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# PATIENTS OF THE STATE

## An Ethnographic Account of Poor People's Waiting

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*Abstract: Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in the main welfare office of the city of Buenos Aires, this article dissects poor people's lived experiences of waiting. The article examines the welfare office as a site of intense sociability amidst pervasive uncertainty. Poor people's waiting experiences persuade the destitute of the need to be patient, thus conveying the implicit state request to be compliant clients. An analysis of the sociocultural dynamics of waiting helps us understand how (and why) welfare clients become not citizens but patients of the state.*

### INTRODUCTION

Waiting, writes Pierre Bourdieu (2000) in *Pascalian Meditations*, is one of the ways of experiencing the effects of power. "Making people wait . . . delaying without destroying hope . . . adjourning without totally disappointing" are, according to Bourdieu (2000, 228), integral parts of the working of domination. Although the social sciences have thoroughly examined links between power and time, waiting (as both temporal region and an activity with intricate relationships with the constitution and reproduction of submission) remains, with the exceptions noted herein, "hardly mapped and badly documented" (Schweizer 2008, 1). Understandably so: attention to waiting and its (apparent) related inaction goes against the social sciences' preferred focus on individual and collective action, on the event as that "historical fact that leaves a unique and singular trace, one that marks history by its particular and inimitable consequences" (Dumoulin, qtd. in Tarrow 1996, 587).

Writing precisely about this absence, Bourdieu (2000, 228) asserts that we need to "catalogue, and analyze, all the behaviors associated with the

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exercise of power over other people's time both on the side of the powerful (adjourning, deferring, delaying, raising false hopes, or conversely, rushing, taking by surprise) and on the side of the 'patient' as they say in the medical universe, one of the sites par excellence of anxious, powerless waiting." Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in a welfare office, this article makes a first step toward the construction of such a catalog focusing on poor people's waiting experiences.

The article begins with a brief survey of the scarce sociological work on the experiences of waiting and extracts from it a few broad analytical lessons. After a general description of the methods that served in gathering our empirical data and of the physical site where ethnographic fieldwork was carried out, I present the story of one exemplary waiter, a sort of Odysseus's Penelope of the welfare office, which summarizes as a really existing ideal type the many facets of the shared experiences of waiting. The main three sections of the article examine the welfare office as a site of intense sociability amid pervasive uncertainty. The article shows that, during the long hours they spend in the welfare office in search of a solution to their urgent needs, poor people experience uncertainty, confusion, and arbitrariness. Taken together, I argue, these waiting experiences persuade the destitute of the need to be patient, thus conveying the implicit state request to be compliant clients. An analysis of the sociocultural dynamics of waiting thus helps us understand how (and why) welfare clients become not citizens but patients of the state.

#### TIME, POWER, AND THE (SCANT) SOCIOLOGY OF WAITING

The manifold ways in which human beings in their lifeworlds think and feel about (and act on) time have been the subject of much scholarly work in the social sciences—from general treatments (Sorokin and Merton 1937; Hall 1959; Schutz 1964; Durkheim 1965; Giddens 1986; Munn 1992; Levine 1997; Flaherty 1999) to more empirically informed ones, many of them based on ethnographic work (Roth 1963; Mann 1969; Geertz 1973; Zerubavel 1979; Young 2004; Flaherty, Freidin, and Sautu 2005). The relationships between the workings of power and the experiences of time have also been the object of many a social scientific analysis. Time, for example, has been examined as a crucial dimension in the workings of gift exchanges (Bourdieu 1977) and in the operation of patronage networks (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977; Auyero 2001). In both those cases, the objective truth of the (usually unequal) exchanges needs to be misrecognized so that the exchanges can function smoothly (Bourdieu 1998; Ortner 2006). Time, these analyses demonstrate, is responsible for the veiling.

Temporality, historical and ethnographic works illustrate, is manipulable. It can be the object of an incessant process of bargaining, as Roth (1963) shows in his insightful ethnography of the ways patients and doc-

tors jointly structure the passage of time in a tuberculosis hospital; it can be the object of frantic marking, as Cohen and Taylor (1972) examine in their phenomenology of the security wing of an English prison. Time can also be the target of a constant onslaught, as Willis (1977) illustrates in his dissection of the lads' rejections of the school's arduously constructed timetable, or the medium through which discipline is imposed and negotiated, as Thompson (1994) demonstrates in his classic analysis of the changes in the inward notations of time at the early stages of industrial capitalism. Collective time senses are deeply intertwined with the workings of (and resistance to) social domination. Time, these works expose, is the locus of conflict but also, and as important, of acquiescence (see also Hochschild 2001; Jacobs and Gerson 2004).

Waiting, as a particular experience of time, has not received the same scholarly attention. Highlighting the ubiquity of this experience, the essayist Edna O'Brien (1995, 177) writes: "Everyone I know is waiting." Hinting at the sense of powerlessness that comes with waiting, she continues "and almost everyone I know would like to rebut it, since it is slightly demeaning, reeks of helplessness, and show we are not fully in command of ourselves" (O'Brien 1995, 177). Pace O'Brien, waiting does not affect everybody in the same way—nor does everybody experience it in a similar fashion. The sociologist Barry Schwartz (1974, 1975) has probably done the most to show that waiting is stratified, that there are variations in waiting time that are socially patterned and that respond to power differentials. The unequal distribution of waiting time tends to correspond with that of power. As Schwartz (1974, 847) puts it in his classic study of queues as social systems: "Typical relationships obtain between the individuals' position within a social system and the extent to which he waits for and is waited for by other members of the system. In general, the more powerful and important a person is, the more others' access to him must be regulated."

To be kept waiting, he continues, "especially to be kept waiting an unusually long time, is to be the subject of an assertion that one's own time (and therefore, one's social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait" (Schwartz 1974, 856; on the demeaning effects of waiting, see Comfort 2008). Schwartz established the basic contours of a sociology of waiting. Since then, however, the differential experiences of that (unequally distributed) waiting time (and the activities that, appearances to the contrary, go with it) have received little empirical attention and no systematic treatment.

Extensive waiting periods, the scant research on the subject shows, "weary" people (Fox Piven and Cloward 1971, 160) and/or act as obstacles to access particular programs (Redko, Rapp, and Carlson 2006). If frequent contact with long queues molds people's subjectivities (Comfort 2008), how is that, to quote Bourdieu (2000, 228), the "interested aim-

ing at something greatly durably—that is to say for the whole duration of the expectancy—modifies the behavior of the person who ‘hangs,’ as we say, on the awaited decision?” If delays are not only suffered but also interpreted (Schwartz 1975), what meanings do those who are routinely forced to wait attribute to the waiting? And if waiting makes the waiter feel “dependent and subordinate” (Schwartz 1975, 856), how does waiting produce the subjective effects of dependency and subordination? In other words, how does objective waiting become subjective submission? These are the general questions that guided this project’s ethnographic research in the waiting area of the main welfare office (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social) in the city of Buenos Aires.

#### *A Note on Methods*

Between August 2008 and January 2009, the project team conducted team ethnographic fieldwork at this site. For the first two months, three to five hours and four times a week, we sat alongside current and prospective welfare recipients in the waiting room and observed their interactions (among them and between them and welfare agents). The starting point for the fieldwork was quite simple: what happens while people hang out in the welfare office with apparently nothing else to do other than wait for their benefit? We paid particular attention to whether they were alone or in groups, to the way they managed to keep their children entertained, and to everything they did while waiting for a welfare agent to call them. We also observed and took note of clients’ interactions with agents, focusing on speech and body language.

After we familiarized ourselves with the setting and its inhabitants, we began the interviews. We conducted sixty-nine interviews (forty-three with noncitizens, and twenty-six with citizens; 87 percent of interviewees were women), which lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. We stopped interviewing when we found no further variation along the dimensions that interested us. Interviews typically began with a general inquiry about the welfare clients’ reasons to be applying for a specific benefit. This enabled us to reconstruct the clients’ trajectory into the world of welfare. We then focused on the following nine dimensions: (1) general evaluations of the working of the welfare office and things attendants think are working well and things they believe should be improved; (2) perceptions of requirements to access welfare and information about paydays; (3) reasons they have been given to explain lack of payments or cancellation of a program; (4) times they have been asked to come back for the same claim and reasons they have been given for such a request; (5) comparison between the time they have to wait at the office with waiting times at other public institutions (they came up with their own comparison); (6) views of others who are waiting alongside them;

(7) views of the welfare agents; (8) whether they come alone or in groups; and (9) ways to find out about the particular program they are trying to access. We also asked about the times they had come to the office before (and for what reason) and about whether, at the time of the interview, they knew if and/or when they would receive the benefit and/or payment. This latter question served as a rough indicator of the uncertainty regarding the workings of each program. Interviews were carried out in Spanish and then translated by the author. We did not tape-record them but transcribed verbatim as soon as the interview was over. Interviewees were not compensated for their time. At the beginning of each interview, we informed participants that we were part of a team of university students and faculty conducting a study on the workings of the welfare office.

Pulled together, observations and interviews allowed us to reconstruct as completely as possible the shared experience of waiting. We found that, for most of our interviewees, waiting is a modal experience: they have to wait for almost everything (e.g., housing, health services, employment). But the waiting at the welfare office has some particular features to which I now turn attention.

#### THE (PHYSICAL) SITE

According to official documents (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires 2008) there are twelve different programs administered at the central welfare office of the city of Buenos Aires. However, most of the people we observed and interviewed were waiting for a decision or a payment on one of the following three cash-transfer programs: *Nuestras Familias* (NF), the *Ticket Social* (TS), and/or a housing subsidy (HS). The office serves Argentine nationals and documented foreigners (most of them recent migrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil). There are no citizenship restrictions on accessing any of these plans, provided that recipients can show proof of residence in the city of Buenos Aires.

The welfare waiting room is, then, a universe where, much like in the daily life of many poor neighborhoods in the city, Argentines and migrants from neighboring countries come together in what Goffman (1961) would call a “focused gathering”—that is, a set of individuals involved in a common flow of action and relating to one another in terms of that flow. But above all, the waiting room is a world of women and children who are seeking urgent help; they live in what Ehrenreich (2001) has referred to as a state of emergency. Many of the women were raising their children alone or with the help of family members other than the children’s fathers. In fact, many cited the father’s desertion as the main reason they ended up asking for one or more welfare benefits—another frequently cited reason was (personal or partners’) illness. Those claiming an HS, predictably, come to the welfare office after an eviction. During the eviction (either



Figure 1 *Waiting in line* (by Agustín Burbano de Lara).

from illegally occupied houses or from rental properties they couldn't afford to pay), state personnel informed them about the HS distributed at the welfare office.

As with the welfare rooms that Hays (2003, 85) examined in *Flat Broke with Children*, this one was characterized by the “ubiquity of children,” and much like in Hays's cases, “the cries of hungry or frustrated or sad or disgruntled children, the laughter and chatter of playing children, the ‘inconvenience’ of children whom you trip over, children who are seeking amusement, and children who demand a space in your lap” (85) dominate much of the room's landscape. Babies are fed and changed in public (there are no changing stations). Children run or crawl around the usually dirty floor.

Comfort's (2008) insightful ethnographic account of the “agonizingly long and uncertain” (50) waiting in the Tube at San Quentin State Prison—the site where, four days a week, inmates' wives, girlfriends, mothers, and relatives wait for permission to visit their loved ones—can be reproduced, almost word by word, to describe the general disposition of the bodies inside the waiting room of the welfare agency:

Seated or standing, adults . . . pace, fidget, and rock, while their children squirm, holler, whine, and cry. Pregnant women perch awkwardly on the narrow benches, supporting their bellies with their hands because they cannot recline far enough to relieve their backs of the weight of their wombs. . . . Mothers of infants clumsily



*Figure 2 Baby crawling in waiting room (picture by Nadia Finck).*

assemble feeding bottles and apply fresh diapers in the absence of clean water, sanitary surfaces, or changing tables. . . . [The room's] acoustics amplify and echo every outburst, squeal, tantrum, and reprimand, and visitors brace themselves against this cacophony while shivering with cold, slumping with fatigue. (45)

Comfort's description also directs attention to the general conditions in which the waiting takes place. The waiting room at the welfare office has only fifty-four plastic seats for a welfare population that far exceeds that number. As a result, on numerous occasions (especially in the morning hours), the hundreds of (current and potential) clients who pass daily through the office must wait for hours standing and/or leaning against the walls and/or sitting on the floor. High windows prevent much natural light from entering the room—white fluorescent tubes provide most of the light. The room lacks a good ventilation system, a running heating system, and air-conditioning (of the six existing ceiling fans, two were working); it is extremely cold in the morning hours during the winter months and unbearably hot by noon during the summer months.

By the time the office closes its doors (usually around 4 p.m.), remains of food, bottles, used napkins, spilled sodas, even used cotton swabs, have piled up on the floors of the waiting room. Every now and then, we also found vomit and dirty disposable diapers, but no cleaning personnel showed up during the hours we were there. After a few hours of opera-





Figure 3 Waiting grounds (picture by Nadia Finck).

tion, the bathrooms have also become dirty (we never found soap or toilet paper in them).<sup>1</sup>

#### MILAGROS'S TRIAL

In the back of the welfare office waiting room, twenty-seven-year-old Milagros plays with two little children; one is her two-year-old son Joaquín. Milagros is Peruvian, and she has been “in this thing” (the way she refers to the paperwork at the welfare office) for a year and a half. She is a beneficiary of two programs (NF and Subsidio Habitacional, an HS program). The HS is “late,” she tells us, “because there’s no payday scheduled for foreigners.” She has been told that with a national ID card “everything would go faster,” but without it, “there’s not much they can do.” She has the *precaria*—literally, “precarious”—resident status. She began the paperwork to obtain a national ID card four months ago, but she has to wait “for a resolution at least one more year.”

1. Together with the uncertain and arbitrary delays described herein, these minor indignities amount to what Piven and Cloward (1971) refer to as ritual degradation of a pariah class.

She oftentimes walks to the welfare office; it's a mile and a half walk, but it saves her much-needed cash. Since giving birth, she can't carry much weight on her, so the days Joaquín's grandmother can't babysit, Milagros takes the bus with him. The bus fare, which is expensive for her, is not the only reason she avoids coming with him. Waiting, she says, is "boring and tiring" for her and her son. Waiting, she adds, is "costly"—referring to the expenses she incurs every time her son demands "something to drink or to eat" from the little stand located in the back of the welfare area. In her nickel-and-dimed life, a one-dollar treat and a thirty-cent bus ride are luxuries she cannot afford. In this and many other respects, Milagros's is not an isolated story. During one of our first observations, a mother scolded her daughter, saying: "You are making me spend a fortune. That's it. I'll buy you a chocolate milk in the afternoon." Dozens of interviewees told us similar stories.

Milagros learned about welfare benefits from a social worker at the hospital where she gave birth. When she first attempted to apply, she came to the welfare office at dawn. "At 4 a.m., they were giving thirty slots, and I was number thirty-two. I thought they were going to attend [to] me, but they didn't." The next day, she came "earlier . . . at 11 p.m. [of the night before]. I waited outside all night long, but there was some sort of problem, and they didn't open the office that day. That was a long wait." She then waited three more months. One day, she came back at noon and was told to come earlier in the morning. She did the paperwork and received the housing subsidy for one month. Because the owner of the apartment she was renting "did not have everything in order," her subsidy was abruptly terminated. She had to start the paperwork all over again to receive two more installments, after which she ceased to be eligible.

Milagros makes US\$9 per day taking care of an elderly couple, and she can't afford to miss a day of work. When she comes to the welfare office, she meets with friends, and they talk about how agents give them the "runaround." "You feel despondent here [*te desanimas*]," she tells us, "because [welfare agents] tell you to come on day X. You ask for permission at work and then you find out that they have not deposited the money. I lose one day at work. . . . I think the aid is a good thing but . . . well, I don't think it's fair that they make you wait so long and that sometimes they make you come here for nothing [*te hacen venir al pedo*]. . . . They tell you to come on Monday, and then Wednesday, and then Friday . . . and those are working days."

Milagros does not know whether she will receive the subsidy today. The last time she came to this office, she "left with nothing." She felt "impotent" and cried a lot at home, she tells us, but she says, "Here I didn't say anything." She desperately needs the city government monies to pay the rent and to feed her son.

Milagros's story contains several patterns detected in the waiting experiences of other welfare recipients. Contrary to our initial visual impressions regarding the isolation of those who wait, waiting is doubly relational. First, people like Milagros learn about available welfare benefits from trusted others (friends and relatives) and/or from social workers. Second, clients and potential clients awaiting a decision on their cases or a payment are usually not alone in the waiting rooms. They create or mobilize a set of relations or networks that allow for them to spend long hours there. While there, they often meet with friends and relatives who help them tolerate and make sense of those boring and tiring hours.

Waiting, Milagros's story also teaches us, is a process, not a one-shot event. The overwhelming majority of those we interviewed in the waiting room had gone through some version of what, with Kafka's Josef K. in mind (*The Trial*, 1946/1998), we could call "the trial" of welfare. As Milagros's story of endless hassles illustrates, this process is, much like Kafka's, pervaded by uncertainty and arbitrariness (and resultant frustration). Other cases show that it is also a process dominated by persistent confusions and misunderstandings.

Finally, Milagros's one-line statement regarding what she did (or did not do) when forced to wait suspended in uncertainty ("here I didn't say anything") and her feelings at the time ("impotent") point to what is probably the most difficult, challenging aspect to be dissected about the experience of waiting (and the reason I believe it should be studied in the first place): why do most of the poor people we observed and talked to, most of the time, put up with the uncertain, confusing, and arbitrary waiting? The why of their compliance is in the how. How do they spend that dead time? How do they make sense of, think and feel about, the long hours of wait?

Milagros carved out the work for us. In what follows, I examine poor people's waiting as a relational process characterized by uncertainty, confusion, and arbitrariness. I also explore the ways lived waiting produces certain symbolic effects on the frequent visitors of this simultaneously spatial and temporal region. Everything in the experience of waiting conspires to teach welfare clients like Milagros a lesson—"keep waiting, be patient, there's nothing you can do about the endless queues." Welfare clients learn, in practice, to be patients of the state.

#### THE (TEMPORAL) SITE: SOCIABILITY AMID UNCERTAINTY

In the now-classic piece "Banana Time," B. Roy (1959, 158) describes a group of workers who develop a series of games ("times" and "themes") to deal with the "formidable beast of monotony" prevalent in the factory. Welfare clients confront a similar beast. In almost every single one of our interviews and our innumerable informal conversations (with us and overheard), clients (current and prospective) referred to the tedious wait-

ing time in frustrating terms. The following brief field note excerpt from October 1 summarizes this shared nuisance:

Mother yells to her 4-year-old who is running around: "Diana, please, stop, we have to wait." Her number is called. She comes back, in loud voice she tells no one in particular: "Oh, no, it can't be, it can't be. . . . What are we going to do for so many hours here?!"

As noted earlier, many current or prospective clients come to the welfare office with their children. They also come together with their neighbors and/or develop informal interactions in the waiting room. Clients bring and share food during breakfast and lunch—innumerable times we observed (mostly) women having their meals together and sharing the care of the little ones. In a space dominated by countless urgencies regarding access to food and housing and, as we will see here, by confusion and uncertainty about the actual workings of the welfare programs, informal interactions also serve to exchange information about existing soup kitchens, the availability and prices of housing in the city, required paperwork for a specific welfare plan (and the difficulties of obtaining this or that document), and other welfare programs of the city and/or federal government (e.g., which one has been, usually abruptly, canceled, or which one is accepting applicants). Although these interactions do not take the regular form that B. Roy (1959) describes (i.e., we did not identify anything akin to a banana time, a peach time, or a Coke time), they help clients avoid the tedium (and fatigue, tedium's "twin brother," according to Roy). They also informally diffuse information about formal state requirements.

While they wait, welfare clients keep themselves busy. They play with their children, they feed the little ones and change their diapers, they walk around, they leave the building for a smoke break, they buy snacks from the stand and negotiate with their children about prices and portions, they play games on their cellular phones, and occasionally they read the newspaper (we twice saw clients reading paid newspaper editions; for the most part, they read the free newspapers available throughout the city in subways and kiosks). In other words, their waiting is active and relational.

Together with the informal interactions that characterize this space, a first-time visitor can easily sense the disorganization of the waiting room and the sudden changes that await those who venture there. "Let's do this," screams a welfare agent from behind the counter: "Two lines!" "Everybody against the wall," another one commands. Our field notes are filled with expressions like the following, again coming from behind the counter: "Guys . . . all of those with numbers . . . please have a seat" (at the time we recorded this, there were no seats available). "We'll call you but take a seat." "Please be quiet!! All those waiting for the NF, here." "Everybody against the wall, please!"

Field note October 1: A woman comes out from behind the counter and screaming, in a teacher-like voice, says: "Let's get some order. Those who are for the NF, here. The rest, against the wall. They will call you by name." As a result a long line is formed in the middle of the room. Thirty minutes later, the line is dissolved. Everything is chaotic today.

The waiting room is disorganized and puzzling for first-time visitors and for recurrent ones.

Field note September 11. Two ticket number counters are working today. One is on number 52, the other one signals number 47. A man from the counter is calling number 92. There's a waiting line in front of the door (and the security guards) that separates the waiting room from the offices. Plus, there's another line at the very entrance of the building. There are five different but unmarked "waiting zones" within the same room.

Field note October 2. A woman asks me if I think Monday will be a holiday. They told her to come back on Monday (October 12 is a holiday in Argentina). I tell her that if they instructed her to come back on Monday, it is because it will not be a holiday. I assume they don't give appointments for impossible days. The woman corrects me and tells me that the last time they gave her a Sunday appointment. As I later find out, she was right. They have given her an appointment for a wrong day—Monday is a holiday.

This objective disorganization finds its subjective correlates in the experiences of uncertainty, arbitrariness, and confusion. Writing about the nineteenth-century English proletariat, Friedrich Engels (1973, 139) describes a class that "knows no security in life," a class that is a "play-ball to a thousand chances." Those waiting in the welfare office fit this description well. As we described previously, their lives are constantly on the edge of disaster or in the midst of it—they have recently been evicted or they are about to be, they have just lost their jobs, they are seriously sick, their spouses recently left them with three or four or more small children to be cared for and no source of household income, and/or any combination of the foregoing. Once they come into the welfare waiting room, the insecurity does not stop.

Many of our subjects describe their waiting in ways that echo Engels's depiction of lives far away in time and place: "They kick us around like balls" (*nos pelotean*). The simple statement encapsulates the pervasive uncertainty and arbitrariness of the lived experience of waiting. The overwhelming majority of our subjects know when to come (the earlier the better) to the office; most of them, however, don't know when they will leave. As Noemí laments while sitting in one of the few unoccupied chairs: "I told my husband: 'I'm going to the welfare office . . . don't know when I'm coming back.'"

The uncertainty about the time they will spend there comes together with the uncertainty regarding the outcome. More than half (59 percent)

of our interviewees do not know if and/or when they will receive the benefit they came to ask for. This uncertainty does not vary by program (whether they are asking for a housing subsidy or food assistance) or by citizenship status of the claimant—the not knowing is equally distributed among Argentine citizens and foreigners. In other words, noncitizens are not overrepresented among those who don't know if and/or when they will become beneficiaries. The specific rules, regulations, and benefits of each welfare program do not seem to affect the level of knowledge people demonstrate about their claims. This straightforward figure does not say much about what is a much more interesting sociological phenomenon: namely the protracted process poor claimants have to traverse every time they need urgent aid, a process and a web that remind us, again, of Josef K.'s pilgrimage. The following conversation takes place as Sofia and Hilda are awaiting a decision on two different welfare programs. Their doubts, their feelings, and the actual outcome of their petition vividly illustrate what I would call, following Bourdieu (2000), an instituted disorder. As we will see in the following section, this disorder is presented to the client as an order from the arbitrary dicta of a computer machine:

Field note December 11, 2008. Sofía is in her early 30s and she moved to Argentina from Paraguay in 1999. She first came to the welfare office when she was evicted from her rental apartment. Hilda is 28 and moved from Paraguay in 1998. When her husband left her, she quickly ran out of money to pay for the rent—she was about to be evicted when a neighborhood social worker told her to come to the office. With two small kids, she is having trouble finding a place to live—"hotels won't take you with children," she tells me echoing what we heard repeatedly from poor mothers who are raising their kids alone.

They have been at the welfare office for 40 minutes already when I meet them. Sofía addresses the issue of the long waiting right from the start: "But you can be here for three or four hours." Why? I ask. "That's exactly what we'd like to know: why do we have to wait that long? Afterward, they tell you there's no money and that you have to come back some other day." Sofía began her paperwork for the NF 5 months ago. She received her first check this week but she was expecting a sum three times higher: "They suspended my payments three times already. Supposedly, I'll get paid today." She is also a beneficiary of the HS "but I'm not being paid. I don't know what's going on." Someone at the counter calls Sofía. She leaves. Like Sofía, Hilda does not know if and when she will receive her check: "Last year, I didn't get paid. They told me 'We can't do anything about it. . . . [They say] it is what it is.'"

Sofía comes back and tells me that her payment was suspended again. "They told me to come back on December 30. I've been waiting since July. I don't know what we're going to do. That's what pisses me off."

We then talk about the required paperwork and they agree that it is "too difficult": "They always give you an excuse. . . . They ask you for some document, then they ask for it again and again, and you have to come back at 5 a.m. . . . Now they are attending quickly, but there's no money. Damn."

Both of them have come to this office many times before. And many times they have been “re-scheduled” (term used by state agents and beneficiaries alike to describe the delay in the payments). It is now Hilda’s turn. She goes to the counter and quickly comes back. She is also “re-scheduled.” “They told me that there is only one payment left. Originally, there [were] four, but now it’s only one. I don’t know why. *That’s what the computer says*” (emphasis added).

The welfare recipients described by Hays (2003, 7) mostly complain about the hassles to obtain welfare and, much like some of the beneficiaries we encounter, point to the “huge number of ridiculous regulations” that make their already-miserable life even more wretched. Hays describes a universe (that of welfare reform in the United States) in which confusions, misunderstandings, and frustrations over the rules, requirements, procedures, and sanctions finds parallels in the world of Buenos Aires welfare. However, for people like Sofía, Hilda, and many others, the main issues are not so much the paperwork or requirements but the unpredictability of the process. Some of them complain about the “difficult paperwork,” but what really bothers most of them is the long waiting period with an insecure result. As twenty-three-year-old Isabel—who migrated from Peru two years ago and who is waiting for NF payments—succinctly said: “You don’t know when you are going to be paid.”

More than half of interviewees bring up the issue of waiting in a public hospital to compare with waiting at the welfare office. Although they all agree that waiting in the hospital is “terrible” and “awful,” and they remark that they “always” have to wait there, they also know, as Isabel comments, that in a hospital “they will attend to you no matter what.” Both waiting lines, they all concur, are long (“you can spend the entire day at the hospital”); both waiting times demand their endurance and serenity (“we all know how it is,” or “there is not much you can do about it”). The hospital line is, to most, “more dramatic” (because they usually attend the hospital when they are seriously sick or when their children need immediate assistance). By contrast, “here [in the welfare office] the waiting is indecisive [*indecisa*].” As Isabel says, capturing well the randomness of the entire process, “I think I’ll be paid . . . at Christmas which is when miracles occur.”

As stated previously, noncitizens do not have a monopoly on uncertainty, nor is it restricted to the admission stage; it affects the operation of the programs as a whole. Noemí, age fifty-five, is an Argentine citizen. According to her, she was in the office “because of an administrative error; they delayed my payment for a week . . . plus the three or four hours of waiting here.” Apparently, mistakes are not the only source of intermittence in the welfare payments. In Noemí’s experience (as in that of most beneficiaries we interviewed), haphazardness is a built-in characteristic of city welfare programs. Once clients are admitted, in other words, their payments can be suspended or delayed for reasons unknown to most of our interviewees: “If the hotel owners were not merciful, they would kick

us out because . . . well, nobody tells you when you are going to be paid. They [welfare agents] tell you it's going to be on the fifth and they pay you on the fourteenth." Noemí is also the beneficiary of another welfare program (a cash-transfer program) that is equally unpredictable: "Every month they put money in your account for you to spend. Well, it's a way of putting it. Sometimes it is every forty days. Do you know how shameful you feel when you go to the supermarket, you buy all this stuff, and then you have to leave it there with the cashier because your [welfare] card has no funds!"

"They tell you one thing, and then another," says forty-five-year-old Rosa angrily (she is a Peruvian national petitioning for a housing subsidy), summarizing what goes on in the welfare office. Rosa ended our hour-long conversation crying: "I'm a grown-up person, and they tell me [come] tomorrow, [come] tomorrow, [come] tomorrow." Probably the best, more straightforward examples of this lived uncertainty are the innumerable times we heard clients ask each other, "Do you know if they are paying today?" Thus, much like in the TB sanatoria that Roth (1963) examined, lack of accurate information regarding programs and paydayes characterizes the welfare room. As we often heard, "Nobody knows anything here."

### *The Fetishism of the Benefit*

The following dialogue (recorded as we were seeking permission to conduct our fieldwork) describes a typical interaction between a state agent and a claimant. The interaction was typical in that the agent was cordial but the outcome uncertain. It is also typical in the extreme depersonalization: the computer system is presented as responsible for scheduling the payments. No human actor is deemed responsible for delays and suspensions. Despite the official's polite handling of the case, the reasons for rescheduling payment always remain obscure. Because the only one who really "knows" when the payment will be made is the computer, complaints and/or negotiations are precluded. Rescheduling is automatic and not open to appeal.

Field note September 18. State agent (SA) [referring to the program NF]: Did you ever get paid?

Beneficiary (B): No, because I had my baby and couldn't come because he was too little . . .

SA [interrupting]: You are Gutierrez, aren't you?

B nods, affirmatively.

SA: You never got paid. . . . The system re-programs the installments by itself. You have to come back on October 2. You will then have two installments ready to be paid. For the time being, everything is suspended but come anyways . . .

I would not be paying much attention to this seemingly trivial interaction if not for the fact that the payment postponements, which are routine



occurrences in the welfare office we observed, were continuously justified in terms of the computer's pronouncements. The payments are "re-programmed," and so are the welfare beneficiaries: "You've been reprogrammed," state agents tell clients. "I've been reprogrammed," subjects echoed. In this way, the "mystical veil" (Marx 1887, 84) of the computer program disguises the politics of welfare. The actual administration of benefits remains a "secret, hidden under the apparent fluctuations" (Marx 1887, 77) of a software program. The social and political relations between men and women, between citizens and the state, at the basis of welfare, assumes, in everybody's eyes, "the fantastic form" of relation between a check and a computer. As the following interaction illustrates, the fetishism of the benefit remains suspended in doubt and creates confusion throughout the time the client is eligible for welfare:

Field note September 18. Looking at the computer screen, talking to (but not facing) the welfare client: "Your next payday is October 9. You were paid [in] September. August is delayed and it has to be reprogrammed. In order to be reprogrammed, come on the 9. You will be paid October and we will reprogram you then." Client nods and leaves.

In many other field notes, we also recorded welfare agents' statements to clients along the following lines: "Everything is delayed; you have to come back next week to see if there is news"; "No, no. It's all suspended, you have to come back next week and find out." These discursive interactions (in fact, pronouncements) depict not only welfare distribution as a "mysterious thing" (akin to Marx's commodity) but also, crystal clear, the demands of the state on claimants. "Keep coming," the agents implicitly or explicitly tell beneficiaries. We don't know, nor do you, when you will receive actual payment, but you have to keep coming. The state, through its authorized spokespeople, tells the poor that, if they want to resolve their claim, they must wait. For how long? They are never told. Two more examples, heard countless times by us and by clients, suffice to depict the constant deferrals and delays, the veritable exercising of power over poor people's time, to which welfare clients are routinely exposed: "Everything is late today, you have to come back next week to see if there is any news," and "Your next payday is November 25. You should not miss that day because you are going to be paid for September. We'll then see."

**"SIT DOWN AND WAIT": FEMALE PATIENTS OF THE STATE**

Jessica is nineteen years old, born and raised in Argentina. She came to renew her housing subsidy. She has been waiting for four hours and, as most of the people we talked to, she does not know whether or when she will receive the benefit: "You come here and you don't know at what time you'll leave." As we are talking with her, a state agent tells her, from

the counter and in a very teacherlike style, "Stay seated." She turns to us and says: "If they are in a good mood, they treat you well."

Jessica shares with many other recipients not only the long wait and uncertain outcome. As did many others, she first heard about the housing subsidy from a state official who was present when other state officials were evicting her and fifteen other families with children ("we were all women, with children in tow") from her room of "wood and metal shingles" in a squatter settlement. She thinks the welfare benefit is an "aid, because with the scavenging, I can't pay for a room. These days, it costs at least \$450 a month [US\$150] and with the scavenging I collect for the day to day, [but] I can't pay the rent with it."

Echoing what we heard countless of times, Jessica says that obtaining the benefit takes "a long time. . . . You never know when they will pay you." And as do many others, she conceives of the waiting time as an indicator of clients' perseverance and thus of their "real need." If you "really need," she and many others believe, "you will wait for a long time," you will "keep coming," and you will show state agents you are worthy of aid. This is how she puts it: "You have to wait, wait, and wait. . . . They will not give it to you until you come here three, four, five, ten times, to check, to talk, to ask, with this one or with the other one."

As many others, Jessica compares this long and uncertain wait with that of the public hospital. In a statement that captures the way poor people relate to the state, she adds: "Here and in the hospital, they tell you the same thing, 'Sit down and wait' . . . and (what do you do?), you sit down and wait. And if you have some money, you buy a soda and a sandwich."

Poor people like Jessica come to this same welfare room to ask about the same welfare program or about the same overdue installments several times during the course of one month. An overwhelming majority of those we talked to said they had come to this office on more than one occasion to claim the same benefit or to see whether the same cash installment was (finally) ready. Welfare clients, in other words, frequently visit the waiting room. Thus, the welfare office is not simply a people-processing institution (Hasenfeld 1972); given clients' recurrent exposure to it and their experiences there, it also is a people-changing operation, that is, a patterned set of interactions with concrete subjective effects (see Comfort 2008).

Different from other places where disinformation and uncertainty give birth to a bargaining process between those who know and those who do not (Goffman 1961; Roth 1963), the waiting room is an area of compliance, a universe in which you "sit down and wait" instead of attempting to negotiate with (or complain against) welfare authorities.

When asked, a third of our interviewees had negative comments about welfare agents. Most of them, like Jessica, grumbled about occasional mis-

treatments. However, in the regular course of waiting, these complaints were muted. Only three times, during our six months of daily observations, did we witness clients addressing state agents and complaining out loud. Given the presentation of delays and rescheduling, this is not surprising. Occasionally, blame for the delays is directed toward “slob” agents who “take too many breaks,” “who don’t care,” “who don’t want to work”—to quote the most common expressions. Other times, the blaming points not to “lazy” state agents but to those who do not deserve welfare benefits, those who, to quote an often-heard assertion, “do not need because they have a business, or a job.” These “undeserving” clients, according to many, overburden the welfare rolls and make everyone wait longer. As every act of blaming, this one invokes some standard of justice (Tilly 2007). Let’s listen to Milagros again: “There’s people here who don’t need. That’s not fair. They have their own business.” The statement is relevant not because it describes well the welfare population we studied (we do not have evidence to back up claims by Milagros and some others that there are many people with stable incomes among the clients) but because it points to the self-understanding of the welfare population and to a symbolic boundary that organizes the experience of waiting. Most people we talked to and observed consider themselves a population in need. They come to the welfare office not because they have a right (in hundreds of pages of field notes and interviews, the word *right* does not appear once) but because they are in need. Those who do not need but who apply and obtain welfare benefits (those who “take advantage”) are perceived as the cause of the long waiting lines.

“It’s an aid,” we heard repeatedly. That is how welfare clients in need understand their benefits—again, not as rights but as aid or help. “And sometimes they help you and sometimes they don’t,” they frequently say. Those in need come to the welfare office and, faced with the general disorganization and disinformation described here, with the endless delays but also with the sudden rushing of surprise payday, quickly learn that this is a space to be a complying (*ply* comes from the Latin *plicare*, “to bend”) welfare client. They learn that, if they want the benefit, they must yield to the (arbitrary, uncertain) wishes or dictates of state agents and/or machines. They know that they have to remain in expectation and comply with the random, arbitrary operations of the welfare office. As Ramiro told us while he waited three long hours leaning against the wall: “You can’t complain here; if you do, they send you back home. . . . So, you have to stay calm here.” Or as many others summarized the experience for us: “Here you have to be patient. . . . You have to arm yourself with patience” (we should also be reminded that the Latin root of *patience* is *patis*, which means “to suffer, to endure”). Milagros, in the opening story, said it well: “here I didn’t say anything,” meaning that she did not voice her discontent. The recurrent comparison that welfare clients make between their

waiting time at public hospitals and that at the welfare office thus takes its full meaning: in both places they have to (silently) endure; they have to act not as citizens with rightful claims but as patients of the state. The daily operations of this office and the seemingly ordinary assertions and actions of state agents and clients jointly (but hardly cooperatively) define what we could call, following Bourdieu (1998), the “doxa” of welfare—(for the most part, uncontested and) basic compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of welfare distribution: show patience, wait, and you might obtain a benefit from the state.

Although the genderless language of the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (as articulated in its official publications<sup>2</sup>) speaks of its attempt to “include . . . excluded citizens,” of “assisting” and “socially promoting” the “most vulnerable” families and individuals, the “target population” of its focalized programs is overwhelmingly female. As we noted earlier, most of the women and children with whom we waited were expecting resolutions or payments from the following programs: TS, NF, and HS. The TS (a cash-transfer program that provides a monthly check of US\$25 for beneficiaries to purchase food and cleaning products) is restricted to women only. Although formally open to everybody, the HS and the NF also focus (mainly) on women. Among the objectives of the HS is to provide assistance to families in *situación de calle* (or, to use a less euphemistic term, homeless) by “strengthening the family income” devoted to paying for shelter.<sup>3</sup> Although the target population of the benefit is “the family,” the first requirement points to the household composition—with special consideration given to “female-headed families.” Although not explicitly articulated in official documents, a similar gender bias affects the NF. Among its objectives is to “strengthen family groups” in “vulnerable situations” or at “risk of not being able to satisfy their basic needs.” In practice, however, women are (again) the main target. As an official of the welfare agency told us: “It is difficult for men to obtain benefits. Because there’s the idea that if a man is of working age, he has to work. More benefits are given to mothers.” This gendered conception is further reinforced (and concretized) by the ministry’s policies toward men. In the section describing the “strategic objectives” for 2010, we read that the agency seeks to do the following: “1. Increase social inclusion and strengthen equal opportunities for the most vulnerable groups; 2. Increase employment among vulnerable fathers.” Under No. 1, the ministry’s policies will pay “special attention” to the issue of violence against women, with “lectures, work-

2. See, e.g., *Guía de Servicios Sociales 2009*, [http://estatico.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/des\\_social/fortal\\_soc\\_civil/guia\\_version\\_web.pdf](http://estatico.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/des_social/fortal_soc_civil/guia_version_web.pdf).

3. All quotes come from descriptions in the social services guide published by the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social ([http://estatico.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/des\\_social/fortal\\_soc\\_civil/guia\\_version\\_web.pdf](http://estatico.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/des_social/fortal_soc_civil/guia_version_web.pdf)).

shops, treatment, and seminars." Under No. 2, it will "double the amount of job training fellowships for vulnerable fathers."

Thus, as we detected in the waiting room and see articulated in official documents, welfare is structured around women: for them, the state provides (limited and random) welfare benefits (for shelter, food, and protection against violence); for men, it seeks to provide access to full employment. In my mind, this represents a gender pattern that reproduces the bifurcation between male independent workers and female dependent nonworkers that scholarship on the welfare state has repeatedly noted (Pateman 1988; Fraser 1989; Gordon 1990; Orloff 1993; Haney 1996). Men are conceived of as subjects who rely on the labor market; women are constructed as submissive clients of the state. Once we get down to the level of state practice, the state is doing more than simply reproducing a particular kind of relationship with the poor; structured around gender differences, the daily work of the state structures gender hierarchy itself (see Mink 1990; Nelson 1990).

#### CONCLUSIONS AND TASKS AHEAD

The complex relationship between subordinated groups and the state has been the subject of much scrutiny in historical and ethnographic research (see, e.g., D. Roy 1994; Bayat 1997; Wedeen 1999; Chatterjee 2006; Goldberg 2007), but for the most part, it has drawn the attention of empirical investigation when it has broken down, when it has erupted in episodes of massive contention or explosive insurgency (for a classic statement on the subject, see Joseph and Nugent 1994). There is much to be understood and explained about the cultural dynamics of daily, routine, engagement of the dominated, in this case the urban poor, with the state, and specifically about the everyday forms in which relations of subjection are constructed.

This article has provided an ethnographic outline of one type of relationship between the urban poor and the state. Taken together, the (not very varied) ways poor people experience their waiting at the welfare office point to one way in which they relate to the state (and the state to them): what I call the patient model. To be an actual or potential welfare recipient is to be subordinated to the will of others. This subordination is created and re-created through innumerable acts of waiting (the obverse is equally true; domination is generated anew by making others wait). In those recurring encounters at the welfare office, poor people learn that, despite endless delays and random changes, they must comply with the requirements of agents and their machines.

Welfare agents do not place much emphasis in the "customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking" (Foucault 2000, 209) of those in need. We did not notice the attention to (and attempt to control over) the minutest

aspects of poor people's behaviors, on governing their bodies and souls, on molding the "habits, behavior, or dispositions" on which the "rehabilitative function" of welfare in the United States historically placed much emphasis (Goldberg 2007, 3), which Hays (2003) detected operating at the ground level in the welfare offices she so carefully studied.

The welfare bureaucracy we studied introduces economy and order (i.e., government, in Foucault's sense) by manipulating poor people's time. It is through this practice, through this "governing technique," that the state seems to be aiming for the creation of a docile body of welfare clients (Foucault 1979, 198). The patient model could thus be considered a particular, historically situated illustration of the productive nature of power. Interpreted in this light, the "mundane statements by minor administrators" acquire a different (more relevant, more consequential) sociopolitical significance (Rabinow 1984, 15).

This model should not be read as a demonstration of the (presumably perennial) passivity of poor welfare clients (this ethnography and other qualitative research detected nothing of that sort; see Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003; Korteweg 2006). Nor should my emphasis on the subordination created in repeated encounters with the welfare office be read as an argument against state provision of welfare to the destitute. The state is the "vexed institution" (Scott 1999, 7) that is the ground of both poor people's domination and their possibilities of survival. One could thus paraphrase Hays's detailed analysis of welfare mothers in the age of welfare reform as follows: if the state really wants to include beneficiaries as active citizens, as "full fledged participants in society," it does not make much sense to make them wait in this zone of uncertainty. If, however, the state is actually creating subordinate subjects who do not raise their voice, who "know" (because they learn in practice) that they have to be patient, then the uncertainty and arbitrariness of the welfare office is a very effective route for doing so.

The fact that most of the welfare clients we encounter at the office are poor women is hardly incidental. As other research has shown (Hays 2003; Korteweg 2006), face-to-face interactions between representatives of the state and welfare-reliant women reproduce gender hierarchies outside the welfare office. Given the empirical analogies we found between this welfare office and those others have studied, the gendered dimension of the patient model should be further scrutinized, because it points to the daily ways in which durable inequality is being reproduced.

If the analysis presented herein is correct, then what remains to be seen is the dominance of the patient model of relations between poor citizens and state. Is it restricted to poor people on welfare, or is it applicable to other categories (and experiences) in the universe of the destitute? To what extent is the experience of being poor defined as one of waiting, of always waiting for, borrowing from Beckett's (1952) famous play, a Godot who (seldom) comes? To what extent, in what specific social universes, does

being a poor citizen in an underdeveloped state resemble that of Josef K.'s trial in Franz Kafka's fiction? The welfare office is certainly not the only arena in which the state forces the poor to wait; the experience of waiting transcends the time and space of the waiting room. Recent ethnographic work in a polluted shantytown on the outskirts of Buenos Aires shows that waiting (in that case, for relocation) can also characterize the life of an entire community (Auyero and Swistun 2009). Current ethnographic work on the streets and in waiting lines of the Registro Nacional de las Personas (National Registry of Persons) hints at interesting similarities between the waiting experiences of the urban poor and those of the undocumented: uncertainty and arbitrariness plague both.

All this suggests that, if we are to follow Bourdieu's advice regarding the need to catalog and analyze all the experiences of powerless waiting, the theoretical agenda to be developed and the empirical ground to be covered are vast and challenging. Much work lies ahead.

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