



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

A Right to Childhood: The U. S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46 by Kriste Lindenmeyer

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the story McAfee so ably tells. His rather blithe reference to universal acceptance of coeducation in the public schools obscures the heated debates among parents, educators, and government officials and denies parallels between race and gender in American public schools that should not be overlooked.

Overall, the book's strengths outweigh these weaknesses. McAfee presents an innovative and well-supported argument for the centrality of public education to Reconstruction politics. His detailed analysis of the transformation of Republican ideology after the Civil War never loses sight of the inextricable links between politics and polity. *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction* is a major contribution, one that combines the best elements of traditional political narrative with the insights of social and cultural history. This study of the complex relationship of religion, race, and education bears contemporary relevance as well, as America continues to struggle with defining and achieving a democratic vision for the nation at once unique and universal.

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Kriste Lindenmeyer. *A Right to Childhood: The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997. 344pp. Cloth \$49.95, paper \$21.95.

A Right to Childhood is the only comprehensive history of the United States Children's Bureau, the world's first national public agency devoted solely to social policies for children. That Bureau was created in 1912 out of the reform agendas of Lillian Wald, Florence Kelley, and Jane Addams, and through voluntary associations such as the National Child Labor Committee. The Children's Bureau conducted large-scale social research projects, organized numerous national child welfare conferences, and produced mountains of advice literature on maternal, infant, and child health. During the 1920s, it helped design and implement the Sheppard-Towner Act. Between the World Wars, the Bureau fought for a failed constitutional amendment to outlaw child labor. Although the Bureau usually ignored or opposed controversial programs that would have greatly helped single mothers, such as the dissemination of birth control information and day care provision, it became an advocate for public aid to dependent children and it administered several millions of dollars of federal funds for medical care to needy children during the Great Depression. By recovering the expressed ideas of the leaders of the Children's Bureau and carefully documenting the administrative and political details of their most important policy reform efforts, *A Right to Childhood* will be a useful first source for many scholars who are interested in child welfare issues.

Lindenmeyer stresses two persistent themes in the ideological history of that Bureau: the effort to ensure “a right to childhood” for all Americans and the philosophy that considering the “whole child” was necessary to improve child life. Lindenmeyer argues that the “whole child” philosophy provided a framework for justifying a separate administrative body in the federal government to serve children as a constituency. Serving a constituency allowed the Bureau to protect children’s interests in the “right to childhood.” Unfortunately for the Bureau’s supporters, this constituency-based approach made it difficult for them to effectively defend the existence of the Bureau when efficiency experts reorganized the federal bureaucracy on a more purely functional basis after World War II. Lindenmeyer shows that as a result, the Children’s Bureau’s functions were partitioned among several different federal departments in 1946, and thus their “whole child” philosophy and constituency-based approach to children was dismantled.

While persuasively advancing this argument, *A Right to Childhood* does relatively little to explore the contradictions between the middle-class notion of a “right to childhood” and the “whole child” approach in public policy. Lindenmeyer makes it clear that the Bureau’s leaders loaded their approach to children with the assumption that households should be based on conjugal units that were supported by bread-winning fathers and managed by care-giving unemployed mothers. But, she makes these points mostly to suggest the ways that middle-class reformers were limited in their approaches to working-class families and children. Perhaps the trouble adhered more profoundly within modern middle-class ideals. One might suspect that a right to modern childhood, a childhood encompassed in domesticity, would encourage the very functional partitioning of social policies that ultimately destroyed the Bureau and its “whole child” philosophy. If modern domesticity is dependent upon large-scale institutions like schools and hospitals and an increasingly complex set of diagnostic categories, then the right to modern childhood might make it impossible to reckon with the “whole child” in any meaningful or sustainable sense. This speculative observation aside, Lindenmeyer deserves credit for offering new insights into how the middle-class biases of the Bureau’s leaders limited their vision of policy reform. In an important way, her close institutional analysis forces us to grapple with the fact that the Bureau’s leaders were circumscribed by complex political and social relationships. The political feasibility of reforms was not self-evident to them and neither were the social consequences of given policies, even for the future of the Bureau itself. Lindenmeyer appropriately approached her critique of the Bureau with a fundamental respect for its attempts, flaws and all, to help children.

A Right to Childhood is clearly written, thoroughly researched, and cogently argued. It brings forth a fresh, sophisticated, and comprehensive view of an important federal agency, and it deserves a wide readership.