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A Radical Journal of Geography

Jason Hackworth, *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-8203-4303-7 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8203-4304-4 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8203-4372-3 (ebook)

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) have long been a critical part of the welfare apparatus in the United States. Their legacy and continued importance is visible in the contemporary urban landscape of American cities; religiously affiliated hospitals, food banks, and homeless shelters still often provide critical services to the poor and marginalized. This history of FBOs dates back to the very beginning of the country. Early charitable services were frequently provided by local churches, and by the 1800s the YMCA, the Tract Society, and Catholic charities all delivered various social services to the urban poor while simultaneously ‘saving souls’. However, the failure of so-called scientific charity and the suffering of the great depression led to the development and growth of publicly delivered social services. What began largely as a state regulatory apparatus in the late 1800s, such as public boards of charities, developed into a more extensive public welfare delivery system in the aftermath of the great depression. Since the advent of the modern welfare state, public discourse over the proper role of the state and private voluntary charities, such as FBOs, in relation to welfare services continued. This tension has increased over the past 30 years as proponents of limited state involvement in welfare delivery once more turned to FBOs as the ‘proper’ vehicles to distribute services to the poor.

In *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States*, Jason Hackworth offers a detailed analysis of these recent attempts to fuse neoliberal economic theory with socially conservative religious beliefs through the

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politics of welfare. The book provides an important complement to recent geographical work that traces the migration and translation of the economic theory (e.g. Austrian School and Chicago School economics) which serves as the ideological foundation for neoliberal public policies such as welfare retrenchment (see Harvey 2005; Hackworth 2007; Peck and Tickell 2007; Peck 2011). Hackworth begins with an important premise, that economic neoliberalism *cannot exist* without additional political/ideological supports. Hackworth cites the failure of neoliberal economic policies to achieve their stated objectives and the claim that no political movements specifically pursue ‘neoliberalism’ to support his proposal. While the extent of this assumption is debatable (e.g. the rise of Rand Paul, Ted Cruz, and particular factions of Tea Party conservatives), Hackworth convincingly argues that since the 1980s religious conservatives, specifically Evangelicals, have served as critical political allies for the advance of neoliberal capitalism. His book analyzes both how this ‘fusion’ between social and economic conservatives was constructed and the significant ideological fault lines that continue to make this coalition unstable.

Faith Based provides a detailed examination of the “synergies and tensions between economic and religious conservatives” (p.vii). It has long been recognized that religious conservatives in the US have been an important component of the electoral strategy to advance neoliberal economic policy. However, the nature of this alliance has been insufficiently examined. Hackworth is at his best when he traces the development of the *idea* of religious neoliberalism through specific evangelical theologies (Chapters 1 and 2) and institutions (Chapter 3). He defines religious neoliberalism as a merger of religious conservatism and neoliberalism and then identifies welfare delivery as a

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principle public policy ‘problem’ through which these two movements aligned in the 1980s.

In Chapters 1 and 2, “Faith, Welfare, and Neoliberalism” and “Religious Neoliberalism(s)”, Hackworth uses texts by various evangelical leaders to examine their positions on the welfare state. He begins with a discussion of theological debates on the role of the state and FBOs in welfare service delivery, concluding that FBOs are often understood as ‘enhancements’ and ‘replacements’ of the state in the dominant framework that informs the evangelical position on welfare policy. Hackworth then focuses on the specific theologies within the evangelical conservative movement that are most amenable to neoliberal economic policies. Dominionism, Christian libertarianism, and prosperity theology are shown to offer important ideational support for religious neoliberalism. Dominionism seeks to have Christians occupy all secular institutions until the return of Jesus Christ, and institute biblical law into the state legal framework. Believers, such as Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), are widely credited with advocating for state support of FBOs. Christian libertarianism combines classic libertarian ideas of limited government with biblical principles. It is a framework that strives for “the maximum feasible freedom within a biblical framework, primarily the Ten Commandments” (p.36). Prosperity theology, which currently includes many of America’s most prominent preachers, suggests that adherence to God’s commands will be met with material richness. This belief system equates material success with God’s will and fits comfortably with its counterpart: poverty is a part of God’s judgment. With a detailed examination of both biblical passages and how these are deployed by evangelical leaders, Hackworth reveals the discursive labor by which these traditions employ biblical justifications for punitive social policies consistent with neoliberal economic priorities. Just as importantly, these

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evangelical traditions provide ethical cover for the most harmful of these policies, as FBOs are imagined to be superior institutions for delivering welfare services. FBOs are consequently positioned, by Hackworth, as the compassionate arm of compassionate conservatism.

Chapter 3, “Compassionate Neoliberalism?”, takes this argument further by examining how these specific political and theological arguments filter into the broader evangelical community. Hackworth examines the welfare discourse, specifically narratives on the appropriate role of the state in welfare service delivery, of two prominent evangelical institutions: the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the largest association of evangelical churches; and *Christianity Today*, a major evangelical magazine. Hackworth documents that the translation of biblical scripture into specific policy positions about poverty, the role of the state, and welfare delivery amongst evangelicals is varied, complicated, and occasionally contradictory. Rather than a simple celebration of the real or imagined contributions FBOs make to poverty alleviation, the documents reveal an unresolved strain between biblical understandings of an idealized welfare apparatus constructed within communities and churches and the messy realities of delivering food, shelter, and other services to those rendered unnecessary by the dictates of the market. Although the evangelical doctrinal authorities perform ‘discursive contortions’ in their attempt to both portray compassion for the poor and maintain a firm anti-welfarist policy agenda, those members of the evangelical community on the frontline of service delivery occasionally express more nuanced stances towards the welfare state. Hackworth’s research reveals this tension and suggests that it contributes to the long-term uncertainty of the alliance between religious conservatives and neoliberals.

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After establishing the development of a unique framework of religious neoliberalism, Hackworth attempts in Chapter 4, “Mainstream Jesus Economics”, to demonstrate that religious neoliberalism circulates back into ‘mainstream’ policy discussions. This chapter strives to develop the argument that religious neoliberalism has currency beyond just conservative Christians and the pages of *Christianity Today*. He attempts to establish this relationship through a discourse analysis of Habitat for Humanity, an FBO that is prominently featured in the mainstream media. Founded in 1976, Habitat focuses on building affordable housing and has local chapters throughout the world. Hackworth examines 1,427 newspaper articles that refer to Habitat in six major newspapers located in the US and Canada. His analysis explores how the services of Habitat are framed versus government services and its religiosity. With respect to the discursive representation of Habitat relative to government services, Hackworth reveals that Habitat is commonly characterized as a solution to government failure in the sphere of affordable housing (13.7 percent of the 532 articles that substantively discussed Habitat offer this perspective). Furthermore, there are years in which this narrative is more heavily prevalent, such as 1995 (40.0 percent), 2002 (29.3 percent), and 2007 (22.2 percent). This representation occurs despite the assessment of Habitat officials who are largely pessimistic about the organization’s capacity to solve the affordable housing crisis. The conclusion that media accounts of Habitat provide discursive reinforcement for neoliberal welfare policies that champion voluntary approaches to affordable housing is significant and draws attention the ideational power of the voluntary narrative. This narrative proves durable despite the informed judgment of those who work within voluntary organizations such as Habitat.

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Hackworth also analyzes how the media frames Habitat in relation to its religiosity. Hackworth determines that “Habitat’s religious element and its independence from taxpayer funds were cited commonly as reason for its value” (p.84). This conclusion bolsters Hackworth’s conclusion that religious neoliberalism has circulated into mainstream media accounts of welfare services. Yet, in this regard, his data is far from convincing. He identifies only nine specific religious descriptors of Habitat’s faith-based origin within the 532 substantive articles and does not clarify if these references occurred in multiple articles, in nine specific articles, or if a single article has multiple religious references to Habitat. In the absence of this clarification, one is left with the impression that the ‘mainstream’ is reluctant to attribute the work of Habitat to explicitly religious foundations. This suggests that the main contribution of FBOs, whether explicitly neoliberal or more progressive, to the persistence of neoliberalism is their ability to act as discursive signifiers of the voluntary spirit that neoliberalism requires to affirm its compassionate basis, rather than as a conduit for religious neoliberalism itself.

The following chapters examine the complex interaction between evangelical religious theology, neoliberal economic theory, and the actual faith-based practices of evangelical FBOs. Hackworth’s research on gospel missions, “Practicing Religious Neoliberalism” (Chapter 5), and FBOs in post-Katrina New Orleans, “Religious Neoliberalism as Default” (Chapter 6), persuasively demonstrates that welfare services delivered by FBOs, and the refusal by many of them to accept government money, works to the discursive advantage of those who seek to advance a neoliberalized welfare regime, religious or secular. Those gospel missions and post-Katrina FBOs that choose not to receive government funding, for whatever purpose (ideological, practical, biblical) provide yet another example of the alleged capacity of FBOs, and the voluntary sector

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more generally, to provide social services without government intrusion. The extent of gospel missions and FBOs operating in post-Katrina are particularly valuable to the neoliberal project, as their presence and visibility, regardless of their actual capability to meet the needs of the community, can be championed by religious and economic conservatives who seek to restructure welfare programs away from state delivered social services.

However, his other implied argument that religious neoliberalism, or biblical justifications for voluntary approaches to welfare delivery, directly influences the practice of FBOs and the state is less clear. Hackworth, in his examination of gospel missions, uses the decision by FBOs to reject government funding as a proxy for the presence of religious neoliberalism within the organization. This decision along with interviews of senior administrators of gospel missions forms the basis for his contention that some FBOs are engaged in a distinct practice of religious neoliberalism. He is careful to recognize that the practice of religious neoliberalism is not even across gospel missions and therefore FBOs as vehicles of religious neoliberalism is uneven. However, even this qualified conclusion seems far from evident. His identification of the practice of religious neoliberalism relies heavily on the proxy of government funding and a few quotes from evangelical leaders and senior FBOs administrators. Yet, this connection is underdeveloped for two reasons. First, my own research on FBOs involved in medical services suggests that the decision to accept government funding is often more complex than an organization's beliefs about the welfare state. Factors such as the length and stability of funding, the administrative costs associated with meeting government regulations, and the increased regulation of service delivery were all important considerations for these FBOs. These other factors are present in Hackworth's analysis as

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well, but he does not directly address them in his analysis; for example, gospel missions referred to the lack of stability of government funding and government oversight as factors that influenced their stance on government funding. Second, my experience with FBOs suggests that ethical motivators shaped by biblical doctrine are the primary motivators for most FBO volunteers and employees. It is not primarily due to the beliefs about the proper role of government by evangelical leaders or political elites. This diversity gets lost in Hackworth's analysis, largely as a result of his reliance on the discourse of evangelical leaders and administrators rather than interviews with laypeople that compose most of the volunteers and employees of FBOs. I suspect that these additional voices would demonstrate that a great range of religious, ethical and political ideologies were being 'practiced' within FBOs simultaneously.

This flaw conceals an important conclusion from Hackworth's research. In his attempt to establish religious neoliberalism as practice he overlooks the discursive flexibility of neoliberalism itself. One of neoliberalism's strategic strengths is its ability to construct an alluring narrative around a range of material practices. Regardless of the actual motivations of the employees, volunteers, and donors of FBOs, or other voluntary associations, their work in transforming the lives of communities is used as justification for state withdrawal by those committed to the neoliberal welfare state. This oversight is important because it suggests that even if FBOs incorporated a more progressive orientation in regards to welfare delivery, their participation in service delivery in the absence of a comprehensive welfare state contributes to the ideological support of neoliberalism.

Ultimately these shortcomings do not detract from the importance of Hackworth's larger project of examining the relationship between neoliberalism and FBOs, particularly

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those from the evangelical community. Hackworth provides an important intervention that takes seriously the role of evangelical FBOs in the construction of our current welfare apparatus. But they do suggest important trajectories for future research on the connection between faith and economic policies. For instance, what is the relationship between evangelical theologians and/or movement leaders and religious laypeople? Again, parts of Hackworth's work (e.g. evangelical FBOs that *do* accept government funding) suggest that this connection is more complicated than any direct adoption of an 'evangelical position'. Rather, multiple elements of the faith commitment are fundamental to informing faith-based welfare activity, some of which may not be related to idealized conceptions of the state and/or welfare, such as compassion, service, and love. Furthermore, while Hackworth provides an important analysis of the convergence of evangelical theology and neoliberal economic policy, it leaves other questions about this political alliance unanswered. One area that requires consideration is the blending of religious and socially conservative positions on, for example, same-sex marriage or abortion, into the neoliberal political alliance. Hackworth's work offers an important template for researchers to address these other important questions.

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