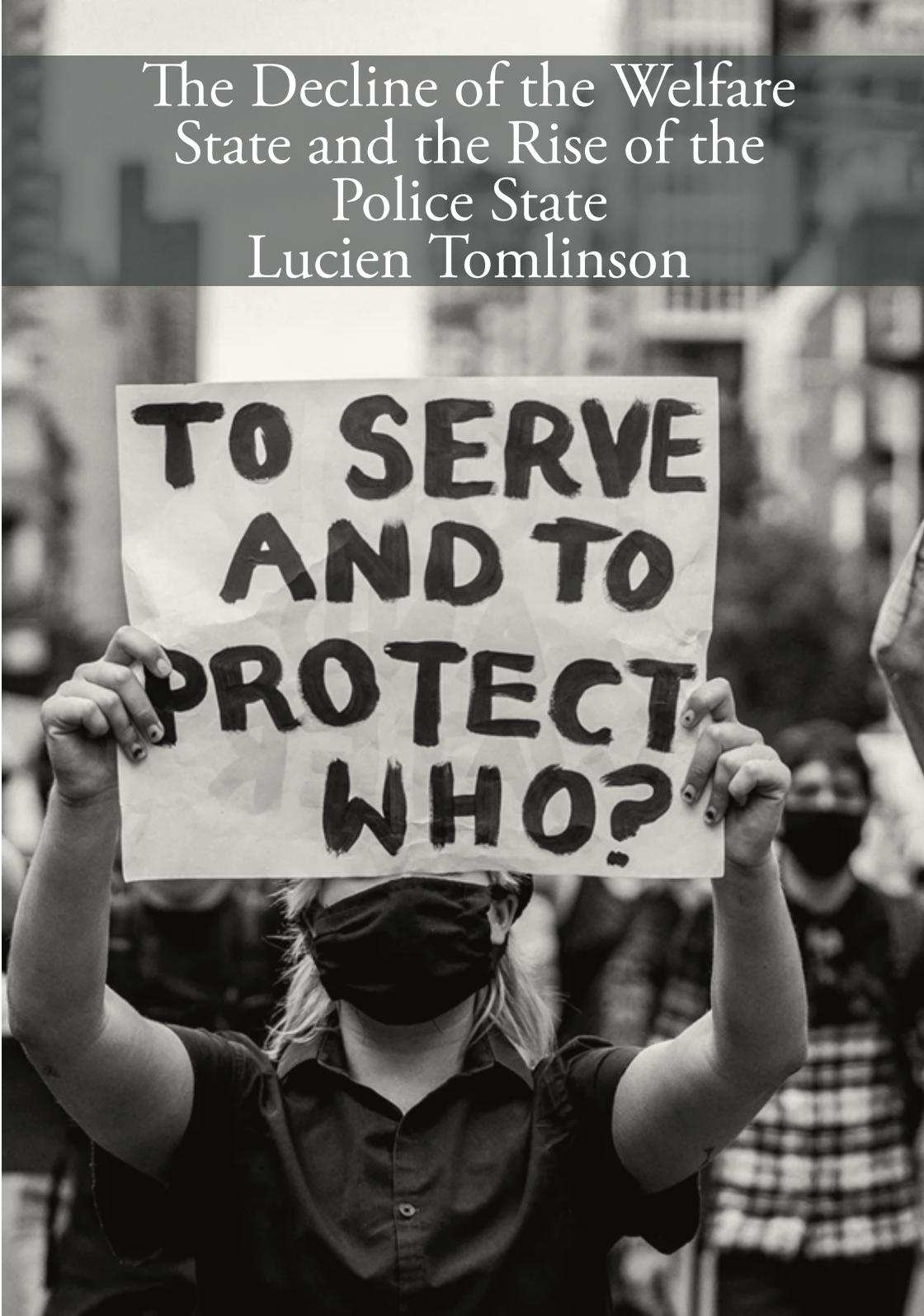


The Decline of the Welfare
State and the Rise of the
Police State
Lucien Tomlinson

A black and white photograph of a person at a protest. The person is wearing a dark face mask and a dark short-sleeved button-down shirt. They are holding a large, rectangular sign with both hands, raised above their head. The sign is made of a light-colored, slightly crumpled paper and has the words "TO SERVE AND TO PROTECT WHO?" written on it in large, bold, black, hand-painted capital letters. The background is out of focus, showing other people at the protest, some wearing masks, and buildings in the distance.

**TO SERVE
AND TO
PROTECT
WHO?**

The United States' incarceration rates and wealth inequalities undo popular claims of American exceptionalism. According to prisonpolicy.org, 1.9 million people are locked up in over 6,000 facilities, while incarceration per 100,000 people is 664, nearly 6 times the United Kingdom's incarceration rate. In fact, the US incarcerates its citizens at a rate that no other country can rival. Worse, US mass incarceration falls along racial and classist lines; with the median White household being 7.8 times richer than Black households (Brookings, 2020). Black Americans are disproportionately imprisoned, making up 38% of the prison population despite being only 13% of the United States population (Prison Policy Initiative, 2022). In the United States, there is a direct correlation between incarceration, race, and poverty. The United States government, on all levels, has responded to this correlation with the mass incarceration of those in poverty and minorities.*

Looking through a macro lens, the lack of welfare support, the current systematic class war against those in poverty, and mass incarceration are recent phenomena with a redistribution of wealth occurring since the 1980s. The United States government has had a complete paradigm shift in the past forty years, from a welfare system that supported poor and minority communities to the modern status quo of mass incarceration and racial inequality. This path has led the United States distribution of wealth between White and Black Americans to increase dramatically, rising to a level not seen since pre-segregation America. In the past forty years, the

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United States has dramatically transformed, and that transformation has led to grave consequences: the rise of the police state and mass incarceration.

The modern state of mass incarceration disproportionately affects those in poverty. Adults in poverty are 3 times more likely to be arrested, and 15 times more likely to be charged with a felony than those above the federal poverty level. (Woravka, 2021). Incarcerated citizens in the United States today are made up of an excessive amount of low-income and minority populations, who make up three-fifths and two-thirds of the prison population, but only 10 and 25 percent of the total United States population, respectively. (Hayes, and Barnhorst, 2020.) This depicts an institution that is broken, but how the system broke and why is key to understanding the modern issue of mass incarceration and wealth inequality.

The carceral state truly began to be created in the 1980s. After the 1960s Civil Rights movement's momentous legislation achievements, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, Black communities would see two decades of socio-economic progress. This led to educational improvement and increased employment opportunities within those communities. (Farley, Hermanlin 1972). This progress continued throughout the 1970s. Black Americans, while being significantly economically disadvantaged compared to White Americans, would see a decrease in the racial wealth gap. "Earnings and wages relative to whites of the same sex rose during the 1970s, [but] they stagnated or declined during the 1980s." (Blau, Beller. 1992). Since then, wealth inequality between White and Black Americans has quadrupled. (Brandies University, 2010). This directly coincides with the defunding of many social programs and the rise of the modern police state.

In 1980, the United States only had a prison population of 300,000 people, which doubled every decade until hitting its peak of nearly 2 million in 2008 (Prison Policy Initiative, 2022). Using the phony “War on Drugs”, Reagan would begin the United States’ path to over-policing communities of color, beginning the first wave of incarceration booms.

Reagan’s criminal justice policies would harm Black and Latino American communities at a higher rate than their White counterparts. (Prison Policy Initiative, 2022). By capitalizing on voters’ fears to win elections, politicians on every level of government would use racist messaging. “During the 30 years, in which crime rates were increasing, politicians never took responsibility for it. They played to voters' fears by advocating ‘law and order’ and many varieties of ‘getting tough on crime’”. (Reiman, Leighton. 2017). Politicians would use crime as an effective way to win elections while taking money from private prison corporations. The uniquely American trend of mass incarcerations peaked in the 1990s but still targets minority communities, with over-policing that persists today. The United States has become a modern police state with the largest incarceration rate in the world. (Prison Policy Initiative 2022).

When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, he promised the American people “the end of the era of big government.” In reality, the Reagan Administration would go on to entirely alter the way in which the government treated its citizens. This began by creating and implementing a new economic philosophy, referred to as trickle-down supply-side economics, or Reaganomics for short. It was pitched as a system to end poverty by decreasing taxes and cutting government spending. In practice, the Reagan Administration aimed to keep Black people poor and in prison, by destroying the welfare systems many minority groups

relied on. This was achieved through several methods; the defunding of social programs, lowering of taxes on the rich, and privatization of the public sector.

In 1982, the United States would see some of the largest budget cuts to social programs under the Reagan administration's budget. These funding cuts eliminated 44 billion dollars in social programs, including direct welfare and education. The Reagan Administration needed to cut the budget after directing massive decreases in the rate of taxation for corporations and the wealthy. Reagan targeted federal subsidies in state education, significantly reducing states' education budgets. This has resulted in overall education budgets in the aggregate falling 30% from the 1970s to the 2000s. (Archibald, Feldman, 2006). Higher education would be the first to see their budgets cut when federal subsidies declined and, as Archibald and Feldman in their study on state education spending note, "for a given level of state spending, more spending on corrections ... will lead to less spending on higher education." (Archibald, Feldman, 2006).

The Reagan Administration, while cutting the education budget, would increase federal funds allocated towards corrections. This would continue past his presidency. States with reduced federal subsidies for education would follow in his example. "Between 1986 and 2013 the amount states spent on corrections increased by 141 percent, while higher education expenditures increased by 5.6 percent" (Reiman, Leighton, 2017).

The decline in federal and state education programs would have three major consequences. First, property taxes would become the main revenue for public education, therefore creating a form of economic segregation of the quality of education. This meant a school's funding came directly from the property taxes of its surrounding neighborhood, which deprived poor communities

of previously allocated funding. (Gallagher, 2019). Second, universities would be forced to raise tuition to make up for budget needs, causing a rise in tuition of nearly 500% since 1986, outpacing inflation and forcing students and their families to shoulder the cost. (QianQian, 2019). Third, it would severely restrict the quality of education for Black Americans, leading to the gap between Black and White students' Bachelor's degree attainment to double between 1974 to 2014. (The U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These changes to how the government funded education had the effect of severely stagnating Black opportunities to attain wealth. (Franklin, 2013).

For all of Reagan's talk about the "End of The Era of Big Government", the Reagan Administration only decreased programs that helped the American people. (Danziger, Haveman, 1987). Even in the 1980s, it was known that cutting social programs for the poor would disproportionately harm minorities. In an economic report from 1987, Danziger and Haveman warned that the Reagan cuts disadvantage Black Americans and the poor. For example, they wrote, "Black [people] will suffer disproportionately from the Reagan programs because a higher proportion of black [people] are poor... relying on welfare support more than white [people]..." (Danziger, Haveman, 1987).

Additionally, Black Americans made up a significant portion of public sector employment. The Reagan Administration would eventually gut public sector jobs, in which 55% of those to lose their employment were Black. "Suppose the supply side miracle does succeed in stimulating economic growth, there is little to think this will significantly reduce poverty" (Danziger & Haveman, 1987).

The Reagan Administration aimed to reduce welfare payments, despite the decrease in cash welfare, having the effect of

increasing crime in communities. One study found that children of welfare recipients turned to crime when they lost welfare as a source of income; “Terminating cash welfare benefits of these young adults increased the number of criminal charges by 20%.” (Oxford University Press, 2022). The Administration signed several pieces of legislation into law to severely limit the aid that went to poor youth; cutting Medicare, food stamps, and cash benefits. Many of these previously guaranteed benefits to the disadvantaged would now require full-time employment the moment they turned 18, all to ensure those receiving “handouts” would be “productive members of society”. (Brandeis University, 2010). The Reagan Administration attempted to drive individuals into the job market by reducing the welfare cash benefits but, as noted, “welfare [benefits] has a much larger discouragement effect on criminal activity than it does on formal work.” (Oxford University Press, 2022).

Ronald Reagan had racist tendencies long before he ran for president, as revealed in a leaked phone call with President Richard Nixon when Reagan was governor of California. “Those monkeys from those African countries—damn them, they’re still uncomfortable wearing shoes!” (Reagan, 1971). Reagan knew his programs disadvantaged Black Americans and used white-southern anger throughout his campaign to reach voters in southern states. Reagan used racist “dog-whistle” coded language as a form of social control to appeal to conservatives and southerners, while flying under the radar of moderates. This is known as the “Southern Strategy”, beginning as soon as Reagan launched his 1980s campaign. For example, Reagan announced his run for president using the language “restore state’s rights” in Philadelphia, Mississippi, at the site of an infamous murder of three civil rights workers by sheriff deputies and the Klu Klux Klan. Throughout his

campaign, Reagan used hateful language such as “welfare queen”, essentially using the imagery of a Black woman obtaining welfare to enrage and drive white voters in the South to their polling places. (Bruney, 2020). As Bernie and Messerschmitt, in *Criminology a Sociological Approach* discuss, politicians using a “narrative” and “characters” to create fear in the population to distort the image in the minds of the public is an effective way to fearmonger. Reagan would successfully achieve this and pave the way for Conservatives to take complete control over the south, campaigning on “states’ rights”, “law and order”, and “public safety”.

The Reagan Administration’s destruction of the American welfare state and his support of racism ended two decades of Black economic growth and led to decades of oppression and mass incarceration. The Reagan administration purposely created a system that disadvantaged the poor and minorities in the United States. He used racist messaging to drive white Southerners to vote and demolish a system that benefitted many Black Americans. Reagan began the system of mass incarceration with the racially motivated defunding of welfare programs, leading to wealth inequality between White and Black Americans being the greatest since after the end of segregation in 1968. (Brandies University, 2010). Targeting desperately needed welfare aid and education, the Reagan Administration created the opportunity for future policymakers to incarcerate minority and poor communities in a disproportionate amount. This initial deterioration of the welfare state led directly to the modern issue of mass incarceration, and wealth inequality we see today.

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