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Working for food stamps:

Economic citizenship and the post-Fordist welfare state in New York City

ABSTRACT

In the United States, the number of people receiving state-subsidized food aid has risen dramatically since 2001. This increase complicates the well-worn story that the post-Fordist welfare state has been continuously cut back in the neoliberal era, indicating instead that it is expanding to subsidize poor workers' participation in the formal labor market. In New York City, welfare office workers operationalize policies that ease access to food assistance for poor workers who can demonstrate that they are formally employed. Meanwhile, workfare programs punish the unemployed and marginal workers by making them work for food stamps. This conservative, paternalistic welfare regime commodifies labor, creates new patterns of stratification among the urban poor, and redraws the terms of economic citizenship. [*welfare, poverty, citizenship, food policy, employment, social stratification, New York City*]

Lester Towns, a soft-spoken, middle-aged African American man, sat across the table from me, patiently explaining his job and its challenges. He works as an eligibility specialist for the New York City Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services, which administers welfare programs.¹ Towns interviews people who apply for food aid under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, and determines if they are eligible for benefits.² He and the other eligibility specialists I met complained of old, malfunctioning equipment and of too much work, too few employees to do it all, too little pay, and too little respect, both from the applicants coming in and from their managers. But Towns's biggest frustration was a new approach from management and city officials to expand food stamp enrollment. As he put it, "The policy with the city is 'When in doubt, give it out.'"

This liberal attitude toward food aid is a striking departure from the diversionary tactics of the 1990s. Under the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (1994–2001), street-level bureaucrats like Towns were charged with preventing poor New Yorkers from applying for food stamps (Davis et al. 2002; Krinsky 2007). Predictably, the number of recipients dropped dramatically, from about 1.5 million in December 1994 to 798,000 in December 2001, a reduction of 45 percent (IBO 2008). In this period, attorneys from local advocacy organizations accused welfare workers of violating applicants' rights in several ways, including failing to give them application forms right away, as required by law; requiring the poor to search for jobs before receiving food stamp assistance; cutting off food stamps to needy families who were still eligible for them; and sending hungry people to food pantries. In 1999 several of these complaints were confirmed in a report by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA 1999) and in a ruling against the city in federal court.³

Since Mayor Michael Bloomberg took office in 2001, the food stamp rolls have risen 120 percent—a fact his administration touted as a success. This growth was no accident. At a food bank conference in 2012, Robert Doar, Bloomberg's welfare commissioner, bragged that the mayor had transformed the food stamp program and increased

enrollment by sending the message that it was “more than a welfare program, but a work support.”⁴ From a low of 798,000 recipients in 2001, the food stamp caseload soared to 1.8 million by 2012. These numbers reflect national trends. Food stamp rolls rose from just above 18 million in 2001 to 27 million in 2008 under the Bush administration and continued to climb with the onset of the recession, reaching their peak at 47 million Americans, or around 15 percent of the population, in 2012 (Cunnyngham 2012).⁵

The dismantling of the Fordist welfare state, both in the United States and globally, is widely considered one of the neoliberal era’s hallmarks (Hall, Massey, and Rustin 2013; Harvey 2005; Muehlebach 2012; Peck 2001; Wacquant 2009). In the United States, welfare programs have been made more punitive to push people (primarily poor women with children) into the labor market and, according to many accounts, to reduce the size and scope of the welfare state (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Kingfisher 2002; Morgen, Acker, and Weigt 2010; Maskovsky and Morgen 2003; Newman 2001; Wacquant 2009). But the growth of the food stamp rolls complicates this conventional wisdom and suggests the need to rethink some fundamental assumptions about the neoliberal welfare state in the postwelfare era. It signals not only “an unstable, uneven, and in some ways anachronistic jumble of impulses” (Fairbanks 2009, 264), but also a cultural reevaluation of the welfare state in the face of so many US citizens’ declining fortunes.

This article traces how food stamps went from being a stigmatized welfare program to a valued “work support,” to use Commissioner Doar’s term. The expansion of work supports, like food stamps, has emerged as a political solution to the problem of insecure work and stagnating wages in an era of widespread precarity. Towns’s complaint about the pressure to “give it out” suggests the need to examine “the mechanisms whereby societies make gradual shifts . . . between the poles of social welfare generosity and stringency,” as Michael Lipsky put it (1984, 5). Building from Lipsky’s insight that macroeconomic pressures either to constrain or expand welfare spending shape the specific actions of public officials and welfare office workers, this research takes the encounters between poor people and these workers as a primary site where welfare policies are being retooled in the face of broader economic transformations.

In New York City, this new post-Fordist welfare regime combines protective work supports for the so-called working poor and punitive workfare regimes for the unemployed.⁶ In this, it does not simply correct “the structure of inequality, but is in its own right a system of stratification” that commodifies labor in new ways by tightening the links between formal employment and the social wage—that is, the “the share of a nation’s resources that is distributed according to social rather than strict market criteria” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 23, 115; see also Polanyi

1944). Welfare office workers rely on documentation tying applicants to an employer to determine whether they deserve work supports. In doing so, they operationalize policies that make employers the gatekeepers of both literal wages and the social wage. People who fall outside the formal labor market and cannot establish their identity as workers are made to perform workfare assignments in exchange for their food stamps. They are at constant risk of losing even these meager and punitive benefits. Far from a weak or receding state, this postwelfare configuration demonstrates the outsize role state agencies play in shaping the low-wage labor force through the distribution of the social wage. Welfare restructuring along these lines becomes a new mode of governing poverty and insecurity, creating stratified economic citizenship rights for poor people by incentivizing low-wage labor on the one hand and punishing unemployment on the other.

I conducted 18 months of participant observation from 2011 to 2012 in a food stamp outreach program located in a soup kitchen and food pantry in north Brooklyn. My primary role was as an advocate for people attempting to access public benefits—mostly food stamps, but also Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Safety Net Program, the two programs that provide cash for the poor in New York City. I helped people fill out applications and went with them to the welfare office when their benefits were cut off or reduced. I wanted to know if the expansion of food assistance adequately addressed food insecurity among the urban poor and, moreover, what this expansion might mean for the future of poverty policy and poverty governance in an era of growing precarity.

The post-Fordist welfare state

The Fordist-Keynesian welfare regimes that emerged in the 20th century were built around and constituted what James Ferguson (2013) calls “work membership,” which forms the basis of social belonging in industrial societies. Most national welfare state protections in the United States were established in the 1930s during the New Deal and were expanded in the 1960s as part of the War on Poverty. The US welfare state was designed to protect people when they fell out of the labor market for various reasons, including illness, old age, and the need to care for children. Welfare programs were also designed in such a way that they maintained race and gender hierarchies. The more generous social insurance programs were designed to benefit male workers and their families when they retired, lost a job, or became disabled. They excluded African Americans en masse (Katznelson 2005; Quadagno 1996). Poor single mothers and people without a substantial work history were relegated to stingy means-tested welfare programs when they were given any assistance at all (Abromovitz 1996; Katz 1986).

In the Fordist era, full employment was seen as an attainable goal that could incorporate most—if not all—marginal workers into a growing industrial economy. This idea was extremely valuable for regulating society as a whole and the working class in particular. The “Fordist dream” (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012, 318) is perhaps best understood as a kind of aspirational politics, but it was a politics that was widely shared, fueling demands for equal participation in the affluent society of the mid-20th century. The political movements of the 1950s and 1960s focused on fully including women and people of color in the labor market, in the electoral process, in housing and consumer markets, and in state welfare programs. These struggles were premised on the idea of extending the social and economic rights associated with citizenship within the nation-state. But in the decades since then, as the relationship between the state, capital, and the global working class has shifted, new questions have emerged about what a politics of inclusion might look like.

In today’s postindustrial landscape, the Fordist dream of secure, decently paid work and strong welfare provisioning seems more and more untenable, producing widespread nostalgia, anxiety, and fear (Allison 2012; Ferguson 2015; Kalleberg 2011; Millar 2014; Molé 2010). In an era when work has become flexible, insecure, and unreliable, the predictable risks faced by poor and working people have changed significantly, and the terms of economic citizenship are being redrawn. One of the challenges of the post-Fordist era is how to preserve work as the foundation of social belonging when there begins to be a breakdown in the ideology of work and reward that has governed the US labor force and US society more generally—not just for historically excluded groups but for formerly included groups, such as working-class white men (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Muehlebach 2011; Standing 2011). Rebranding food stamps as a work support and encouraging low-income workers to enroll in the program is one response to this political dilemma. Subsidizing insufficient incomes is a political solution to the problem of low-paid, insecure jobs that are no longer sufficient to meet a household’s basic needs. With the rise of flexible labor in the post-Fordist era, unstable, irregular, and low-wage work has become the norm. In response, social support is being transformed to protect poor workers against the predictable, systemic risk of below-subsistence wages.

Nothing made this transformation clearer to me over the course of my fieldwork than a poster that hangs in the local welfare office (see Figure 1). It reminds applicants, who often spend hours in the waiting rooms, that “there are few choices on welfare and even fewer dollars” and that “a job is your path out of poverty.” What is striking about the poster is not that it advocates work as the antidote to poverty, but that it advocates work supports—welfare

programs and entitlements that can be used to supplement low wages.

The poster features Corinne, a single mother with two children, and a bar graph that contrasts her income receiving welfare with her income working full-time. “While she was on cash assistance,” it states, “her family was in poverty. She was hired at an entry-level salary for nine dollars an hour, earning 15,010. After taxes and applying for benefits for which her family is eligible, Corinne raises her family income to 40,858.” Notably, Corinne’s base salary of \$9 an hour working full-time leaves her earnings several thousand dollars below the poverty line of 19,090 for a family of three. To turn her \$9-an-hour job into one that provides \$40,858 a year, Corinne would have to receive tax credits, a child care subsidy, child support payments, and food stamps. What is particularly striking is that the graph juxtaposes “welfare vs. work,” even though over half the income Corinne earns in the work scenario is in the form of state-administered welfare benefits. As this poster makes plain, means-tested welfare programs no longer target the neediest Americans. Rather, they increasingly benefit the working poor who have access to formal employment and regular wages.

The significant gains for the working poor through the expansion of means-tested benefits suggests a shift in the welfare state’s “theoretical substance” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 19). The debates over welfare in the 1990s revolved around encouraging self-sufficiency through work and reducing dependence on state assistance (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Morgen 2001). Today, however, poor workers are encouraged to rely on both an insecure labor market and the welfare state to make ends meet. Welfare state programs, including the earned income tax credit, subsidized child care, food stamps, and expansions of other tax credits have all grown in size and scope since the mid-1990s (Bitler et al. 2010; Moffitt 2015). In fact, overall spending on welfare programs for the poor has increased dramatically since the mid-1980s (Moffitt 2015). The reorganization of welfare programs for the poor is producing new stratification patterns among the US working class. The very poor, whose incomes are less than half the official poverty threshold, receive less in state assistance today than they did in 1996, while households that earn from 100 percent to 200 percent of the poverty threshold receive considerably more (Ben-Shalom, Moffitt, and Scholz 2011; Moffitt 2015; Shafer and Edin 2012; Ziliak 2013).

Welfare reform was widely understood as an attempt to reduce the size and scope of the welfare state and establish a less interventionist neoliberal state. But pushing people off the welfare rolls into a declining labor market has done little to alleviate their need for state support. The expansion of work supports targeted specifically at the working poor is a paternalistic, conservative effort to address the problem of insufficient wages for so many US workers. Conservative regimes favor “granting an array of social rights,” but these

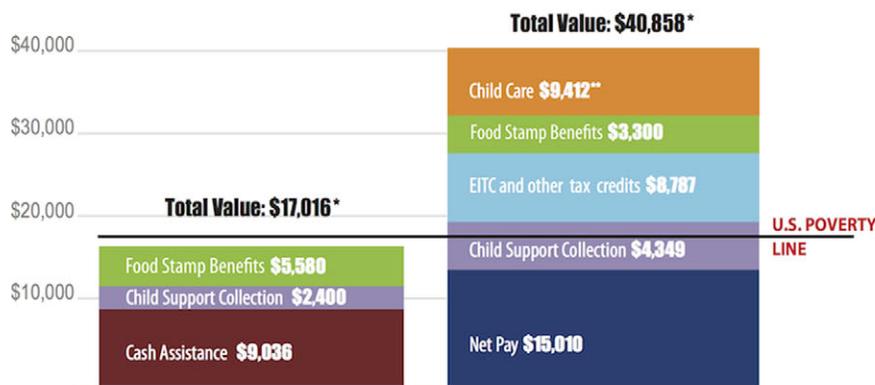
There are few choices on welfare and even fewer dollars

A Job Is Your Path Out of Poverty

Corinne is a single mother with two children. While she was on cash assistance her family was in poverty. She was hired at an entry level salary of \$9.00 per hour, earning \$15,010 after taxes, and by applying for benefits for which her family is eligible, Corinne raises her family's income to \$40,858.*

A household with 2 children where the parent makes \$9 per hour for 35 hrs per week, can increase the value of a year's salary.

welfare vs. work



* These charts are based on individual examples in 2011. Your cash assistance and income value will vary depending on your eligibility and earnings.

** Child Care amount is not cash payment but represents the value of the benefit a client may be eligible for.



Figure 1. A poster promoting work supports that was prominently displayed in the waiting rooms of New York City's welfare offices in 2012. (City of New York Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services)

rights are “conditional upon appropriate loyalty and morality” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 40). By expanding support but making it conditional on being employed, the post-Fordist welfare regime strengthens the authority of employers and further commodifies labor (Esping-Andersen 1990; Polanyi 1944). Importantly, the growth of assistance for the working poor has been layered on top of the minimal, punitive, and residual welfare state aimed at the unemployed. Poor New Yorkers negotiate these stark distinctions in their interactions with the welfare office when they apply for food stamps.

Negotiating the new self-sufficiency

One evening after work, I met Marta, a Polish single mother of three, who worked as an assistant in a dentist’s office. She was wearing a smart fitted suit jacket and matching black skirt. She was agitated because her food stamps had been cut off. Her case had been open for seven years, and she had never had a problem recertifying, a process that has to be completed annually. She had been employed in the same job that whole time, and every year she simply resubmitted a copy of a letter showing her income. But at her most recent recertification, the caseworker told her that he suspected the letter was fraudulent and requested extra documentation. She was terrified that she would be fined or worse and was afraid to return to the food stamp office. Further, she worried that if she asked her employer for the documents, he might find out she was applying for food assistance and react negatively. As a result, her case was closed for several months.

When she had SNAP benefits, she never had to think about whether to buy certain foods. Families like hers, who could rely on steady wages and food stamps, regularly reported eating healthier and worrying less about affording food. USDA officials confirmed that this was how they hoped the program would work, primarily to supplement the wages and improve the nutrition of the working poor households who rely the program.⁷ But once Marta’s food stamps were cut off, she found herself weighing the bag of potatoes more carefully. “I just kept thinking, ‘If we buy this, how are we going to pay the lights?’ So we eat the same things every day. But [the children] don’t understand and they feel bad.” We went over the paperwork she would need to reopen her case, and she agreed to ask her employer for a printout of her earnings. She was nervous but said she would go the next week because, as she put it, “I don’t know what we’re going to do without food stamps.” She called to thank me once her case was reopened. Her relief was palpable.

Expansions of work supports like food stamps do ease some of the hardships associated with wage stagnation for some segments of the urban working class. But the resistance Marta experienced at the welfare office is instructive.

Whether applicants can receive food assistance hinges on their making their employment legible, visible, and verifiable to the food stamp office. These negotiations between people in need and welfare office workers reveal the limitations of this new welfare regime.

Determining deservingness

The suspicion Marta encountered is not unusual. Many frontline employees still see their job as fraud prevention. Lester Towns felt that applicants “don’t want to put income down.” He continued: “They don’t want to put their bank accounts down. They don’t want to fill out anything that they feel that’s gonna make them not receive food stamps.” This was echoed by Tish Taylor, an African American woman who has worked in the welfare office for over 20 years. “We’ve been working here so long,” she said, “we know how to pull it out, the stuff that gets them in trouble. We know certain things, so we question it.”

Eligibility specialists probe clients about two main issues: household composition and income, which both determine whether a household qualifies for food stamp benefits and how much it will receive. Clear documentation of income, especially with pay stubs, is one of the easiest ways for workers to make sense of a client’s case. Clients who have no work or unstable work, work off the books, or receive some other form of irregular income are subject to far more scrutiny and have to document their income with letters written by either an employer or the applicant. Taylor described her interactions with these clients: “We say, ‘Bring the pay stubs,’ and when the client says they don’t get pay stubs, we get a letter, which we *know* is a fraudulent thing.” Caseworkers rely heavily on official documents like tax forms and pay stubs to evaluate whether the applicant is eligible. Those who lack documentation face skepticism and suspicion. These policies create a host of dilemmas and difficulties for poor people in the face of “work-first” welfare reforms passed in 1996.

Flexible workers who work in temporary or short-term jobs often find it difficult to establish their employment status. Jeff, a white man in his early 40s, works as a freelance sound engineer for corporate events. His jobs typically last one or two days. He routinely uses food stamps when work becomes scarce, as it did in 2008 at the onset of the recession. There exist, however, significant differences between someone like Jeff and those, like Marta, who are regularly employed by a single employer. The differences between Marta’s and Jeff’s interactions with the welfare offices speak to some of the challenges confronting these flexible workers in the face of a safety net built around work. “They want to see pay stubs and all that,” Jeff said, describing his interactions when he went to apply. “And I show them what little I could show them because I don’t get paid that way. There’s checks, but they’re whenever [my employers]

get paid themselves.” He added that when the caseworker asked how much he made each month, he answered, “It depends.”

After a tense interview in which he felt the caseworker was accusing him of trying to scam the system, Jeff was denied food stamps. He called the food stamp office to complain about the caseworker who had initially processed his case, and he was told to apply again, so he did. After three months, he was finally approved. His case was flagged, however, because his income was so irregular. Two weeks after his benefits were approved, he received a letter informing him that he was not meeting the work requirements. Food stamp recipients who are not elderly, disabled, or caring for a child under six years old are required to work 20 hours a week to qualify for assistance. As Taylor explained, “Anything less than that, you could be coded as a WA [an applicant who is not meeting the work requirements], even though you’re working.” The paperwork Jeff could provide was not immediately legible to the welfare office workers. The gaps and holes in this documentation raised red flags about his deservingness.

The letter required him to report to a work-assessment appointment in order to maintain his eligibility. Jeff found the process frustrating:

I have a job. I don’t need to go to this. I had to sit there all day to show them paperwork that I have a job. They really give you a hard time. You know, it’s demoralizing to not be able to support yourself, and they don’t make that process any more ... you know, they add to the stress of that.

As in Marta’s case, it was Jeff’s ability to produce paperwork that corroborated his identity as a worker, someone who “has a job,” that finally convinced the welfare office workers that he deserved assistance.

Unemployment and the post-Fordist welfare regime

The language of “work supports” is important both for what it reveals and for what it conceals. Work supports, like those enumerated in the poster that hangs in New York City’s welfare offices, are vital resources for low-income households. But subsidizing low wages does nothing for poor people when they cannot find work.

One of the hallmarks of welfare reform in the 1990s was the institution of workfare programs, which require people to work in exchange for their benefits. New York City implemented its notoriously strict workfare program, the Work Experience Program (WEP), in 1995. WEP workers are typically assigned to work in public parks, the sanitation department, or the subway system alongside regular, unionized city workers, but under radically inferior conditions. They are made to wear brightly colored vests that stigmatize

them as WEP workers. The public spectacle of the WEP program has deepened the sense that “those who accept relief must cross the road that separates the community of citizens from the outcast company of the destitute” (Marshall 1992, 15).

Jessica, a white woman in her late 40s, was acutely aware of the social stigma attached to WEP. She had worked her way up to a job making \$70,000 a year in marketing but was laid off at the onset of the recession in 2008. She sent out hundreds of résumés with nothing to show for it. As she approached the end of her 99 weeks of unemployment, she grew increasingly anxious, even moving to Texas for a summer in hopes that her employment prospects there would be better. Jessica looked for any work, under any conditions. “I kinda feel like at least being in New York, if I have to clean toilets or turn down beds at the Marriott and be a maid or something, or if I worked in day care or something, I could do that,” she said.

She came to see me at the food pantry when her unemployment finally ran out. She wanted help applying for food stamps. She had no income at all and had to move out of the apartment where she had lived for 12 years. She was sleeping on a friend’s couch. Despite her dire economic situation, her choices about what kind of help to pursue were shaped by her perceptions of the line between “the community of citizens” and “the outcast company of the destitute,” or what she called “that totally forgotten group”:

I have found that I’m having a hard time eating. It’s almost like I’ve reached this place where I know I have no resources. And so I just refuse to be hungry. I’m embarrassed. I don’t go and pick up a bag of food. And I know it’s gonna sound terrible, but when I see myself, and when I see the guys who are alcoholics and homeless—I know this is gonna sound really bad—I feel if I sit with them, I’m going to become them. I’m almost afraid that whatever it is that they’ve experienced is contagious. And that I have to keep somewhat removed. Because if I slip into an identity that is so socially frowned upon, that I’ll never get out of it. It’s really scary. So I kind of hold it. It’s like you keep it at bay just enough so that you can get the help that you need.

Although she had no income, Jessica decided not to apply for cash assistance because she knew she would have to perform a WEP assignment, and this was a line she was unwilling to cross. She assumed that food stamps were different and that she could receive them simply by virtue of her need. But unemployed New Yorkers like Jessica who apply for food stamps are routinely required to perform a WEP assignment in exchange for their food assistance.⁸ Several weeks after she and I completed her food stamp application, I ran into her on the street. She told me her benefits had gone through but she had received a letter requiring her to report for a work assignment. She was furious and

told me that there was no way she was going to “sweep the streets or clean up the parks.” She decided to forgo all her benefits, leaving her unable to afford even basic necessities like food. Ultimately, she decided to leave New York to live with an out-of-state relative who could support her while she looked for work.

Jessica made decisions about the kind of help she would pursue based both on her economic situation and on her perceptions of what constitutes an identity that is “so socially frowned upon.” Personal networks play an important role in how people navigate these forms of aid. Those, like Jessica, with middle-class networks can turn to them when faced with a stigmatizing, punitive welfare system, even if that means taking drastic measures like moving far away.

Race is another important factor in determining who can rely on these private forms of help and who cannot. Whites like Jessica are far more likely than African Americans or Latinos to have personal wealth or people in their networks with personal wealth who can support them (Lui et al. 2006). The housing crisis and the recession have substantially intensified these racial inequalities, with the racial wealth gap between whites and blacks rising from 11 to one in 2004 to 20 to one in 2009 (Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor 2011).

The demonization of welfare that characterized the policy debates around reform in the 1990s was heavily racialized and continues to inform popular ideas about welfare and poverty (Hancock 2004; Haney-Lopez 2014; Quadagno 1996). Jessica’s belief that workfare and charitable food aid mark an identity “that is so socially frowned upon” is significant. Confronted with the prospect of “sweeping the streets or cleaning up the parks,” she found her sense of self unsettled in ways that played on a distinct racial imaginary.

But there was more than just a racialized anxiety at work in Jessica’s reluctance to accept welfare. She was justified, for example, in fearing that performing a workfare assignment would put her in a social identity she could never escape. Workfare programs contribute to downward mobility as part of workers’ race to the bottom of the labor market in search of jobs that cannot be moved offshore (Collins and Mayer 2010). As Jamie Peck has argued, workfare “is not about creating jobs for people who don’t have them” but about creating “workers for jobs that nobody wants” (2001, 6). The relentless push to take any employment and the threat of degraded and stigmatized WEP assignments hardens attachments to any kind of work, regardless of how poorly paid or insecure. Like the old poorhouses, workfare has made assistance—including food assistance for the unemployed—so stigmatized and punitive that many people will do anything to avoid it.

Jessica’s attempts to secure any kind of work at all and her anxiety at the prospect of participating in WEP expose some important dimensions of the post-Fordist

welfare regime that took shape under Bloomberg’s tenure as mayor. In an interview early in his first term, Bloomberg reflected, “I’ve spent my career thinking about the strategies that institutions in the private sector should pursue, and the more I learn about this institution called New York City, the more I see the ways in which it needs to think like a private company” (Cardwell 2003). He viewed working-class people not primarily as citizens but as employees. His willingness to grant relief to poor workers was informed by the principle of *noblesse oblige*, a classically conservative, paternalistic approach in which political and economic elites accept some obligation for the welfare of their subjects. But this obligation is conditional (Esping-Andersen 1990). Bloomberg’s position was “If you are working, I want to help you” (quoted in Bosman 2009).

The line between public and private has become thoroughly blurred in this corporate view of the city, giving rise to a new approach to welfare provisioning that is implemented in street-level encounters between welfare workers and food stamp applicants. Applicants who can prove they are working are granted unconditional aid in the form of work supports. Those who cannot are subject to punitive and stigmatizing workfare programs. In this way, welfare policy was retooled under Bloomberg to benefit the “good citizens” who have access to jobs and to punish the “undeserving” who do not. Poverty reduction has been harnessed as part of a move toward a more authoritarian, conservative, and paternalist welfare regime—one that is less about social and economic rights and more about loyalty, obligation, and deference, particularly to employers (Mead 1986, 2005).

This post-Fordist welfare regime shapes social citizenship and belonging. Jessica desperately wanted to work. She was angry that her joblessness placed her outside the bounds of social and economic citizenship, and she desperately wanted back in. Subject to WEP because she was unemployed, she saw herself falling into that “totally forgotten group”—the modern-day paupers assigned to sweep the streets or clean the parks. Or, even worse, the homeless left with no protection at all.

Working for food stamps

For poor people without employment in the formal labor market or friends and family who can help them, applying for assistance means giving up many of their basic rights as workers. Workfare programs raise a host of questions about the labor rights of welfare recipients, including how they should be paid for their work assignments. Shortly after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act passed in 1996, Clinton’s Labor Department ruled that workfare workers must receive minimum wage. This was a potentially radical decision because it would have created parity between workfare jobs and minimum-wage jobs

in the private sector. It also would have undermined the long-standing relationship between welfare and work in the United States, a relationship in which welfare benefits for the poor are set low enough to “make any job at any wage a preferable alternative” (Piven and Cloward 1993, 36).

Food stamps were the key to undermining the radical potential of this decision. Shortly after welfare reform passed, the USDA approved simplified food stamp programs to bring food stamps in line with work-first welfare (Super 2004). Simplified programs allowed food stamp benefits to be counted as part of the minimum wage paid to workfare workers. The legally dubious practice of counting food stamps as wages had been in place since the creation of WEP in 1995 in New York City (Krinsky 2007). This federal policy decision brought New York City’s practices in line with national legislation and provided legal cover. By allowing food stamps to be counted as wages, the USDA’s decision ensured that workfare programs would not compete with minimum-wage jobs in the private sector.

For many of the people I met, the most troubling aspect of WEP was that they were made to work for less than minimum wage, somewhere between \$2.48 and \$4.25 an hour in cash. (The prevailing minimum wage in New York State at the time of this research was \$7.25 per hour.) Much of the rest of their pay came in the form of food stamps. The creation of categories of labor like workfare, in which people are paid in nonstandard currencies, marks a significant boundary between this labor and what most Americans would properly term *work*. Those who do not participate in the formal labor market are made to work for food stamps, creating stark distinctions between those with and without employment and, ultimately, undermining poor people’s economic citizenship rights (Collins 2008).

During my research, many of the people I met who were assigned to workfare programs chafed at the idea that food stamps could be counted as wages. This was expressed by Donald Jones, an African American man in his mid-50s, who had lost his job as a gypsy-cab driver and had been receiving cash assistance and food stamps for several months. He reasoned,

That’s not really a fair way of looking at it, when you look at it completely. See, cash allows you to do a multitude of things. Food stamps only allows—you have limitations. So, I mean, I wouldn’t be able to buy soap. You’re limited with the food stamps. You can’t go in Macy’s with your food stamp card. You can’t buy a pair of socks. Not unless you have the cash on you.⁹

Donald had been assigned to the sanitation department and was required to work there 20 hours a week and also to report to Back to Work, a job-search program. By his calculations, the compensation he received was far out of line with the work he was required to perform. He would be

earning \$42 a day if he were being paid minimum wage. Instead, he was earning \$50 a week for a job that did not match his skills.

I have no problem if I’m getting good pay. I mean, I don’t mind doing things, but send me something in the area where I have a little bit of skills, not where I just have to pick up trash and go through all of that. It’s like—what’s going on? Why am I doing this? It’s not equaling out.

Like many people I met who were given WEP assignments, he did not oppose the work but the lack of choice and the lack of compensation, which in his case was about \$2.76 an hour. Although he pursued regular employment, this was quite difficult because the flexible and informal labor arrangements that have come to predominate the low-wage labor market have made steady work with a single employer increasingly unattainable, particularly for those without any higher education or specialized training. Meanwhile, he said, the welfare office was of little help:

Most of the jobs they find would be temporary. The last job they sent me to was FedEx. It’s only seasonal. I don’t mind, but at the same time, it’s like you want to have a job where you can just look forward to just working and doing your thing. In two months it’s going to end. Then I’m back to square one again, like a yo-yo.

Donald also pursued other revenue-generating activities, including collecting bottles and cans, scrapping metal, doing odd jobs, and working as a day laborer. These informal or short-term jobs often conflicted with his obligations at the welfare office. Missing a day of his WEP assignment or one of his other obligations at the welfare office would mean being cut off from any assistance. “You couldn’t just tell them you had this job,” he explained. “I mean, you can call them and say, ‘Hey, something happened,’ but you have to make sure everything is done right.” Doing things right depended both on Donald’s ability to obtain the proper paperwork to prove that he was at work and his caseworker’s willingness and ability to properly update his case so he would not be sanctioned.

Donald’s efforts to provide for himself raise the politically fraught question of what we mean by *work*. As feminist theorists have pointed out, work is an intensely political concept (Federici 2012; James 2012; Mullings 1995; Susser 1996). One of the significant challenges for poor people with irregular or informal jobs is that they cannot prove that they are working. When an applicant’s informal labor cannot be verified through documentation, welfare office workers assign them to WEP, a stigmatized form of labor that pays people in nonstandard currencies like food stamps and housing vouchers. For Donald, the shortcomings of WEP were clear. “The structure of welfare, it’s structured in a way that you

would—particularly if you have a work history like I do—that you [would] prefer so much more to be working.” In the face of an unforgiving labor market, Donald begrudgingly accepted sub–minimum-wage labor as he struggled to find his way back into the formal economy.

Beyond work and welfare

But even degraded workfare employment can be preferable to the absolute pauperism of no work and no resources. I often assisted community residents when they lost access to welfare benefits. Albert, a small, wiry white man with a nervous and distrustful demeanor, came to see me on a bright spring day in 2011. He had received a letter from the welfare office telling him he was being cut off from all his benefits, food stamps, cash assistance, rent assistance, and Medicaid. It was common for people with cash-assistance cases to be sanctioned or have their cases closed for minor infractions like missing a meeting or failing to wear proper clothing. It was often difficult to ascertain why a person’s benefits were being cut without filing for a fair hearing. At the back of the church sanctuary where the food pantry was housed, Albert and I sat at a small wooden table as I sifted through a pile of wrinkled and smudged papers from the welfare office trying to figure out what went wrong with his case.

His WEP assignment was in the mail room of a Human Resources Administration office building in Manhattan. He liked it. He delivered packages three full days a week, earning \$2.87 an hour, or \$115 every two weeks, with the rest of his pay coming in the form of food stamps and rent assistance. Albert had not completed high school, struggled with addiction, and had lived on the streets for 13 years. Having a room with a bed was an immeasurable improvement for him. He was devastated by the idea of losing work that he liked and the meager compensation he received for it. Unlike Donald, who saw his WEP assignment as an affront to his rights as a worker, Albert was grateful for any work at all. His attempts to maintain such an exploitative labor arrangement by negotiating with welfare office workers is what James Ferguson has termed “declarations of dependence”; for the abject, Ferguson notes, “subjection can only appear as a step up” (2013, 231). For Albert, even a degraded sub–minimum-wage WEP assignment was preferable to returning to the absolute pauperism of life on the street.

Albert had tried to reinstate his benefits by meeting with a caseworker, who told him he was being sanctioned because he had missed a job-search appointment. Albert insisted he had been there, but with no proof of his attendance, there was little we could do besides faxing in a request for a fair hearing to contest the welfare office’s decision to cut him off. But it often takes six months or more for a hearing to be scheduled (McNeil 2011). In the interim, Albert lost all his benefits and was left with nothing. The glacial pace of contesting welfare office decisions reflects

the general treatment of public-assistance cases, which are rife with bureaucratic neglect (FPWA 2012; Lipsky 1984). The pressure to “give it out” that eligibility specialist Lester Towns described does not extend to unemployed welfare and food stamp recipients who have to perform a WEP assignment in exchange for their benefits. Instead, welfare office workers subject these individuals to diversionary tactics, bureaucratic neglect, and strict sanctions.

It was now practically assured that Albert would return to that “totally forgotten group” of urban paupers. Shortly after we met, he was evicted from his shabby single room. He began collecting cans and bottles to survive. A month or so after we requested a fair hearing, I heard from a mutual friend that he had landed back in jail for stealing copper pipes from an abandoned building. The bureaucratic neglect he encountered in his dealings with the welfare office meant that he was “robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions” (Polanyi 1944, 73) and left totally exposed, living life back out on the street.

In New York City, WEP and, in particular, the practice of paying workfare workers in a restricted currency that can only buy food have helped to create new categories of stigmatized and degraded labor. The working poor who can prove that they are employed are incorporated into the community of citizens and given aid for their basic needs, like food stamps and tax credits, with no strings attached. Unemployed citizens are required to work in degraded labor arrangements in exchange for help with their basic needs. But the welfare administration’s bureaucratic neglect of these unemployed WEP workers means that many of them find themselves among the abject beyond the reaches of both work and welfare.

Social stratification and the post-Fordist welfare state

Welfare protections raise a host of political and economic questions about the relationship between the state and the inequalities produced by capitalism. The social wage provided to the nonelderly poor in the United States has been transformed, increasing dependence on the market and employers in new ways and intensifying social stratification. “Only those Americans with real jobs are real citizens, and this association has tightened considerably in the last few decades” (Katz 2001, 348). What has also tightened considerably is the link between work and access to public benefits that target the poor. Jane Collins and Victoria Mayer demonstrate that “those who even temporarily lose their footing within the labor market lose aspects of their citizenship” (2010, 16). Increasingly, one of those lost aspects is an entitlement to welfare benefits, including work supports for the working poor. Welfare benefits, retooled as work subsidies, have become a sorting mechanism—both sorting the deserving from the undeserving poor and sorting the work

that is rewarded from the work that remains unrecognized, unremunerated, and unsubsidized.

Given racial discrimination in the labor market, African Americans and other workers of color are far more likely to experience un- or underemployment (Desilver 2013). By extension, they have a harder time accessing work supports like food stamps. Welfare protections have long been structured in the United States to shore up the privileges of whiteness and to maintain an exploited African American labor force (Fox 2012; Katznelson 2005; Quadagno 1996). In the pre-civil rights era, welfare workers routinely denied poor blacks relief through overt discrimination (Piven and Cloward 1993). In an era when overt racism is unacceptable, racial inequalities in the welfare system are reproduced indirectly. The most stringent welfare policies are put in place where there are large populations of African Americans (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Work supports tied to formal labor market attachment also reproduce and intensify racial inequalities through the welfare system. One's ability to establish oneself as a legitimate worker opens the door to a whole range of benefits administered through the welfare office and the tax code. Workfare regimes rob un- and underemployed workers, who are disproportionately people of color, of their basic economic citizenship rights when they attempt to secure assistance.

Within the bureaucratic workings of the city welfare administration, New Yorkers without access to wages are part of the "categories of poor who are deemed appropriate to neglect" (Gupta 2012, 63). They are made into a "social identity that is so frowned upon," sweeping the streets and cleaning the parks and subways. "The suffering body must be recognized as morally legitimate, a qualification that turns out to be both exceptional and deeply contextual" (Ticktin 2006, 4). In the context of growing precarity, the transformed welfare state recognizes the suffering bodies that work for wages but cannot afford basic necessities like food. These low-wage workers are protected by rights and by a responsive welfare administration. The suffering bodies that do not have formal work and cannot afford adequate food, however, are not morally legitimate and hence unworthy of support. These distinctions were not lost on poor New Yorkers. I met many unemployed workers who wanted not just work but "something on paper" that would afford them access to the myriad work supports available to low-wage workers.

These transformations in welfare policy emblemize a broader shift in urban poverty governance in the 21st century. The promise of the Fordist era, that workers could achieve middle-class security through their labor, has broken down (Allison 2012; Standing 2011). This shift in the way the urban labor force is organized has been accompanied by a shift in the way the welfare state operates. Transforming the welfare state to subsidize low-wage labor may have broad popular and bipartisan appeal in the United States,

but it represents a troubling shift in the reconfigured relationship between citizens, employers, and the state.

Under this conservative, paternalistic post-Fordist welfare regime, socioeconomic rights are tied to an obligation to work. In the absence of full employment, this policy approach inevitably intensifies inequalities among the urban working class. This post-Fordist welfare regime is an example of what Gavin Smith (2011) calls "selective hegemony," characterized by the extension of welfare protections to a select group to shore up hegemonic power. At the same time, other groups are excluded from the hegemonic project. Un- and underemployed workers surviving on the margins of a formal labor market that cannot provide adequate employment are confronted with an unresponsive, punitive welfare system. In reconstructing food stamps as a program that both subsidizes low wages and punishes unemployment, the growth of the food stamp rolls actually reinforces large-scale economic changes, including the expansion of low-wage labor markets and the maintenance of a stigmatized, marginal reserve army of labor. Food stamps and other work supports, then, are an essential feature of a regime of economic inequality, precarity, and increased polarization. The expansion of these work supports suggests that neoliberal welfare restructuring has not primarily been about dismantling the Keynesian welfare state or even exclusively about making it more punitive. Rather, the post-Fordist welfare state puts welfare programs to work in new ways, shoring up subsistence for low-wage workers and intensifying the hardships of the unemployed.

Notes

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1. I have changed all research participants' names and identifying details unless they are high-level public officials.

2. The food stamp program was renamed SNAP by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 2008. New York State changed the name of the state-level program to SNAP in 2011. I use the terms "SNAP" and "food stamps" interchangeably, since this transition took place during my research. In common parlance, SNAP is still primarily referred to as food stamps.

3. *Reynolds v. Giuliani*, No. 98 Civ. 8877 (WHP) (S.D.N.Y. Dec. 30, 2004).

4. Interview with Robert Doar, former commissioner, New York City Human Resources/Department of Social Services, January 11, 2012.

5. Despite minor cuts to the program in 2014 and an improving economy, SNAP rolls have remained persistently high, with 45.5 million enrolled in the program as of August 2015.

6. I use the term “working poor” to refer to low-income individuals who are employed in the formal labor market but do not earn enough to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. In political and popular discourse, this group is often portrayed as deserving assistance because they work. The term is somewhat problematic, however, because it implies that people without formal employment are not working. This view overlooks the informal and unwaged work carried out by poor people who are not connected to the formal labor market.

7. Interviews, January 6, 2012, and July 12, 2012.

8. In 1996 welfare reform legislation passed that required “abled-bodied adults without dependents” to perform a workfare assignment in exchange for food stamps. But when the unemployment rate is high, states and municipalities can apply for a waiver to this provision. At the onset of the recession in 2008, the USDA offered to waive it for all states. Bloomberg consistently refused to accept this waiver, even at the height of the recession, when unemployment in the city stood above 10 percent. Nearly every other state and municipality in the United States accepted the blanket waiver. Although New York City was an outlier when I conducted this research, eight states have since reinstated the work requirements, and many more will be required to as the unemployment rate falls, making New York City something of a test case for the national reimplementation of this policy.

9. New York State has a general assistance program that benefits single adults without children in addition to the TANF program, which is available only for poor families with children.

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