

## Releasing Work's Hostages

D a n S p a r a c o <sup>a</sup>

Speaking of the “emerging British underclass” in the late 1980s, Charles Murray declared that “Britain has a growing population of working aged, healthy people who live in a different world from other Britons, who are raising their children to live in it, and whose values are now contaminating the life of entire neighborhoods.”<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, this statement embodies the exportation of American-style discourse on poverty. But in another, this statement is a rehearsal of underclass stereotypes that industrialized societies have contained throughout their histories.<sup>2</sup> These stereotypes claim to describe the “world” occupied by many poor people through reference to a series of ‘dysfunctions’: childbearing outside of the marriage relation, a resistance to or ambivalence towards marriage as such, dependency on government support, criminality, and a resistance to work, or, a failure of the ‘work ethic.’

Murray’s work has been an aggressive and unapologetic defense of ‘basic American values’ like marriage, hard work, individualism, and the nuclear family; his ideological position has been quite clear. That of the left, on the other hand, has lacked a level of coherency which could lead to what could be called an effective anti-poverty politics. I think this has been related to a hesitancy about the lives many poor people lead; in other words,

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all too often, the above listed 'dysfunctions' were taken to be just that by the left.<sup>3</sup> Is it these behaviors, or the material circumstances in which they occur which merit our focus? My sense is that the social practices like drug use or single parenthood, for example, might not be (and indeed, often are not) seen as social problems in a different, more affluent, context characterized by good housing, education, and child care. Perhaps a resistance by large sectors of the left to the possibility that an alternative set of norms are being generated by communities of poor people—where, for example, the institution of marriage does not occupy a central place—has led to a real lack of clarity about where the energies of anti-poverty advocacy should be directed.

Our current situation makes it critical that we move beyond this hesitancy. Between 1979 and 1992, the top fifth of the population claimed 99% of the new wealth created in the United States.<sup>4</sup> If financial wealth were equal, each household would possess \$220,000. But by 1991, median wealth was \$36,000, and the average wealth possessed by African American households was \$4,000.<sup>5</sup> 22% of children in the United States—15 million—are classified as poor.<sup>6</sup>

Even in light of this gross inequality, poverty discourses have rightly moved away from using the term 'underclass,' meant to denote some distinct and separate 'culture of poverty'—the "world" Murray refers to. But my resistance to this term is a bit different, I think, than theorists who argue that it is inaccurate because poor people really aren't as different or removed from the mainstream as the term implies; like us, the argument goes, poor people believe in the importance of 'values' like hard work and family. While this may be true, I think it misses the core of the underclass fallacy, which encourages the belief that poor people are somehow fundamentally disconnected from the relations of

production; that poor black single mothers, for example, are not playing a productive economic. Such thinking dangerously underestimates the importance of the labor of poor people in this economy, which has an increasing need for low-skilled (and low-waged) service workers.

But to make a different point, one thing I want to accomplish here is to acknowledge the idea that, to the extent that the concept 'underclass' intends a statement about culture or 'values,' it is not, strictly speaking, inaccurate: there *are* a multiplicity of non-normative lives being lead by the poor (and non-poor), ones which *are*, as Murray worries, different from or at odds with the dominant culture. My task is to prepare the ground for thinking about how an anti-poverty politics can *begin* with the conclusions of folks like Murray. This is because I am concerned about what interests are being spoken for by defenses of poor people based on the logic that poor people are really, at bottom, 'just like us.'

One of the stated goals of welfare 'reform,' for example, was the reinforcement or re-instantiation of the work ethic, of poor peoples' 'attachment' to the world of wage labor. One response to such a position can take the form of an argument which directly opposes the story being told about poor people. One could perhaps begin by pointing to the range of sociological research which documents the devotion to 'the work ethic' exhibited by poor people, across lines of race.<sup>7</sup> While I respect such approaches when motivated by a genuine desire to defend poor folks in places they can't often readily do it themselves—like in the New York Times Op-Ed page, or on the floor of Congress—this kind of defense leaves uncriticized, or implicitly vindicates, normative values in ways I'm not comfortable with.

So here I would like to go further then this: further, that is, then showing how poor people 'live up' to the ideals upheld by

dominant American culture. I want to highlight and explore the reality that many poor people (not to mention non-poor) *don't* live up in this way. Resistances to wage labor and marriage are real; there is no way around them, so instead we should map a path *through*. I think such a path can valorize this resistance, and see the ways in which it is productive and powerful. In this way, rather than excusing or avoiding the reality of non-marriage or non-work, those interested in an anti-poverty politics might best think about the political potential of this reality. In it could lie a truly progressive politics—one which doesn't fight for the right to wage labor, but for a different relation between labor and income; which doesn't apologize for the decline of the wedlocked nuclear family, but seeks new forms of human relations; which doesn't apologize for single parenthood, but seeks new ways to raise children, and considers this activity itself to be 'work.'

This inquiry is motivated by a belief that, at this moment, it is critical to shed light upon the political possibilities latent within (and realizable in) the lives of poor people. The representational structures through which the struggle against poverty had previously been fought are under threat, and while I make no predictions about the future of these structures (for example, unions or the nation-state), I want think about alternative modes of and forums for political activity.

I think it is critical to acknowledge that the changes in welfare have taken place in a time of increasing *informatization of production* and increasing *globalization of capital*. Though instigators of the changes in welfare were many and varied—some, such as those on the far right, remain adamantly opposed to the notion of a global economy undermining U.S. hegemony—it is critical to consider the ways in which the move toward a global economy discourages increases state-sponsored poor relief.<sup>8</sup>

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, coining the term “informatization,” argue in their work *Empire* that the nation-state has less and less power to regulate the flows of money, technology, people and goods across its borders.<sup>9</sup> Its decreasing ability to impose its authority over the economy—especially the labor market—should be read as a threat to the authority upon which welfare programs are predicated, and to the forums through which poor people have historically sought redress.

The processes of informatization and globalization, which I do not pretend to summarize here, have wrought significant changes in the nature of economic (and social) production. The computer and informational revolution has brought about a situation where “industrial production is no longer expanding its dominance over other economic forms and social phenomena.”<sup>10</sup> Evidence of this can be found in the redefinition of manufacturing processes, and in the migration from industry to service jobs. In manufacturing, for example, “Toyotism” is replacing Fordism. “Ideally, according to this model, production planning will communicate with markets constantly and immediately. Factories will maintain zero stock, and commodities will be produced just in time according to the present demand of existing markets.”<sup>11</sup>

At a time when “information and communication have come to play a foundational role in production processes,”<sup>12</sup> many questions are worth raising concerning the impact of this new situation upon the lives of poor people (none of which will I pretend to give a complete answer to here). What new forms of labor are coming about, for example, with the rise of “just in time” production? What are the perils and possibilities of these new forms of labor? How do these new forms undermine received notions of work and productivity which are still prominent in poverty discourses? Further, if informatization and globalization

are beginning to fundamentally undermine traditional leftist anti-poverty strategies, what new approaches are required?

Any new approach must grasp the evolving political and economic terrain; my goal here is to suggest how normative claims about work, productivity, and poverty both fail to take into account the shifts of this terrain and at the same time invalidate the alternative forms of life being lived upon (and are helping produce) this terrain.

According to Hardt and Negri, “the poor is a subjugated, exploited figure, but nonetheless a figure of production.” The poor in this way are at the center of the political and economic terrain—poor people make the economy work. “The poor itself is power.”<sup>13</sup> My concern here is the way that this power is blocked or held ‘hostage’ by a set of normative values often invoked in discussions of poverty, and often offered as the road to poor people’s salvation. I just don’t think we can look to these values for help here, nor do we need to: the necessary tools for fighting poverty—which, really, is a fight for the creation of a new society—reside precisely within the creative and prophetic power of poor people themselves.<sup>14</sup>

*Questioning the Need  
for Work’s Discipline*

The U.S. has undergone a significant reorientation towards service-based economy. In the “mass production system” which characterized much of the previous century, “plenty of blue-collar jobs were available to workers with little formal education. Today, most of the new jobs for workers with limited education and experience are in the service sector....”<sup>15</sup> Between 1981 and 1991, 1.8 million manufacturing jobs disappeared.<sup>16</sup> Low-wage

service jobs have replaced them: between 1994 and 1997, there were 19,000 new high-wage jobs, and 400,000 new jobs in retail stores.<sup>17</sup> Not only is service industry employment less stable and less unionized than previous forms of blue collar work, there are signs that there may not be enough of it: New York City, for example, needs another 1 million jobs to employ all of its unemployed and welfare-dependent.<sup>18</sup>

The effects this economic shift has had on the urban poor is the focus of William Julius Wilson's *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. This text has had a significant influence on the debate of the causes of poverty. At the risk of oversimplifying his work, I want to focus on the link between wage labor and what he terms "social organization"—the informal social controls carried out by institutions and individuals within a community—that plays a central role in his overall analysis. To be clear, I am not coming at this as a sociologist—at issue here is not the veracity of the studies Wilson uses but rather the assumptions upon which his own analysis relies. My concern is that Wilson relies upon a notion of work whose existence is being undermined by economic shifts (shifts which he does acknowledge in part); as well, this notion of work, as I will make clear, carries with it a lot of baggage I'd rather do without.

The thrust of Wilson's analysis which I want to focus on here is that the disappearance of work has been the major cause of the problems found in "inner city ghetto neighborhoods."<sup>19</sup> A neighborhood in which people are poor but employed is "different" from a neighborhood where people are poor and jobless: fundamentally, that difference, as the title of his book suggests, is the decrease in opportunities for wage labor in the formal economy. Through this we can, Wilson asserts, understand the reality of life in poor communities: "neighborhoods plagued by

high levels of joblessness are more likely to experience low levels of social organization: the two go hand in hand."<sup>20</sup> More than any other factor, joblessness explains the uniqueness, in terms of severity, of inner city poverty. For example, Wilson points out that ghetto neighborhoods were as highly segregated in the 1950s as they are today. The fundamental difference between the two periods is that in the fifties, more people in these neighborhoods were working.<sup>21</sup>

The explanatory power of work—not in some general sense, but specifically wage labor—lies in the fact that, as Wilson sees it, work is the critical “regular, and regulating, force” in the moral and social life of a person and a community: it is “the central experience of adult life.”<sup>22</sup> In contemporary poor urban communities, where wage labor previously served as the central normative or normalizing force, its “disappearance,” the decline, that is, in the availability of formal sector employment, contributes to the production of a new set of norms, a “dysfunctional” way of life which Wilson captures with the term “ghetto related behavior.”<sup>23</sup>

The difficulty I have with this analysis stems from the assumption upon which it relies: the notion that wage labor *must* be ‘central’ to adult life. The implicit referent of Wilson’s analysis is a ‘stable,’ working community with low levels of ‘disorganization’—I first want to ask, where are, and who are, these communities? I won’t take up the task of speculating on this question (because I’m not really sure where or who they are); but I do want to point out the possibility that there are other communities besides those of the inner city which lack the regulating force of wage labor and manage to avoid being accused of inordinate levels of social ‘disorganization.’ I would suggest that wage work is not a central organizing force in, for example, the



population of idle rich, or in allegedly 'normal' upper middle class communities—many of which do not contain a single place of employment within them, and within which there is a large population of housewives whose 'only' concern is child rearing. Universities as well contain thousands of people largely disengaged from wage work. What I mean here is that we should note the possibility that there exists a dearth of wage work in many communities, not just those in inner cities. Within many of these other communities, whatever social disorder exists—relating to crime, drugs, sexual behavior, or dependency—is an amount of disorder which is largely tolerated or excused by society at large.<sup>24</sup>

That work is a "regulating" force I do not deny (in fact, I would say that is precisely the problem). Nor do I question that wage labor has been "disappearing" from inner cities. As Wilson documents, from 1967 to 1987, northern cities hemorrhaged manufacturing jobs, the kind of low-skilled, unionized jobs many relied upon to raise a family: Philadelphia lost 64%, Chicago lost 60%, New York lost 58%, and Detroit lost 51%.<sup>25</sup> Through the 1980s, New York City lost 135,000 jobs where workers had an average of less than 12 years of education, and gained 300,000 jobs in areas where workers averaged 13 or more years of education.<sup>26</sup>

It just seems to me that this is a moment where we can (and must) consider alternate forms of life's 'regulation' which do not rely upon the centrality of wage labor in the fashion Wilson does. Wilson's analysis leaves us in a place where the only solution is to engineer the return of the kind of jobs which have fled cities. I think instead that the decline of stable low-wage labor begs us to re-examine wholesale the claim that wage work (an eight-hour shift in a factory, for example) is central to a community's "social organization."

The broad cultural acceptance of this notion does not negate its boldness, anthropologically and philosophically speaking. I'm trying to highlight that the hegemony of particular notions about work fundamentally—and unnecessarily—limits our ability to conceive of alternative forms of economic and social existence. This is an urgent problem at a moment when these notions are at risk of serious destabilization as a result of shifts in economic production. I also think Wilson's reliance on the centrality of wage labor wedds us to relations of power which we might be better off critiquing.<sup>27</sup>

The limitations I'm talking about are, for example, the kind Wilson places on what counts as legitimate work, on what counts as 'being productive.' His analysis exempts a host of productive activities from the definition of work: housework and baby sitting, and drug dealing are not part of the realm of legitimate forms of work because they do not possess the traits of formal sector work: "greater regularity and consistency in schedules and hours."<sup>28</sup> For the wage laborer, "the demands for discipline are greater."

I'm just not so sure about this; in fact, I'm inclined to read our society's failure to consider mothering, for example, as worthy of a 'wage' as saying much about the relations of power among the sexes. Mothering might *lack* the discipline of wage labor, but it is subject to the needs of a child which might provide an alternative—more autonomous, but not lesser—mode of 'regulation' of life. As well, not only do each possess their own particular 'discipline,' but housework, baby sitting and drug dealing, while all quite different forms of work, are united in their inability to be directly disciplined by corporate capital. That is, they are not forms of labor directly subject to the demands of this power; I see this as an intrinsic value to these forms of labor.

Ironically, corporate capital is in a position where it is essential to be “mobile” and “flexible.”<sup>29</sup> That is, production and management practices increasingly favor flexibility. As a result, it may be problematic to rely upon ‘consistent’ or ‘regular’ forms of labor at a moment when production often favors, and capital flows often produce, irregularity. The informatization of production “now facilitate[s] the effectively instantaneous mobilization and mobility of capital.”<sup>20</sup> The shift in the nature of production directly effects the nature of employment: underemployed and contingent/part-time/ temporary workers make up perhaps as much as one quarter of the workforce.<sup>31</sup> This trend in employment—masked or minimized by official unemployment statistics—significantly undermines the static notion of work which Wilson sees as central to a healthy, ‘socially organized’ community.<sup>32</sup>

Both because false limitations on the definition of ‘legitimate work’ inscribe particular dominations—economic, gendered, and racial—and because shifts in production are beginning to surpass previous models of labor, we need to seriously reconsider the kind of work which Wilson wishes there was more of. All of this is meant to question the notion of ‘social organization’ with which he seems to work. That is, his call for a remedy for severe inner city poverty seems to serve also as an endorsement of a particular set of norms which make claims about what family, work, and recreation are supposed to look like. The alleged universality and timelessness of these values, I argue, pose a significant limitation on our ability to conceive of new forms of life (as such values are meant to do). I am interested in conceiving the forms of life which exist in poor communities as politically potent evidence of creative, autonomous powers which the ‘discipline’ of the wage relation has the effect of holding back. Thus, I seek to view these

forms of life with more than just a disapproving eye. A first step in this direction is de-linking that which the notion “low social organization” invites us to conflate: on the one hand, particular cultural practices, such as non-marital relations among the sexes, and on the other, the poverty and material deprivation in which such ‘non-normative’ practices take place.

Such a de-linking is meant to make the point that ‘fighting poverty’ is different than fighting the decline of a set of traditional, normative ideals regarding work and family structure. A failure to appreciate this difference risks re-enacting relations of power which contributed to the problems of inner city communities to begin with; this, I am suggesting, is what Wilson risks doing by linking his critique of the economic plight of poor people in the inner city with a critique of non-normative “ghetto related” behaviors. These are actually two very different projects; I subscribe to the first, but it seems to me that the second is carried out in service of a particular set of normative values which I’m really not interested in for the reasons I’ve highlighted.

What if ‘non-normativity’ was embraced, rather than simply brought back into the narrative of the ‘American mainstream,’ or scolded by it?<sup>33</sup> The purpose of such a reconsideration is to see how non-normative practices of poor urban communities contain the kernel of new forms of life, of a transformative, even revolutionary praxis. I disagree with critiques of such practices which fail to take this possibility into account—even if they seek to end poverty or economic inequality—because such critiques throw out the baby with the bath water.<sup>34</sup>

*The Hegemonic Power of Work  
in the Lives of Poor People*

*No Shame in My Game*, Katherine Newman's study of the working poor in Harlem, New York, and Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein's study of the lives of welfare mothers, *Making Ends Meet*, are examples of work which is helpful in understanding the ways in which work *does* play a role in the lives of poor people. Newman, for example, finds that "69% of the families living in central Harlem have at least one worker."<sup>35</sup> In their study, done before welfare reform in 1996, Edin and Lein find that—in part because cash welfare, food stamps, and SSI covered only three-fifths of a welfare-reliant mother's expenses<sup>36</sup>—5% of the welfare-recipient mothers worked jobs and reported them, 36% worked off the books or under a different name, and 8% worked in an illegal underground economy.<sup>37</sup>

In this way, Newman and Edin and Lein demonstrate the ways in which poor people are connected to 'the world of work.' But if one only celebrates this fact—this dedication to and desire for work—one risks missing the detrimental effects of the hegemonic power of work as it functions in the lives of poor people. I am concerned here with the ways this power decreases people's ability to conceive of a political and social life in which something other than low-wage service work dominates.

I will be careful here, because I recognize that a devotion to work, a commitment to working, is often the only way out of poverty: I think we can, however, recognize this, and at the same time push further, and move towards a broader critique of a society which claims that work is the "central experience of adult life" and at the same time glosses the form work actually takes in the lives of poor people: often a demeaning and futureless

'McJob'—the kind of job which leaves people feeling as though they were economically and politically powerless. Because of this, I want to ask: in what ways does an ideological devotion to work—of both poor people and society as a whole—legitimize demeaning, dead-end labor, as well as poverty as such, and obfuscate the need for transformative political activity?

To put this another way, I want to ask a different question than Newman does when she asks, "where does this drive come from, this desire to be a working person?"<sup>38</sup> Instead, I would like to ask: what are the effects of this desire?

There is no doubt that basic material needs—for food and housing, among other things—along with the inadequacy of social welfare programs, makes the need for employment necessary and real, even predictable. At the same time that I recognize the reality of deprivation, I also want to be careful not to allow this reality to place limitations upon other inquiries like, how could the desire to be a 'working person' be redirected and become a desire for a life liberated from low paying, dead-end wage labor?

I ask this question because I don't necessarily think that all poor people already possess this kind of liberatory desire; I want to resist the idea that poor people, by virtue of their poverty, somehow 'naturally' come to this. There are, of course, very real desires for liberation from poverty; but I want to think about the ways this can be realized not by *becoming* a low-wage laborer but through an *opposition to* menial low-wage labor.

I recognize that many poor people might not be interested in making the critique I want to here, because becoming a 'working person' is for some a way out of poverty. But I think I can begin to get at this problem by separating, on the one hand, the material needs satisfied through acquiring an income, and on the other hand, the non-material or perhaps moral satisfactions which come

with becoming a 'working person,' and living up to the requirements of those in the 'mainstream.' Again, I realize the necessity of fulfilling material needs for food, shelter, and education, but we need to look closer at this 'moral' satisfaction; that is, the often deeply satisfying moral and ideological investments which develop regarding work, when one lives up to normative claims made about working. While such investments are seemingly benign or beneficial in the lives of middle class people, they may have the effect of binding poor people to a set of values which, I argue, end up legitimizing poverty. The transformative potential which resides in the lives of poor people—evidence of which I begin to see in the cultural practices often labeled 'dysfunctional'—can only be released by poor people themselves. I am concerned with the ways that the ideology of work, or the morality of which work and the 'work ethic' are a central part, demands that poor people forsake this transformative potential—for the sake of becoming 'normal, working people.'

As I move in this direction, I want to respect Edin and Lein's finding that welfare-recipient mothers had a unanimous desire to end all government support.<sup>39</sup> I am not unaware of the cultural significance of the difference between getting a welfare check from the government and getting one from an employer. But both of these are, strictly speaking, forms of *income* which can fulfill material needs. Despite this, I would suggest that today many (though not all) of these mothers would still want to end government support and find employment, *even if* welfare-based income was equal to an adequate employment-based income and *even if* they weren't forced to participate in workfare. In other words, some of the mothers would choose work even if there income from a job was no higher than their welfare benefits. This

idea is meant to point out the way in which work possesses a value in addition to and independent of income.<sup>40</sup>

My concern is the ideological function of this additional value, and the ways in which work is seen as an avenue by which one can *become valuable*. For example, Newman argues that the desire to work manifest in the lives of Harlem's poor is evidence that the "messages of the mainstream world get through."<sup>41</sup> While I think this is the case, I read these messages (differently than Newman, perhaps) as exalting the value of work and working people, while denying value to welfare recipients—those who are given income but don't work. The desire to work which Newman observes is, I think, the search for this value which supposedly comes through work, however demeaning this work may be.

In other words, I want to suggest the possibility that what Edin and Lein's welfare mothers might be seeking if they chose employment-based income over welfare-based income is something, some value, which the regime of normative values denies they possess or holds 'hostage,' a value that this regime needs them, for the sake of its own legitimacy, to try and 'get back.' I do see the advantages, both psychic and material, to becoming a person who is validated by these normative values. But there are so many who are left 'unvalidated' that serious reconsideration is required of both the moral and spiritual value of work (and the corresponding de-valuation of those associated with poverty and non-work) and the existing regime of normative values of which work in this sense is a central part. This reconsideration begins by affirming that whatever value is bound up in the notion of being a 'working person'—'moral,' political, or economic—it is one which welfare recipients *already possess*.

Newman, taking a much different approach, suggests that "work benefits inner city workers because working keeps them on



the right side of American culture." On this account, there is, the one hand, a group of working people who have "made the right choice;" on the other, a group who has failed to "separate themselves from the irregular, the excluded, the despised, and cleave to the regular, the accepted...."<sup>42</sup>

I think this is a really problematic way of looking at things. What, I wonder, does it mean for an author writing about poverty in Harlem to discover 18% unemployment<sup>43</sup> and a 14:1 ratio of applicants to jobs in fast food establishments—a 'boom industry' in the area, and a major source of employment<sup>44</sup>—and at the same time frame her discussion of poor lives in a way that 'individual choice' plays a prominent role? Newman's investment in a particular ideological position, one which embraces work (and the desire for it) as morally fortifying, seems to result in a real ambivalence about the people who are formally unemployed, who are "excluded" or "despised." Perhaps this is just the result of a perspective which is thankful that anyone escapes the clutches of inner city poverty and unemployment, and which views the situation as so dire that we need to accept the fact that there aren't enough life preservers to go around. I don't really know; but I do know that there are a whole lot of people on that 'wrong side.' This talk of sides might encourage the idea that the 'wrong side,' this underside, is full of people outside of or removed from social and economic production. As I have tried to suggest, it is incorrect to think that poor people, by virtue of poverty or lack of employment within the formal sector, occupy a position of economic irrelevance or powerlessness within society.

This division between the right and wrong sides of American culture is put to use by some of the workers Newman encounters in a way which encourages them to buy into the notion that they have become 'productive' members of society while the "excluded" and "despised" remain outside of (or beneath) such

productivity. Amidst the assault upon their character which is part of the daily experience of a fast food restaurant employee, workers and managers, according to Newman, "call upon timeless American values to undergird their respectability."<sup>45</sup> "...I know people who are on [welfare] that can get up and work," says one worker. "There's nothing wrong with them. And they just chose not to...."<sup>46</sup>

I recognize the need of these workers to defend themselves from the demeaning nature of fast-food service work; but it seems to me that Newman's investigation into the daily lives of poor people working 'McJobs' was an opportunity to suggest a framework whereby the workers could understand their situation without the need to refer to a kind of class antagonism which I think comes along with 'timeless' American values. While I am trying to keep in mind the difficulty these workers face, I want to suggest that poverty might not exempt poor people from the need to reflect upon the alleged 'timelessness' of the values Newman is talking about, even if they might help make low wage employment tolerable. These values, at least when put to use in this fashion, denigrate and isolate the non-working poor in a way that both undermines the sophisticated critiques that poor people make of poverty<sup>47</sup> and masks the way in which, particular circumstances aside, poor people in Harlem are united in being poor.

It is also noteworthy that the worker's terms are quite similar to middle class critiques of the "welfare-dependent." I think recourse to this way of thinking re-inscribes particular cultural values within Harlem's poor community of color which have traditionally been used by working and middle class whites to isolate and denigrate that same community. While perhaps not intending to, Newman's text has the effect of demonstrating this way of thinking:

Drug dealers, welfare recipients, the hustlers, the jailed and forgotten—these are the people whom the working poor see as occupying the lower rungs of ghetto social organization. Working men and women, no matter how lowly their jobs, can hold their heads up in this company and know that American culture “validates” their claim to social rank above them.<sup>48</sup>

What desires are satisfied when one, for example, ‘hold one’s head up’ over a welfare recipient? What does it mean for this to be a satisfying experience? Can this desire effect a ‘solution’ to poverty, or does it simply maintain or legitimize it? When poor people are doing the head-holding, how does it obscure the material circumstances shared by all poor people regardless of which ‘side’ their on, and thus undermine counter-hegemonic political activity organized around that unity? The struggle against poverty will have to contend with precisely these desires, and with the way they lead to the use of a particular morality as a weapon against others who don’t fit its requirements.

*The Search for Possibilities  
in the Age of Information*

I have tried here to investigate some normative categories used in debates and discussions about poverty, to begin to think about their continued use in, and what effect they have upon, what could be called an anti-poverty politics. My discussion of William Julius Wilson’s *When Work Disappears* was meant first to highlight the disconnect between the notion of work or labor which informs his analysis and the reality of labor at the dawn on the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and second, to scrutinize the urge to call lives lived within this disconnect ‘dysfunctional.’ I am trying to suggest the possibility

that the cultural practices labeled dysfunctional are in fact adaptations to a political and economic situation that can no longer be described in the terms Wilson would like to use—at least with respect to work. In other words, what may need ‘reform’ is not the lives and behavior of poor people, but the ways in which their political and economic circumstances are understood. I have used Wilson’s notion of work to suggest that rather than seeking to enforce a particular understand of work that both the economy and poor people might be leaving behind, perhaps we should reformulate the notions of work and productivity used to talk about poverty and economic justice. By doing this, I have tried to suggest, the cultural practices of inner city poor people can be ‘reread’ by poverty discourses as containing positive, transformative potential.

My analysis of Katherine Newman’s *No Shame in My Game* was intended to grasp, within the lives of poor people, the effects of the ideology of work, and particularly the moral dimension of work, upon which Newman, Wilson, and welfare reform itself relies, though in different ways. I have consistently recognized the fact that a dedication to the redeeming value of work is a tool that can be used by poor people to escape poverty and, as Newman’s study shows, to justify and make tolerable otherwise intolerable, dead-end, low-wage labor. But we cannot be blind to the effects of such a dedication. Each effort meant to justify or make tolerable the conditions of low wage service work might displace efforts which could be dedicated to making war against this work, and its dominance in the lives of poor people. I think a position needs to be found that both recognizes the material needs which are satisfied by ‘McJobs’—and thus the need for this type of employment—and at the very least recognizes the limited form of salvation this type of labor offers.

I have also tried to show how the moral dimension of work can lead working poor people to create a division between themselves and the non-working, when perhaps a unity based upon their shared poverty would be more productive; this morality's emphasis on individual volition encourages the belief that objective success or failure is really a matter of 'choice.' This morality bound up in the 'plus value' of work, the value independent of income which I have discussed—what Newman might call the moral fortification which comes with becoming a 'working person'—needs to be openly questioned where it functions to convince people that it is only by becoming a 'working person' that one actually becomes a valued member of society. In this way, the moral dimension of work obscures the *actual value* of poor people to economic and social production.

In other words, similar to Hardt and Negri's conception of critique from the standpoint of the exploited, I do not imagine myself in any way as "aligned with the marginalized or the powerless." While I may conceive of poor people as exploited, I recognize that they are "always already central to the dynamic of social production; [they are] always already in a position of power."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps a passage from Newman, writing about a family she encountered in Harlem, can help us picture this:

If we were to look at an official government census of Rey's household, we would find that the adults within it are classified as out of the labor force. Indeed, it would be deemed a single-parent household supported by the welfare system. Harlem is populated by thousands of families whose official profiles look just like this. Yet there is a steady stream coming into Rey's home, because most of the adults are indeed working, often in the mostly unregulated economy of small-scale services and self-employment, including home-

based seamstresses, food vendors, gypsy cab drivers, and carpenters. Most of this income never sees the tax man.<sup>50</sup>

The power Hardt and Negri are talking about isn't completely illustrated here, but I do think the example of Rey's household is helpful in grasping the productivity of poor people. I also think it is critical to see how the autonomous, 'informal' entrepreneurship of self-employed seamstresses and carpenters is fundamentally different from a 'McJob.'

But I am concerned with the ways that the moral dimension of work tries to obscure or hold hostage the power to which Hardt and Negri refer, which might create an unwarranted feeling of lack in the lives of poor people. Do Black people in Philadelphia, for example, conceive of themselves, by virtue of their numbers and, more importantly, their central role in that city's economy, as in a position of political and economic power? Much of my work here has assumed that not enough do, and that only a reversal of this can create a new society and release work's hostages. Perhaps the deconstruction of the moral 'plus value' of work is a way through which poor people can recognize the value, the *power*, they already possess.

What has driven this inquiry is a belief that the economic and political terrain is changing drastically. Changes in economic and political structures require that poor people prepare to confront poverty not through representatives in labor unions or Congress but directly, themselves, (with the help of those very things, such as the internet, which have accelerated these changes). My analysis is an attempt to prepare for a situation where such structures, while previously representing the needs of poor people and mediating their desires, do not or can no longer carry out this function. Debating whether this is *actually* the situation we are in—whether structures like the state or labor unions really can't function as they

have in the past—will be left for another day. My point here rather has been to discuss the problem of poverty while recognizing the changes that are, indisputably, taking place now, without predicting the future, and begin thinking about how debates about poverty can take these changes into account.

Thinking about poverty requires thinking about forces and processes—in particular, informatization and globalization<sup>51</sup>—which might undermine any recourse to structures such as the state to rectify the injustice of the 1996 changes in welfare. The International Monetary Fund, for example, is explicitly encouraging the world—‘developed’ and ‘developing’ both—to move towards a neo-liberal model of capitalism.<sup>52</sup> According to the IMF, labor-market ‘flexibility,’ central to the neo-liberal model, consists of

less generous unemployment insurance provision in terms of benefit payments, duration of benefits, and qualifications of benefits; wider earnings dispersions; lower levels of unionization and less centralized wage bargaining; less government intervention in the wage-bargaining process; fewer restrictions on hiring and firing of employees; and lower social insurance charges and other non-wage labor costs, such as the amount of paid vacation.<sup>53</sup>

What are the effects of such a model upon both poor people and upon the structures with the help of which poor people have historically sought protection—from wide “earnings dispersions” and unrestricted “hiring and firing”?

A Jobs Study conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests that “a reduction of unemployment benefits and the restructuring of social assistance are seen as important in removing disincentives to job searches

and acceptance of low wage work."<sup>54</sup> The U.S. market itself is celebrated for its labor market's "flexibility,"<sup>55</sup> no doubt in part because the 1996 changes in welfare basically apply a logic similar to the OECD's Jobs Study. Specifically, welfare in this country at this moment is designed not to protect workers from discontinuities in the labor market but to force them to live with those discontinuities—whether it is in the form of low wages, temporary work, or no health benefits.<sup>56</sup>

I do want to point out that welfare reform may be difficult to read simply as the subjection of the American poor to the demands of global economic elites, or that globalization 'caused' the changes in welfare. I say this because welfare reform, as its very substance suggests, was uniquely American in theme and character, and was in some sense not a preparation for economic changes, but a wish that these changes hadn't happened. For example, I think it could be argued that workfare programs have in mind a romanticized notion of both wage labor and its availability which is no longer applicable in an age of informatization and globalization. It is almost as if workfare embodies a hopeful wish for a return to some romanticized time prior to the global economy and shifts in economic production; perhaps it is a demand that the poor re-make this previous, imagined, 'simpler' world where anyone willing to work could find a blue-collar, non-temporary job with decent pay and benefits, without the need for a government 'hand-out.'<sup>57</sup> In this sense, workfare might be the calculated resistance of a conservative culture unwilling to deal with economic change and the resulting displacement and isolation of large numbers of people. All of this is a way of saying that it is most likely incorrect to view welfare reform as 'in the service of' globalized capital, or informationalized production and might instead be a reaction or resistance to it.



It is critical, however, to consider the ways in which the current climate, characterized by the power of the IMF and by shifts in economic production, makes it difficult to imagine *going back* to a situation of welfare, health care, and unemployment benefits at levels that shield the poor from, rather than subject them to, economic hardship. One way to grasp this difficulty is to acknowledge how the reference point for much of the American left's own politics—Western European social democracy—has been more directly subject to the forces and processes of informatization and globalization. Ramesh Mishra points out that the new function of European social democracy has shifted away from sponsoring progressive state-based policies towards the more modest aim of assuring that the retrenchment of capital is a more equitable process than it has been in the U.S.<sup>58</sup> Mishra takes this as evidence of a significant narrowing of political choices in Europe effected by the power of informationalized and globalized capital.<sup>59</sup>

Whether this is a temporary situation or not, it is one that cannot simply be ignored or written off as anomalous by anti-poverty advocates in the U.S. To the extent that a new arrangement of power is emerging, we should be prepared to leave behind traditional economic and moral conceptions of work and construct new concepts which correspond to this emerging arrangement. While I recognize the violence new forms of economic and political power wield over poor people, I see this shift away from traditional arrangements as a positive one, since they were themselves extremely problematic; their surpassing will require that anti-poverty advocates, and poor people themselves, formulate new notions of work and productivity which leave behind the limitations of the old. In this sense, the emerging economic order is better in the same way that Marx insists that

capitalism is better than the forms of society and modes of production that came before it.

Notes

1. Chris Jones and Tony Novak, *Poverty, Welfare, and the Disciplinary State* 3 (1999).
2. *Id.* at 4.
3. For more on the left's ambivalence towards poor people, mothers on welfare in particular, see Francis Fox Piven, *The Link Between Welfare Reform and the Labor Market* 4 HYBRID 1 (2000).
4. Jones and Novak, *supra* note 1 at 19.
5. *Id.*
6. Katherine S. Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* xii (1999).
7. Jones and Novak, *supra* note 1 at 28.
8. See Ramesh Mishra, *Globalization and the Welfare State* (1999).
9. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* xi (2000).
10. *Id.* at 285.
11. *Id.* at 290.
12. *Id.* at 289.
13. *Id.* at 157.
14. Paraphrasing *Empire* at 65. The direct quote states: "whereas Machiavelli proposes that the project of constructing a new society from below requires "arms" and "money" and insists that we must look for them outside, Spinoza responds: Don't we already possess them? Don't the necessary weapons reside precisely within the creative and prophetic powers of the multitude?"
15. William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* 27 (1996)
16. Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work* 8 (1995)
17. Newman, *supra* note 6 at xii.
18. *Id.* at 269.
19. Wilson, *supra* note 15 at xix.

20. Id at 21.

21. Id at 54.

22. Id at 52.

23. Id at 51-52, 71-73.

24. Alternatively, we might consider what inner city communities would look like if, while still lacking the presence of wage work, and still containing their allegedly 'dysfunctional' cultural practices, they had good schools, benefitted from a generous social safety net, child care, had an intact physical infrastructure and decent housing, and didn't suffer from racism. How might this scenario map the situation of middle and upper class white communities: which do enjoy government largess; where there is often a disengagement from wage work; where there is drug abuse; where there are single-parent families; where there is deviant sexual behavior?

25. Wilson, *supra* note 15 at 29.

26. Id at 32

27. "....in a disciplinary society, the entire society, with all its productive and reproductive articulations, is subsumed under the command of capital and state, and... the society tends, gradually but with unstopably continuity, to be ruled solely by criteria of capitalist production. A disciplinary society is thus a factory-society." Hardt and Negri, *supra* note 9 at 234.

28. Wilson, *supra* note 15 at 74.

29. Hardt and Negri, *supra* note 9 at 152.

30. David L. Gregory, Br(e)aking the Exploitation of Labor?: Tensions Regarding Welfare Workforce 25 *Fordham Urb. L.J.* 1, 2-3 (1997).

31. Id.

32. "Although government employment data indicates that official unemployment in the United States is less than five percent, everyone recognizes that many of the details—and human beings—are lost in the government's peculiar non-counting. For example, when one counts the underemployed, temporary, and contingent part-time workers who now constitute conservatively multi-millions of workers, and those the government no longer counts, such as workers who have vanished from the official unemployment figures because they have exhausted their unemployment compensation insurance benefits after twenty-six weeks, the "official" unemployment level may be only one-third of actual

unemployment.” Id.

33. I recognize the possibility that Wilson has made no error in his argument—he may, in fact, be uninterested in the way in which they might embody alternative forms of life, or their oppositional nature, because his position is not, fundamentally, oppositional.

34. Again, perhaps that is precisely the point—the baby, of course, being the cultural practices, behaviors, and beliefs which some consider ‘dysfunctional.’ I would like to spend more time ‘cleaning up’ or discarding the bath water; that is, the broader cultural and economic milieu in which these practices take place, one in which things as single parenthood are penalized, politically, culturally, and economically—with evident racial bias.

35. Newman, *supra* note 6 at xi.

36. Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet* 43 (1997).

37. Id at 45.

38. Newman, *supra* note 6 at 209.

39. Edin and Lein, *supra* note 39 at 64.

40. For an analysis of the relationship between work and income, see Michael Hardt, *Guaranteed Income, or, the Separation of Labor and Income*, 4 HYBRID 21 (2000).

41. Newman, *supra* note 6 at 215.

42. Edin and Lein, *supra* note 39 at 111.

43. Newman, *supra* note 6 at 57.

44. Id at 62-63.

45. Id at 98.

46. Id.

47. For such a critique, see Kensington Welfare Rights Union, *Criminalization of the Poor* 4 HYBRID 50 (2000).

48. Newman, *supra* note 6 at 113.

49. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysis: A Critique of the State Form* 307 (1994).

50. Newman, *supra* note 6 at 201.

51. “Globalization” has most broadly been defined as “the intensification of economic, political, social, and cultural relations across borders.” See Clarence Lusane, *Persisting Disparities: Globalization and the Economic Status of African Americans*, 42 *How. L.J.* 431, 432 (1999). Lusane argues

## 91 Sparaco

that it is impossible and perhaps even dangerous to contemplate the black condition without a framework that critically links the local with the global.

52. See generally Mishra, *supra* note 12.

53. *Id* at 9, citing IMF *World Economic Outlook* (1994).

54. *Id* at 10, citing *The OECD Jobs Study: Implementing the Strategy* (1995).

55. *Id* at 9.

56. See Lusane, *supra* note 57 at 433: under these new circumstances of globalization, "labor's ability to bargain in its own interests, i.e., [for] increased wages, better benefits, greater safety guidelines, stronger pension and retirement plans, and job protection, is severely undermined."<sup>1</sup>

57. See note 32 for a discussion of official unemployment statistics, which incorrectly paint the picture that just about everyone is already working, and thus risk leading people to think that there really is a job waiting for everyone willing to work.

58. Mishra, *supra* note 12 at 54-55.

59. The recent history of Sweden is instructive on this score. In the 80s, when capital controls were removed in that country, there was a virtual hemorrhage of capital out of the economy towards more 'investor-friendly' climes. Greater economic openness has since spelled the end of full employment. In the late 80s, unemployment was still about 2%, and in 1990, it was 1.8%. But by 1993, it was 9.5%. (Unemployment continued to hover near 10% through the 90s). As Sweden becomes more integrated into the global economy, though Swedish labor continues to rely upon Swedish capital, the latter has wider options. This has translated that into a strong domestic position for capital, politically. In 1994 for example, when the Social Democrats were poised to win a national election, four of Sweden's largest international companies publicly threatened that 50 billion Skr. would be at risk if taxes were raised. *Id* at 76.