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Marieke de Goede

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# Ideology in the US welfare debate: neo-liberal representations of poverty

**Marieke de Goede**

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

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**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses the political ideologies underlying the welfare debate in the US. It argues that conservative arguments and rhetoric, that were in the margin of the political debate in the early 1980s, have been naturalized in the mainstream discussion on welfare and poverty in the US. A sample of 11 articles taken from the relatively liberal news magazine *Newsweek* is compared with conservative ideology concerning welfare and poverty to illustrate this argument. This transformation of the welfare debate is placed in the broader context of a changing political climate and dominant ideology, in which the socially inclusive 'Keynesianism' (or corporate-liberalism) has been increasingly replaced by the neo-liberal ideology of unfettered market forces. The conservative argument concerning poverty which stresses cultural factors and induces victim-blaming is part and parcel of the neo-liberal discourse of individualism and laissez-faire economics.

**KEY WORDS:** dominant ideology, neo-liberalism, *Newsweek*, poverty, US welfare debate, welfare discourse

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*The world is increasingly populated not by cheerful robots but by some very angry human beings. As things stand, there are very few intellectual resources available to understand that anger, and hardly any political ones (at least on the left) to organise it. (Ellen Meiskins Wood)*

## INTRODUCTION

In an era when free-market capitalism seems all pervasive and, in fact, a natural state of affairs, the call for a critical left is more urgent than ever, according to Ellen Meiskins Wood (1995a: 11–12, 1995b: 1). Contemporary US liberalism,<sup>1</sup> however, seems void of a true critical perspective on society in general and free-market capitalism in particular. After more than a decade of political defeat and popular discrediting, US liberalism has lost its theoretical premises as well as popular appeal or even popular legitimacy. In this respect, William Plowden describes how 'liberal' was made a 'dirty word' during George Bush's presidential campaign of 1988 (1991: 411). As US liberals currently attempt to re-enter the political debate, they frequently accept the conservative diagnosis of what is wrong with

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American civil society as the basis of their arguments.<sup>2</sup> US progressives now occupy a passive position in a public debate in which reaction against conservative theoretical claims and empirical data is prominent. In this position, liberals accept terms of the debate as set forth by US conservatives, even when proposing different policy measures.<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall et al. (1978a) discuss the problems inherent in this passive position. In public debate, the primary definition of a social problem is of extreme importance, they point out, because:

the primary definition *sets the limit* for all subsequent discussion by *framing what the problem is*. This initial framework then provides the criteria by which all subsequent contributions are labelled as 'relevant' to the debate, or 'irrelevant'—beside the point. (p. 59, original emphasis)

By accepting the conservative primary definition of topics for public debate, progressives reproduce and strengthen certain concepts of state and civil society that were hitherto exclusive to the right wing. Stuart Hall concludes:

Opposing arguments are easy to mount. Changing the terms of an argument is exceedingly difficult, since the dominant definition of the problem acquires, by repetition, and by weight and credibility of those who propose or subscribe it, the warrant of 'common sense'. (1982: 81)

This article presents an inquiry into the public debate concerning welfare and poverty in the US and the political ideologies underlying this debate. It is especially concerned with the position of American liberals in this debate and assesses whether or not this position is passive in the sense described earlier, by addressing the following two questions: which images and arguments have presently acquired the 'warrant of common sense' in the public debate concerning welfare and poverty, and where do these specific arguments originate or with which political ideologies are they associated? Second, this article discusses the role of the mainstream media in the production and reproduction of these specific images and arguments concerning welfare and poverty and thus of the underlying political ideology.

We address these questions in an empirical manner, with the help of critical discourse analysis. This empirical research consists of the analysis of a number of opinion articles as well as news reports concerning welfare and poverty that appeared in the US weekly news magazine *Newsweek* in 1993, 1994 and 1995. We compare the content of these articles with conservative arguments and rhetoric on these issues, in order to be able to conclude to what extent typical right-wing notions have been internalized in the mainstream discussion and have acquired the 'warrant of common sense'. As *Newsweek* is considered in the US a moderate but left-of-centre news magazine, it is the appropriate study material to analyse whether US liberalism indeed proceeds from the terms of the debate as set forth by conservatives.

This article proceeds from a critical theoretical perspective in which ideology, discourse and power are firmly connected. We trace this connection in the US welfare debate, starting with the assumption that there is a specific poverty discourse in the US that is ideological as well as political.

This specific discourse consists of the construction of arguments and images that have become detached from historical developments. As Michael Katz puts it in his historical study of the American poverty debate:

poverty discourse has maintained only a tenuous relation to the origins and demographics of poverty and the results of public policy. How we think and speak about poverty and what we do (and don't do) about it emerges as much from a mix of ideology and politics as from the structure of the problem itself. (1989: 5)

The first section of this article sets out a theoretical framework which connects discourse, power and ideology and forms the basis of the empirical analysis. The second section studies in detail current conservative theory and discourse concerning welfare and poverty. Next, the empirical analysis is carried out. Section three is devoted to the analysis of the *Newsweek* articles. The conclusion sums up the findings from the discourse analysis and relates these findings firmly to the theoretical issues discussed in this introduction and in the first section.

#### THE AMERICAN WELFARE DEBATE IN A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This section outlines a critical theoretical framework which connects discourse, ideology and power.<sup>4</sup> Most critical scholars in the field of discourse and ideology proceed from the assumption that a certain 'dominant ideology' exists, a mainstream interpretative framework of events that is conducive to the interests of a certain ruling class or elite group. As Golding and Middleton point out, the discussion concerning the dominant ideology thesis is a highly precarious one and "... sociologists, including those interested in the mass media, spend much of their time running away from a crude but tempting fable called conspiracy theory" (1982: 112). However, a subtle and useful theory concerning the influence of dominant groups in society on general beliefs and perceptions has been set up by neo-Gramscian social scientists.

#### *Ideology and discourse in a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework*

Neo-Gramscian scholars argue that in order for a capitalist organization of society to be viable, the groups profiting most from this organizational form—or elite groups—must seek hegemony over society. Hegemony in Gramscian sense is a fusion of coercion and consent, meaning that domination of a certain group within society does not rest primarily on the threat of violence (coercion) but on the active consent and participation of subordinate social groups. It is in the creation of consent that ideas and ideology gain prominence in the theoretical debate. For in order to attain hegemony, a dominant group must phrase its specific class interests in terms of universal interest, transcending class boundaries. Power of a certain ruling class is thus exercised not through force or violence but "... through an ongoing transformation of moral values and customs in civil society" (Hall et al.,

1978b: 47). As neo-Gramscian International Relations scholar Stephen Gill puts it: “bourgeois hegemony, at least in the most developed nations, necessitates a relatively consensual order, with political debates anchored in the acceptance of the agenda and the key ideas of the bourgeoisie” (1990: 47).

When power of dominant groups in society becomes the power of agenda-setting as well as the power “... to condition the way individuals and groups are able to understand their social situation, and the possibilities of social change” (Gill and Law, 1988: 74), discourse becomes one of the main sites of struggle. Critical linguist Norman Fairclough puts it as follows: “... the exercise of power in modern society is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language” (1989: 2). In Gramscian theory, ideology always originates with the real world of relations of production.<sup>5</sup> Thus discourse, in a Gramscian sense, is “... one site of social interaction which is decisively shaped by relations of work and conflict, i.e. is shaped by class struggle” (McNally, 1995: 14).<sup>6</sup> In contrast to postmodern discourse analysts, for whom “... the text and its relationship to other texts [...] replaces the analysis of the relationship between text and a given social reality” (Meinhof, 1994: 88), we believe that discourse cannot be analysed in isolation from this social reality and language cannot be considered detached from context and meaning. Struggle in discourse is struggle over meaning and over the representation in language of the real world of production, which is eloquently expressed by Stuart Hall:

... the more one accepts that how people will act will depend in part on how the situations in which they act are defined, and the less one can assume either a natural meaning to everything or a universal consensus on what things mean—then, the more important, socially and politically, becomes the process by means of which certain events get recurrently signified in particular ways. (1982: 69)

In periods of hegemonic rule of one class configuration over subordinate groups, a consensual order exists in society and public discussion (except perhaps in the radical left-wing press or radical academic circles) is confined within certain limits, proceeding from a set of shared assumptions that are rarely questioned or made explicit. Noam Chomsky speaks in this regard of ‘The Bounds of the Expressible’. Within these boundaries, he argues, public discussion is possible and even encouraged:

Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites, and it should furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns. (1989: 48)

The role of the media is one of agenda-setting and reinforcing the bounds of the expressible. This does not mean that journalists are consciously fulfilling this role, nor that the press is firmly in the hands of the ruling classes. While journalists generally regard themselves as “reflecting rather than

forming public opinion” (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 147), the Gramscian concept of hegemony in which subordinate groups give active consent the socioeconomic system explains, according to Hall,

... how media institutions could be articulated to the production and re-production of the dominant ideologies, while at the same time being ‘free’ of direct compulsion, and ‘independent’ of any direct attempt by the powerful to nobble them. (1982: 86)

In analysing TV news reports, Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1987) proceeds from a theoretical framework that conveys exactly this role upon the media. Journalists, argues Jensen, are often constrained by social norms that prohibit them from approximating objective reality. Jensen refers to a certain ‘news ideology’ that sets boundaries on which events will be reported and in which manner. He concludes: “... through the discourses of television news a new version of the same social model is constructed every day, contributing to the maintenance and perpetuation of a political and economic order” (1987: 8).

### *Comprehensive concepts of control*

What is missing so far from our theoretical account of ideology and the media is an element of change. Jensen’s conclusion that a new version of the same social model is constructed every day through news media implies that change of this social model is virtually impossible. However, change is exactly our area of interest, as we are concerned with tracing a *shift* in the boundaries of public discourse. Kees van der Pijl provides a broad model of change in which economic structures, interest articulation of elite groups and political action are integrated. Hegemonic rule of society by a class configuration requires, as we have noted, the consent of the larger part of the population. According to van der Pijl, this consent will be created through a *comprehensive concept of control* which is “... a strategy of capital accumulation elevated to the level of overall class strategy and accordingly phrased in terms of ‘general’ interest” (1989: 148). This concept of control combines a particular organization of the relations of production with a dominant ideology. Thus, while this organization of society is in the interest of a certain dominant class fraction, it is, by means of the dominant ideology, generally accepted as being in the general interest of all classes in society. Structural changes in the sphere of production (the economic or financial spheres) are inevitably coupled with conflicts within as well as between capitalist class fractions, which will translate into political struggle. New forces will articulate and propagate a new model of organization of society. If this new model can be elevated to the level of a comprehensive concept of control and thus be generally accepted as a universal truth rather than an ideological program, a new hegemony will be attained.

To make this rather theoretical discussion more concrete, we can think of Keynesianism and the welfare state as belonging to a comprehensive concept of control which was widely accepted as ‘the way the world works’

two or three decades ago. This particular organization of society combined mass production in assembly-line factories with a public social safety net to compensate for the negative workings of the free market. This model has been increasingly questioned since the early 1970s and has been replaced by a new concept, called neo-liberalism, that:

... stresses the market as the sole arbiter of social life ... This new concept in turn is broadly seen as an almost natural, self-evident truth rather than as the ideological program of particularly interested financial specialists and individual entrepreneurs. (van der Pijl, 1995: 5)

It is thus that the vital connection is played out between power, discourse and ideology.<sup>7</sup> For the articulation of a new concept of control implies a shift in the boundaries of public discourse as hitherto debated notions form part of a shared set of assumptions or 'common sense'. For instance, while Keynesianism questioned the beneficial workings of the free market and in fact buttressed the negative consequences of the free market with social policies, it has become currently 'common sense' that the free market must be the sole organizer of life because its consequences are either invariably beneficial or at least impossible for human agency to alter in a positive manner (the idea of free-market capitalism as 'the best of all possible worlds'). Similarly, Göran Therborn (1980) points out that ideologies are not conceived in a historical vacuum but will always be produced and reproduced within a certain socioeconomic and political context. Studying this context, he stresses, is the first step in understanding generation of new ideologies or change in existing ones. Regarding change in the 'dominant ideology' or what we have called the comprehensive concept of control, Therborn states: "Ideologies change and new ideologies emerge and spread when the old matrix of affirmations and sanctions changes through contradictions and other, disarticulating developments" (1980: 47). Thus, as the Keynesian consensus began to wither in the early 1970s due mainly to economic instability, ideological change accelerated.

The media play an important role in this transition of concepts of control, which flows directly from the importance of language and discourse (the struggle over meaning and representation) in modern power struggle. For it is in the media that certain ideas and ideologies can be elevated to the level of 'common sense' both through discursive strategies and by repetition and weight given to a topic. This process can be referred to as 'naturalization' of representations of reality, i.e. these representations become part of a set of generally undebated assumptions at the basis of all public debate. It is important to understand, as Fairclough points out (1989: 107), that once ideological representations become naturalized, these representations appear to lose their ideological character: "Thus when ideology becomes common sense, it apparently ceases to be ideology; this is in itself an ideological effect, for ideology is truly effective only when it is disguised". This is exactly what Van der Pijl has in mind when saying that a comprehensive concept of control must by definition be accepted as a universal truth rather than as an ideological programme.

The welfare debate in the US is one site of struggle in the transition of

concepts of control, as the market model or neo-liberal concept of control entails a specific concept of welfare and poverty that is quite distinct from its Keynesian counterpart. A neo-liberal understanding of welfare and poverty was first formulated in extremity by US conservatives in the early 1980s. Although this extremity has subsided somewhat, this initial conservative ideology has to a large extent established focus, arguments and rhetoric of the neo-liberal ideology on welfare and poverty. In the third section of this paper we examine whether this neo-liberal understanding of welfare and poverty has been naturalized by the liberal but mainstream news magazine *Newsweek*.

### *The structure of ideologies*

All that is left for us to incorporate into our theoretical framework before we can start to make our analysis more concrete, is a short sketch of the structure of ideology and how people are influenced by it. As such a 'sketch' could easily generate several books by itself, we limit it here to a few remarks relevant to our previous discussion.

Like Eagleton, we consider ideological discourse as a "... complex network of empirical and normative elements, within which the nature and organisation of the former is ultimately determined by the requirements of the latter" (1991: 23). Thus, we assume that people, as members of society, have internalized structures of ideology in which certain norms and values will influence their interpretation of events or empirical evidence. Van Dijk calls this the sociocognitive aspect of ideologies, as it intermediates between personal opinions and perceptions and social events (1995: 245). This structure of norms and values shared by group members may be called a schema, which is "... a cognitive structure of organised prior knowledge [...] that guides the processing of new information and the retrieval of stored information" (Johnston Conover and Feldman, 1982: 96). Such schemata need not be and probably rarely are completely internally consistent and coherent. Although we assume that ideologies concerning welfare and poverty combine a general philosophy concerning human nature with economic principles and specific political policy proposals regarding the poor, this consistency will probably rarely be reflected in people's opinions, except maybe in opinions of very politically engaged individuals. Van Dijk summarizes this argument as follows:

... ideological frameworks need not be very precise, well-organised or consistent. They may be fuzzy, vague, confused and inconsistent, as long as they function (more or less efficiently) in monitoring social interpretation and interaction. (1995: 246)

The media can influence such group schemas by different strategies. We have mentioned naturalization as a powerful strategy to convey (political) ideologies. In addition, the media have the power of agenda-setting, which implies that regular focus on a specific topic in the media will put this topic on the agenda of social concern. In addition, by making a certain argument or association (for instance, as we show later, between welfare and single,



black mothers) repetitively, the media may influence people's schemata to regard this association as natural and inevitable. Thus, as van Dijk points out, while news reports do not necessarily prescribe elite opinions, they do construct "... the general outline of social, political, cultural and economic models of societal events" (1988: 182), while precluding alternative interpretative frameworks of events and thereby constructing and influencing schemas shared among the public at large.<sup>8</sup>

#### CONSERVATIVE THEORIES ON WELFARE AND POVERTY

In order to be able to trace conservative arguments and rhetoric concerning welfare and poverty in the *Newsweek* articles analysed in the next section, we need to have a detailed understanding of those arguments and rhetoric. In the early 1980s, the poverty debate in the US was strongly influenced by several conservative scholars, of whom George Gilder and Charles Murray were undoubtedly the most important ones. Both have published forceful arguments against the modern welfare state. George Gilder published *Wealth & Poverty* in 1981 and it became '... what stands as the comprehensive theology of the Reagan era' (Phillips, 1990: 62). Charles Murray published his attack on the US welfare provisions, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980*, in 1984. The influence of these publications was large, not so much for the strength or infallibility of their arguments but more so for the timing of publication as well as the promotion skills of conservative politicians and organizations. As the new Reagan administration was looking for a justification of its conservative social policies, Gilder and Murray provided ammunition in a political battle. Michael Katz says of Murray's book: "Murray's argument fitted the Reagan agenda perfectly. At precisely the appropriate moment for it, it provided what appeared to be an authoritative rationale for reducing social benefits" (1989: 152). We review schematically the reasoning of these conservatives and the lexicon connected to it.

#### *The law of unintended consequences*

The main reason why, according to Gilder and Murray, the liberal welfare state can never work, is the so-called 'Law of Unintended Consequences'. This law states that government programmes have often promoted and perpetuated just those conditions they sought to eliminate. By institutionalizing a system of transfer payments, the poor get paid to be poor and have no incentive to alter their conditions. Murray puts it quite bluntly: "It appears that any program that would succeed in helping large numbers of the unemployed will make hardcore unemployment a highly desirable state to be in" (1984: 217). Similarly Gilder argues: "... the current poor [...] are refusing to work hard ... [They] choose leisure not because of moral weakness, but because they are paid to do so" (1981: 87–8). Poor people are thus

forced into a situation of dependency, argues Gilder, that in the long run prohibits them from working themselves up the social ladder and becoming respected members of society. This reasoning allows the conservatives to portray themselves as taking the interests of the poor at heart. Gilder asserts this in the preface to *Wealth & Poverty*:

Yet today, in a great historic irony, [members] of the New Right have become the best friends of the poor in America, while Liberalism administers new forms of bondage and new fashions of moral corruption to poor families. (1981: XII)

Only the free market, Gilder and Murray argue, is able to provide the proper incentives and disincentives to the poor and we should interfere with it as little as possible. "In order to succeed", claims Gilder, "the poor need most of all the spur of their poverty" (1980: 118). Murray therefore radically proposes the abolition of the entire welfare system:

The proposed program, our final and most ambitious thought experiment, consists of scrapping the entire federal welfare and income-support structure for working-aged persons ... I am hypothesizing, with the help of powerful collateral evidence, that the lives of large numbers of poor people would be radically changed for the better. (1984: 228–9)

However, in a compassionate mood, he proposes to retain a system of temporary and subsistence-level unemployment benefits for victims of short-term swings in the economy. These conservatives are great believers in and proponents of private charity. Charity is able to help the poor without creating a prolonged situation of dependency because it treats financial help not as a human right but as an emergency benefit, they argue. In addition, it interferes little with the working of the free market.

### *The culture of poverty*

In addition to providing a rationale to cutting social services that claims to take the interests of the poor at heart, conservative theories attach a cultural explanation to the poverty problem, with strong emphasis on race and family structures of the poor. Although family and race have always been important issues in US political debate concerning social services, the Reaganite conservatives of the early 1980s gave these topics a specific content, coupled with a specific discourse.

Gilder's *Wealth & Poverty*, which is strongly patriarchal and anti-feminist, makes a connection between morality and welfare by arguing that welfare benefits destroy family structures. The largest welfare programme in the US, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), aims at helping single mothers by providing financial child support. Thus, income becomes not something earned by the man through hard work but a right conveyed to the woman by the state, according to Gilder; and in Gilder's reasoning, this is fatal for the coherence of family. He states: "... the benefit levels destroy the father's key role and authority. He can no longer feel manly in his own home" (1981: 139). When the man realizes that his wife

and children are capable of getting by without him, his self-value will be destroyed and he will turn to violence, crime and alcoholism to assert his manhood, says Gilder. Welfare thus becomes not only a cause of change in family structures but also of what Gilder calls 'moral corruption', including crime and drug abuse. The erosion of family structures will make it even harder for the poor to overcome their poverty, argues Gilder, since "The only dependable route from poverty is always work, family and faith" (1981: 87). Charles Murray is equally concerned with the effects of welfare on the family, although his book manages to avoid the strong anti-feminism of Gilder's. The rather well-known example in Murray's book, in which the imaginary couple Harold and Phyllis must choose whether or not to marry when Phyllis becomes pregnant, attempts to prove that the 1980 welfare laws actually discourage Harold and Phyllis from doing so (1984: 160–2). As AFDC is reserved mainly for single mothers, Phyllis might not be eligible for this benefit if married. The economic rationale of the social security system thus undermines family structures of the poor, argues Murray.

In addition to the family, the conservatives centred their welfare debate around the issue of race. It cannot be denied that race should be addressed within this context. The suburbanization of the US that took place mostly in the 1960s and 1970s left many blacks living in or near poverty in decayed inner cities. This was largely due to discriminatory housing development policies that favoured the white middle class (Katz, 1989: 134–7; see also Harrington, 1984: 127–35, for explanations of the high correlation between race and poverty). Race as well as political geography thus are important issues to be addressed in the poverty debate. However, the conservatives redirect the debate away from structural political and economic factors, while creating a negative stereotype of inner-city blacks. Discrimination and unemployment are not the main causes behind black poverty, argues George Gilder; it is the social security system as well as programmes of affirmative action for blacks that keep them in an inferior, dependent position. These programmes have led to the widespread belief in US society that "... blacks cannot now make it in America without vast federal assistance" (Gilder, 1981: 86), which at once demoralizes and discourages blacks from upward mobility.

At the same time, Gilder and Murray refer to race at will, creating a specific image of the average welfare recipient. In a large section of *Losing Ground*, entitled 'Being Poor, Being Black 1950–1980', Murray compares statistics concerning crime, educational achievement and 'illegitimate' births for blacks and whites in US society. The outcomes of these statistics are unsurprising and state that on average blacks are more likely to be involved in crimes than whites, have lower scores on school tests than whites<sup>9</sup> and have higher rates of what Murray calls 'illegitimate' births than whites. What *is* surprising is the meaning Murray gives to these statistics and the selectivity with which he presents them. He creates the suggestion that race is the direct causal factor of the variations in these statistics. Instead of taking structural economic and historic factors into account when explaining these differences, Murray relies on cultural explanations, creating an

image of blacks as purposefully deviant from middle-class (white) norms in society. For instance, when discussing the rate of black 'illegitimate' births he writes: "For reasons that are still not understood, something in black culture tolerates or encourages birth out of wedlock at higher rates than apply to white culture" (1994: 22).

It is important to see that conservatives do not just present very specific causes of poverty but also start all debate in this field with a set of undebated moral judgements about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour. Thus, Murray describes this increase in births to unmarried (black) women as "dangerous", "devastating" and "the cause of social deterioration" (1994: 17), thereby condemning it as morally wrong behaviour. However, it can be argued that this increase is in part a very positive development as it signifies that women have become more independent and are able to leave mentally or physically abusive relationships. In addition, there is a more insidious moral judgement in the conservative writing on welfare. For by saying that the rise in 'illegitimate' births is morally wrong and by trying to prove that welfare causes this rise, Murray's article 'Does Welfare Bring More Babies?' (1994) effectively says that society does not *want* poor single women to have children. Obviously, these children are not welcome in contemporary conservative US society.

Summarizing, Gilder and Murray argue that because of the liberal welfare state, America's poor get locked into a 'culture of poverty'. This culture of poverty or welfare culture (as it is alternately called) is never precisely defined but seems to imply an inner-city lifestyle, in which teenage pregnancy, illegitimate births, unemployment, crime and family breakdown are the rule rather than the exception. Government transfers to the poor encourage this lifestyle, the conservatives argue, as "... AFDC ... offers guaranteed income to any child-raising couple in America that is willing to break up, or any teenaged girl over sixteen who is willing to bear an illegitimate child" (Gilder, 1981: 149).<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that this conservative focus on behaviour and culture has the effect of creating a deep division between poor people and the rest of the US citizens. For once the poor have been induced to the 'wrong' behaviour by the liberal welfare state, this lifestyle becomes self-perpetuating (see also Peterson, 1991: 25) and behaviour becomes a determining factor of poverty. This is expressed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in an article in the arch-conservative journal *The Public Interest*: "What I had not adequately grasped was the degree to which [...] unequal distributions of property were [...] dependent upon a still more powerful agent—the behaviour of individuals and communities" (1989: 20). Thus, the poor are portrayed as living by radically different norms and values than other Americans. They are perceived to care little about work ethic and family values. Consequently, welfare recipients are seen by most Americans as strangers or outsiders who should be pitied and helped in the best case or ignored and feared in the worst.

This 'culture of poverty' theory effectively redirects the welfare debate away from structural economic and political causes of poverty in favour of a cultural explanation that puts strong emphasis on behaviour and family

structures of poor people. Conservatism thus explains poverty in terms of individual, private causes and denies legitimacy to public and economic causes. This strategy implies a high degree of victim blaming which "... occurs when situations that appear as widespread public issues are discussed largely as personal troubles, and responsibility for them is located primarily in the individual" (Wright, 1993: 3). The only way in which the deviant poor can be forced to adhere to the norms and values of middle-class society, conservatism tells us, is through negative incentives, that is by reducing welfare benefits to below subsistence level or abolishing welfare all together.

### *The language of poverty*

The conservative arguments against the US welfare state are made with a distinct rhetoric and style that we will review in this section. First of all, the conservative argument is made with overwhelming simplicity. Although this simplicity was very effective in enlisting popular support for the argument in the early 1980s, it is surprising that any serious politician or academic should rely on it. Statements made by Gilder and Murray are often unfounded and imprecise. Their reasoning is wholly black-and-white, leaving little space for nuances of the problem. The Harvard Law Review speaks in this regard of: "... the alarming simplicity of much of the debate over welfare reform. Welfare recipients, and by extension the welfare program, have been vilified". Through this popular rhetoric, the Harvard Law Review goes on to state, welfare, not poverty, has become "... the demon that policymakers need to exorcise" (1994: 2013).

This simplicity expresses itself in the haphazard choice of seemingly representative hypothetical stories. We have already mentioned the imaginary couple Harold and Phyllis, used by Charles Murray to illustrate the negative effects of welfare on family structure. In another article, Murray discusses the situation of the imaginary welfare recipients Mr and Mrs A and Ms B to argue that poverty is less widespread in the US than is widely believed (1987: 11–13). However, he provides no official sources to the numbers (imaginary incomes, welfare benefits, etc.) these sketches are based on. They could spring from his imagination rather than official rules on welfare transfers and, in the eyes of one observer, they do. Michael Katz discusses Murray's example of Harold and Phyllis and concludes: "Murray's argument is flat wrong" (1989: 156). In addition, this use of examples and hypothetical stories has the effect of individualizing the poverty debate and thus directing it away from structural causes of poverty.

Moreover, the conservatives have coloured the poverty debate in the US with extreme negative stereotyping. We have described how the 'culture of poverty' bears the image of deviant lifestyle, of "violent men and immoral women" (Harrington, 1984: 179). These images are created and sustained linguistically by the use of expressions like 'welfare mothers' instead of the more neutral 'welfare recipients'. Some examples of Gilder's writing style show the extent of his unfounded stereotyping. He paints a picture of

uncontrolled sexuality in the ghetto, supported by welfare, by using phrases like the following:

... so-called 'love-children', born of barely preadolescent fathers or of others passing by ... (1981: 140)

... these men are not necessarily fathers of the particular children they happen to be living among. They are just men who live for a while with a welfare mother, before moving on to another one. (1981: 141)

And Gilder's typification of life in the ghetto:

... welfare mothers who live and bear children of dubious paternity, with a succession of men working from time to time in the cash economy on the street, or those who dabble in prostitution, sharing apartments with other welfare mothers while leaving the children with a forty-five-year-old grandmother upstairs who is receiving payments for 'disability' from a sore back. (1981: 142)

Many of these stereotypes are unsupported by the facts on welfare but they have caused widespread assumptions on the issue, to the benefit of conservative popular support. One observer says of the conservative welfare discourse: "Right-wing welfare critics have learned to use images and stories strategically to shape public opinion" (Lucie White, quoted in *Harvard Law Review*, 1994: 2019). One of these assumptions is that unmarried black mothers consume most of America's welfare budget and drain public resources. Another is that welfare recipients hardly ever work and are unwilling to look for jobs. These assumptions can be refuted with statistics on welfare recipients. For instance, in 1991 black families accounted for less than 39 percent of all welfare recipients. In addition, most welfare recipients regularly hold temporary and part-time jobs (see *Harvard Law Review*, 1994: 2019–23, for statistical counter-evidence to popular welfare stereotypes).

The conservative welfare discourse has to be countered, argues Michael Katz:

The point is not to avoid difficult issues, such as the sources and consequences of female-headed families, but to define issues precisely—to speak, that is, directly of problems rather than slip into imprecise euphemisms, that, it seems, inevitably stigmatize people to whom they are applied and excuse mean and punitive policies. (1989: 234)

In the following section we examine whether the more liberal *Newsweek* uses the focus, arguments and discourse of right-wing welfare critics or the more nuanced and more intelligent approach that Micheal Katz proposes.

#### NEWSWEEK ON WELFARE: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

We have chosen to analyse *Newsweek* (from now on: NW) articles because NW can be considered a moderate but left-of-centre news magazine. Its more liberal background can be recognized in its contents, as in its overt attention to sexuality (for instance a lengthy cover article on bisexuality in

the edition of 17 July 1995), its generally negative coverage of conservative Republicans (which we discuss in this section), a moderate approach to development problems (for instance, a lengthy cover article on underage soldiers in developing countries in the edition of 7 August 1995) and an occasionally critical view of big business (for instance, in its 26 June 1995 article on the G7 Summit). Of course, NW's approach and political views are not uniformly liberal and it more often than not adheres to neo-liberal principles concerning international trade and business. However, we can safely say it takes a more liberal view to social and economic issues than its more conservative competitors *Time*, *Business Week* and *The Economist*.

*Newsweek* is a serious international news magazine, printing an international as well as a US edition. Its target audience consists of educated and relatively well-off people. Its image is that of serious, objective and in-depth coverage, mainly of timely international news stories, international business and domestic US affairs. In addition, it regularly runs smaller articles on culture, science and religion.

### *Methodology of discourse analysis*

Our sample for detailed discourse analysis consists of nine opinion articles and two informative articles that discuss poverty and welfare, published in the international edition of NW throughout 1993, 1994 and 1995. These 11 articles discuss welfare and poverty in the domestic US context, with the exception of one opinion article on the Swedish welfare state. A list of all articles used, including their publication dates, is provided in the Appendix. This sample seems relatively small; however, NW's focus is not primarily on domestic US affairs and it does not regularly publish articles concerning welfare and poverty. Our data comprise all articles published by NW on welfare and poverty in the last three years and are thus representative of NW's general approach to the subject. We do not take the individual authors of the articles into account in our analysis, as all opinion authors are referred to as 'columnists for NW', and no mention is made of possibly biased political opinions.

Here we set out a number of discourse analytical tools that will enable us to describe in detail how NW represents poverty and welfare and to uncover ideological notions underlying these representations (the discussion is based on Jensen, 1987: 12–13; Menz, 1989: 233–40; Fowler, 1991: 70–105; van Dijk, 1994: 8–19, 1995: 259–83; Fairclough, 1995).

**Presupposition.** What is presupposed in a text is implied not to be a topic of discussion but something that is generally agreed on. Therefore, by tracing presuppositions in texts on welfare we will find which focus and what facts are regarded as uncontroversial in this debate and what ideology has become part of 'common sense'.

**Inferencing.** In many texts, "Implicit assumptions chain together successive parts of texts by supplying 'missing links' between explicit propositions" (Fairclough, 1989: 81). The reader or listener has to supply these

linking assumptions between explicit propositions (between sentences or paragraphs) by a process of gap-filling or inferencing, of which he or she is often not conscious. We must analyse the NW texts to uncover these 'missing links' which are often ideologically charged.

**Transitivity.** This grammatical structure assigns to different groups different semantic roles: the role of Agent, Patient or Object. The assigning of different semantic roles is ideologically charged because it "... has the facility to analyse the same event in different ways" (Fowler, 1991: 71). In addition, the semantic role an individual or social group has in a clause can associate this individual or social group with a greater or lesser degree of responsibility in a positive or negative action. Hence, it is important to analyse which semantic positions poor people and welfare recipients typically occupy in NW texts.

**Ingroup-outgroup definition.** Ideology is typically conveyed through the construction of contrasting social groups, which is described by van Dijk: "... many ideologies, for example those underlying relations of social conflict, domination and resistance, may be organized by a polarization defining ingroup and outgroup(s)" (1995: 248). Defining characteristics of ingroups and outgroups are, for instance, group activities and shared goals. We must now analyse whether in the NW articles welfare recipients and poor people are constructed as an outgroup, external to the rest of US society. We must ask whether these are people portrayed as "strangers in our midst" (Katz, 1989: 7) who think, feel and live in ways unlike middle-class Americans.

In addition, an important defining factor of an outgroup is **Norm and Value Violation**. In this strategy the norms and values of the ingroup are presented as universal norms and values rather than belonging to a specific group. Thus, we must analyse whether poor people and welfare recipients are portrayed as living by fundamentally different norms and values than middle-class US citizens.

**Coherence.** In particular, we are interested in examining implied cause and effect between clauses and tracing what effects this discursive strategy has on the representation of, for instance, single mothers.

**Black-and-white depiction.** Do the NW articles use this strategy of simplification of the argument like, as we argued, the conservatives do? This strategy is characterized by the haziness of central concepts, the use of haphazard examples and the use of unfounded statistics. In addition, we examine the way NW authors make use of 'official' (journalistic or academic) sources that support their arguments.

**Association.** It is important to examine with which characteristics and which activities of the poor are generally associated. In this manner we can infer to which extent the conservative stereotype that we discussed in the previous section appears in the NW articles.

**Negative lexicalization.** What lexical items are used with regard to welfare recipients and poor people? Are their actions described in strongly negative terms?

In addition, we must examine **ideological language use**, which occurs



when seemingly neutral words or expressions are in fact ideologically charged. The best known example in this respect is the expression 'terrorist' versus 'freedom fighter'. We discuss a few expressions that are frequently used in the welfare debate to reveal their ideological background.

With the use of these analytical tools, we attempt to answer the following two questions that are central to the thesis of this article. First and most important, we want to know whether the NW articles accept the general argument of the conservatives and whether they focus the welfare debate around the same central issues (notably race and family) as the conservatives do, while ignoring or denying structural political and economic factors. Second, we want to know at what point the NW articles take a different approach to welfare, follow a different reasoning or propose different policy measures than the conservatives do.

### *Interpreting the data*

We do not work systematically through the preceding list of analytical tools but rather present an integrated analysis of all texts, while explaining which analytical strategy is relevant in reaching a particular conclusion. The bold capital letters after each quotation refer to the article the quotation is taken from (listed, chronologically, in the Appendix). Not every article of our sample devotes equal attention to poverty and welfare and some articles thus receive more attention in the following analysis than others.

Before turning to the actual representation of people in poverty in our sample, let us first unravel several assumptions concerning the welfare state that form the general political background to all debate in NW on these topics:

(1)

It's the modern welfare state. Government's very generosity helps make it unpopular ... The modern welfare state ... creates a vast web of dependency on government that is the ultimate source of huge budget deficits, and quite perversely, distrust of government. [A]

(2)

[The article discusses the problems of the Swedish welfare state] Capping benefits ... would force individuals to take greater responsibility for their own lives. [C]

We can already trace a number of assumptions that are conducive to the conservative argument. It is assumed that the welfare state is *very, even too*, generous, that this generosity makes people dependent on government (example 1) and allows individuals not to take responsibility over their own lives (example 2). Moreover, it is implied that people distrust government and that trust in government can be restored by scaling down the welfare state. In addition, the author designates the core problem, which is the budget deficit, according to him caused by the welfare state (instead of, for instance, by defence spending) (example 1). Hence, the general conclusion of these fragments is that the welfare state is no longer economically viable

and has to be reformed (or, rather, reduced), which in the long run would be good for its citizens who would be forced to become more responsible.

*The poor as passive.* We now turn to the question of *how* people in poverty and welfare recipients are represented in NW, by looking at the discursive strategy of transitivity. Which semantic roles are typically assigned to the poor? The following examples show that welfare recipients very rarely are actors in the discussion in NW, especially when that welfare recipient is a young unmarried mother (and NW seems to talk almost exclusively of welfare recipients who are young unmarried women with children). They often occupy a passive position or a 'Patient' position, as people who are affected by the actions of others. Either welfare recipients are directly affected in the text, as in the quotes in example 3 or they appear in passive clauses, as in the quotes in example 4.

- (3)  
 Government supports unwed mothers  
 ... an age limit might force teenage mothers  
 Getting people off welfare rolls [B]  
 ... have had ... impact on the local underclass  
 The people here [people from a poor neighborhood] are isolated  
 Residents of the local projects are assumed unreliable  
 Teach poor people the work habits [D]  
 ... compassionate talk about the poor  
 ... to uplift the poor  
 ... to lift the poor [F]  
 ... help ... poor children  
 welfare enabled young mothers to live independently and young fathers  
 to abdicate [H]  
 ... avoid ostracizing the mother and her children  
 ... stigmatizing ... teenage mothers [K]

- (4)  
 abolish welfare for women under ... the age of 20 or 24  
 Ending welfare for teenagers [B]  
 ... to become involved in the lives of the poor [D]  
 ... no welfare for teenagers  
 ... plans would make it impossible for teenage recipients ...  
 ... a program aimed at teenage welfare recipients [K]

In the few cases where poor people do have an 'Agent' role, their actions generally affect only themselves, that is their actions are non-transactive (see Sykes, 1985: 90). Welfare recipients thus remain passive agents whose actions are not often the result of conscious choice. This is illustrated by the following examples:

- (5)  
 ... unmarried teenage mothers wind up on welfare  
 Young black men have high unemployment rates [B]  
 ... girls become mothers ... and boys won't be responsible  
 ... half of teen mothers go on AFDC  
 ... if these new ideas are reinforced by stricter welfare rules, even poor  
 teenagers will respond [H]

These teenagers might not respond to the moral stigma of the white community  
As welfare dries up ... girls will have fewer children [K]

In NW, the welfare-receiving poor are portrayed as a social problem group, which must be discussed and which must be induced to change its behaviour, while having no active role in this discussion. This representation is constructed partly through the semantic roles poor people occupy in NW texts. These roles are almost invariably passive and present welfare recipients as "... unable to reflect on or control their reactions to circumstance, and lacking independent will" (Sykes, 1985: 88). In an excellent article on the rhetoric of poverty, Thomas Ross discusses the ideological consequence of this persistent passive portrayal of the poor:

Our inability to imagine the poor as strong, successful, ambitious, and responsible people who win battles of life prevents us from feeling empathy for them. The persistent idea of the 'passive poor' in the 'underclass' keeps blocking our imagination. (1991: 1542-3)

If the poor are not actors in the NW articles, then who are? Obviously, we cannot list every actor in the eleven articles of our sample. However, we can designate a few categories of actors that typically occur in the articles. First of all, some articles use the inclusive actors 'we' or 'everyone'. Let us look at examples from the text that may define these actor groups more precisely:

(6)  
We prefer to ignore, we resist talking about these issues, we don't understand, we should abolish welfare, we need to discuss things, we need to thrash out these differences, we can't understand what we don't talk about. [B]

(7)  
Welfare is where shame is getting its most serious test. 'We need to say that it's shameful to bring a child into the world and not be able to love, support and care for it'. [K]

(8)  
The point of welfare reform ... should go beyond getting people off welfare rolls. The real point should be preventing people from getting on in the first place, and, more important, emphasizing the moral principle that people shouldn't have babies before they're ready to take care of them. Everyone agrees on this principle. [B]

(9)  
Without the a dramatic decline in single parenthood, no combination of government policies can do what everyone wants, which is to help the prospects of poor children. [H]

The 'we' (or 'ingroup') of examples 6 and 7 are middle-class, well-educated US citizens, perhaps NW readers, who participate in the welfare debate and have the power to influence the lives of the poor. Welfare recipients themselves are not participants in this debate and they are not part

of 'we'. In fact, welfare recipients are strongly defined as an outgroup ('they') in these examples. For instance, in example 7 it is implied that welfare recipients do not love, support and care for their children and feel no shame about this—which 'we' obviously would. Welfare recipients thus live by different moral standards than 'we' do, according to this text. A similar message can be found in example 8, which implies that welfare recipients who have children are not able to care for them and that everyone thinks this is morally wrong—except, of course, welfare recipients themselves. 'Everyone' in this example is thus everyone but welfare recipients. Example 9 does not only imply that there are far too many families headed by a single parent but also that this family situation typically occurs among poor people and that this family situation deprives children who grow up in it. When 'everyone' wants to help the prospects of poor children, this obviously does not include poor people themselves whose family situation is detrimental to their own children. Example 9 not only takes a very paternalistic attitude towards the poor, who allegedly cannot help their own children, but may even make the poor seem evil, in implying that the poor do not *want* to help their own children.

It is important to see that the use of 'we' and 'everyone' as actors in these articles serves not only to effectively construct the poor and welfare recipients as an outgroup but also to represent the ingroup in a very positive manner. For 'we' rationally discuss the social problem poverty even though "we resist talking about these issues [because] every discussion risks slipping into a debate over racism" [B] and obviously 'we' are not racists. In this discussion about poverty, 'we' take the situation of poor children at heart. In addition, 'we' would never have children without being able to love them and care for them and think it is shameful to do so. Moreover, the expression 'everyone' has the consequence of presenting 'our' norms and values as universal instead of belonging to a specific social group. An ideological ingroup–outgroup definition is thus constructed in the NW articles that the quotations in examples 6–9 are taken from.

There is still another group of actors that frequently appears in the NW articles. This is a group of professional people, journalists or academics, who have studied the social problem of poverty. These experts invariably support the arguments made by the authors of NW. Let us take a quick look at who these experts are:

(10)

Leon Dash, a black reporter for the Washington Post, spent more than a year living in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods in an effort to understand why unmarried teens had babies. [B]

(11)

'These people are so isolated from the world of work, they don't know how to go about finding jobs', says Jan Rosenberg, a Long Island University sociologist [D]

(12)

'The success of the *public* safety net . . . depends on the *private* safety net',

writes social critic Richard Neely in a recent book, 'and the private safety net is the family'. [**H**, original emphasis]

These researchers are mentioned in the NW articles with name, profession and often place of residence, which reinforces their status as authorities. This is in sharp contrast to poor people, whose names and professions are mentioned not once and who are always described as groups, for instance, with expressions such as 'teenage mothers' or 'troubled teens' (later we discuss these expressions designating the poor). This detailed mentioning of researchers has the ideological consequence of reinforcing the legitimacy and the influence of the opinions of the authors of the NW articles because now "... well-informed citizens can conclude that they have in fact heard from the experts and that they are qualified to identify the sources of poverty and potential solutions to it" (Wright, 1993: 9). In fact, one observer of the so-called 'intellectual press', which includes NW, argues that although journalists of the intellectual press often draw upon the ideas of academics to legitimize their arguments, they do not always reproduce these ideas truthfully. She writes: "... these publications often politicize and redefine through misplaced emphasis the social science paradigms they use" (Wright, 1993: 8).

Before examining in more detail how exactly the poor are represented in NW articles, one striking case of passive transformation of sentences must be discussed. The following quotations are all taken from article [**B**]:

(13)

A young black child now has only a one-in-five chance of growing up with two parents.  
 Nearly two thirds of black children are now born to single mothers.  
 Plenty of children will ... survive.  
 One fifth of all black children are now born to unwed teens.

(14)

These children of children start with the odds against them. Their parents haven't developed job skills.

(15)

We can't understand what we won't talk about—and the ultimate victims of our silence are our children.

The three sentences of example 13 are passively transformed to make the children, instead of the mothers, grammatical subject of the sentence. This emphasis on children continues in example 14. The implicit message in this foregrounding of the children in the welfare debate while backgrounding the parents is that the ingroup should be more concerned with the well-being of the children born to welfare recipients than with the well-being of these welfare recipients themselves. For these welfare recipients (the outgroup) have violated the norms and values of the ingroup and are thus not worthy of compassion. Ultimately, these quotations have the rhetorical effect of creating an alliance between the children of poor single mothers and the 'we' appearing in the article, which is the ingroup. This is confirmed in example 15, where children of single mothers are suddenly 'our' children.

The mothers are thus placed in rhetorical opposition to their own children as they do not belong to this alliance. In addition, this construction allows a positive self-representation of the ingroup as it is presented as taking the interests of poor children at heart and appears not to want to make these children suffer for the 'sins' of their parents.

*Us versus them: the poor as morally deviant.* We have seen that the poor are constructed as an outgroup. We must examine which particular words and expressions that might seem neutral, embody this definition of otherness and deviance (which is inextricably intertwined with the ideological definition of otherness). Welfare recipients are almost exclusively referred to in terms of their age and whether or not they have children. The following list sums up expressions used for welfare recipients throughout the different articles:

(16)

unmarried teenage mothers, girls have babies, unwed mothers, women under 20 or 24, teenagers, teenage mothers, poor mother, troubled teens, girls become mothers, unwed mothers under 18, teen mothers, a young girl becomes an unwed mother, impoverished teenagers, young mothers, young fathers, poor teenagers, unmarried mothers, teenage welfare recipients, teens, welfare mothers, etc.

Partly, this focus on young mothers is explained by the fact that the major welfare programme in the US, AFDC, is aimed at providing income support to single mothers. However, this large diversity of expressions to designate a relatively small group of welfare recipients can be called over-lexicalization, which is "... an excess of quasi-synonymous terms that are a particular preoccupation or problem in the ... discourse" (Fowler, 1991: 85). While some of the expressions found in the list such as 'young mothers' or 'unmarried mothers' are fairly neutral, other expressions such as 'girls have babies' and 'teen mothers' are derogative and bear an image of immaturity and irresponsibility. In addition, the exaggerated focus of these articles on young poor mothers creates the stereotype of *all* welfare recipients being single mothers under the age of 20 years.

One expression that appears neutral but is in fact strongly ideologically coded deserves some attention. The expressions 'welfare dependency' and 'welfare dependants' now occur in all debate on welfare to describe welfare recipients. In our sample, we find the following examples:

(17)

web of dependency. [A]  
welfare dependency, dependent behaviour. [D]  
dependence on entitlements [E]

Welfare dependency is uniformly considered a bad thing by the authors who use this expression and in article [D] it appears in an enumeration of what are called 'cataclysmic social indicators', which also includes AIDS and crime. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon have studied the historical meaning and use of the expression 'dependency' to uncover the ideological

meaning it carries in the present welfare debate. While it was once desired of a woman to be dependent (the woman as housewife), currently 'dependency' is exclusively reserved for welfare recipients and carries an image of passivity and irresponsibility, as well as a racial and gendered stereotype. Fraser and Gordon write:

By the 1980s ... the racial imagery of dependency had shifted ... Now the preeminent stereotype is the unmarried teenage mother caught in the 'welfare trap' and rendered dronelike and passive ... This new icon ... is often evoked in the phrase *children having children*. (1994: 327, original emphasis)

In the conservative theories discussed in the previous section this passive image of dependency was first constructed. 'Welfare dependency' is therefore an inherently conservative expression that cannot be used in a neutral ideological sense. Two other words are similarly ideologically coded. 'Illegitimacy' refers in NW articles to the children of unmarried couples, effectively saying that the lives of children whose parents are not married are illegitimate and therefore undesirable. This is an archaic and condemning expression that should have been banned from public discussion decades ago. Finally, it must be noted that 'welfare reform' is invariably a euphemism for the decrease in or abolition of welfare benefits. While almost all authors in our sample discuss how welfare can be 'reformed', none of them proposes to raise or even freeze benefits.

We showed how welfare recipients are constructed as an outgroup in NW articles. We now examine in detail through which discursive strategies this outgroup is negatively portrayed. The following list sums up characteristics and social situations with which welfare recipients and poor people in general are associated in our sample texts:

- (18)  
 out-of-wedlock birth, unemployment, hardship. [B]  
 public housing projects, AIDS cases, crime, out-of-wedlock births to teenagers, absence of work habits, absence of responsible parents. [D]  
 violence, anarchy, despair, slums. [F]  
 single parenthood, out-of-wedlock birth, irresponsibility, sexual freedom, illegitimacy. [H]  
 state of anarchy, social devastation. [I]  
 teenage pregnancy, sins. [J]  
 sin, out-of-wedlock pregnancy. [K]

One does not have to be a discourse analyst to see the negative lexicalization and stereotyping in the list in example 18. Poor persons are not once associated with positive characteristics or positive social circumstances.<sup>11</sup> In addition, extreme negative lexicalization is attached to the characteristic welfare recipients are most frequently associated with: having children while not married. In example 19 we quote some expressions that describe single parenthood:

- (19)  
 a social disaster, disastrous, explosion, devastating. [B]  
 cataclysmic. [D]

This lexicon would be more appropriate to describe a life-threatening disaster such as an earthquake than a social development that has its good as well as its bad sides. This hyperbole serves to reinforce the image of welfare recipients (in this case, young mothers who receive welfare) as morally deviant. These young mothers are portrayed as defying the norms and values of the ingroup, first by having children without getting married, second by having children in their teenage years<sup>12</sup> and third, by having to look to the state for financial support.

In addition, there is a more subtle way in which welfare recipients are constructed as a morally deviant outgroup. The following examples are all based on assumptions of moral weakness of the poor:

(20)

Poverty seems more desperate, intractable and amoral now than it did a hundred years ago ... The old ways—a society-wide insistence on moral behaviour and exemplary acts—may be the best way to lift the poor. [F]

(21)

[In an article on shame and morality, one politician is quoted as saying:] The reason I started welfare reform was not to induce shame in a recipient but rather to inculcate responsibility. [K]

(22)

The GOP [Grand Old Party—Republicans] is pushing major stigma: no welfare for teenagers ... And both the GOP and the Democratic plans would make it impossible for teenage recipients to get their own apartments or drop out of school and still receive benefits. [K]

(23)

But welfare may have made out-of-wedlock birth more possible. Government supports unwed mothers. Fathers get and escape hatch. They are allowed not to take responsibility for their children. Should we, then, simply abolish welfare for women under, say, the age of 20 or 24? [the author goes on to say that this option should be seriously considered] [B]

The moral weakness the poor are accused of is most explicit in example 20, which directly says that poverty (thus, the poor people) is amoral and *even more* so than in the past. The rest of society (presumably middle class, white Americans) should set an example for the poor to induce them into the 'right' moral behaviour. In example 21 the quoted politician effectively says that welfare recipients are irresponsible people and have to be induced into becoming responsible through 'welfare reform', which is a euphemism for decreases in welfare benefits. Examples 22 and 23 similarly imply that the poor do not have an own sense of 'wrong' and 'right' but have to be *induced* into the 'right' moral behaviour through government policy. Obviously middle-class norms and values say it is wrong for teenagers to get their own apartments, drop out of school and have children while not married. The ingroup (middle-class, wage-earning families) adheres to these norms and values naturally and does not have to be compelled (for tax laws are not modelled to induce morally 'right' behaviour and discourage morally 'wrong' behaviour). However, the poor *do* have to be compelled to comply. According to example 23, if AFDC for young single



mothers were abolished and subsequently a single, poor woman would choose not to have a child she would thus do the right thing by society's standards, albeit for the wrong reason (in response to the state's financial incentive rather than as a matter of moral strength; see Ross, 1991: 1518–22, for an account of how this implicit argument of moral weakness figures in court decisions).

There is a paternalistic attitude as well as an argument of undeservingness implied in examples 20–23. The poor should be grateful for receiving income support, these authors say, and indulging in morally deviant behaviour at the expense of the state is an act of ungratefulness and should be punished harshly. In this argument, welfare is made into a charity rather than a universal benefit for the poor<sup>13</sup> and poor persons are turned into 'children' who have to show gratitude for whatever they get and are not considered capable of deciding on their own lifestyle. In addition, an important aspect of examples 21–23 is that the poor have to be induced into morally right behaviour through disincentives—punishment instead of reward. Thus the argument of moral deviance becomes an excuse for cutting welfare benefits, cutting federal expenditure and effectively letting people starve.

Finally, we must discuss briefly the following examples that are connected to our previous argument:

(24)

Parts of Wisconsin and New Jersey now refuse to expand welfare benefits every time a new baby is born. Their explanation is that no wage earner automatically gets a raise every time he or she has a child, so why should welfare recipients? [K]

(25)

[Both Clinton and the GOP] want to discourage welfare mothers from having more babies. [J]

Examples 24 and 25 both stereotype women on welfare as having uncontrolled sexuality and having a high number of children without thinking of the consequences. This stereotype is implicit in the expressions 'every time a *new* baby is born' in example 24, which implies new babies are born with some regularity and '*more* babies' in example 25, which implies that the average welfare mother already has a high number of children. In fact, the average size of a family receiving welfare is approximately the same as that of other families in the society at large (Harvard Law Review, 1994: 2020). Thus, the frantic discussion about how poor people can be discouraged from having children finds its origin in that society does not welcome the children of poor people and regards them as a burden on the state. Indirectly, the 'ingroup' says it does not value the lives of the children of the 'outgroup' equal to the lives of its own children. Moreover, the argument made in example 24 is wrong. Wage-earning families might not get a wage increase when a child is born but they do get a tax-benefit. Thomas Ross points out that if the government chose to put a ceiling on the number of dependants that could be claimed for tax purposes, wage-earning

families would see this as an unacceptable infringement upon their rights and their personal choice of family size (1991: 1520). Apparently, it is not an unacceptable infringement on the rights of welfare recipients for the government to financially induce family-planning, which means that the outgroup has in this respect different rights than the ingroup.

We now look in some detail at article [D] of the sample to understand how an ingroup–outgroup contrast is used to construct a conservative argument concerning the causes of poverty. The main argument of the article is that the absence of jobs and white racism do not suffice to explain (black) poverty and that the lifestyle and family arrangements of the poor have to be taken into account. The author makes this argument by discussing a Brooklyn neighbourhood called Fort Greene, implicitly claiming that this neighbourhood is to a certain extent representative of poor neighbourhoods in New York or other large US cities. In Fort Greene there is a large population of very poor people but there is also a black middle class and recently a company called Metrotech set up office in this area. The author constructs a sharp contrast between the poor population on the one hand and the middle-class office workers on the other hand, by using the following expressions:

(26)

a tale of two cities, the contrasts are striking, and disheartening, the black middle class . . . are like foreigners, urban divide [D]

These ‘two worlds’ of the Fort Greene neighbourhood are not only sharply contrasted but are also hierarchically classified; the middle-class and the office buildings are portrayed exclusively in positive terms, the poor in exclusively negative terms:

(27)

Over the past four years more than 16,000 jobs arrived in the neighborhood with Metrotech, a \$1.25 billion office complex (a classic enterprise zone, subsidized by generous tax breaks), there is a busy retail district with lots of entry-level jobs. There is also a solid, stable—and active—black middle class. None of which seems to have had any impact on the local underclass, especially those living in public housing projects. Fort Greene has New York’s highest infant mortality rate . . . and a glut of the usual cataclysmic social indicators—AIDS cases, welfare dependency, crime, and, of course, out-of-wedlock births to teenagers. [D] (see also example 18)

(28)

On the one side, the glittering towers of Metrotech. Across the street the projects, drug dens and numbers holes. [D]

In example 27 the detailed mentioning of numbers (*four years, 16,000 jobs, \$1.25 billion*) is supposed to positively impress the reader, as is the expression ‘classic enterprise zone’. Although the latter expression implies healthy, booming capitalism, we may wonder what characteristics an ‘enterprise zone’ has. To mind spring conservative proposals to create ‘Urban Enterprise Zones’ (UEZs) which would be set up in inner city areas to create jobs. These UEZs would benefit from tax breaks *as well as* a lowering

of official health and labour standards and a partial exemption from environmental requirements. Note also that the author condones government activity in this field (for the tax breaks are very *generous*), while condemning government's role in poverty relief. The poor of Fort Greene are portrayed very negatively and the enumerations in both examples 27 and 28 are scandalous in implying that receiving income support from the state ('welfare dependency') can be compared with AIDS in terms of causes and consequences (example 27) or that living in public housing equals drug abuse (example 28).

Moreover, example 27 conveys that the poor of the Fort Greene neighbourhood live in a land of opportunity. This is implied not only by the mentioning of numbers (for instance the number of jobs available at Metrotech) but also by the expression 'lots of *entry-level* jobs', as the poor are assumed to have little or no education. In addition, the statement that 'none of [this] seems to have had any impact on the local underclass' effectively says that the developments in the neighbourhood *could* and *should* have affected the poor—that poor people would have been able to find work with Metrotech had they tried hard enough. So why, according to the article, are the poor now not all working at Metrotech to overcome their poverty? The author explains this by saying that the poor live in an isolated world where deviant morals and values reign. The following examples illustrate this argument:

(29)

The people [from public housing projects] are so isolated from the world of work they don't know how to go about finding jobs. [D]

(30)

... hiring preference is referential as opposed to residential (or racial, for that matter): it's done by word of mouth ... Residents of the local projects are assumed unreliable. If you don't know anyone who works, you're not likely to find work. [D]

(31)

... government can fund programs that create the networks (and teach poor people the work habits) they'll need to plug into the world of work ... [D]

The expression 'world of work' that appears in examples 29 and 31 effectively conveys that poor people live in a different world than other Americans do. In this different world there is no work ethic (for the poor have to be *taught* the work habits in example 29) and it is so isolated that its inhabitants do not know anyone from the other and better world, the world of work (example 30). However, we may wonder whether this is the main reason, or even a reason at all, that the poor didn't get many jobs at Metrotech. For the article admits that "much of the construction work at Metrotech went to locals, but most of the permanent jobs were filled by employees the companies brought with them" and, indeed, that the "residents of the local projects are assumed unreliable" (example 30). The latter clause is passively transformed which allows the author to delete the actor of the clause, which is Metrotech (and perhaps large companies in general). It is thus possible that Metrotech never intended to hire the local poor,

except to do the harsh and temporary building work, because it assumed that the locals are unreliable people who have no work ethic. It is even conceivable that Metrotech moved to the neighbourhood only to profit from government subsidies. However, the author does not discuss these options and he does not say *why* the poor are assumed to be unreliable people nor whether this is a rightful assumption by Metrotech.

After discussing the absence of work habits, the author designates family structure as the core problem of poverty:

(32)

... the absence of responsible parents, especially fathers, is the phenomenon at the heart of underclass poverty ... this isn't a poverty that will be cured merely by jobs or with surrogates. The children of the cities need parents. [D]

This association of the absence of work habits with family structure provides an interesting challenge of gap-filling, or inferencing, for the reader. Example 32 implies that the poor are not responsible parents. Thus, the reader is required to infer that 'normal' parents, especially fathers (for the father is supposed to be the breadwinner), teach their children a work ethic—which poor parents who are either absent or irresponsible (maybe both) do not do. This article strongly defines the poor and unemployed as an outgroup who live by deviant norms and values and in deviant family structures. It explicitly rejects a structural social and economic explanation of poverty and places the causes (and blame) for poverty with the poor themselves. Article [D] is the most explicitly conservative article of our sample, accepting the 'culture of poverty' thesis which argues that it is the lifestyle of the poor that perpetuates their poverty. In fact, George Gilder could have written example 32 himself, for in *Wealth & Poverty* he says: "... depriving poor families of strong fathers both dooms them to poverty and damages the economic prospects of their children" (1981: 140). Later we will see that this argument is skewed; poverty causes family breakdown more than family breakdown causes poverty.

*Stereotyping the poor.* It should be clear from the general tone as well as the discursive strategies we have made explicit in examples 1–32 that the NW articles of our sample present poor persons and welfare recipients very one-sidedly, which leads to unfounded stereotyping. This may not always be done intentionally by the authors but it does lead to the naturalizing of an image of welfare recipients that reinforces the conservative argument. In fact, much of the discussion about poverty and welfare invites the reader to 'fill the gaps', that is provide part of the argument through inferencing. The reader has to bring to bear general assumptions about poverty and welfare for the structure of the text to make sense. Let us look for instance at text [K]. It is a five-page article on shame and morality but the section on welfare is less than one page and consists of five paragraphs which consecutively discuss: welfare in general and teenage pregnancy, teenage welfare recipients, state legislation on welfare, black teenage

out-of-wedlock pregnancy and the ability of a strong societal stigma on illegitimacy and divorce to “improve the life circumstances of children”. Thus are linked shame–welfare–teenage pregnancy–teenagers who drop out of school–the expansion of welfare payments when a new baby is born into a family receiving welfare–black out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancy–re-establishing stigma on teenage pregnancy–a sense of shame about illegitimacy and divorce–the terrible message sent when minimizing the importance of fathers. However, the exact connections between these topics are not made explicit. For instance, it is not mentioned what percentage of welfare recipients are single black young women with children. Nor is explained exactly *why* shame is linked with welfare—it is simply taken for granted that it should be. Thus the reader is invited to provide these missing links and most NW readers will do so unconsciously, thereby accepting the stereotype of welfare recipients as irresponsible, young, unwed, black mothers who minimize the importance of fathers and have no sense of shame.

We now turn to article [I] and analyse it more closely to uncover how the text constructs a negative stereotype of a poor neighbourhood and the people living there, without explicitly attributing negative characteristics to the poor. The article discusses Republican Newt Gingrich visiting a town meeting in an inner-city neighbourhood in Washington. Very slowly, a portrait of the residents of this inner city neighbourhood is painted. When it is described how Gingrich visits this “jam-packed town meeting on a combustible August night”, “in a neighborhood where Republicans are usually about as common as eskimos”, we already get a sense of the commotion that will be described ahead in the story and the reader is invited to construct a picture of Gingrich visiting “enemy territory” on a hot and inflammable summer night. Next, the author wonders why Gingrich should worry about the “urban embarrassment” of Washington when his constituency is “profoundly pale”, implying that the neighbourhood in question is an embarrassment (to whom we don’t know) and, moreover, populated mostly by blacks. This (black) audience “was mostly into ranting”, which is associated with “primal therapy”, implying that the people present at the town meeting were violent and disturbed (or at least in need of psychotherapy). No mention is made of *why* the residents of this neighbourhood might be upset, for instance because there are no jobs for them, no proper schools, less and less income support and because Republicans like Gingrich generally do not take their interests at heart. Meanwhile Gingrich, who is described to be “neck-deep in Washington” (one is usually neck deep into trouble—implying that this particular neighbourhood means trouble), is described to be listening patiently (unlike the blacks who cannot control themselves, the Republican keeps calm). Furthermore, “the central urban question” is perceived to be “public order” and inner cities are described to be in “a state of anarchy” which strengthens the image of inner-city residents as uncontrolled and irresponsible. “A Gingrich associate” is quoted as saying “The levels of anger and paranoia we’re dealing with are truly terrifying”, which implies that the black residents of this inner city neigh-

bourhood and, for that matter, all inner-city blacks, are not only violent and disturbed but paranoid and dangerous on top of that. In addition, it is mentioned that it is hard for Gingrich, who is described as a man with *real* responsibility (obviously in contrast to the people at the town meeting), to “get too specific about the culture of poverty at the heart of social devastation” (recall that ‘the culture of poverty’ is a conservative expression used by authors like Gilder and Murray). The stereotype is complete: inner-city Americans, who differ from ‘other’ Americans (the ingroup) not only by the colour of their skin but also by their way of living (in “a state of anarchy”, thus violating democratic American norms and values) and by their violent and paranoid behaviour, are almost beyond helping by the government. It may be better to cut them off from mainstream society all together—which, according to critical economist John Kenneth Galbraith, is already happening. In his book *The Culture of Contentment* he calls the US “... a democracy in which the less fortunate do not participate” (1992: 13).

It is important to see that while a negative stereotype with racial and gendered undertones of poor people is relatively easily uncovered in a text like article [I], as well as in other articles in our sample, the authors would never express these images overtly and explicitly. Thus, we do not find in NW direct statements like: “Black poor males are violent and irresponsible” or “Young mothers on welfare are lazy and promiscuous”. This indirectness is an integral aspect of the rhetoric of poverty according to Thomas Ross. He writes:

The rhetoric of poverty invites the reader to provide part of the picture, to bring to the reading culturally taught, stereotypical assumptions about the poor. This invitation is the most powerful aspect of the rhetoric ... The charges of difference and deviance become problematic for many readers when they are explicitly asserted. (1991: 1541–2)

In fact, many authors present themselves as more subtle and more thoughtful than the conservatives. They are aware that the acceptance of conservative arguments collides with their more liberal (self-)identity. One discursive strategy by which these authors can distance themselves from conservative arguments, while factually supporting them, is through the use of disclaimers, which can be called a “strategy of face-keeping and impression management” (van Dijk, 1994: 9). A good example of this strategy is provided in article [B], in which the author even confesses to having found Charles Murray’s policy proposals “cruel” and “unthinkable” a decade ago. Nonetheless, he urges his readers to seriously consider Murray’s arguments and policy proposals, while trying to save face by the use of disclaimers. In the one-page article, we can find no less than four examples of this textual strategy:

(33)

[the author calls the breakdown of two-parent black families a social disaster] I don’t mean that single-parenthood inevitably fails ... *But* two parents are better than one. [B]

(34)

Some of these trends also affect whites ... *But* the effects have been more devastating for blacks. [B]

(35)

The idea that girls have babies to get welfare checks is absurd ... *But* welfare may have made out-of-wedlock birth more possible. [B]

(36)

[after saying that abolishing welfare for teenage mothers may be a proposal worth considering, the author goes on to state:] Granted, any constructive change faces huge obstacles ... young black men have high unemployment rates; depriving some mothers of welfare would cause hardship; any poor mother who wants a job needs adequate child care. *But* we need at least discuss things that were once undiscussable. [B]  
(emphases added in Examples 33–6)

*Statistical evidence or numbers juggling.* In some cases, text coherence can suggest a causal relationship, where in fact this relationship is dubious. This is illustrated by an example from our sample article on the Swedish welfare state, where the following statement is made:

(37)

Benefit abuse: ... Sweden has among the healthiest citizens in the world, but in the early 1990s employees skipped work about 25 days a year on average. [C]

This statement implies that Swedish employees are encouraged by the level of sick-leave compensation to take days off while they are, in fact, as healthy as can be. However, reversing the argument might make more sense. Maybe Swedes are among the healthiest people in the world *because* they have sick-leave benefits, so they are not forced to keep working when they are not feeling well in fear of losing pay or even their job. This use of 'inverted logic' can be found with regard to the US welfare state as well. The following two examples imply causality without giving proof to support it:

(38)

Within a year after giving birth, roughly half of unmarried teenage mothers wind up on welfare. [B]

(39)

People ultimately leave welfare, because children grow up. Welfare rolls don't decline because new mothers constantly arrive. About 40 percent of them have their first baby as a teen; half of teen mothers go on AFDC within four years of giving birth. [H]

Both these examples suggest that the reason young mothers need to turn to welfare is because they have children while they are too young, without being able to take care of them and without being married. This suggested causality ignores other possible factors why young women might need income support—for instance because of the lack of affordable child care, the refusal of the father to pay child support, the absence of jobs or discrimination in the labour market against young mothers. Still, there is a

more insidious assumption in examples 38 and 39. It is implied that single parenthood (read: single motherhood) causes poverty for young women require welfare after having a child and they leave welfare when their child or children grow up. This reasoning has cause and effect (at least partly) backwards, because “poverty creates female-headed families more than female-headed families create poverty” (Schram, 1993: 260. For more statistical evidence on the relation between poverty and family structure see Bane, 1986: 209–31 and Gramlich, 1986: 341–3). This ‘inverted logic’ serves the ideological purpose of individualizing poverty and victim-blaming. According to one author:

As long as the prevailing discourse helps recreate the idea that family structure causes poverty rather than the other way around, many people will continue to accept the invidious distinction that sees single-parent families as the cause of their own poverty rather than recognizing poverty itself as a major cause of the problems that beset ... female headed families. (Schram, 1993: 260–1)

In addition, any statistical evidence can be manipulated to the advantage of the user and therefore has to be examined closely for what it is actually proving. One strategy of manipulating statistics is the alternation between relative and absolute numbers. Compare the following examples—incidentally, by the same author:

(40)

Costs soar, and as they do, public compassion and support collapse. On welfare, we have long passed this threshold. In 1994, about 5 million families with 9 million children receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The cost was about \$26 billion; food stamps and Medicaid add about \$36 billion more. [H]

(41)

The budget can't be balanced by slashing 'traditional welfare'; Aid to Families with Dependent Children is 1.2 percent of federal spending, food stamps, 1.7 percent. [G]

Obviously, absolute numbers in example 40 are used to give the image that welfare is a large financial burden for the state and thus for all taxpayers, whose willingness to pay for this burden is (understandably) waning. In example 41, however, a more realistic picture is painted, by the use of relative figures. Welfare, in fact, makes up only a small proportion of federal spending. The same ‘number juggling’ can be observed in the following examples:

(42)

Consider how government has become central to our lives. In 1990, 34 million of us qualified for Medicare, 1.7 million got farm subsidies and 22 million received food stamps. [A]

(43)

Traditional ‘welfare’ (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) goes to only 4 percent of families. Food stamps go to 9 percent. [E]



While the 22 million of example 42 and the 9 percent of example 43 in fact refer to the same families (if the statistics are from the same year; if not, then these numbers do not refer to exactly the same families but a very similar number of families), the amount is manipulated to look relatively large in example 42 and relatively small in example 43.

### *Newsweek and the conservative argument*

In the discourse analysis of the previous sections we uncovered much of the conservative rhetoric and stereotyping in the *Newsweek* articles of our sample. In fact, it is striking to see to what extent the articles openly accept the conservative argument that the welfare system is to blame for much of current poverty in the US. All *Newsweek* articles are strikingly oblivious to structural socioeconomic causes behind poverty and put strong emphasis on immorality and ‘welfare dependency’ or the ‘culture of poverty’, complete with all the stereotyping (illegitimacy, crime, laziness, etc.) that the conservatives reinforced in the early 1980s. We have already observed that this cultural explanation for poverty effectively redirects the problem to the private, individual sphere and thus encourages victim-blaming. In addition, we find in the *Newsweek* articles the same simplicity of arguing, fuzziness of central concepts and unfounded use of statistics that characterize conservative black-and-white arguing.

Although the text fragments of the previous sections strongly support this conclusion, let us finally look at two lengthy quotations from *Newsweek* articles that explicitly accept and endorse the conservative argument:

(44)

The problem in the Fort Greene projects [public housing projects for the poor] isn't the absence of jobs. It's the culture of poverty. It's the pattern of dependent, irresponsible, anti-social behaviour that has its roots in the perverse incentives of the welfare system, and the legacy of white racism, and the general societal obsession with sex, materialism and violence, and—yes—the departure of manufacturing jobs as well. [D]

(45)

‘Blacks aren't genetically programmed to have lots of babies when they are teenagers’ . . . These teenagers, and their parents, might not respond to the moral stigma of the white community, but they will respond economically, as all humans do. As welfare dries up . . . girls will have fewer children. [K]

Although example 44 mentions structural factors like racism and, as an afterthought, the absence of jobs for the poor, it does so only in order to minimize the importance of these factors in explaining poverty in favour of the conservative cultural explanation. The parallelism in this quote (the repetitive use of ‘it’s’) serves to reinforce the author’s conclusion. This statement leaves no room for discussion or qualification of the problem. It conveys a cataclysmic image of life in public housing projects that prohibits any possibility of viewing the poor as victims, as outcasts of society,

struggling to survive. Example 45 asserts that blacks have ‘lots of babies’ when they are (too) young, which is morally wrong. It thereby puts pregnancy among young, black women at the forefront of the welfare debate and in fact proposes the conservative solution of abolishing welfare in order to discourage these women from having children.

However, most articles are careful about endorsing conservative policy proposals and this opposition to the Republican welfare policies grows stronger when an article is actually discussing concrete plans of Republicans such as Gingrich. This shows that *Newsweek* is ultimately more sympathetic to the Democrats. One article points out that abolishing the welfare state, as the Republicans propose, will hurt the middle class just as much as it will hurt the so-called underclass:

(46)

Voters may soon discover an uncomfortable truth: that the real beneficiary of the welfare state is the middle class ... only a third of all the money spent on government entitlement programs goes to the poor. [J]

In addition, one article criticizes Republican policy proposals concerning welfare on the grounds that they might be too harsh and carefully suggests that financial *incentives* might be able to address some of the social problems associated with welfare, instead of the conservative sole reliance of *disincentives* (which is a comfortable euphemism for practically letting people starve):

(47)

The GOP is pushing major stigma: no welfare for teenagers ... Some of the state experimentation is instructive ... Ohio has a ... program aimed at teenage welfare recipients. In addition to losing benefits for truancy, the teens get *increased* benefits for staying in school. Truancy is down. The sticks work better in combination with carrots. [K, original emphasis]

This supports the argument made in the introduction, that US liberalism accepts the definition of social problems as set out by the conservatives, while not necessarily proposing the same solutions.

It is hard to say to what extent we can generalize from our analysis of *Newsweek* articles to draw conclusions about the role of the US media in general in naturalizing conservative concepts of welfare and poverty. Our sample was rather small and its representativeness of US media in general may be questioned. It could be argued that many more publications would have to be analysed, both discursively and in terms of arguments and context, to be able to draw general conclusions about the liberal–conservative debate on poverty and welfare. However, there is one argument that supports generalization from our small corpus: *Newsweek* is a mainstream US news magazine and is generally perceived as an example of objective, intelligent journalism. Although much of our sample consists of opinion articles that are not *supposed* to be objective, one important article in our analysis, which we have called [K], was not. In addition, of all the opinion articles not one openly criticized conservative reasoning. In fact, most articles repeated conservative arguments *without* mentioning their con-

servative background thus effectively naturalizing conservative political ideology into common sense. Perhaps the authors themselves were not always aware of the political origins of the arguments they were using.

We can thus conclude that the conservatives who wrote about poverty and welfare are no longer at the fringe of the political spectrum—as they were in the early 1980s. In fact, much of their reasoning has become part of a set of generally undebated assumptions in the field. In this manner, conservative reasoning loses its ideological appearance and is most effective in influencing readers. The media have been of prime importance in naturalizing conservative concepts, for the media choose which stories about poverty and welfare are printed and which images about poor persons and welfare recipients are conveyed. Michael Harrington remarks:

Two images of the poor have probably done more to set back the struggle against poverty than have all the efforts of reactionary politicians: a young black mugger knocking down an aging white woman as he steals her purse (the poor as victimizer rather than as victim); a welfare mother with a large family, pregnant once again (the poor as promiscuous and lazy). (1984: 179)

These images have been constructed in and conveyed through the media (although they may well have originated with reactionary politicians). In the media, “poor female-headed families get constructed as the alien ‘other’ we are all not supposed to be” (Schram, 1993: 250). And this construction of ‘otherness’ and moral deviance allows the proposal of cruel and inhumane policies, while mainstream America argues it is otherwise ‘helpless’ to improve the circumstances of the poor. But, as Thomas Ross points out:

... all that has ever been required to eliminate poverty is a redistribution of wealth. Although the complex mix of history, traditions and political structures may help to explain why Americans have chosen not to abolish poverty, it does not explain how that choice is a product of helplessness. (1991: 1510)

Undoubtedly, there is a need for the US Left to address social problems, such as the changing family structure and the disintegration of inner cities. But this effort should go beyond the countering of conservative arguments with statistical evidence. It should critique the basis of the conservative argument, firmly reject the ‘culture of poverty’ thesis and start taking structural socioeconomic factors into account. In a land of plenty, poverty is no longer natural but a product of power relations. As Michael Katz puts it:

Mainstream discourse about poverty, whether liberal or conservative largely stays silent about politics, power and equality. But poverty, above all, is about distribution ... Description of demography, behaviour, or beliefs of subpopulations cannot explain the patterned inequalities evident in every era of American history. (1989: 7)

#### CONCLUSION: A SHIFT IN THE BOUNDARIES OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Our discourse analysis clearly showed that hitherto conservative notions in the welfare debate have made their way into the mainstream: arguments

that 15 years ago were at the fringe of the political spectrum are now firmly established in the mainstream and have become part of 'common sense', properties agreed on by all parties, liberals and conservatives alike. Democratic politicians propose welfare reform conservative-style, Democratic opinion leaders put forward the same arguments as the conservatives, albeit in a slightly more moderate form. The Harvard Law Review concludes: "Although a decade ago many considered Murray to be on the fringe, his theories have gained support on Capitol Hill and have made their way into the mainstream" (1994: 2024).

This change in the debate on welfare and poverty signifies a larger shift to the right of the US political mainstream or a shift in Chomsky's 'Bounds of the Expressible'. The emphasis on individual responsibility in the welfare debate and the reduction of the structural problems surrounding poverty to the private sphere of culture and family are part and parcel of the neo-liberal world view, which places overwhelming emphasis on individualism, self-reliance and the free market as organizer of all aspects of life. Conservative discourse on welfare and poverty is thus one element of a "neo-liberal, laissez-faire discourse which accords the pursuit of profit something akin to the quest for the holy grail" (Gill, 1995: 66). There is no such thing as 'society', one conservative thinker wrote, just a collection of individuals. Neo-liberalism is the champion of this individualism in which the wealthy and the business world do not need to feel public responsibility towards the poor and excluded.

According to Chomsky, "... we can still identify some moments when traditional ideas are reshaped, a new consciousness crystallizes, and the opportunities that lie ahead appear in a new light" (1989: 45). Let us thus identify the 1980s as a period in which changes in the relations of production (that originated in the 1970s) called for a new dominant discourse on welfare and poverty. The socially inclusionary capitalism of the 1950s and 1960s which combined mass-production in assembly-line factories with Keynesian industrial policies to compensate for the discrepancies of the free market, gave way to a socially exclusionary capitalism characterized by flexible production strategies, global competition and increasing importance of international finance in the 1980s and 1990s, that leaves workers exposed to the increasingly volatile free market (for a detailed account of these transformations in world economics and politics, see Gill, 1990). Concomitantly, the comprehensive concept of control (or dominant ideology) which we called corporate liberalism was replaced by the primacy of neo-liberal ideology. These economic transformations created a new poverty, as is pointed out by Michael Harrington: "[The structures of misery today] are the results of massive economic and social transformations and cannot be understood apart from an analysis of them" (1984: 8). They also created a new poverty discourse, first formulated by marginal conservative thinkers, now naturalized in mainstream media texts.

If the articles of our *Newsweek* sample exemplify mainstream thinking on poverty and welfare, there is little hope the poor might be able to improve their circumstances in the near future. John Kenneth Galbraith's *The*

*Culture of Contentment* (1992) captures the situation of poverty in the neo-liberal era. It describes an increasingly segregated US, in which the politically and economically 'included' part of the US population (the mainstream or the middle class) is relatively contented with the state of things, while the politically and economically 'excluded' (the unemployed, the poor, the newly arrived immigrants) face a deterioration in living circumstances, while fulfilling their economic role of a reserve army of labour. Urban life for middle- and upper-class US citizens, Galbraith argues, is comfortable because of the poor underclass that responds to the need for "... a vast range of tedious or socially demeaning jobs that require unskilled, willing, and adequately inexpensive labor" (1992: 38; see also Sassen, 1991, on the change in relations of production within and between major cities and the role of the poor and immigrants in these new urban economic structures). It is useful to quote at large one observer of the US welfare debate who integrates poverty discourse, structural economic change and 'the culture of contentment' as follows:

... the old canard that the poor are different when it comes to work and family becomes a sick joke in the context of deindustrialization, the evaporation of decent paying, low-skill work, and the decline of wages ... Such an active rewriting of social policy history enables welfare dependency to be seen as a cop-out when in fact it is often nothing more than an inadequate last resort for those who cannot find the means of even basic survival in deindustrializing economy and a fissuring society. (Schram, 1993: 263)

The neo-liberal hegemony does not mean that all US citizens are now adhering to Murray's philosophy. Some observers even believe that public opinion with regard to welfare has not changed much during the 1980s (see for instance Himmelstein, 1990). However, as Levitas points out:

Hegemony does not require that all of the people are convinced all of the time, only enough of the people most of the time ... A dominant ideology is dominant not just by its receipt of a majority vote, but because it is propagated and supported by the institutions of civil society and of the state. (1986: 17)

And, if we may generalize from our small research sample, we can conclude that one very influential institution of civil society, the mainstream news media, undeniably support and propagate the aspect of neo-liberal ideology concerning poverty and welfare.

#### APPENDIX

The following *Newsweek* articles were used in the discourse analysis. The bold capital letters in brackets are used for citing the articles in the text.

##### *Opinion Articles*

1 February, 1993, *Clinton's Nemesis: It's the Modern Welfare State. Government's very generosity helps make it unpopular*, Robert J. Samuelson, p. 4. [**A**]

13 September, 1993, *Should We Think the Unthinkable? It may be time to abolish welfare for teens*, Robert J. Samuelson, p. 31. [**B**]

20 December, 1993, *The Dilapidated Swedish Model. Why work, save, or take risks if security is assured*, Assar Lindbeck, p. 17. [C]

15 August, 1994, *A Tale of Two Cities. The problem isn't jobs, but the culture of poverty*, Joe Klein, p. 17. [D]

24 October, 1994, *Sowing More Cynicism. Gingrich's contract with America isn't new and isn't good*, Robert J. Samuelson, p. 2. [E]

23 January, 1995, *Bowling for Virtue. Kill the welfare state, but save the national service*, Joe Klein, p. 32. [F]

23 January, 1995, *The Spigot of Last Resort. Ending programs like Amtrak would foster a 'public philosophy'*, Robert J. Samuelson, p. 33. [G]

27 March, 1995, *Welfare Can't be Reformed. Strong families are society's ultimate safety net*, Robert J. Samuelson, p. 28. [H]

14 August, 1995, *Newt 'n The 'Hood. Gingrich tries fixing urban America and finds some strange allies*, Joe Klein, p. 37. [I]

#### News Reports

21 November, 1994, *Goodbye Welfare State. The GOP wants to cut your taxes and whack welfare. That may be more painful than it sounds*, Evan Thomas, pp. 18–20. [J]

6 February, 1995, *The Return of Shame. Americans are fed up with everything from teen pregnancy to drunk drivers. How do we restore a sense of right and wrong?*, Jonathan Alter and Pat Wingert, pp. 15–19. [K]

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MARIEKE DE GOEDE is a student at the Department of International Relations and Public International Law of the University of Amsterdam. Her research concentrates on neo-liberal ideology and US conservatism. ADDRESS: Kinkerstraat 78G, 1053 EA Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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#### NOTES

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1. We must be careful with and clear about the meaning of the adjectives liberal and conservative, especially as the American understanding of these concepts differs from the European one. In this essay the term 'liberal' is used in the American sense, implying adherence to an economically interventionist state and a certain degree of social permissiveness. Both these characteristics find little sympathy with American conservatives.
2. I owe much to Professor Gerard Heather of the State University of San Francisco who first discussed these developments in US politics in a lecture at the University of Amsterdam on 20 April 1995.
3. Not all observers are quite as pessimistic about the current state of liberalism in the US. William Plowden, for example, a British observer of the US welfare debate, writes that while liberals 'became demoralized' and 'came to half-believe the conservative rhetoric' in the late 1980s, they are now challenging the conservative rhetoric and policy proposals with new academic arguments (1991: 411–12.) Two remarks are in order in this respect. First, the academic left does not quite share the defeated image of the political left. Socialist and Marxist academic writing challenge the seemingly all-pervasive free-market capitalist

- ideologies. Second, although Plowden praises the 'come-back' of American liberals in the welfare debate, he describes this come-back primarily in terms of a *reaction* against the New Right. This is not in contradiction to my argument that liberals occupy a primarily passive position in the public debate.
4. Ideology in this essay is used exclusively in the sense of 'dominant ideology'. As van Dijk points out, there are many other sources and concepts of ideology that do not originate with dominant groups in society (1995: 245). While acknowledging this diversity in ideological debate, we do not consider it relevant to the discussion in this article.
  5. 'Relations of production' must be understood in a broad sense, thus comprising production not only of goods but also of services. In fact, I would like to use this expression to denote the general organization of society, as according to Ellen Meiskins Wood we cannot in fact separate the economic from the political or social as the economic in capitalism *is* political and social (see Meiskins Wood, 1995b: 19–49).
  6. Fairclough largely agrees with McNally's historical materialist view that considers the real relations of production as being at the basis of all social interaction, including language. Fairclough writes: 'the way in which society organizes its economic production, and the nature of the relationships established in production between social classes, are fundamental structural features which determine others' (1989: 32).
  7. I do not mean to imply any possible chronological or causal order between changes in power, discourse and ideology respectively, believing that any change must be a dialectic between the three. I therefore disagree with Fairclough when he writes: "if there is a shift in power relations through social struggle, one can expect transformation of orders of discourse" (1989: 40). He implies that a shift in power relations must precede a shift in discourse, whereas I believe a shift in discourse may in some cases help to attribute to a shift in power relations.
  8. It is of course uncertain which effects arguments made in the mainstream media have on shared schemata in society at large. Assuming that there is any effect at all, it is bound to vary between individuals. Recently, there has been a shift in academic attention from the production to the reception of media texts (see, for instance, Richardson, 1994). This article, however, proceeds from the assumption that ideology in the press does influence shared schemata, although the extent of this influence remains uncertain.
  9. Murray raised much controversy with his recent book *The Bell Curve*, which attempts to establish a causal relation between IQ and race (of course to the detriment of blacks). One observer argues that this book was written mainly to support the Republican plan to cut welfare (Ramos, 1995: 12–20).
  10. One critic of this argument has been quoted to say: "anyone who thinks that a woman goes through 9 months of pregnancy, the pain of childbirth and 18 years of rearing a child for \$45 more a month ... has got to be a man" (Ann Plant, Director of Clayton County Department of Family and Children Services, quoted in Harvard Law Review, 1994: 2028).
  11. There is one exception to this, in which poor people are associated with positive acts. Article [B] discusses the findings of a reporter who studied why poor young women and men have children. The conclusion of this study was that these people frequently consciously choose to have children. The article cites the study: "for many girls in poverty stricken areas having 'a baby is a *tangible* achievement in an otherwise dreary and empty future. It is one way of announcing I *am* a woman. For many boys ... the birth of a baby represents an identical rite of passage. The boy is saying: I *am* a man'" (original emphasis). Thus, the study cited in the article represents poor young parents as responsible

- individuals who make conscious decisions over their own lives. However, this positive representation is immediately countered by the author of article [B], who condemns these conscious choices as bad choices that need to change: “[these conclusions] are optimistic in a sense that teenagers and young adults are making more or less deliberate choices and, however bad these choices may now be, they could change”.
12. In fact, nowhere is it explained which age group is meant by ‘teenage mothers’. It seems to imply girls aged 16, 17, 18 years. However, sometimes the concept ‘teenagers’ is enlarged to ‘teenagers and young adults’ and is argued that teenage pregnancy is possibly reduced by abolishing welfare for mothers under 20 or 24 years [B].
  13. In the US, of course, welfare was never a universal benefit for the poor. However, it was also never regulated by moral requirements.

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