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Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal

*The Workers Alliance of America and the Works
Progress Administration, 1935–1941*

Drawing on feminist and historical institutionalist studies of the welfare state as well as the concept of classification struggles developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this article examines how the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) influenced the subsequent political mobilization of the unemployed in the United States. The WPA combined features of both the liberal, nationally administered social insurance tier and the nonliberal, state-administered public assistance tier of the U.S. welfare state. By positioning its workers in contradictory ways that resembled both public employment and public assistance, the WPA gave rise to a struggle over their status and rights, manifested in part by the activities and claims of the Workers Alliance of America. A careful examination of this struggle suggests that although the constitution of relief recipients as a clearly demarcated pariah class may facilitate social control, attempts by the state to regulate ill-defined subjects encourage political contention over how those subjects will be constituted.

From 1935 to 1943, the U.S. government relied on an enormous public employment program known as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to cope with the mass unemployment generated by the Great Depression. At its peak in 1938, the WPA put more than three million unemployed relief recipients to work (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1946: 28). Drawing on feminist and historical institutionalist studies of the welfare state as well as the concept of classification struggles developed by French sociologist Pierre

Bourdieu, this article examines how the creation of the WPA influenced the subsequent political mobilization of the unemployed. It argues that by positioning its workers in ambiguous and contradictory ways, the WPA gave rise to a struggle over their classification, manifested in part by the activities and claims of the Workers Alliance of America. The Workers Alliance, a nationwide social movement organization that sought to organize and represent WPA workers from its inception in 1935 until its demise in 1941, demanded that WPA workers be recognized officially and treated as independent citizen-earners rather than dependent paupers.¹ In other words, the Workers Alliance demanded not only higher wages for WPA workers, but also recognition of a new identity, one that the WPA conferred upon its workers only in a partial and contradictory fashion. The material and symbolic stakes of this struggle were inextricable: “To possess the name is to feel the right to claim the things normally associated with those words, i.e., the practices . . . and the corresponding material and symbolic profits (wage claims, etc.)” (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1981: 141–42).

In addition to addressing the historical question of how the WPA influenced the collective identity and subsequent political mobilization of the unemployed, this article aims to make two more general theoretical contributions. First, it helps to fill a significant gap in existing research on the development of the U.S. welfare state. We know a great deal about the policy feedback effects of the welfare state’s gendered social insurance and public assistance tiers (Fraser 1989; Nelson 1990; Gordon 1994). Nationally administered social insurance programs positioned their predominantly male beneficiaries as “rights-bearing individuals” and “members of a liberal regime. . . . To New Dealers, these persons qualified as ‘independent’ citizens, and thus as free and equal bearers of rights, strictly because they were long-term, full-time wage earners.” In contrast, state-administered public assistance programs positioned their disproportionately female beneficiaries “in a nonliberal manner” as “dependent persons who required supervision and protection rather than as bearers of rights” (Mettler 1998: xi–xii, 23–24). By positioning clients differently, social insurance and public assistance programs also encouraged different patterns of political participation (Soss 2002; Campbell 2003). However, the New Deal’s federal works program comprised a third tier of social policies that were institutionally distinct from both social insurance and public assistance (Amenta 1998). This article aims to contrib-

ute to our understanding of the policy feedback effects of this works program in comparison to those of social insurance and public assistance.

In addition, this article uses the case of the WPA to move beyond the inadequacies of two broad perspectives on the feedback effects of social policies. Social citizenship theories emphasize the potential of social policies to empower dominated groups, while social control theories stress the regulatory and disciplinary functions of social policy (Soss 2002: 11–15). Scholars frequently link these theories to the different tiers of the U.S. welfare state, suggesting that “social insurance recipients are treated as something akin to social citizens—they are ‘rights-bearing beneficiaries and purchasing consumers of services’—while public assistance recipients are treated as dependent objects of social control” (ibid.: 15). The case of the WPA reveals that both perspectives limit our understanding of how social policies shape political contention. Social citizenship theories presuppose but do not explain the formation of the groups that social policies are said to empower, while social control theories conflate the formation of groups with their social control. The case of the WPA demonstrates that although the constitution of relief recipients as a clearly demarcated pariah class may facilitate their regulation (Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]), attempts by the state to regulate ill-defined subjects encourage political contention over how those subjects will be constituted.

The article is organized as follows. The first section rethinks the relationship between social policies and the collective identity of welfare state clients through a critique of social citizenship and social control theories. The article then turns to the case of the WPA to provide empirical support for these theoretical arguments. The article’s second section shows that the WPA positioned its workers in contradictory ways that resembled both public employment and public assistance. Rather than forming part of the national tier of New Deal social policies that largely benefited long-term, full-time, male wage earners, the WPA shared features of both nationally and state-administered social policies. The article’s third section shows that the contradictory position of WPA workers expanded opportunities for the Workers Alliance to contest their classification as paupers. In the article’s fourth section, the contentiousness of these claims is traced to the potential material and symbolic profits that corresponded to the status of employee. Finally, the article’s conclusion addresses the political impact of these clas-

sification struggles and highlights the broader theoretical contributions this article makes to the historical sociology of the welfare state.

Beyond Social Citizenship and Social Control

Following T. H. Marshall (1964 [1949]), the social citizenship perspective emphasizes how social rights enable citizens to use their civil and political rights more effectively. This view thus “emphasize[s] the potential of social provision in democratic states, secured at least partially through the political struggles of citizens and others, to counter domination” and enhance the interests of subordinate groups, even if “this potential is often far from being realized” (Orloff 1993: 305). Since Marshall’s seminal essay, subsequent research has developed these kinds of arguments in relation to both class and gender inequalities (e.g., Esping-Andersen 1985, 1990; Korpi 1983, 1989; Shalev 1983; Gordon 1990; Hernes 1988; Orloff 1991). Studies that have applied this perspective to the WPA suggest that the program enhanced the interests of workers, racial minorities, and the unemployed (Weir 1992: 47–50; Sullivan 1996: 92, 141; Amenta 1998: 121, 144–59; Klehr 1984: 297–98).

These accounts rightly suggest that social rights may facilitate the political mobilization of dominated groups, but they do not adequately explain how. Proponents of the social citizenship perspective typically explain mobilization by pointing to the potential “independence effects” of social policies, i.e., how social policies provide resources that may render male wage earners less dependent on employers, women less dependent on male breadwinners, and so forth. This argument is consistent with resource mobilization and political process theories of collective action, which emphasize the importance of external resources and political opportunities (i.e., incentives) for the emergence of social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982). Social citizenship theories thus see social policies as state interventions into conflicts between already constituted groups (e.g., workers and capitalists) pursuing predefined interests. From this perspective, policies may provide incentives and resources for collective action, but they do not enter into or influence the formation of groups themselves. Like the resource mobilization and political process theories of collective action upon which they implicitly rely, social citizenship arguments therefore presuppose but do not explain the formation of collective actors “able to recognize the open-

ing of political opportunities and to mobilize . . . [new] resources for political purposes” (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 286). To be sure, scholars originally developed this line of criticism in reference to the identity-oriented “new social movements” of the postwar era, not the “old” labor movement. However, as Craig Calhoun (1995: 183–84) and others have shown, the collective identity of the “old” labor movement was no more fixed, stable, and unproblematic than the collective identities of the “new social movements.” This is particularly evident from the case of WPA workers in the 1930s.

In contrast to social citizenship theories, the social control perspective emphasizes how social policies police, manage, and regulate dominated groups, reinforcing “the marginality of poor people” and maintaining “the legitimacy of political institutions and the viability of economic institutions” (Soss 2002: 13; van Krieken 1986). Like social citizenship theories, social control theories have been developed in relation to both class and gender inequalities and applied to the WPA (Piven and Cloward 1977, 1993 [1971]; Poulantzas 1973, 1980; Wilson 1977; McIntosh 1978; Abramovitz 1988). These theories improve upon the social citizenship perspective insofar as they explicitly attend to the ways in which social policies constitute recipients of public aid as a group (cf. Simmel 1971 [1908]: 173–78). However, social control theories assume that such groups are formed in an inherently stigmatizing and demobilizing way. From this perspective, the ritual degradation of a pariah class serves to discipline labor and regulate the poor. Social control theories are therefore vulnerable to the criticism that they assume “invariance in the regulatory function of welfare states” (Orloff 1993: 305).

By drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of classification struggles, sociological research on the welfare state can avoid the difficulties of both social citizenship and social control theories. Bourdieu (1985) improves on the former by providing a genetic theory of groups. According to this theory, classification systems help to “bring into existence the thing named” and “*contribute to producing* what they apparently describe or designate” (Bourdieu 1991: 220, 223). The identity and the very existence of groups depend, in other words, on the exercise of symbolic power. Bourdieu also improves on social control theories insofar as he does not see classification systems as merely imposed or inherently demobilizing. Rather, “classificatory systems are . . . the stake of struggles between the groups they characterize and counterpose, who fight over them while striving to turn them to their advantage” (Bourdieu 1984

[1979]: 477). Since these “classificatory schemes and systems . . . are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization” (ibid.: 479), what is at stake in these struggles is “the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize . . . the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups*” (Bourdieu 1991: 221, emphasis in the original). To be sure, the state plays an important role in these classification struggles as the “supreme tribunal” and the “holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1985: 732; 1989: 21–22). However, in contrast to the “pessimistic functionalism” of social control theories, Bourdieu views the state as itself an arena of struggle, not a unified apparatus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 102, 111–15; Bourdieu 1994). As a result of internal struggles, the state may unintentionally create indeterminacy through inconsistent and contradictory classifying practices. This indeterminacy, in turn, “authorizes antagonistic interpretations, offering to the dominated a possibility of resistance to the effect of symbolic imposition” (Bourdieu 2001: 13–14).

Between Public Employment and Public Assistance: The Contradictory Position of WPA Workers

The meaning of a policy is determined by its relation to other policies. Consequently, the WPA must be placed in the broader policy context of the New Deal in order to understand the contradictory and indeterminate position of WPA workers. During the First New Deal (1933–34), the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt pursued reform and recovery primarily through the Agricultural Adjustment Act and the National Industrial Recovery Act, both enacted by Congress in 1933. When the U.S. Supreme Court struck down both laws as unconstitutional in 1935, Roosevelt introduced or supported a series of new economic and social measures, collectively known as the Second New Deal: The WPA, modeled on earlier work programs created during the First New Deal, was established in May 1935 and ceased operations in 1943.² The National Labor Relations Act, enacted in July 1935, protected workers’ rights to organize and bargain collectively. The Social Security Act, enacted in August 1935, established old-age and unemployment insurance and provided public assistance for the aged, the blind, the crippled, and for dependent children. In contrast to the key policies of the

First New Deal, these new measures eventually were upheld by the Supreme Court. Although Roosevelt's landslide reelection in 1936 raised expectations of further reforms, the failure in 1937 of his "court-packing" plan, the so-called Roosevelt recession of 1937–38, and the growth of a conservative coalition in Congress after 1938 increasingly placed New Dealers on the defensive. Nevertheless, New Dealers pushed one other notable reform through Congress during Roosevelt's second term. In 1938, Congress enacted the Fair Labor Standards Act, establishing a federal minimum wage and maximum work week.

Existing scholarship typically treats the WPA as part of the national tier of New Deal social and labor policies that largely benefited long-term, full-time, male wage earners (e.g., Rose 1994: 100–104). This view is not implausible. The close connection between the federal works program and the social insurance programs created in 1935 suggests that the WPA was oriented primarily to the needs of unemployed male breadwinners (Gill 1939: 201–2, 257–58; Amenta 1998: 89). Moreover, because New Deal officials considered husbands to be the economic head of the family and sought to avoid "public criticisms for employing 'too many women,'" unemployed men were "the first to be put on the [WPA] rolls. . . . The husband's position [as economic head of the family] had to be protected even if this involved putting 'some brake upon women's eagerness to be the family breadwinner, wage recipient, and controller of the family pocketbook'" (Rose 1994: 101). Finally, although the WPA did not exclusively employ male breadwinners, the proportion of women working for the WPA (between 12 and 18 percent up until the end of June 1940) was less than the proportion of women in the country's entire labor force (25 percent, according to the 1940 census) (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1946: 44).³ All of these considerations suggest that the WPA was part of the masculine tier of the U.S. welfare state (cf. Amenta et al. 1996: 17–19; Amenta 1998: 155–56).

Nevertheless, closer inspection reveals that the WPA positioned relief workers in much more contradictory ways, not only at a discursive level, but also as a consequence of how New Deal policy makers and relief administrators organized work relief. The WPA thus was characterized from its inception by a "Janus-like nature" (Howard 1943: 251). First, the WPA shared aspects of state-level as well as nationally administered social policies. Although the WPA "emanated out of Washington," it "functioned through a network of nearly 400 state and district offices, which marked what one

observer called the ‘relinquishment of federal control over the execution of projects’” (Schwartz 1984: 254; see Durant 1939). Second, because female WPA workers were ghettoized in largely feminine projects such as sewing and white-collar clerical work, the gender divisions characteristic of the U.S. welfare state as a whole were reproduced *within* the WPA itself (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1946: 44). In this respect, the WPA anticipated similar developments within the “androgynous” Old Age Insurance program (Fraser 1989: 150–51). Third, the proportion of women working for the WPA steadily increased after 1940 (reaching 40.8 percent at the end of 1942) as men left the WPA rolls for private employment more rapidly than women, in effect feminizing the program (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1946: 44). Fourth and most importantly, “neither Congress nor administrative officials” ever clarified “the perennial question of . . . how far the WPA should be regarded as a relief program as opposed to a work program” (Howard 1943: 246–47; see also *ibid.*: 421–22; Lescohier 1939; Bremer 1975). This can best be demonstrated by comparing the social position of WPA workers to that of the disproportionately female dependent poor who were relegated to state-administered public assistance, on the one hand, and to the long-term, full-time, primarily male wage earners served by social insurance, on the other hand.

The WPA and Public Assistance

Policy makers created the federal works program for “a new class of unemployed . . . who were resentful” of traditional poor relief (Schwartz 1984: 70). They intended the works program to help the “employable” unemployed rather than those whom national WPA administrator Harry Hopkins called “unemployables” and “chronic dependents,” to keep these new poor from the degrading fates of private charity or local poor relief, and to preserve their morale and skills (*ibid.*: 34–35; Axinn and Levin 1997: 186; Bremer 1975: 639–40). These policy aims led New Dealers to emphasize the difference between their brand of work relief and earlier forms like the workhouse, which they rightly regarded as punitive and stigmatizing (Gill 1939: 160–61; Hopkins 1936: 100–101, 114–15; Howard 1943: 277).

However, while the federal works program elevated relief workers above the traditionally despised pauper class, policy makers never entirely sundered it from local and conventional forms of public relief. Despite the insistence of the advisory council to President Roosevelt’s Committee on Economic

Security that “the Government employment program should be divorced completely from relief,” the WPA employed almost exclusively workers who were certified as needy and referred by local relief agencies (Howard 1943: 354; see also *ibid.*: 247). Indeed, policy makers restricted WPA employment to relief recipients on the grounds that “if workers are to be brought to the realization that WPA employment is a form of relief rather than ‘just another job,’ it is necessary to require them to accept relief as an antecedent to a job” (*ibid.*: 409). Many Americans regarded the WPA’s link to public assistance as socially polluting. As New York City WPA administrator Hugh Johnson pointed out, WPA employment failed to prevent “the humiliation of home relief,” since “to go on work relief, the rules require that a man first go on home relief. To get there, he must submit to the equivalent of a pauper’s oath” (quoted in *ibid.*: 412–13).⁴ Thus, while the relief policies of Roosevelt’s Second New Deal distanced WPA workers from paupers and the dependent poor, they did not entirely eliminate their relief status or the ritual degradation that historically has been associated with it. Instead, WPA employment combined features of what Suzanne Mettler (1998) describes as the liberal, national tier and the nonliberal, state-administered tier of the U.S. welfare state.⁵

The WPA and Employment

Just as the welfare reforms of the Second New Deal only partly and incompletely separated WPA workers from paupers and the dependent poor, the WPA only partly and incompletely resembled long-term, full-time paid employment. To be sure, federal officials, WPA administrators, and official pamphlets distributed to WPA workers all described the WPA as employment, and institutional features of the program reinforced this perception as well.⁶ This is evident, for example, from the benefits provided to WPA workers. The WPA provided its workers with a cash wage rather than in-kind assistance, and the wage was based on place and skill rather than a family’s estimated need. Moreover, in a concession to organized labor, Congress eventually determined the number of hours that WPA workers were required to work by dividing the sum of their cash benefits by the wage rate prevailing for that type of work.⁷

There were limits, however, to how closely the WPA resembled regular paid employment. Although the *hourly* wages of WPA workers were the

same, their *total* wages were lower than those in private industry. The WPA paid a monthly “security wage” deliberately fixed below those paid in private industry to encourage the unemployed to take jobs in private industry when they became available (Howard 1943: 255; Rose 1994: 98). This wage differential, rooted in the traditional poor relief principle of less eligibility, served to set WPA workers apart from those in private industry (Howard 1943: 255–56). Indeed, although the WPA was oriented primarily to the needs of unemployed male breadwinners, the second-class status of WPA workers relative to federal employees, public works employees, and workers in private industry placed them in a subordinate position. As suggested by the demands of the Workers Alliance for equal pay for equal work (see below), the WPA “security wage” had more in common with the “supplemental” wages historically paid to female dependents than the “family” or “living” wage that male workers historically demanded (Kessler-Harris 1990).⁸ Low wages and precarious job security thus de-masculinized WPA work insofar as they hindered WPA workers from being reliable family breadwinners (cf. Barrett and Roediger 1997: 21).

The conditions of employment for WPA workers also reveal their hybrid status. On the one hand, rather than contract work out to private employers, the WPA itself hired, paid, and supervised workers (Howard 1943: 150–51). Under these conditions, WPA workers were more likely to see themselves as directly employed by the federal government. The relatively long-term duration of their employment reinforced this perception (*ibid.*: 519), discouraging the unemployed from seeing the WPA as something they did between jobs. In addition, the WPA guaranteed that workers could organize, and it prohibited discrimination against workers active in unions or other labor organizations (*ibid.*: 218), further encouraging relief workers to see themselves as employees rather than dependent paupers. On the other hand, significant distinctions remained. Because Congress determined WPA wages and hours, they were “beyond the pale of bargaining” (*ibid.*: 219). Moreover, federal policy prohibited WPA workers from striking against the federal government. Although WPA workers nevertheless did engage in strikes, President Roosevelt and WPA officials publicly refused to describe *de facto* strikes as such, instead using euphemisms such as “defection from WPA employment” to refer to them (Ziskind 1940: 133–84; Howard 1943: 222–27). “What is most noteworthy about this general consensus [that WPA workers had no right to strike],” observed one contemporary, “is that many who share it do so not

because the struck jobs were ‘government’ jobs but because they were relief, not real, jobs” (Howard 1943: 222).

Finally, the contradictory character of the WPA is evident when one examines whether relief workers were entitled to the existing rights and protections granted to public employees and workers in private industry. The federal government provided workers’ compensation benefits to injured WPA workers through the U.S. Employees’ Compensation Commission (*ibid.*: 265). However, eligibility for unemployment compensation benefits under the 1935 Social Security Act was less clear: “Was a worker employed by the WPA to be regarded as employed or unemployed? In some instances, the question was decided in one way, in others, differently. In Michigan it was decided both ways. At one time it was decided that WPA work was employment and not relief. . . . According to another interpretation, however, WPA workers could be regarded as ‘totally unemployed’ and, therefore, eligible not only to file claim for but also actually to receive [unemployment compensation] benefits” (*ibid.*: 435–39, quotation on 436).

Why did the federal government organize work relief in such contradictory ways? These contradictions resulted in part from the WPA’s conflicting policy goals and the constraints of a capitalist economy and federal political structure (Lescohier 1939; Bremer 1975; Katz 1986: 228–34). In addition, political conflicts contributed to the contradictory organization of work relief. These conflicts are obscured if one sees the state as a unified apparatus of social control but become more readily apparent if, following Bourdieu, one sees the state not only as the “supreme tribunal” in classification struggles, but also as an arena of struggle. To begin with, opinions were divided among New Dealers themselves: “For Harry Hopkins, Aubrey Williams, and many other New Dealers, the right to work for the non-elderly was a corollary to an earned right to a pension and the defining premise of New Deal social policy” (Brown 1999: 72). New Deal reformers continued to articulate this vision as late as 1942, when the National Resources Planning Board called for a strengthened and fully nationalized version of the WPA that would be separated from relief and lack a means test, pay the prevailing wage where wages were high or the federal minimum wage where wages were substandard, and resemble private employment in wages, hours, and work conditions (Amenta 1998: 194–95). However, U.S. treasury secretary Henry Morgenthau and President Roosevelt himself remained preoccupied throughout the 1930s with balanced budgets and business confidence (Bremer 1975; Brown

1999). These concerns, shared by many in Congress as well, limited what New Deal reformers were able to accomplish. In addition to these internal divisions among New Dealers, aggressive and (after 1938) increasingly powerful opposition from conservatives also constrained New Deal reforms (Patterson 1967; Porter 1980). The Roosevelt administration designed the WPA as a compromise institution in part to manage these conflicts. However, instead of generating consensus, the hybrid character of the WPA generated intense political conflict over the status, identity, and rights of WPA workers. Although this article focuses on the activities of the Workers Alliance of America as one manifestation of that struggle, the movement was embroiled in a conflict that involved a wide range of individuals and groups, both governmental and nongovernmental, with divergent views and goals.

From Contradiction to Contestation: The Struggle over the Classification of WPA Workers

The same year the Roosevelt administration inaugurated the WPA also marked the consolidation of the unemployed movement in the United States. In the early years of the Great Depression, the Socialist Party, A. J. Muste's Conference on Progressive Labor Action, and the American Communist Party organized the unemployed (Rosenzweig 1975, 1979, 1983). In 1935, the Socialist-led groups and the Musteite Unemployed Leagues merged to form a single, nationwide social movement organization, the Workers Alliance of America. A year later, the Communist-led Unemployed Councils also were included, although non-Communist leaders retained a majority on the alliance's national executive board (Piven and Cloward 1977: 75–76; Seymour 1937: 41–44; Karsh and Garman 1957: 93). As Franklin Folsom (1991: 417) has noted, "What had been three major organizations and a number of minor ones became a single entity able to bring increased pressure on behalf of the jobless."

As the unemployed movement consolidated, it also formed growing ties to the new federal works program. In Harvey Klehr's assessment (1984: 297–98), "Despite [Workers Alliance secretary-treasurer] Herbert Benjamin's warning, shortly after the [1936] unity convention, that the alliance had to guard against becoming merely a trade union for WPA workers, it soon was exactly that. By 1939 some 75 percent of Workers' Alliance members were

WPA employees.” There is some evidence that this percentage fell in the movement’s final years. As anti-Communist attacks on the Workers Alliance mounted and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) began to compete with it to recruit WPA workers, a growing portion of the Workers Alliance membership consisted of unemployables in the early 1940s (Lorence 1994, 1996: 231–35, 274–75, 290). Nevertheless, the Workers Alliance continued to speak for and act on behalf of WPA workers until its demise in 1941.

In the classification struggles studied by Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski (1981: 149), workers modified their job titles “in order to remain aloof from certain groups and get closer to other groups.” This semantic difference, they note, was a “transformed expression of social distance.” The Workers Alliance contested the classification of WPA workers in a similarly two-sided way. On the one hand, the Workers Alliance defined the collective identity of WPA workers in opposition to those who had clearly lost their standing as independent citizen-earners, notably forced laborers and paupers. On the other hand, as the Workers Alliance sought to distance WPA workers from these pariah groups, it struggled to equate them with wage-earning employees.⁹

Defining WPA Workers in Opposition to Forced Labor

Americans historically have defined free labor in opposition to dependent, punitive, and stigmatizing forms of labor, particularly slave labor (Saxton 1990; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1999 [1991]; Glickstein 2002). The United States had, of course, long since abolished slavery. However, in the context of an ominous international setting where fascist movements were growing rapidly in strength, similarly racialized forced labor programs in Nazi Germany provided real and vivid reminders in the 1930s that not all labor was honorable. Like slavery in the nineteenth century, forced labor in the twentieth century gave workers “both a wretched touchstone against which to measure their fears of unfreedom and a friendly reminder that they were by comparison not so badly off” (Roediger 1999 [1991]: 49). These fears led the Workers Alliance initially to oppose the creation of the federal works program and then to attack the WPA’s “slave,” “coolie,” “scab,” and “starvation” wage rates (*Workers Alliance*, August 15, 1935: 1–2; September 1, 1935: 2; October 2, 1935: 2; Salmond 1967: 114–16; Ziskind 1940). The movement did not simply demand public relief or work for the unemployed; it also struggled

to define the relationship created by work relief programs. Implicit in these denunciations of forced work was the claim that WPA workers were free and independent citizen-earners—or at least entitled to that status—and that the state should treat them accordingly. Moreover, as the language of these claims indicates, this was a racialized status. Even as the Workers Alliance struggled to unite the unemployed across ethnic and racial lines, it appealed to an “American standard of living” that rested historically on “white men’s wages” (cf. Barrett and Roediger 1997: 6).¹⁰

Once the WPA was firmly established, the Workers Alliance dropped its initial opposition, instead mobilizing to support and expand the works program and to push for improvements within it. However, by the late 1930s, retrenchment and conservative reforms of the WPA revived old fears and led to renewed ambivalence about the program (*Work*, February 1, 1940: 3). Workers Alliance leaders now defined the WPA in opposition to forced labor, but they pointed to forced labor programs in other countries as a vivid reminder of what the WPA could become if the unemployed were not vigilant. “Perhaps in Germany labor battalions fit the social and political scheme of things,” Workers Alliance president David Lasser wrote in 1939, “but we have no use for them here. And to tell free Americans that they must work at any wages fixed for them, or starve; to tell them that they will go to jail if they strike; to tell them that they are just ‘reliefers’ and have no rights, is an impossible situation” (*Work*, July 15, 1939: 6). Drawing in part on a discourse of industrial democracy that was reinvigorated by the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (Plotke 1996: 98–99), the Workers Alliance insisted that citizenship rights, including the right to organize, had to be extended to WPA workers to prevent the program from becoming “a system of forced labor in which the workers have no rights,” a “situation abhorrent to democracy.”¹¹

Defining WPA Workers in Opposition to Paupers

The Workers Alliance defined the status of WPA workers in opposition not only to forced labor, but also to those on “direct relief” or “the dole” rather than work relief. The partial separation of the works program from direct relief and the strong desire of relief workers to avoid the taint of pauperism facilitated these efforts. Public opinion data and anecdotal evidence strongly suggest that the unemployed preferred work relief to direct relief, not only because work relief provided greater economic security, but also because it

provided greater social respect (Hopkins 1936: 109–10; *Work*, October 22, 1938: 12; June 3, 1939: 6; Howard 1943: 411; Bakke 1940: 257, 278, 280–81, 284).

The continuing concerns of the Workers Alliance about the pauperization of WPA workers reflected this desire to avoid the stigma of direct relief. The *Professional Worker*, the newspaper of the Berkeley-based Union of Professional Workers, an affiliate of the Workers Alliance, noted with concern on March 1, 1937, that “non-relief workers . . . will be eliminated [from WPA rolls]. . . . Relief status in this program [WPA] was to have been incidental, but the inadequacy of the Congressional appropriation coupled with the need for retrenchment are making pauperdom the standard by which to determine eligibility for WPA work.” Later that same month, on March 22, the *Professional Worker* condemned increased investigations by social workers as “the first step in requiring pauperdom as a requisite for work relief.”

By 1939, Workers Alliance leaders were calling for the complete separation of the WPA from traditional forms of public relief and elimination of the rituals of degradation associated with them, particularly the means test. “It is not fair nor good Americanism,” Lasser testified to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee in 1939, “to make it necessary for [the] unemployed to exhaust their last resources before they are entitled to employment on this [WPA] program. . . . This makes the program more of a relief program, it provides less morale and self-respect for those who work on it” (*Work*, July 1, 1939: 2). Indeed, Lasser continued, “we believe that the W.P.A. program suffers from its characterization as a relief program, and because the W.P.A. workers are called ‘relief workers.’ We believe it should not be necessary for decent self-respecting Americans to reach the relief level before they can secure useful work and earn wages on a works program.” Without the relief test, Lasser emphasized, the WPA “would not stigmatize the workers as ‘relief clients’” (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives 1939–40: 34). While the Workers Alliance conceded that need should continue to be an important consideration in certifying the unemployed for WPA jobs, it insisted that need be determined “without forcing the unemployed to go through the relief rolls” (*Work*, May 7, 1938: 1).

Conservative proposals in Congress to further decentralize the federal works program also raised fears about the pauperization of WPA workers. As late as 1945, Lasser warned that reintroducing a decentralized works program would render it indistinguishable from traditional poor relief; workers

would become “charity recipients as clearly marked as though they were at the county almshouse” (Lasser 1945: 215). To resist decentralization was to resist pauperization, but it also was to claim a largely masculine standard of citizenship most completely realized in social insurance. To their credit, Lasser and other leaders of the Workers Alliance struggled to pull up all relief recipients to this national standard even as they resisted efforts to push down WPA workers to the lower standard of public assistance.

Indeed, although the Workers Alliance defined WPA workers partly in opposition to direct relief recipients, this opposition should not be overstated. Even when the majority of Workers Alliance members were WPA workers, the movement never defined itself exclusively as a movement of the “productive” or “employable” unemployed. On the contrary, the Workers Alliance also recruited and worked to organize direct relief recipients and consistently fought to upgrade and expand direct relief for unemployables. “Whether you are a W.P.A. worker, a direct relief client, or an unemployed worker who can’t get either a W.P.A. job [or] relief, your place is with us,” the Workers Alliance proclaimed in a 1937 pamphlet (Workers Alliance of America 1937: 5–6). Insisting that “the Federal government makes its contribution only in part when it provides a work program,” the Work and Security Program adopted by the alliance’s 1938 national convention called for restoration of federal responsibility for general assistance (i.e., in addition to categorical assistance to the aged, the blind, and dependent children); moreover, the Work and Security Program insisted, neither work nor a means test should be a condition for receiving public assistance or unemployment insurance (*Work*, November 5, 1938: 2). However, the Workers Alliance saw direct relief as a necessary evil at best: “The unemployed want work, not relief” (Workers Alliance of America 1937: 19). “Our purpose in organizing these victims of unemployment,” Lasser declared in 1939, “is to help secure work—and, failing that, enough income to provide security for themselves and their families” (Lasser 1939: 3).

Why did the Workers Alliance not define WPA workers more exclusively in opposition to other categories of relief recipients? As noted above, the social organization of the WPA made sharp social distinctions difficult, and the contradictory position of WPA workers led not only to a desire for social distance from paupers but also to a sense of grievances shared in common. Moreover, the organizational structure of the Workers Alliance itself discouraged a sharper and more exclusive division between WPA workers

and other categories of relief recipients. Until the Communist-led Unemployed Councils merged with the Workers Alliance in 1936, the American Communist Party built organizations “around the ‘project level,’ inclusive of all [WPA] workers on a given [work] project or job location” (Seymour 1937: 40–41). Since recipients of direct relief were not employed on WPA work projects, Communist organizers relegated them to separate organizations. In contrast, the Workers Alliance “advocated inclusion of WPA workers in existing ‘neighborhood locals.’” (ibid.). Since neighborhood locals incorporated WPA workers on the basis of where they lived rather than worked, this form of organization brought WPA workers “together with direct relief members” (ibid.). In this way, the organizational structure of the Workers Alliance prevented WPA workers from becoming socially isolated from direct relief recipients, encouraged fraternization, and fostered solidarity and a shared identity among the various categories of relief recipients. Indeed, following the merger of the Communist Unemployed Councils with the Workers Alliance in 1936, “Socialist leaders defend[ed] ‘neighborhood’ as against ‘project locals’” on precisely these grounds. The project local, they argued, “separates WPA workers from direct relief members and therefore weakens a bond that should be close, not only because both groups are unemployed, but because WPA jobs have not been secure and transfer back to relief is frequent” (ibid.: 45; see also *Workers Alliance*, March 1, 1936: 3).¹²

WPA Workers as Government Employees

As the Workers Alliance sought to distance WPA workers from forced laborers and, to a lesser extent, paupers, it simultaneously struggled to equate them with wage-earning employees and elicit recognition of such claims from others. In a letter to Roosevelt outlining the demands of the Workers Alliance on the eve of the 1936 presidential election, Workers Alliance president David Lasser wrote, “While programs such as WPA exist, the WPA workers want . . . the opportunity to do a useful day’s work and receive decent pay. They want to be taken out of the twilight zone in which they are not on relief and yet have an essentially relief status. We WPA workers want to work and be treated as workers” (quoted in *New York Times*, August 25, 1936: 11). The Workers Alliance continued to press for such recognition after Roosevelt’s landslide reelection. In reference to the first meeting between Lasser and Roosevelt in March 1937, a Workers Alliance pamphlet declared,

“This conference between President Roosevelt and the spokesman of the Workers Alliance meant that . . . the administration now recognizes that the W.P.A. workers are its employees and are therefore entitled to a hearing, just as workers in private industry are entitled to meet with their employers” (Workers Alliance of America 1937: 13). This kind of official recognition is crucial in classification struggles. As Bourdieu (1991: 223) points out, the effectiveness of “the act of social magic which consists in trying to bring into existence the thing named . . . is directly proportional to the authority of the person doing the asserting.” Because of divisions among New Dealers and the insistence of conservatives inside and outside of Congress that WPA workers be treated as “relievers,” official recognition of WPA workers as government employees remained partial, inconsistent, and uneven. Nevertheless, even limited recognition undermined conservative efforts to stigmatize WPA workers as recipients of public charity.

In addition to seeking official recognition for their claims, Workers Alliance organizers also encouraged WPA workers to see themselves as government employees and to make claims on that basis. When retrenchment threatened to reduce WPA rolls, the Workers Alliance did not hesitate to describe such reductions as layoffs. “We know you don’t want to go back on relief,” declared a handbill issued by the Workers Alliance of Greater New York in response to layoffs in 1939. “You want a decent job, if not possible in industry, then thru [*sic*] work relief at your skill, with better pay, and working conditions.” Another 1939–40 handbill announced, “your job, your right to work, is seriously threatened.” Similarly, a flier from the Writers Local of the Workers Alliance Federal Arts Council declared, “Act in defense of the [WPA] projects—in defense of your jobs!”

Although by 1939 the Workers Alliance had hundreds of thousands of members and reportedly exercised “influence over about one and a half million” (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives 1939–40: 93–95; see also *New York Times*, September 25, 1939: 21), one cannot assume that all WPA workers shared the views of Workers Alliance leaders. Nevertheless, there is evidence that many WPA workers did come to see themselves as government employees by the late 1930s, increasingly looking upon the WPA as “work not significantly different from that in the private sector, except for the important assumption that public employment was a temporary phenomenon” (Lorence 1996: 81). According to WPA national administrator Harry Hopkins (1936: 114), WPA workers considered themselves to be “working for the Government” and not “on relief any more.” This view is also con-

firmed by newspaper accounts. According to a 1939 editorial in the *Philadelphia Record*, WPA workers “don’t regard a W.P.A. job as charity. They don’t want charity. They want work, consider their job IS work” (reprinted in *Work*, January 28, 1939: 7). Finally, public opinion data also suggest that many WPA workers came to see themselves as government employees. In July 1939, a Gallup public opinion poll asked a cross section of the U.S. population whether they approved dropping from the WPA rolls WPA workers who went on strike for more than five days. The American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup 1999: 169) reported that 74 percent of respondents approved, and 26 percent disapproved. The institute also broke down its findings by income (upper, middle, and lower), which revealed that approval was correlated positively with income. Among those with lower income, approval dropped to 62 percent. Among WPA workers only, the approval rate dropped still further to 49 percent. “In explaining reasons for their attitude,” the *New York Times* (July 19, 1939: 4) reported in an article about the poll, “voters who approve the firing of WPA strikers say, chiefly, that WPA is a ‘form of charity’ and the workers should be ‘glad of what they get.’ On the other hand, voters who disapprove the dismissals argue that ‘all workers should have the right to strike’ and that the WPA ‘doesn’t give them enough money anyway.’” This suggests that by 1939 WPA workers were less likely than others to approve punitive action against their strikes because they were more likely to consider themselves employees.¹³

Material and Symbolic Stakes of the Classification Struggle

“Agents shape their aspirations,” writes Bourdieu, “according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not ‘for us,’ a division as fundamental and as fundamentally recognized as that between the sacred and the profane” (quoted in Swartz 1997: 107). Claims that WPA workers were government employees undoubtedly shaped their aspirations and expectations, but what did it mean to be “treated as workers,” in David Lasser’s words? Shared cultural understandings of the rights to which workers are entitled—the “material and symbolic profits” that correspond to the name “worker”—are not, of course, inherent in the name or category itself. The Workers Alliance developed these understandings by transposing cultural schemas from federal employment, public works programs, and employment in private industry to the circumstances of WPA

workers.¹⁴ Moreover, these cultural schemas were themselves changing. As other New Deal institutions such as the National Labor Relations Board and the Fair Labor Standards Act granted new rights to workers in private industry, the Workers Alliance demanded similar rights for WPA workers.

Analogies to Federal Employees

By encouraging WPA workers to see themselves as employees of the federal government, the Workers Alliance encouraged them to demand parity with other government workers. In 1936, for example, the Workers Alliance approvingly reported that “two suits to force granting of 26-day annual vacations to all WPA employees have been filed in the United States District Court [in New York]. . . . The suits are being filed under a federal law allowing all government employees 26 days annual vacation and sick leave, exclusive of Sundays and holidays” (*Workers Alliance*, “Second July Issue” 1936: 4). In its 1938 report to the fourth national convention of the Workers Alliance, the alliance’s WPA Labor Relations Committee called for vacation and sick leave privileges for WPA workers on similar grounds (*Work*, November 5, 1938: 4).

This kind of analogical transposition was a double-edged weapon. While the transposition of cultural schemas provided a basis for the alliance’s contentious claims on authorities, it also could facilitate attempts by authorities to discourage claim making. In August 1938, on the eve of an important congressional election, the Senate Campaign Expenditures Committee warned the Workers Alliance against raising money from WPA workers to promote the election campaigns of favorable candidates, arguing that such fund-raising was illegal under an 1883 federal statute that prohibited the collection of campaign contributions from federal employees (U.S. Congress, Senate 1939, pt. 2: 374–75).¹⁵ As Workers Alliance leaders pointed out, the law in question was applicable only if WPA workers were classified as federal employees, which legislators did inconsistently and selectively to serve their own ends (*ibid.*: 375; *New York Times*, August 28, 1938: 19).

Analogies to Public Works Employees

The Workers Alliance also demanded parity with employees of the Public Works Administration (PWA). Unlike the WPA, which directly hired,

paid, and supervised workers, the PWA was essentially a financing agency that channeled federal money to private contractors who hired and supervised most of the program's employees (Meriam 1946: 358). Congress did not require PWA employees to go through the relief rolls like WPA workers, and it required employers to pay PWA employees the prevailing wage from the program's inception (Edelman 1957: 173–74). As early as 1935, David Lasser criticized the federal works program for paying PWA workers more than WPA workers even though “the actual work done might be the same in either case” (*Workers Alliance*, August 15, 1935: 1). Echoing claims that had long been made on behalf of women workers (Kessler-Harris 1990: ch. 4), the Workers Alliance demanded that equivalent work be remunerated with equal pay (*Work*, December 17, 1938: 2, 9). Moreover, Lasser pointed out in 1939, the WPA worker suffered other humiliating indignities that the PWA employee was routinely spared: “He is ‘examined’ regularly, he takes ‘tests’ to see that he is not an alien, or not plotting to overthrow the government, or not earning 50 cents a week extra, or has not been on the program too long” (*Work*, July 15, 1939: 6). Thus, by drawing analogies to PWA workers, the Workers Alliance not only shaped WPA workers’ understandings of what constituted a just wage, but also what it meant to be treated as a worker more broadly: parity with PWA workers meant being positioned as a rights-bearing individual rather than as a dependent person who required humiliating supervision.

Analogies to Workers in Private Industry

The Workers Alliance also demanded parity with workers in private industry. Early on, for example, David Lasser rejected WPA wages as inadequate because they were “unreasonably lower than those paid in comparable industries and the trades and professions from which WPA workers have been drawn” (*New York Times*, August 25, 1936: 11). Parity with workers in private industry remained a constantly moving target as those workers won new gains (Derber 1957; Babson 1999: 51–111). Successful labor struggles in private industry inspired similar demands by relief workers on the WPA rolls, particularly after the formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization (later renamed Congress of Industrial Organizations) in November 1935 and its victories against Goodyear in 1936 and U.S. Steel in 1937. According to a contemporary observer, “organization on work relief projects, previously a

difficult task not successfully performed, would appear to have gained impetus from the C.I.O. ‘organization’ atmosphere” (Seymour 1937: 45).

The National Labor Relations Act

As New Deal labor policies encouraged and legitimated organizing efforts in private industry (Piven and Cloward 1977: 111–15; Skocpol 1980), the Workers Alliance invoked these same policies to encourage and legitimate protest among WPA workers. For example, after Congress enacted the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), creating the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and making collective bargaining rights enforceable for workers in private industry, the Workers Alliance claimed these same rights for WPA workers. When Workers Alliance members demanded the removal of Pennsylvania WPA administrator E. N. Jones in 1936, for example, a spokesman for the protesters simply explained: “Mr. Jones has . . . violated the principles of collective bargaining as set forth in the Wagner labor disputes law” (quoted in *Workers Alliance*, “First January Issue” 1936: 4). When it became clear that the existing legislation would not cover WPA workers, the Workers Alliance demanded that Congress expand the law’s protections—and thus the category of employee (Workers Alliance of America 1937: 17; *Work*, March 19, 1938: 3; October 22, 1938: 5; November 5, 1938: 4).¹⁶ As late as January 1940, David Lasser complained to Roosevelt that “discrimination, intimidation, [and] terrorization of [WPA] workers for exercising their legal rights to organize is widespread and growing.” He decried the “old tricks” being used against the Workers Alliance, including “tricks which would haul a private employer before the National Labor Relations Board.”¹⁷

The Fair Labor Standards Act

Like the NLRA, the applicability of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to WPA workers also was contested fiercely. Congress seemed to settle the question in the 1938 Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, which required the WPA to pay its workers the prevailing wage unless it was below the minimum set by the FLSA, in which case the federally mandated minimum would apply (*Work*, August 13, 1938: 1). However, upon closer inspection, the legislation was less clear. Conservatives argued that the standards established by the FLSA were largely inapplicable to WPA workers because

most were not engaged in interstate commerce and “because the occupations on WPA and those covered by the Wage-Hour Bill are ‘not similar’ to task” (*Work*, December 3, 1938: 2; also see *Work*, October 22, 1938: 3). Nevertheless, both the leadership and the rank and file of the Workers Alliance used the FLSA as a benchmark for defining the rights of WPA workers and invoked its minimum-wage provisions to make claims on their behalf. “The Administration officials are always hammering away at the private enterprise or large corporate interests to shorten hours and pay good wages,” Workers Alliance member B. W. Adams wrote in a letter to the movement’s newspaper. “Why does not the Administration agencies of PWA and WPA take some of their own advice?” (*Work*, September 10, 1938: 12; cf. *Work*, September 24, 1938: 6).

When WPA administrator Harry Hopkins announced wage increases for 500,000 WPA workers in 1938—in part because of political pressure on the Roosevelt administration to apply the FLSA more consistently—the Workers Alliance hailed the increases as a victory (*New York Times*, June 27, 1938: 1; *Work*, July 2, 1938: 1; U.S. Congress, Senate 1939, pt. 2: 369–72).¹⁸ Since the increases mostly occurred in the South, where WPA wages were as low as 15 cents per hour, extension of the newly established national minimum wage made possible “a substantial increase in the [wages of the] lowest paid WPA workers” (*Work*, September 24, 1938: 6). Insofar as the Workers Alliance derived a large share of its resources from dues payments by members, such wage increases were advantageous for the movement.¹⁹ But the Workers Alliance hailed the 1938 wage increases as a victory not only because they expanded the movement’s potential resources but also because of the social meanings inscribed in these higher wages (cf. Kessler-Harris 1990; Zelizer 1994). When the Workers Alliance first began agitating for higher WPA wages, Lasser noted, “the papers scoffed at our attempt to ‘raise the wages of those on relief.’ Relievers, it was said, were being given charity. They should be thankful for whatever was bestowed!” Now, Lasser wrote, “we can appeal to WPA workers with pride and assurance. The justice of our cause has been vindicated” (*Work*, July 16, 1938: 5). Thus, these rights claims were about the categorization of WPA workers as employees—or, to be more precise, as employees that fell on the more privileged side of the gender and racial divide in the coverage of U.S. labor standards. Congress excluded millions of workers who were deemed not to be involved in interstate commerce from the minimum wage provisions of the FLSA, and “women and nonwhite men fell

disproportionately into those [excluded] categories, in agriculture, as domestics, and in retail and service work” (Mettler 1998: 188). Like struggles to resist further decentralization of the WPA, struggles to extend FLSA protections to WPA workers involved claims to a standard of citizenship that was largely white and masculine.

Conclusion

Political Impact of Classification Struggles

This article has examined how the creation of the WPA in 1935 influenced the political mobilization of the unemployed in the United States. The effects of the WPA were limited, in part because its reach was limited. The WPA did not hire all or even most of the unemployed; even at the peak of its expansion in 1938, when the program provided 3.3 million jobs, more than 10 million Americans were out of work (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1946: 28; U.S. Department of Commerce 1975: 135). Nor did the WPA in any sense generate the unemployed movement, which formed well before the program was implemented.

Nevertheless, the WPA did affect the political mobilization of the unemployed in several important and related ways. By positioning WPA workers in ambiguous and contradictory ways, between relief and employment, New Deal policy makers inadvertently encouraged an intense political struggle over their status, identity, and rights within the emerging New Deal welfare state. This struggle was manifested in part by the activities and claims of the Workers Alliance of America, which demanded that WPA workers be recognized officially and treated as rights-bearing, independent citizen-earners rather than dependent paupers requiring discipline and supervision. Hundreds of thousands of WPA workers, mobilized by the Workers Alliance of America, were themselves actively involved in this conflict. Moreover, this struggle over the classification of WPA workers also influenced *how* they mobilized—as employees. This identity entailed particular repertoires of action, discourse, and organization (even though others were available), and it influenced the political alliances that organized WPA workers were likely to form, orienting them primarily to the labor movement rather than to other groups such as women’s or consumers’ organizations.²⁰ Finally, although the Workers Alliance failed to obtain full and consistent official recognition of WPA workers as government employees, the movement “func-

tioned as a training ground for unionism,” returning hundreds of thousands of WPA workers to private industry as dedicated unionists (Lorence 1996: 150). In all these ways, the WPA—and the classification struggles it encouraged—were politically consequential.

Implications for the Political Sociology of the Welfare State

In addition to addressing the WPA’s policy feedback effects, this article also has broader implications for political sociological models of the New Deal welfare state. In line with historical institutional models of the New Deal, this study emphasized the ways in which institutions shape the perceptions of interests and the behavior of individuals and groups. However, while most of the existing institutionalist work on the New Deal focuses on national governmental capacity, the U.S. party system, and other enduring structures that constrained New Deal reforms, this study focused on those institutions created by the New Dealers themselves, particularly the WPA, and the classificatory schemes objectified in them. To understand these institutions and their policy feedback effects, this article has built upon and extended feminist models of the welfare state. While feminist scholarship has revealed the gender subtexts of the social insurance and public assistance tiers of the New Deal welfare state, its third tier—the federal works program—has been largely neglected. This study found that the centerpiece of the works program, the WPA, combined features of both the liberal, nationally administered social insurance tier and the nonliberal, state-administered public assistance tier of the U.S. welfare state. By positioning workers in contradictory ways that resembled both public employment and public assistance, the WPA fostered distinctive forms of political contention.

To fully understand this kind of contention, it was necessary to move beyond the limitations of social citizenship and social control theories. Because social citizenship theories take groups as given, they are of limited usefulness for understanding political struggles over how individuals will be grouped. In contrast to sociological studies of the New Deal that show how struggles between already constituted groups (usually labor and business) influenced policy, this article drew on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to explain how struggles over classificatory schemes (re)constituted groups. In contrast to social control theories that view the constitution of relief recipients as a

stigmatizing process that facilitates their regulation, this study's findings suggest that the outcome of regulatory efforts varies depending (among other things) on how relief recipients are defined. Although the constitution of relief recipients as a clearly demarcated pariah class may facilitate social control, attempts by the state to regulate ill-defined subjects are instead likely to encourage political contention over how those subjects will be constituted. In short, the New Deal was shaped not only by struggles among classes but also by what Adam Przeworski (1985) calls struggles about class.

Appendix

Archival sources

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Notes

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- 1 I borrow the concept of citizen-earner from Shklar 1991: 63–67.
- 2 “The WPA by 1939 had become the most comprehensive, ambitious, and controversial government program,” and it “was regarded as the cornerstone of domestic relief” (Porter 1980: 61, 70). As “Roosevelt’s top priority in social policy,” the WPA absorbed both the greatest amount of public spending and public attention”; by 1939, it accounted for 46 percent of social spending in the United States and 1.7 percent of America’s gross national product (Amenta 1998: 81, 83, 144). Although Congress abolished the WPA in 1942, the program did not cease operations until 1943 (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1946).
- 3 Although women officially were not denied WPA work, they found it harder to get work because they were more often classified as unemployable and because WPA employment was restricted to one family member (usually the husband or father).
- 4 Home relief was a form of poor relief historically provided by local or state governments, so called because it did not involve incarceration in a poorhouse or workhouse. To receive poor relief, an individual traditionally was required to swear that he or she was destitute and had lived in the locality for a specified amount of time. Even after they secured WPA employment, workers sometimes were forced to supplement their wages with direct relief if their WPA wages were not sufficient to support their families (Rose 1994: 98). WPA workers remained subject to other forms of ritual degradation as well, including fingerprinting by law enforcement officials (*Work*, April 9, 1938: 3; May 7, 1938: 1; December 17, 1938: 8; January 28, 1939: 5).
- 5 My use of the term *liberal* closely follows Orren 1991, Smith 1993, and Mettler 1998. Social policies are liberal in this sense when they position individuals as rights-bearers and purchasing consumers (Fraser 1989: 151–52), take on “some of the trappings of civil exchange,” and guarantee “secure entitlements . . . by mimicking private contracts” (Fraser and Gordon 1992: 60).
- 6 First lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins both suggested that the federal government should classify WPA workers as employed in the course of gathering statistical information on unemployment (*New York Times*, February 1, 1939: 12; May 7, 1939: 4). A widely circulated pamphlet entitled *Our Job with the WPA* bluntly told WPA workers that they were “off relief. You are working” (U.S. Works Progress Administration 1936: 8). National WPA administrator Francis Harrington expressed similar views (see Harry L. Hopkins, Container 35, in the Appendix). There is some debate about whether social workers or other types of administrators

were more likely to emphasize the work aspects of work relief. Bremer (1975: 641) argues that social workers sought to “maximize work relief’s work aspects and to minimize its relief aspects as much as possible.” In contrast, Bonnie Fox Schwartz (1984: viii, 237–38) argues that as engineers, technicians, and management experts displaced social workers as administrators, they ran work relief programs “more like an emergency employment corporation rather than charitable made work.” Harrington was recruited from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is consistent with Schwartz’s argument.

- 7 As Viviana Zelizer (1994: 132) points out, relief administrators sometimes have compensated relief work with in-kind assistance rather than cash as a way of “signaling concretely the difference between ordinary wages and work-relief payments.” Congress instituted the prevailing wage with the 1936 Emergency Relief Appropriation Act. However, rather than raise the WPA security wage, Congress reduced “the hours of labor until the amounts of the original security wage translated into hourly terms equaled the prevailing wage” (Macmahon et al. 1941: 156; see also *Workers Alliance*, August 15, 1935: 1; October 2, 1935: 1; “First July Issue” [1936]: 1; Seymour 1937: 40; Millett 1938: 41–45; Ziskind 1940). In August 1939, Congress abandoned the prevailing wage policy and set hours uniformly at 130 per month (Rose 1994: 98).
- 8 Even as WPA workers were demanding pay equal to that of federal employees, public works employees, and employees in private industry, Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) president John L. Lewis was publicly advocating equal pay for women engaged in “substantially the same work” as men (Mettler 1998: 48). Given the identical language in which these claims were made, WPA workers could not have failed to notice the parallel.
- 9 In the discussion that follows, I rely on qualitative archival evidence (see Appendix) rather than the kind of protest event data that Kerbo and Shaffer (1986, 1992) collected. They find that the number of protest events peaked in 1936 and declined thereafter, which is consistent with the social control view of the WPA. However, disruptive street protests are not the only form that classification struggles take. If one considers institutionalized as well as noninstitutionalized forms of struggle, as I do below, it is clear that political conflict over the classification of WPA workers persisted well into the early 1940s. While institutionalized forms of claim making may have been less disruptive (Piven and Cloward 1977), the claims made by the Workers Alliance were certainly no less contentious after 1936.
- 10 On the opposition between (white) free labor and (black) slave labor, see Roediger 1999 [1991]. On anti-Chinese and anti-Oriental sentiment against “coolie laborers,” see Smith 1993: 559–60 and Barrett and Roediger 1997: 22–23.
- 11 See Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Appendix.
- 12 These debates were never fully settled, and local practices varied (Seymour 1937: 45–46; *Work*, December 3, 1938: 7; November 9, 1939: 3; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives 1939–40: 69–70). However, despite the adoption of project locals in some places, fraternization continued to occur at higher levels of the Workers Alliance, which was organized along territorial rather than program-specific lines. Locals

elected delegates to a countywide or statewide organization, and these various constituent units elected delegates to nationwide annual conventions (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives 1939–40: 36).

- 13 Unfortunately, there is not enough public opinion data to track changes in the views of WPA workers over time. The average number of persons employed on WPA projects in July 1939 (when the poll was taken) was 2,282,087 (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1946: 28).
- 14 I borrow the concept of transposition from Sewell 1992.
- 15 As Zelizer (1994) has shown, cash benefits are more difficult for authorities to earmark for activities they condone and approve. Consequently, the use of cash relief for political purposes became a highly contentious issue in the 1930s. While the Senate Campaign Expenditures Committee was partly concerned that relief funds might become a form of federal patronage, some senators and congressmen were also clearly worried that relief funds might provide political resources for relief recipients. See U.S. Congress, Senate 1939. See also “Analysis of Cases Investigated by the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures Which Affect the Works Progress Administration,” December 29, 1938, memorandum to Harry Hopkins (see Harry L. Hopkins, Container 80, in the Appendix).
- 16 The WPA established its own Labor Policies Board, which was meant to be analogous in some respects to the NLRB, but it lacked enforcement provisions (therefore failing to satisfy the Workers Alliance) and eventually was discontinued. On the formation, limitations, and demise of the WPA Labor Policies Board, see the comments made by Herbert Benjamin, the national secretary-treasurer of the Workers Alliance, in 1938 (*Work*, August 13, 1938: 7; October 22, 1938: 4, 7).
- 17 See Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Appendix.
- 18 The wage increases occurred at the end of June 1938 in 13 states, including 2 states (Kentucky and Oklahoma) where New Dealers faced important congressional primaries. Far from dampening protest, these wage increases led the Workers Alliance to demand further increases, which it justified in part on the basis of the FLSA’s minimum-wage provisions (Lasser 1938: 32; *Work*, October 22, 1938). The Workers Alliance launched a national drive to raise the pay of WPA laborers in low-wage categories that climaxed with a National WPA Wage Conference in Washington, DC, in December 1938 (*Work*, July 16, 1938: 1; August 13, 1938: 1; August 26, 1939: 3).
- 19 The Workers Alliance depended heavily on contributions from members, three-quarters of whom were WPA workers by 1939. Workers Alliance secretary-treasurer Herbert Benjamin testified in 1939 that roughly half of the movement’s monthly income—about \$4,000 on average—came from membership dues, initiation fees, and charter fees. An additional 45 percent of the Alliance’s monthly income was derived “from the sale of other organizational supplies such as literature and our newspaper” to members (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives 1939–40: 82; see also *ibid.*: 37–39; *New York Times*, April 18, 1939: 3). “Initiations and dues are the life blood of our organization,” Benjamin’s successor, Frank Ingram, wrote a year later (quoted in *Work*, June 20, 1940: 3).

- 20 As James Lorence (1996: 81–82) points out, once WPA workers “perceived themselves as jobholders,” the “labor union model” became “relevant for organizational activity.” On repertoires of collective action, see Tilly 1995. On discursive repertoires, see Steinberg 1995. On organizational repertoires and the way they affect alliances among groups, see Clemens 1996. Although many organizers worked hard to instill class consciousness and solidarity in the unemployed, the unemployed did not always make claims as workers. This is perhaps best illustrated by the “Bonus Army” that marched on Washington in 1932 (Daniels 1971).

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