



# The Segregated Origins of Social Security: African Americans and the Welfare State

*Mary Poole*

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The relationship between welfare and racial inequality has long been understood as a fight between liberal and conservative forces. In *The Segregated Origins of Social Security*, Mary Poole challenges that basic assumption. Meticulously reconstructing the behind-the-scenes politicking that gave birth to the 1935 Social Security Act, Poole demonstrates that segregation was built into the very foundation of the welfare state because white policy makers--both liberal and conservative--shared an interest in preserving white race privilege.

Although northern white liberals were theoretically sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, Poole says, their primary aim was to save the American economy by salvaging the pride of America's "essential" white male industrial workers. The liberal framers of the Social Security Act elevated the status of Unemployment Insurance and Social Security--and the white workers they were designed to serve--by differentiating them from welfare programs, which served black workers.

Revising the standard story of the racialized politics of Roosevelt's New Deal, Poole's arguments also reshape our understanding of the role of public policy in race relations in the twentieth century, laying bare the assumptions that must be challenged if we hope to put an end to racial inequality in the twenty-first.

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