a country where technocratic optimism is a strong intellectual tradition that Rogers-Dillon and others trace back to the Progressive Era and, more recently, Johnson's Great Society. Ironically, as the author points out, the illusion of purely detached policy evaluation can empower political actors who seek to hide their ideological crusade behind the veil of objective experimentation and policy evaluation. The welfare debate during Clinton's first mandate certainly provides ground to that claim.

Based on direct observation, surveys, content analysis and dozens of interviews, *The Welfare Experiments* is a well-researched book that offers new insights about the politics of social policy reform in the United States. Yet, the book offers more than that: it includes a critique of the technocratic spirit that blinds many experts and social scientists involved in the business of policy evaluation. Moreover, at the theoretical level, this book contributes to the scholarly debate over institutional change in public policy. For example, the empirical material analyzed in *The Welfare Experiments* provides ground to recent arguments about policy change that are not discussed in the book. According to Kathleen Thelen, for example, two main mechanisms may explain institutional change: layering and conversion. On the one hand, layering involves "the grafting of new elements onto an otherwise stable institutional framework. Such amendments (...) can alter the overall trajectory of an institution's development." (Thelen, 2004: 35) On the other hand, conversion is about adopting new goals or bringing in new actors that end up altering the function or the role an institution performs in society. To a certain extent, the welfare experiments analyzed by Rogers-Dillon represent forms of layering and conversion, as these programs were created alongside AFDC (layering) while transforming the role of existing welfare bureaucracies (conversion). More generally, *The Welfare Experiments*, like Thelen's work, points to the incremental nature of policy change. This is true because even the path-breaking 1996 welfare reform is described in part as the product of smaller, gradual transformations taking place at the state level. In her analysis, Rogers-Dillon may exaggerate the meaning of the welfare experiments of the mid-1990s. This is predictable, as scholars tend to overemphasize new arguments that distinguish their contribution from the existing literature. Despite this, *The Welfare Experiments* is an original book about policy change and the illusions of scientific evaluation that even students who have little interest in US politics and policy should read as a reminder that politics always lies behind technocratic discourse.

### Works Cited

Thelen, Kathleen (2004), *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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