

THE DISCURSIVE DIMENSION OF EXCLUSION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF «WELFARE RACISM»

LA DIMENSIONE DISCORSIVA DELL'ESCLUSIONE: UNA RECENSIONE CRITICA DI «WELFARE RACISM»

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Introduction: The need for urgent reflection

Welfare systems are one of the tools through which states exercise control over immigration through mechanisms of layered restriction on access to social rights, based on criteria of social belonging and formal requirements, such as national origin, possession of an employment contract, and the methods and timing of arrival. This results in exclusive, selective, and differentiated forms of solidarity and narratives that exploit social policies to construct a sense of national identity and unity to the detriment of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and Bipoc (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), which also indirectly weaken the working class and citizenship.

In a historical period characterized by the succession/overlapping of multiple crises (economic, geopolitical, ecological, health), in which intolerance and hatred towards diversity have become the main value ingredients in the government agendas of many countries, racism in welfare raises growing concerns.

In the United States and Europe, we are witnessing the emergence of increasingly restrictive and punitive immigration policies, implemented thanks to modern technological detection tools, artificial intelligence, and brutal law enforcement raids on cities, buildings, and private homes. The Trump presidency has ushered in a period of violence, detentions, and deportations unprecedented in recent history, which is changing the face of the country, marking the transition to an autocratic police state. In 2024, the British government carried out anti-immigrant raids on businesses with high levels of foreign employment, such as car washes, barbershops, and takeaways. In June 2025, the French Ministry of the Interior deployed 4,000 police officers to conduct

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widespread checks on public transportation and arrest and detain undocumented people. In Germany, undocumented people risk detention and deportation if they try to access public services, as most public authorities are required to report them to immigration officials.

Future developments at the European level could consolidate this phase of intolerance, violence, and expulsions. The proposal for a «Return Regulation» appears set to support house searches, invasive measures to identify undocumented people wherever they are, and could pave the way for the introduction of general reporting obligations.

This phenomenon must be taken seriously at all levels of social life and adequate theoretical and practical tools must be developed to address it, expanding guarantees of social justice with a view to mutual integration based on effective equality.

«Welfare Racisms» (2026) edited by Professor Fabio Perocco, part of Routledge's «Critiques and Alternatives to Capitalism» series, aims to position itself among these tools. The volume analyzes the role of racism in welfare through a discursive approach, examining its developmental trajectories, specific characteristics in different countries, mechanisms of operation, and consequences. By addressing one of the main critical areas in contemporary society, the Volume represents a further piece – until now missing – in the mosaic of academic works that have implemented a critical global approach to capitalism, inspiring meaningful conversations suitable for engaging and informing international audiences.

A Literature Review on Welfare, Migration, and Racism

The nexus between welfare, migration, and racism represents one of the most debated critical issues in contemporary political sociology and social policy. International literature highlights how the welfare state, historically conceived as an instrument of national cohesion, frequently operates as a mechanism of stratification and differential inclusion. At the heart of this debate lies the so-called «progressive's dilemma»¹, a hypothesis arguing that the growing ethnocultural diversity induced by migration undermines the social solidarity and mutual trust necessary to sustain generous and redistributive welfare systems. Providing solid empirical support for this tension, Alesina and Glaeser's² macro-comparative analysis has demonstrated how ethnic and racial heterogeneity is a key factor in explaining majorities' reluctance to finance redistributive policies, perceived as a transfer of resources to racialized outgroups. This institutional

¹ D. Goodhart, 2004; W. Banting, K.G. Kymlicka, 2006.

² Cf. A. Alesina, E.L. Glaeser, 2004.

dynamic is echoed, at the micro-sociological level, in Putnam's³ research, which highlights how increasing diversity in local contexts tends, in the short to medium term, to trigger mechanisms of social withdrawal (hunkering down), corroding the social capital and interpersonal trust on which the welfare state pact rests.

This tension manifests itself politically through the phenomenon of welfare chauvinism—a concept introduced by Kitschelt⁴ and widely explored in studies of the rise of the radical right in Europe⁵. Welfare chauvinism posits that social benefits should be limited to the national in-group, constructing immigrants as usurpers of scarce resources. This rhetoric is deeply imbued with racialization: migrants, especially those from the global South, are systematically labeled as exploiters. In this regard, Van Oorschot's⁶ studies on «deservingness» empirically demonstrate how migrants consistently rank lowest in the hierarchy of public solidarity, considered less worthy of support than the native elderly or disabled populations.

From an institutional perspective, sociologist Lydia Morris⁷ demonstrated how the welfare state creates a system of differentiated rights based on legal and migratory status, producing structural inequalities. Access to welfare inexorably intersects with racial exclusion. Scholars drawing on theories of racial capitalism⁸ argue that the European welfare state was historically built on the asymmetries of colonialism and continues to operate through forms of «institutional racism», systematically discriminating against racialized minorities in access to housing, healthcare, and social assistance.

Furthermore, although economic literature has extensively deconstructed the welfare magnet theory⁹—the idea that migrants are attracted to generous welfare systems—demonstrating how migration flows are driven by social networks and labor markets rather than by subsidies¹⁰, this narrative persists in public discourse. It legitimizes policies of deterrence and the externalization of borders. In this context, welfare becomes an instrument of bordering¹¹, an internal border that disciplines the migrant workforce, keeping them in conditions of vulnerability and socioeconomic subordination.

In conclusion, the triangulation of welfare, migration, and racism reveals that the social exclusion of migrants is not a mere administrative accident, but rather a structural device. Racism acts as a catalyst that justifies the contraction of universal social rights,

³ Cf. R. Putnam, 2007.

⁴ Cf. H. Kitschelt, 1995.

⁵ H-G. Betz, 1994; C. Mudde, 2007.

⁶ Cf. W. Van Oorschot, 2006.

⁷ Cf. L. Morris, 2002.

⁸ E.g. P. Hansen, 2021.

⁹ G. J. Borjas, 1999.

¹⁰ P. J. Pedersen *et al.*, 2008; G. De Giorgi, M. Pellizzari, 2009; M. Kahanec, K. F. Zimmermann, 2009; C. Giulietti *et al.* 2013.

¹¹ S. Mezzadra, B. Neilson, 2013.

transforming welfare from an egalitarian institution into an instrument of biopolitical control, aimed at protecting the racial and national boundaries of citizenship to the detriment of migrant populations.

Summary of the Volume: the field of investigation and the division into chapters

The volume, «Welfare Racism», offers original investigations that further develop the notion of racism in welfare, while simultaneously strengthening its empirical foundation and informing us about the shape of this phenomenon on a global scale. Combining accessible language and analytical rigor, the volume is aimed at scholars from various disciplines – sociologists, lawyers, political scientists, anthropologists – and other professionals interested in the intersection of racism, migration, and welfare.

The paper explores how racist discourse fuels and legitimizes inequality, as well as its role in public policies related to social citizenship and as a structural element of migration policies.

The authors of the chapters that comprise the volume examine the racialized discourse on welfare in eight specific national contexts: Belgium, the United States, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Spain, Japan, Italy, and Hungary. The chapters analyze the effects of racist ideology (classist and sexist) on the historical development of the welfare state, with respect to the dismantling of welfare in Western countries, in relation to the structures and practices of public administration, and finally, with respect to the role of far-right parties, new media, and academics. Starting from this range of processes and profiles, the book expands knowledge on the ideological-discursive dimension of racism in welfare, exploring the relationship between this phenomenon and the conditions of the working class, conflict surrounding the welfare state, and the social question as a whole.

In the chapter «Institutional Racism and Discrimination against Migrants: A Political Stake at the Heart of the Belgian Social Compromise», Nouria Ouali examines the foundations of the regime of exceptional governmentality, highlighting its origins and persistence through the ongoing violations of their fundamental social rights by the state and the organization of its impunity. The author demonstrates that the resurgence of racism in the welfare state is not merely the product of the rhetoric of nationalist and far-right parties, but is rooted in systemic racism dating back to the 19th century.

In the chapter «Dismantling Welfare through Anti-Communism and White Nationalism in the United States», Justin Akers Chacón discusses the process of developing racialized means to maximize the exploitation of labor while minimizing the social obligation to support non-productive labor. The author demonstrates that, during periods of intense class struggle in the last century, concessions were obtained from the

capitalist state through the provision of welfare policies, while, since the late 1970s, repression against the radical left and migrant working-class communities has shifted the balance of social forces in favor of the right, creating the political terrain for the dismantling of welfare through the reactivation of prejudice towards racialized populations, represented as unproductive and undeserving.

In the chapter «Welfare Policy Discourse in Austria – Where Racism and Classism Meet and Intersect», Andreas Schadauer explains that a significant portion of the Austrian welfare state discourse focuses on the interconnected issues of work, employment relations, and work availability. Through discursive analysis of national press articles, the author examines the role of representations of the «guest worker» and the «welfare freeloader» in shaping current welfare discourse, demonstrating the existence of a welfare state narrative grounded in utilitarian and economic class divisions.

Diana Mulinari and Anders Neegaard have addressed racism in welfare in Sweden. In «The impossibility of social inclusion: The ethno-racist welfare discourse in Sweden», the authors analysed the discursive dimension (party documents, government and media texts), integrating it with what emerged from previous research, demonstrating how a reinterpretation of welfare has shifted the discourse and policies towards securitization in a vernacular of raceless racism.

In the chapter «Presenting non-European migrants as a challenge to the welfare state: The racialized welfare state discourse», Meltem Yilmaz Sener focuses on the Norwegian context to analyze popular discourses and academic debates. In these spaces of public construction, the notion of integration has operated as a discursive tool for the racialized governance of non-European migrants and refugees. The author highlights the portrayal of these populations as difficult to integrate due to marked cultural differences and a supposedly disproportionate financial burden that risks reducing welfare benefits for Norwegian citizens.

Alèxia Rué and Olga Jubany analyze the case of the Spanish asylum reception system. In the chapter «Beyond welfare racism rhetoric: Exclusionary metamessages at the implementation level», they demonstrate that even in the absence of openly anti-asylum seeker rhetoric from public and political discourse, discriminatory narratives that adhere to the image of the «false» asylum seeker and the «scrounger» are evident in the daily operational dimension of non-governmental organizations, with repercussions on the protection of rights and the distribution of services. This not only exposes the circulation of welfare racism metamessages but also legitimizes exclusionary approaches towards non-citizens, while the absence of explicitly negative discourses makes it more difficult to problematize, thus less evident, the prevalence of welfare racism within asylum facilities.

In the chapter «The Japanese Social Welfare as a Driver of Racist Discourses», Nicola Costalunga examines the modes of action and contexts in which racism in Japanese welfare manifests itself, considering the institutional and non-institutional actors

involved. The author focuses on primary data elaborated through a qualitative analysis of content on the most relevant social media channels to highlight racist ideology as a structural component of Japanese society, operating both institutionally and in everyday life. Welfare is precisely one of the contexts in which institutional racism is expressed, but it is also a vehicle for discrimination and a narrative for fueling conflict between social groups.

Dario Lucchesi analyzes the discursive dimension of racism in Italian welfare in the article «Unmasking the Business of Hospitality: The Normalization of Welfare Racism by the Italian Radical Right». The author uses the Critical Discourse Analysis (Cda) approach to examine the narrative promoted by the Italian radical right regarding welfare benefits for asylum seekers. Focusing on social media platforms and analyzing Italian politicians' Facebook posts and user comments to reveal the interplay between institutional discourse and grassroots discourse, the chapter highlights how «borderline discourse» facilitates the spread of veiled racist opinions under the guise of civility and offers new insights into the intersection of political discourse, social media, and racism.

In the chapter «The Ukrainian Invasion: Welfare Populism in Gyurcsány Ferenc's Facebook Posts During the 2018 Electoral Campaign», Petra Andits analyzes a specific episode in contemporary Hungarian history. Drawing on the theoretical framework of welfare populism and analyzing politicians' textual and visual forms of communication on social media, she demonstrates the presence of anti-Ukrainian welfare sentiments channeled via Facebook during the campaign of Gyurcsány Ferenc and his party – Demokratikus Koalíció (Democratic Coalition) – for the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary elections, connecting the strengthening of welfare racism to the European geopolitical crisis.

In the final chapter, Fabio Perocco (editor of the volume) discusses a set of key themes and identifies some emerging issues related to racism in the welfare system, within the contemporary context of societal structural crisis. The Author systematizes the considerations expressed within the individual chapters by addressing five points: (1) merit, rights and discourses on immigrants' access to welfare benefits; (2) the impact of racialized discourse on the welfare state; (3) the challenges for social work in the face of racism in welfare; (4) the function of the mass media; (5) the role of far-right parties in the expansion and deepening of welfare racism. Through this detailed analysis, the Author warns against the widespread effects that the racist drift in welfare policies can produce and is already producing. Although welfare racism seems to only affect immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and people of color, it constitutes a driver of social disintegration, which breaks down citizenship, corrodes rights and fragments the working class.

Critical analysis: strengths and weaknesses

The volume «Welfare Racism» represents an important tool for understanding and addressing the hardening of the dominant public discourse, fueled by negative attitudes linked to the complex global situation and the rise of the far right in various parts of the world.

By analyzing the dominant discourse on the link between migration policy and social policy, this book establishes a framework that systematizes international reflection on the discourses shaping welfare services in the contemporary era of state racism. To date, racism in welfare has primarily been examined in terms of its institutional and legal dimensions. Moving in this direction, the volume «Racism in and for the Welfare State» (2022) has provided a first and comprehensive overview of the formal dimension underlying processes of racialization in the distribution of public benefits and social rights. In a complementary way, *Welfare Racism* (2026) examines the ideological-narrative profile of this phenomenon, through the discourses that portray immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and BIPOC as slackers, freeloaders and, worse, as a concrete threat to the sustainability of national welfare systems, informing us of the processes of social construction underlying the phenomenon of welfare racism and highlighting the specific profiles emerging in the different national contexts examined.

The second strength of this volume lies precisely in its ability to combine global and national perspectives: on the one hand, a collection of methodologically rigorous and theoretically framed contributions addresses the phenomenon in various countries, highlighting its specificities and offering an in-depth reconstruction of the discourses that exploit the sustainability of the welfare state to impose a differentiated regime of inclusion/exclusion of the immigrant population; on the other, the editor traces a set of common elements that allow us to identify racism in welfare as a unitary phenomenon, a latent, ongoing, and long-term trend, supported by anti-immigration sentiments that influence immigration policies, welfare policies, the system of inequalities, social citizenship, and social rights.

The third major merit of this work is to highlight the aspects that distinguish the current racialized discourse on welfare from the past: first, it underscores the strong connection with neoliberal ideology, which has repurposed and masked racism in the contemporary global landscape; second, and related to the previous point, it invokes the era of austerity in response to the Great Recession of 2008, which fueled fears of a possible collapse of the state and the loss of essential public benefits for citizens; and finally, the condition of structural precarity we experience, due to the exponential growth of poverty, inequality, and social polarization. The volume, therefore, provides us with a clear connection between the racialized discourse on welfare, the rise of paradigms of fear, and the structural precarity of modern capitalism.

Despite the strengths highlighted thus far, the volume is open to some criticism and represents an opportunity for systematization and further development of the literature, which has been at least partially missed. First, the selection criteria for the national contexts covered and discussed in depth in the individual chapters appears arbitrary, likely simply tied to the authors' availability and reasons of expediency. Indeed, some excluded countries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Greece, and Poland, would certainly have contributed to informing the debate regarding the discursive dimension of welfare racism in the 21st century. On the other hand, a critical note can also be raised regarding the theoretical and methodological approach, which appears fragmented and incoherent. Although the volume's objectives are clearly defined, as is its corresponding field of inquiry, the lack of a unified theoretical framework for the individual research presented in the various chapters and a shared methodology among the authors have limited the work's coherence and robustness as a whole.

Nevertheless, *Welfare Racism* provides further conceptual framework for the exercise of radical critique of the multiple forms of oppression that characterize the political, economic, and social relations in contemporary capitalism. It thus becomes a tool to be employed in the political struggle over the question of who is entitled to social benefits and the processes for defining the legitimate beneficiaries of social benefits. Ultimately, the volume rejects those interpretations—prevalent in European and Anglo-Saxon countries—that tend to naturalize the phenomenon of racism, portraying it as an innate element of a society in crisis and a product of the difficulty of deciphering a more complex, connected, and rapidly changing world.

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