CHALLENGING ‘CORPORATE WELFARE’: GOVERNMENT SUBSIDIES AND PUBLIC HEALTH DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Government subsidies for private businesses have been a constant feature of U.S. capitalism, but it is only in the past twenty-five years or so that these subsidies have become defined by political forces on both the left and right as ‘corporate welfare.’ While the concept of corporate welfare has its origins in the New Left, it was discovered by the political mainstream only after the Republican victory in the 1994 Congressional elections. As a result, the dominant definitions of the problem presented in political debate have been those associated with conservatives. Conservative constructions of corporate welfare are fundamentally anti-state in their orientation; corporate welfare is seen as an inappropriate intervention of politics in the market. This is in contrast to liberal-left constructions of corporate welfare, which define the problem as one of excessive corporate power that increases social inequality and environmental destruction.

The power of ‘corporate welfare’ as a symbol in mainstream political debates lies in its equation of government subsidies for business with welfare received by the poor. As with social welfare, corporate welfare opponents argue, corporate welfare has created a culture of dependency that needs to be eliminated through (corporate) welfare reform. For those concerned about sustainable development, however, the use of ‘welfare’ to stigmatize recipients of unwarranted government subsidies reinforces longstanding stigmas of poor people. The liberal-left, through uncritical use of the language of ‘corporate welfare,’ thus runs the risk of alienating a constituency which must be part of any successful coalition for sustainable development.

In this paper I argue that, given conservative success in framing the meaning of welfare, a public health discourse may be more effective for the liberal-left in its efforts to halt subsidies that interfere with sustainable development. Unlike ‘welfare,’ which in the United States divides people into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ categories, talk of a ‘healthy society’ would allow for campaigns in which the non-poor might see a shared interest with the poor in redirecting social resources toward socially and environmentally beneficial programs.