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Timed Out: Temporal Struggles between the State and the Poor in the Context of U.S. Welfare Reform

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Abstract: Welfare reform, in its attempts to order the lives of women on cash assistance, uses time as a means of controlling women. Single mothers living in poverty experience, perceive and use time in ways that the state welfare bureaucracy fails to recognize and/or refuses to work with. Poverty is anchored in a historical and cyclical dynamic based on low valuations of people's time, structured by race, class and gender. This essay shows how specific temporal sequences, orderings and flows are implicated in the etiology of poverty, forming cumulative feedback loops that challenge the linear trajectory of the welfare-to-work model. It argues that the welfare state bureaucracy practices a powerful politics of time, consisting in the imposition of forms of order and rigid temporal structures on the highly contingent and unpredictable lives of the poor. These temporal devices of control, rather than facilitating women's efforts to move from dependence to self-reliance, only exacerbate their struggles to manage the vagaries and irregularities of time in their lives. Time thus constitutes a locus of struggle in the welfare relationship, between women on welfare and the welfare agency.

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A distinctive feature of the "welfare community" as a sociological phenomenon is that it does not really exist. Unlike other microcosms of poverty, such as those of the homeless, housing projects or inner-city residential areas, the world of welfare lacks any clear shape, any spatial or physical contours that are its own apart from the peculiar institutional setting of the welfare office. This space may form one of the few moments of commonality for people scattered widely across the landscape of poverty, the only place where any sizeable collection of unrelated people on welfare may be seen together. Two important factors account for this: first, the welfare relationship

consists of a highly individualized equation between the client and the state; and second, the acute stigma associated with the receipt of cash assistance provokes a suppression rather than an evocation of the welfare identity. Aside from a few discrete attempts at organizing people on welfare¹, there is no “subculture” of welfare recipients. Their diffusion in the public domain has made it difficult for activists to mobilize them, for researchers to find them, and for policy makers to understand their realities. There have been innumerable studies of welfare recipients over the past two decades, but the vast majority have relied on information from welfare rolls, not from real people.

For a researcher studying the lives of people on welfare, then, the welfare office constitutes a critical convergence in space and, to some extent, time, of a scattered set of people and the institutional context that shapes their common experience. This convergence is both real (a space where they all go at some point or other) and notional (the context against which they pin their accounts of themselves and frame their experiences as welfare recipients). The circumstances of poverty are very diverse, even for the single mothers who are the major recipients of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), but their experiences with the welfare bureaucracy provide a common referent. These encounters with the agency that controls a significant part of their basic livelihood constitute a powerful relationship, determining to a large extent how the women perceive themselves and other welfare recipients, how they respond to the terms of definition set by the state, and how they account for themselves. Some persuasive literature has emerged examining the performative character of the interface between state service bureaucracies and their clients (see Herzfeld 1992). This study uses that interface as a key setting for its analysis.

¹ For example, the National Welfare Rights Organization of the late 1960s, and the Kensington Welfare Rights Union of Philadelphia, started in 1990.

The ethnographic study on which this essay is based is part of a larger collaborative project on welfare reform, involving the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, the Department of Sociology of the University of Arizona, and a community partner, Information and Referral Services. The project combined survey and ethnography in trying to understand the experiences of transition from welfare to work for women in the city of Tucson, Arizona. It focused specifically on recipients of the TANF program, heir to AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), a program that provides means-tested cash assistance to women with dependent children in cases where the spouse may be absent, disabled or deceased. The study aimed to explore in detail the coping strategies that women adopted to deal with the reforms, the range of social support networks, institutional resources and occupational and educational assets that may help to explain why some women transition successfully and others do not. The study covered 250 women with a survey questionnaire and ethnographically followed a sub-sample of 16 women over a period of 6 months to a year. This essay reports on ethnographic encounters with 4 of these women. The interviews that constitute the ethnography represent specific *kinds* of accounts, focused around the identity of welfare recipients, contextualized in a historical chronology, and poised at the moment of reform and future uncertainty – the present as nested in the past and future.

Time, thus, emerges as a central axis of narration, a connecting thread running through the individual stories, a built-in organizing framework that the data naturally seemed to wrap themselves around. Time is also revealed as a locus of struggle between the state and its clients. Different meanings, forms and uses of time play through the data, and converge into patterns that pit the temporal experiences of the poor against the temporal devices deployed by the state on a daily basis in the welfare relationship. This essay argues, then, that the welfare state bureaucracy practices a powerful politics of time,

consisting in the imposition of forms of order and rigid temporal structures on the highly contingent and unpredictable lives of poor women. It shows how these practices, far from enabling welfare recipients to move toward self-sufficiency and control over their lives, usually act as impediments, and generate ongoing tensions in the women's own attempts to order their lives.

RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS: SETTINGS AND SELVES

As outlined above, the welfare office formed an important ethnographic setting for this study. Another important setting is the home of the welfare recipient. Not only does it represent a significant part of the material realities of poverty and embody the struggles of poor women to manage their lives and those of their families in a physical space, it has also traditionally been the locus of the state's judgement of welfare recipients as "deserving" or "undeserving." Suitable home criteria were widely applied, from the 1940s on, to assessing the welfare eligibility of single mothers, and were largely based on social workers' characterizations of living conditions: space, cleanliness, hygiene and usually, evidence of a male resident in the house. Home visits were part of the monitoring modalities of the state, specifically for programs of assistance to single mothers (Abramovitz 1988, Gordon 1994). "Suitable home" criteria were also often applied in charging women with neglect to justify removing children from their homes. Although use of these criteria is less common now, poor women still face the threat of having their children taken away by the state on the basis of poverty and housing conditions, construed by the state as neglect. Most of my contact time was spent at the homes of the women I interviewed.

In ethnographic method, time is taken very seriously, both as a methodological imperative (repeated and persistent contact with the setting or with informants), and as a context for understanding observed phenomena. Both dimensions

underpin discussions of my data in this essay: the women's circumstances are framed within the historical contexts of their lives as outlined by their accounts, but the accounts themselves must be read for the temporally bounded material that they represent. An example will make this clearer. My first interviews with Jeanette portrayed her as a tough-talking but responsible and clear-headed woman, bedeviled by chronic health conditions, but confident that she was well on her way to getting a job and settling into the working life she really wanted. Midway through the ethnography, however, I began having difficulties contacting her as she was never home and after a while stopped returning my calls. I eventually learned from her husband that she had left home – he had not heard from her for several days, her mother had no idea where she was, and friends had called him saying they had seen her at a Circle K buying lottery tickets, and at a casino. She had taken all the money in the house, the welfare cash and the food stamps, leaving her husband, who is disabled, to take care of the three children. He told me that she had done this before, that she did it from time to time. This turn of events brought home several important realizations about ethnographic research: the pitfalls of taking self-portrayals at face value, the conditional character of data taken at a given moment in time, the importance of treating findings as tentative and allowing for subsequent events or information to change the entire picture.

The event also brought home the inseparability of method and content in ethnographic research: most of the logistical and methodological challenges encountered in this study are integral parts of the story, of the subject matter of poverty and institutional dependence. Problems in making and maintaining contact with people on welfare, we found, were not trivial: disconnected phones, frequent changes of address and disappearances were common, and illustrated the uncertainty and irregularity of their lives more tellingly than their own accounts could. These experiences helped dismantle common

stereotypes about the unreliability of the poor: not only were there compelling circumstances behind each instance of “unreliability,” but these circumstances were at once highly specific and firmly rooted in the patterns of their lives.

Giving an “account” is a temporal reconstruction, an evocation of history, the individual’s retrospective ordering of her own life. In open-ended interviews about their life histories, my informants were free to define and interpret the chronologies of their lives. The narratives may thus reflect some “presentism” (where events of the past are read from the lens of the present). In particular, their constant aspiration for a sense of control over their own lives, a thread that ran through all the interviews, may result in their ascribing more agency to their past actions than was true of the way things actually happened.

TIME AND POVERTY

This section outlines how the struggles that define the lives of women living in poverty tend to center around a vortex of temporal themes. It shows how temporal sequences, orderings and flows are implicated in the etiology of poverty, forming cumulative feedback loops that are very difficult to break.

CHRONOLOGIES OF POVERTY

The life histories of the women in this study illustrate some of the patterns that make up a cycle of poverty. Although there were commonalities in the accounts, their real value lies not in their scope for generalizing but in their internal coherence and dynamics, the organic links that substantiate the story of how someone comes to be on welfare. In fact, rather than construct generalities, these accounts take general schema used to stereotype the poor and reveal the circumstances and processes that underpin them. The life histories of each of the women in this study are made up of a sequence of events that act with cumulative and mutually reinforcing effect over time: the temporal dynamics, significant in themselves as features of

was given away by an alcoholic father at the age of 5 while her mother was away seeking treatment for mental illness. She went through several foster homes before being adopted by the family that brought her up. After two broken marriages she is now trying to raise her two young children – one of them is disabled and the other showing signs of behavioral dysfunction – on welfare, SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and disability payments. She herself struggles with mental illness for which she seeks regular psychiatric help, and a congenital illness that renders her unable to work long hours.

THE ECONOMICS OF TIME: VALUE, QUANTITY AND RETURNS

A fundamental root of poverty is the low value placed on the time of the poor. This is most immediately apparent in market terms (low wages), but also in the way that various state institutions treat the time of the poor (discussed in more detail under the section *Time in Bureaucratic Practice* below).

Several of the jobs Maria worked at over the years paid little more than \$3 an hour; most of the occupational histories in my study are made up of minimum wage jobs. In the classic circularity of poverty, this low valuation is both a cause and a consequence of poverty – the undervaluation of the time of low-end workers operates simultaneously with the assumption that they have an endless supply of it, that their capacity to meet their livelihood needs by expanding their supply of low-wage labor is infinitely elastic. Abramovitz (1988), Gordon (1994), and other analysts of programs of aid to single mothers trace historical tensions in the capitalist patriarchal state, between keeping women at home to reproduce the labor force and bringing them into the labor market as a low wage workforce. Welfare reforms of the 1980s and 90s, in focusing on welfare-to-work programs, have all but swept out of consideration the burdens of household reproductive labor, thus contracting women's time even more.

Viewed in terms of investment principles, a key systemic feature of poverty is that people who grow up in situations of low liquidity have little hope of banking on the long run, and more importantly, little surplus to bank. Being able to take time for education or occupational training is essentially an investment in future value-addition to their time. The need for quick returns plays into a cycle of low or even diminishing returns to their time over the course of their lives. Maria and Jeanette had to start working in their early teens and dropped out of high school without graduating.

In most cases, time, at this low price, is the only resource that they can exchange for their essential needs. Joanne's path to acquiring a subsidized Habitat Home was by volunteering a specified amount of her time; as her disability prevented her from working on the house itself, she was required to volunteer at a school. For Maria and Jeanette, the only way they could increase their household incomes as their kids were growing up was to take on more work. So both worked multiple jobs, fitting their domestic responsibilities as single mothers into this schedule. Maria had a young woman from Mexico live with her to baby-sit when she was working:

I did my washing, my cooking. And the babysitter just had to be there at night when they were sleeping. ... And then I'd get off of graveyard, and my kids were bigger then, in junior high. And that's when I became a teacher's aid also. So I'd go in at 8 o'clock in the evening, till six in the morning. Then I'd come home and wash and shower and change and be at the school, as the teacher's aid, from 7:30 in the morning, till 2:30. ... I'd come home, and I'd make dinner, or I'd have it going before I left, in a crock pot or something. We'd have dinner, and I'd help them with their homework. I'd go to bed, sleep for three or four hours, maybe five, get up, shower and go to work....

That's why when somebody tells me, I can't work two jobs, it's too much, I tell them, work never killed anybody!

Jeanette's days sound similar.

Let's see, at that time I was... at that time I was driving a school bus, working as a security guard, doing awnings and skirtings, going to college and raising a daughter! As a single mother. Didn't need this DES [Department of Economic Security] then. There was nothing wrong with me, I was going to work!

Anna at age 37 also realizes that after many years on drugs, the only way she can get a decent job in a reasonable time frame to support her 3-year-old daughter is to capitalize on the time she already invested in her education many years ago. She had discovered very soon after getting her two-year Associate's Degree in accounting several years ago that she hated accounting, and at that point dropped it as a career option. Now, however, she is putting all of her time into getting an accounting degree at the University. "Because I don't have that much time, and I already had a two-year degree in it."

Ordinal issues are also key: taking the least popular shifts are part of the lot of the poor. Maria worked graveyard shifts for several years when she had four children. Jeanette prides herself on having been "the best worker they had," mainly because: "you needed somebody in the middle of the night, at 3 a.m., you knew whom to call. If there was a job that needed to be done, that nobody else wanted to do, you know who got it."

Poverty exacerbates the weight of the multiple burdens on the women's time; at the simplest level this is exemplified in their lack of time-saving amenities: a phone, a car. Many of the events Maria recounted to me were set against the backdrop of her lack of transportation. She recalls a "staffing" appointment at the Child Protective Services (CPS) office to report on her daughter Pamela's children:

The last time I went ... my car was broken so I had to take the bus, I had to be there by ten. I had to walk from, like Irvington and 15th to where Home Depot is, on the other side of the freeway! That's how far the bus stop is from CPS! The CPS center is WAY back inside toward the back—almost the last building on Williams Boulevard! So from Broadway you have to walk there! And then you have to walk back to Broadway to get the bus! ... And they didn't even take, like 5 minutes! (All they asked me was) had I heard from (Pamela), had she

seen the kids, and how were they doing. That was it! ... I could have done it over the phone, they made me go way out there for nothing! I was so mad, oh God! It took me longer to walk from here to the bus stop, and from the bus stop over there, than what the meeting was about! And it was raining! To boot!

ORDINAL STRUCTURES OF TIME: IRREGULARITIES AND UNCERTAINTIES IN PACE, FLOW AND SCHEDULE

Stereotypes of the poor include pejorative images of their unreliability and disorderliness, as character attributes taken to explain their persistent poverty². Ethnographic studies of poor communities, however, have shown how irregularity and constant dislocation are so deeply implicated in the circumstances of poverty, both causally and consequentially, as to be simply part of the definition of poverty (e.g. Stack 1975, Abraham 1993). Causally, the preponderance of part-time, seasonal, temporary jobs in the careers of low-wage workers, and their special vulnerability to sudden layoffs and firm closures create uneven employment histories that play back negatively into their future hiring prospects. This pattern emerged to varying degrees in all of the accounts in this study. Maria balanced her work strategies between low-paid service jobs at convenience stores and better paid but less secure jobs in large industrial firms where closures and layoffs were a constant threat. Jeanette combined occasional work in her father's mobile home business with waitressing, driving school buses or working as a security guard, all part-time jobs. The need to hedge against sudden crises by adroitly balancing the available opportunities creates a constant shifting dynamic. As seen in Jeanette's case, ill health and family disruptions can throw the entire balancing act into crisis.

Maria quit a good job as a school bus driver soon after she got a divorce from her husband because "I didn't want to be a risk to the children... I was divorced from my husband but he

² The "culture of poverty" literature is an example of this approach.

would drink and come and cause me problems at home. And you know, you have to be alert when you're with children. ... And I can't go to work sleepy and upset. So I left that job." As much as dislocations in conjugal relationships and household composition provoke crises in livelihoods, they also form part of the coping strategies of the poor. Stack (1975) shows how flux and elasticity of residence and household composition form crucial strategies for assuring the ongoing care of children in poor black communities. For all of the women in this study, getting away from abusive or disruptive relationships was a critical step in asserting control over their lives. Joanne had to move several times to get herself and her children away from her abusive husband. Anna's path out of drugs and the streets of San Diego consisted in making a clean break from the father of her child and relocating to Arizona. The "clean breaks" tend, however, to cycle back into other muddy relationships. Through all of the four life histories in my study runs a vein of repeatedly broken, disruptive or dysfunctional conjugal relationships that play a determining role in bringing the women to the doors of public assistance. Each of Joanne's children and Maria's grandchildren had different fathers, Jeanette had been married three times. Uncertain conjugal unions, like unreliability, are not inherent features of the culture of poverty or the character of the poor, but, as Stack shows, largely the consequence of economic insecurity:

The lack of employment opportunities for the urban poor and unlikeliness of a liveable guaranteed minimum income make it very difficult for urban low-income Blacks to form lasting conjugal units. ... Why marriage is unstable is an intricate weave of cause and effect. [Stack 1975:116]

Inevitably, conjugal uncertainties, the shifting composition of households and residential dislocations feed back into disruptions in women's employment or institutional interactions, arenas where regularity is taken for granted. Jeanette had moved out of the family trailer and was living in

her truck when official notifications about her lapsed car insurance arrived, so she knew nothing about them for months: one of many telling examples of the anomaly between the lives of the poor and the functioning of public institutions.

Liquidity and the schedules of income and resource flows are among the most critical dynamics of poverty. Irregularities in the flow of resources, leading to debt, form one of the principal ways by which poverty is constituted. For Anna the only way she can survive on her welfare income is by borrowing from relatives or on student loans. For Jeanette, one of the major bottlenecks in her path back to a job as a driver was the challenge of finding money to pay six months' insurance. Her license and registration had been suspended by the court because she had no insurance. Eventually she got the money together with assistance from the JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) program, went to court and got all her paperwork sorted out, but in the meantime the job had been given away to somebody else: "Well, needless to say, they hired somebody else. They HAD to. They had to have a licensed driver to fill the position."

The above discussion illuminates some of the struggles that the poor wage to assert control over their lives, struggles centered in the realm of time, over the pathways to resources, citizenship, a working life. The discussion also addresses common stereotypes about the poor, unraveling the images to show the threads of circumstances and the structural dimensions of irregularity. Clearly, the women studied are not lazy, passive, unreliable, content to stay dependent on public assistance. All four of them had goals of their own, not too different from what the state professes to move them toward, visions of a life of dignity and participation, centered around a nice home, family, education and work, all of the central values of the American Way of Life.

TIME IN BUREAUCRATIC PRACTICE

How, then, does the state mediate these struggles and respond to these aspirations? All the discourse of the welfare system since the writing of the Social Security Act in 1935 has been centered around the restoration of dignity and self-reliance to the beneficiaries of state assistance. The reforms, with names like EMPOWER and PROGRESS (the acronym for New Mexico's reform program) are couched in the idioms of enabling and facilitation. Yet in its actual dealings, as the following discussion will show, state practices embody intimidation and control, effectively challenging the bids of clients for self-definition and personhood. At the interface between the state and its clients, these mechanisms are mostly built around the deployment of instruments of time.

WAITING, RITUAL, REPETITION

The waiting room at the Department of Economic Security's Office of Family Assistance is like few other waiting rooms I have been in. The physical space is clearly designed with waiting in mind, but with no thought about comfort: the chairs ranged around the room are hard plastic, functional chairs. There are no stacks of magazines or newspapers anywhere, nothing to relieve the monotony but a T.V. in the corner that delivers very basic and detailed instructions, very carefully enunciated, on how to use the Quest Card or the JOBS services. People sit there for hours, many with blank, faraway looks on their faces, bodies settled in as if for an indefinite length of time. Some have children with them who sooner or later get impatient and begin to make demands or complaints. The waiting people rarely speak to each other. The only regular interaction taking place in that room is between people behind the counter and people at the head of the line in front of the counter. There is usually a security guard at the door who hastens to intervene if people are doing anything prohibited such as allowing their

children to stand up on the chairs! Fully uniformed policemen walk in and out of the offices.

The theme of waiting came up frequently in my interviews. More than the waiting, it was the uncertainty. Particularly if you went in on a "walk-in," that is, if you had not been given an appointment. Anna went in on a Wednesday to recertify for her benefits: they could not see her that day. Then she went in at 7 a.m. on a Friday and waited in line on the cold sidewalk with her three-year-old daughter until the office opened at 8:00, so that she would be seen the same day. If she did not complete her recertification that week, she would be sanctioned. I joined her at the DES office and we sat outside talking. At about 9:30 she inquired at the counter when she could expect to be seen. The receptionist looked at her computer and said "I'd say, you're just going to have to hang in there!" Apparently she could not tell her how long it would be because the wait is not based on the caseworker's list or how many people were there before her, but on which programs she was on. For some programs it may be an hour's wait, for some it may be two hours! She just couldn't tell. Since the child was getting really restless by this point, I offered to stay there and keep an ear out for Anna's name to be called while she took Sarah for a walk. Anna gratefully took me up on the offer.

The wait is just one of several temporal devices of control that are part of the everyday working of the service bureaucracy at its interface with people. The tensions embodied at this interface have been examined and portrayed from several perspectives by students of bureaucracy from Weber on. More recent examinations of this moment of the practice of governance have focused around how it constructs images and confers identities through the use of highly charged symbols of nationalism and family (Douglas 1986, Herzfeld 1992). Douglas shows how bureaucratic classification and categorization creates notions of "matter out of place," thence to dirt, pollution, and anomaly. Ferguson (1984) characterizes the processes of

domination that play out between the client and the frontline bureaucrat (as well as between the frontline worker and his or her superior) as one of “feminization” of the former. In sum, these portrayals of the state-client relationship, particularly as represented in service bureaucracies, have exploded the myth of bureaucratic neutrality and objectivity³. As Herzfeld (1992) argues, bureaucratic interaction is about power, not logic or rationality.

Herzfeld makes a powerful case for interpreting bureaucratic management of time at the juncture with clients as an exercise in power and control, drawing clients into the rhetoric of nationalist ideology on the state’s terms:

The replication of nationalist ideology in bureaucratic daily ritual hinges on a characteristic they both share: the suppression of time. Much as national history – like myth – takes on the features of a timeless landscape, the effect of the daily interactions between bureaucrats and clients is also that of making time irrelevant.

This works in two closely cooperative ways. First the sheer tedium of constantly having to “come back next week” deadens one’s sense of the passage of time, especially in its repetitiousness. Second, the ability to demand this level of obedience expresses the bureaucrat’s control over the client’s time, making the latter unimportant by comparison: “Can’t you see I’m very busy?”. [Herzfeld 1992:162]

Bureaucratic ritual, in the same vein, as Buttitta and Miceli (1986) write, “has the effective capacity to impose the dimension of certainty, of necessity, and of absolute values on the contingent unpredictability of events.”

Maria ranted for over an hour, almost an entire interview, about the useless circles the welfare system made her run in the name of “necessary paperwork.” She showed me a letter that she had just received from DES, demanding more

³ Or rather, as Herzfeld (1992) argues in *The Social Production of Indifference*, these studies have made clearer the rhetorical character of these claims: nobody really believes them, but they serve convenient purposes, both for the bureaucrat and the client.

documentation in order to recertify her for her childcare job. According to her, she had just completed her recertification a month ago and taken them all the documentation. The letter was brusque and official in a generic unfriendly way, starting with a demand that she produce "items 5, 7 and 18 from the following list," and threatening termination of her benefits if she failed to do so. The list which followed contained 18 items, covering the gamut of possible types of documentation. Maria was not intimidated by the letter, just very irritated and went off on a diatribe about how dumb and inefficient the system was.

Maria: I'm not going to look for all this shit, you know, I just took it to them! I just got recertified, and now (they) want more! "The same stuff that's already in the file!... (All this paperwork) takes a lot of my time, and it makes me very mad! Because I've already taken them all of this stuff!"

Karen: Does this happen often, that you've already given them the stuff and they hassle you?

Maria: Two out of three times! And it's not just happened to me: my daughter, my niece, my other niece, Pamela when she was on it! And a lot of times, I feel, they're just too damned lazy to do the paperwork or go through the file or whatever, because it's all THERE!! ... They have them, it's in the record, it's in the computer!! ... (They do this) just to be a pain in the posterior!!

She has to go through this process roughly every three months: a different process for each kind of benefit. Even home visits by caseworkers turn out to be exercises in waiting:

He had an appointment twice, to come do a home visit. And I waited, and the kids waited and he didn't show. So I sarcastically called and I left him a message on his answering machine, because he wasn't there. And I said "What the heck, John, are you trying to be like Jason that you make appointments and I wait and the kids wait and you don't show up and I'm the one that gets in trouble because you say I don't comply with the goddamn program?"

So John left her a note saying he would be by the following weekend, and when he came, he barely stayed for 10 minutes,

just sat down and chatted with the kids a few minutes and then got up to leave! “All this for nothing!” Maria said to me.

Maria’s description of what actually happens when she takes in the required paperwork is a pithy portrayal of bureaucratic ritualism:

OK, like, see if I go in and I take all the paperwork that they want? OK. You go up to the window, you won’t even see the caseworker, all they’ll do is, have you stand there, they’ll run copies of all this shit, and stamp it, they’ll stamp the one you took in and they’ll stamp the copy they made. And then they’ll staple them together and put it in the basket for the worker. Somewhere down the line, could be a week, could be two weeks, I’ll get a letter from the worker, to go in at such-and-such a date, such-and-such a time. Maybe.

So then she goes in and sees the caseworker, a second visit to the DES office. What happens then?

She’ll just go over the paperwork that you just took in! It’s STUPID!! “Listen lady, you sent me this letter, I GOT you the paperwork, and here it is. Now you call me back to say ‘Oh, this is the paper?’ Well, if they’re there, isn’t those the papers that you asked for?”

“Jesus Christ, is there no common sense to this job, or what?” I said to myself – and I think I said it out loud: “Do you think I brought it for my entertainment or what?” And then if you don’t go when they say, they SANCTION you! “Oh, you didn’t comply with the requirements!”

What Herzfeld portrayed as the bureaucrat establishing the “primacy of official space over personal time” (1992:170) is manifested not only in the waiting and useless ritualism at the welfare office, but also in the physical location of state services: Maria’s difficulty in getting to the CPS office by bus illustrates routine bureaucratic insensitivity to the realities of poor people’s lives. Thus the temporal challenges that dog the daily lives of women on welfare are negated by the practices of bureaucratic formality. Again, in Herzfeld’s words,

The petty harassments and especially the oft-repeated advice to “come back tomorrow,” the endless sets of more or less identical

forms, the bureaucrat's professed inability to predict outcome and duration: all these elements, the components of indifference, conduce to the squelching of even a semblance of personal temporality. [Herzfeld 1992: 163]

THE QUEUE

The same theme is echoed in a second image that graphically captures and illustrates the state's handling of client's time: that of the queue. The queue is a classic device for organizing the service relationship in bureaucracies. Bernard Schaffer (1973) showed how practices such as queueing (we can add application forms, codified rules and eligibility criteria) play out the ideology of the "arm's length relationship," the notion of bureaucratic objectivity or neutrality from the politics of society at large. The concept of the queue is used to systematize and equalize (also to depersonalize and routinize) a service at the point of delivery. All applicants are treated as equal, the only merit that distinguishes one from the other is the amount of time they have waited in line. The device also carries normative significance: queueing stands for a principle, it represents order and compliance, queue-jumping is akin to corruption.

Schaffer's unpacking of the mythology contained in this device, his discussions of the real "conditions of access" that underpin the queue are revealing in their implications for gender, ethnicity, race, class. He argues that the queue represents a competition of sorts between its participants: queueing implies a definite cost; the reward (the service) goes to people who can and will bear the time and opportunity costs, who have made certain calculations about the resource and the expenditures involved, who possess the knowledge necessary to make these calculations. Most important, queueing as a model for rational organization of service delivery assumes that time must be a calculable and relatively valuable resource (in other words, that the client sees the service as significant *but not overwhelmingly so*), that there is some degree of correspondence

in the categorical notion of time on either side of the counter, and that the service will be available in a fairly continuous stream at the head of the queue (not fragmented so that the applicant has to wait in several consecutive queues to obtain a complete service).

None of these conditions bears out in the welfare system. For women on welfare, the benefits, meager as they are, are crucial to their survival. They are in no position to make calculations about costs and returns of time invested. Three of my four informants spoke with frustration about what they considered a highly irrational system of organizing services, forcing them to go to different appointments, sometimes in different offices for the various components of the package: one place for JOBS, another for AFDC and sometimes a third for child care. Then there are subsidiary appointments with CPS, with courts, child support offices...As Anna summed up her experiences of getting to the head of the queue:

I take them my bank statements, my utility bills. They call my landlord, ask him how much rent I'm paying, etc. ... They make sure there's nobody else living here. And they check all my utility bills, make sure my bank account isn't greater than a thousand dollars. They make copies of all my statements. And then they refer me to the JOBS program and the JOBS program makes me jump through their hoops. It's really a pain, actually, being on welfare! I mean, I get 200 bucks a month, and 200 bucks on food stamps, I mean it helps out, but it's hardly worth the time they put me through!

Nevertheless she goes through the process because she has no choice.

Jeanette had to go to court when her registration and license were suspended: "It took them six weeks to give me a court date that was in four weeks. So I have been, like nine weeks waiting for this. And then I went to court last week." Once she got to the courthouse, she asked how to get to Courtroom 3, got misdirected and couldn't find the room. By the time she found it, she was seven minutes late for her hearing, and the judge refused to see her. She had to get a new

court date, for a week later. Reaching the head of the queue, then, is not always the end of the story. Unless the applicant can make her case effectively, she is back in the queue.

PROGRAMS OF WELFARE REFORM

The federal welfare reform legislation (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) was passed in November 1996, but Arizona's Welfare Reform Demonstration Project called EMPOWER (Employing and Moving People Off Welfare and Encouraging Responsibility) was initiated in 1994 and signed into law in 1995. Articulated within the now hegemonic rationality of fiscal austerity in government, the reforms employ a time-bound teleology to bring marginal sections of society into the mainstream of economic life. Their agenda, as many have argued, is less fundamentally about cutting spending than it is about reinstating control over the recipients of public assistance and forcing them back to work.

The reforms essentially lay out a temporally ordered path out of poverty and dependence, and deploy time-based mechanisms both as carrots and sticks. Deadlines and time limits form the structural outlines of the reform. Benefits can be received for a maximum of two years, which don't have to run concurrently, in any 60-month period, and all adults are capped at five years over their lifetimes. Children born to women 10 months after they start receiving benefits are not eligible. A tightly prescribed program of phased integration into the workforce—the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program—is the central vehicle of the reforms; the program comprises specified amounts of time spent on workfare activities that include job training, volunteer work, and evidence of an ongoing search for employment. The activities are designed to ensure that the time during which women receive public assistance is channeled into investments toward greater employability, including training in behaviors like punctuality.

Incentives offered by the program include extensions of transitional medical and childcare coverage from one year to two years for people who stop receiving cash assistance due to employment. Sanctions can be applied for failure to comply with any of the workfare requirements, for failure to appear for interviews and keep DES appointments, or to inform the DES of any changes in income, residence or household composition within ten days. The deadliest provision of the extraordinarily well-teethed reform program is that of progressive sanctions, whereby each individual lapse entails a cut in 25 percent of benefits, and three lapses (they do not have to be consecutive) gets one thrown off the rolls altogether.

Some of the provisions of the reforms appear at first glance to be genuinely aimed at “empowering” clients to reenter the workforce. And indeed, Jeanette had warm words for the JOBS program: “It’s a really neat program... With AFDC you cannot do anything to improve your situation, or you get sanctioned for it. JOBS will do everything for you to improve your situation.” It was JOBS that assisted her in getting six months of car insurance paid so that she could apply for a driving job.

Material from the ethnographic interviews suggest however, a fundamental mismatch between the state’s and clients’ notions and treatment of time. The underlying assumption that women on welfare need to learn the practices of a working life is obviously false; as shown above, most of them have juggled several jobs and carried off substantial feats of scheduling in their working careers. At the level of practice, the rules are implemented in ways that tend to hinder rather than facilitate the clients’ progress toward self-sufficiency. Anna’s struggles illustrate this tension. She is engaged in an effort to get her degree in accounting as fast as possible, so she takes as heavy a course load in all semesters as she can manage. The JOBS program, in her account, puts plenty of spokes in the wheel.

Anna: They only count the time that you're actually going to class as a work-related activity. Study time doesn't count at all. When I first went to school it did, and then they kept changing the rules on me, telling me I had to volunteer 10 hours a week, then 20 hours a week, then they said 40 hours a week. This was about a year ago... . My worker called me, they sent me a notice in the mail that you got to come into the office this day for this appointment. I'm like 'Well, thanks for ASKING me, you know, like I don't have anything else going on.' And they're like, well if you can't make this appointment you'll get cut off welfare!

Karen: Is that how it always works, they just give you a date and time, you don't have any options?

Anna: Yeah, it's like 'Be there and if you have anything else to do, too bad!'

Karen: Can you call and tell them if you have a class or something else at that time?

Anna: School doesn't count, only working. If you have a class, that's too bad, you got to figure it out.

Frequent changes in minor provisions of the reforms cause confusion and anomaly; in many instances the caseworkers themselves were not abreast of the latest information. Anomalies also arise from rigidities in bureaucratic specification of time in the face of the clients' realities:

Anna: They told me—because my two year time limit was up—they told me that I could file for an extension because I'm a student in school. So I filed for the extension, which is – eight months from April 1st was December 1st – and I was at that time planning on graduating this December, and they denied my extension because graduation was not until December 12th!! They denied my extension because it's over, you know, by like two weeks!! They said, "No, you got to graduate by December 1st, or else we'll deny it." I mean who graduates in NOVEMBER?! So they took me off.

Thus the reforms, in their efforts to *order* the lives of women on welfare, only succeed in intensifying their struggles to climb out of poverty. This is the anatomy of bureaucratic control; as

Herzfeld shows, the imposition of formal categories on the lived experiences of daily life is the stuff of which indifference is made.

CONCLUSION

Herzfeld writes about the notion of order in the functioning of bureaucracies:

(It) slips all too easily between two meanings: as the exercise of power and as a mode of classification – in short as both practice and system. The existence of order is not a given, but comes about through the continuing agreement of a group of people to respect and even to create a set of regularities in the life they share. ... Structure and agency cannot exist without one another, because the presumption that structure exists provides the necessary context within which agents can in fact make it exist. [Herzfeld 1992:178]

The “order” constructed by the state and deployed by the welfare bureaucracy in the practice of welfare reform, partakes fully of both meanings. Time is used both in exercising power and as a domain of classification: the deserving are those whose practices of time can be made to fit the structures given by the state. The ordering of time, in the world of chaos that the poor often inhabit, is not in itself a bad thing. The ethnographic material allows us to distinguish between ordering that is facilitative, that helps women pursue their goals – many of them identical to those professed by state programs; and ordering that is counterproductive to these goals, that negates their circumstances and histories and does not take their time (either past or present) seriously. When the JOBS program helped Jeanette resolve her liquidity constraints by providing her with insurance payment, it was functioning on a common understanding of the structures of time. Extensions of transitional medical and childcare coverage for employed women function on similar lines; the irony here is that the kinds of jobs that most of the women are likely to get will probably not carry health and child care benefits once the welfare provisions stop. Programs like Habitat Homes and the DES

daycare provider program allow the poor to capitalize on their time in creative ways, with reasonable returns.

The overwhelming character of the reform, however, is to *impose* an order than is not emic on the lives of women on welfare through the practice of specific temporal devices in the service delivery relationship. In bringing marginalized sections of society up to the times, they also put them in their place. By asserting official space over the client's time, anomaly, matter out of place, dirt, is reordered. As this essay showed, the poor experience time in a cyclical way. Prescribing a linear teleology as a way out of poverty is unhelpful at best.

The basic argument of this essay is that notions of time as shaping natural and universal laws of social order hide the different meanings, values and forms it can hold for people in different positions of power. Thus the struggles of welfare recipients to manage the vagaries and contingencies of time in their lived spaces are exacerbated by the state's construction of devices of control out of time. Carried out in this way, welfare reform will only constrain women's efforts to overcome poverty and dependence.

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