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Welfare reform and liberal governance: disciplining Cambodian-American bodies

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Abstract

The impact of the 1996 welfare reform on Southeast Asian Americans has been an important topic for research in recent years. Much of these studies have focused on issues of limited access, culturally/linguistically inappropriate services, and responses of community-based organisations. Although these studies help us assess welfare reforms' material implications on group life, they reveal little about the ideological consequences of welfare reform. This article examines on how contemporary welfare reform governs and disciplines the lives of its recipients. Based on in-depth interviews with Cambodian American families in Long Beach, California, this article examines the imposition of governance upon its recipients by the welfare state.

One of the central aims of the contemporary American welfare state is to instil self-reliance among its citizen-subjects. Accordingly, welfare programs and policies are designed and intended to cultivate individuals with self-sufficient capabilities who will therefore not become a public charge of the state. However, many Southeast Asian refugees¹ struggling to resettle in the United States are simply unfit to be economically independent. After three decades, many remain highly dependent on government aid for their livelihood. The obvious question then is what happens when the welfare state fails to cultivate self-reliance among its citizen-subjects? How does the welfare state deal with citizen-subjects who are incapable of economic self-sufficiency? What methods of governance does the state employ to make public recipients 'earn their keep'? This article attempts to address these questions.

Structured in three parts, this article will first discuss how the passage of the 1996 welfare reform act represented in many ways a triumph of liberal governance, whereby the American welfare state exerts control over the bodies of its citizen-subjects vis-à-vis the imposition of work and normative family ethic. How this regime of liberal governance has operated in the specific case of Cambodian-Americans on welfare rolls is taken up in the second part of this article. I identify the scrutiny employed by the state and illustrate how Cambodian welfare recipients negotiate these attempts to impose **discipline** upon their lives. The third part will discuss some of the material and ideological implications of liberal governance in general and specific regimes of discipline in particular. I focus on what it means when public assistance shifts from being a source of economic support to being a regulating mechanism for social control. This article draws heavily from in-depth interview

¹ I understand that when refugees arrive in ports of sanctuary, they cease to be 'refugees' and become new 'citizens' of the state. In this article, I choose to use the term 'refugees' rather than 'citizens' to emphasise the

data, especially from public assistance-receiving Cambodian-American families living in Southern California.

Welfare reform and the triumph of liberal governance

On August 22, 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), ushering in the most significant and wide-sweeping welfare reform since the New Deal of the 1930s (U.S. Congress, 1996). Clinton's campaign to end 'welfare as we know it' brought about fundamental changes to the American welfare state. These include shifting administrative authority over welfare programmes to the states; rewarding marriage and penalising single-parents; imposing time limits and a lifetime cap; requiring work as a condition for cash assistance; assigning recipients to work in private businesses or public agencies in exchange for their welfare grant; and reducing or eliminating in-kind food and medical assistance for many people. The Act effectively functioned to discourage, denigrate and, in many cases, deny citizen-subjects who have been on public assistance from further dependence by reducing their support, restricting their access and/or removing them from welfare rolls altogether. PRWORA represented the confluence of two key ideological currents: the shift in the mission of welfare programs from economic support to social control *and* the shift in the design and implementation of welfare programs from the federal to the state level, known as 'devolution' (Delgado & Gordon, 2002). Moreover, as PRWORA was decentralised, state compliance with the legislation varied significantly in terms of eligibility, benefits, requirements and ongoing eligibility. For example, 17 states required a mandatory job search at the time of application, payment standards for a family of

dire socioeconomic and political conditions many Southeast Asian Americans continue to endure, despite their

three ranged from a measly US\$164 in Alabama to a generous US\$1,186 in Alaska, and lifetime limit for receiving aid ranged from as few as 21 months to the regular 60 months (Rowe & Russell, 2002).²

These draconian reforms under PRWORA are part and parcel of the triumph of the American welfare state and its strategies to ‘govern at a distance’ (Rose, 1996). Instead of directly imposing its authority, the American welfare state since the 1960s has undergone what is known as ‘devolution’ or the relinquishing of state powers, ‘granting authority to professionals who are licensed and empowered by the state to create norms of individual conduct, make judgments, and administer policies’ (Shah, 2001: 8).

While there are many strategies employed by the welfare state to govern its citizen-subjects, I highlight what I believe are the two most fundamental: the imposition of work and the insistence **on** a normative family ethic. These two dictates are worthy of focus because they both deal with the disciplining of the bodies of citizen-subjects. Tactics such as the use of time limits, sanctions and diversions may interfere with welfare recipients’ behaviours, but coerced labour and controlled reproductive/marital rights actually give the welfare state legal control over the bodies of its citizen-subjects, rendering them more like ‘subjects’ than ‘citizens’.

The imposition of work

One way the American welfare state governs its citizen-subjects is by imposing work. What makes coerced labour under the new welfare system possible is the assumption that recipients of public assistance are ‘lazy’ and ‘unmotivated’ in getting a job, leading them to develop an

length of residency in the United States.

unhealthy dependence on welfare. Historian Alice O'Connor (2001) argued that the passage of the PRWORA was achieved on the premise 'that long-term "dependency" was the crux of the welfare problem and that it could be resolved by changing welfare to promote work and individual 'self-sufficiency' (O'Connor, 2001: 284). The belief was that the underdevelopment of the work ethic was the fundamental problem of those on welfare rolls. Under PRWORA, public assistance no longer functions as a 'pure' entitlement programme, free of obligation. Rather, it has become a government programme designed to inculcate recipients with a strong work ethic and a sense of self-sufficiency by forcing them to 'work' for their benefits.

PRWORA's work logic presupposes that poor people are unwilling to accept the jobs that are available to them, so the government must intervene and coerce them to take up these jobs as a condition for receiving welfare benefits.³ That is, welfare recipients are expected to 'work off' the value of their benefits through unpaid labour in various government projects. The campaign to impose 'work' led to the slashing of a long-time federal cash assistance programme – Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC recipients were transferred to a downgraded programme called Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). Among its many new restrictions, TANF capped a lifetime eligibility limit at five years and required recipients to participate in work or work-related activities (i.e. English classes, job training, job search, participation in government workfare programmes etc.) in order to continue receiving cash aid. Even though TANF allows recipients to enrol in English language classes and job skills training for non-English-speakers and low-skilled workers, the

² For an in-depth discussion of the variance in state compliance of the PRWORA, see Rowe and Russell (2002).

³ Lawrence Mead has advanced this argument for government intervention. For a detail discussion, see Mead (1986).

main thrust is narrowly focused on getting recipients into a job, any job, as soon as possible. Essentially, public assistance has come to be a regulatory mechanism of the welfare state for the imposition of work and discipline on its citizen-subjects. A national study by the Urban Institute showed that the majority of former recipients who left welfare rolls for jobs earned slightly above minimum wage in jobs where there are no benefits, no stability, and no opportunities for advancement (Weil, 2002). As a result, most welfare leavers who are now working find themselves unable to pay rent, utility bills, or for other basic necessities. In short, the main thrust behind new welfare legislations is to get recipients into a job, regardless of the type of job, the pay or the skill-set or preference of the individual.

A key feature of the 1996 act included a welfare-to-work (WTW) component, whereby public assistance recipients are assigned to service projects. These assignments are meant to serve a useful community purpose and afford opportunities for the development of marketable skills. However, as political scientist Mary Hawkesworth (2001) argued, WTW programmes only create an involuntary labour force, intended to fill low-wage and dead-end jobs. Hawkesworth explained that workfare program administrators have made no effort to offer participants jobs which utilise work skills which they already possess, nor have administrators made placements which enable participants to acquire marketable skills (Hawkesworth, 2001). Workfare assignments are typically in unskilled jobs, precisely the kinds of jobs that no one wants because the pay is low, the work is demanding and upward mobility is non-existent. Thus, even if performance in these unskilled jobs is considered a form of 'skills-training', the acquired 'skills' are not marketable because equivalent employment is not readily available in the regular workforce.

Not only does forcing WTW participants into unskilled and low-paying jobs diminish their chances of obtaining employment that affords sufficient income to escape poverty, but in the case of Southeast Asian refugees, it does little to resolve their overall plight. Mark

McKee, Southern California Director of Refugee Services for Catholic Charities (CC) pointed out:

The [welfare] system assumes that getting a job will solve everyone's problems. People think it's the magic bullet – one shot and everything will be okay. But in reality, a job may actually create new problems and stresses. For example, what happens to the kids? Who takes care of them?... What about transportation? Most refugees don't own cars, and they typically live far from their jobs... What about the mental, social, and cultural disconnects? Remember, refugees are new to our country, so they are constantly bombarded with learning how things work and that takes lots of effort.

McKee maintained, '*Forcing them to get a job only compounds the many problems they are already dealing with.*' Moreover, McKee keenly claimed that many of the problems faced by refugees on public assistance are non-economic, comprising mental, physical, social and cultural issues. Thus, there needs to be resources to help people deal with the non-material problems, not just focused on getting a job.

In summary, the American welfare state is able to govern at a distance because it makes work a condition for public assistance participation, shifting the ultimate responsibility for the economic well-being of citizen-subjects from the welfare state to the individual. Thus, if a needy individual is not receiving public assistance, it is not the fault of the government; rather, it is because the individual lacks effort in finding a job.

Legislating normative family

The insistence of a normative family ethic is another way the American welfare state governs welfare recipients. A dominant myth exists within welfare discourse that purports a lack of

family planning in general and single-parenting in particular causes poverty, and thus welfare dependency. Moreover, it is believed that poor life choices (having more children while on public assistance or while unmarried) are not only immoral but also harmful to both the individual and society. Therefore, a close reading of the PRWORA makes it clear that the intent of the lawmakers was to champion normative family values in general and promote marriage in particular, encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. PRWORA begins with the following statement:

Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society that promotes the interests of children. Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children (United States Congress, 1996: 2110).

The law went on to describe the problems of teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, children raised in single-parent homes, fathers who fail to pay child support and irresponsible parenting. Indeed, a reading of this statement of the law's intent would lead one to believe that the problem of poverty itself is the direct result of failures to live up to the family ideal. Congress insisted that there is a close connection between the rising numbers of births to unmarried women and poor families and the growing number of people receiving public assistance. We are told that these households not only create dependence on welfare, they also foster higher rates of violent crime and produce children with low cognitive skills, lower educational aspirations and a greater likelihood of becoming teen parents. These parents will then produce children prone to repeat the cycle and foster ever-higher rates of crime, poor educational attainment, teen pregnancy and welfare dependency.

It concludes with the statement: ‘Therefore, in light of this demonstration of the *crisis in our Nation*, it is the sense of the Congress that prevention of *out-of-wedlock pregnancy* and reduction in *out-of-wedlock birth* are very important Government interests’ (United States Congress, 1996: 2112). Although there are no sound evidence for the direct correlation between single-parent household and poverty, such intense focus on the ‘crisis’ of out-of-wedlock births and pregnancies have not only led to PRWORA’s overwhelming passage but also incited a number of measures designed to penalise unwed mothers and their children. One way the welfare state has demonstrated its commitment to curbing single-parenthood is the prohibition of mothers under the age of eighteen from receiving welfare benefits for any child born out of wedlock, regardless of when the aid is sought for the child. The only way she could qualify for welfare assistance is either to marry the child’s father or someone who adopts the child.

Within PRWORA, there is also a provision entitled ‘family cap’ that bars all non-marital births to existing mothers on public assistance from receiving additional aid. The underlying logic is that women who consider becoming pregnant while on welfare will know that their progeny would be ineligible for benefits and hence **the mothers** will think twice before having more children. Here, we see how existing welfare policies attempt to determine and distinguish between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ births by providing the former and denying the latter of benefits. Such social engineering, political theorist Gwendolyn Mink argued, leads to questions of basic women’s rights and the constitutionality of government-funded programmes’ attempt to penalise some women for exercising their right to reproductive choice (Mink, 1998).

When Cherry Phuong of APALC was asked how the family ethic affects current welfare recipients, she replied:

Majority of API [Asian Pacific Islanders] caseloads are two-parent caseloads...Single-parent caseloads tend to be African Americans. As a result, they [African American caseloads] are usually treated worse. Ironically, this helps the API community because they are seen as more deserving...Playing the API card has been effective because API welfare recipients are seen as a notch up from the other recipients, i.e. Blacks and Latinos.

Based on Phuong's insight, the family ethic within the welfare act has actually given API public assistance recipients a distinct advantage over other groups because of the difference in family structure. However, Phuong quickly admitted:

Even though we are an API advocacy group, we are concerned for all welfare groups, including Blacks and Latinos...We believe that rewarding or punishing certain groups based on whether or not they have two parents in the house is ridiculous.

In other words, the economic need of a household is independent of whether the household has one or two parents. By privileging two-parent households as more 'deserving' of support, the new welfare system unfairly discriminates against single-parent households simply because they do not measure up to the normative family ascribed by the framers of PRWORA.

Like the imposition of work, the use of a normative family ethic (married, two-parent household) allows the American welfare state to govern at a distance. Demarcations like 'single-parent households', 'unwed-mothers' and 'illegitimate births' are used to justify the denial or the reduction of benefits for some needy citizen-subjects; while labels like 'two-parent households', 'married couples' and 'legitimate births' are used to reward others

because they reinforce the normative family ethic. In the next section, I show how the dictates of work and family ethics operate in the daily context of Cambodian-Americans receiving public assistance.

Disciplining Cambodian-American bodies

How has the regime of liberal governance under PRWORA impacted welfare recipients at the individual level? What has life been like for those who remained on public assistance in the post-welfare reform era? Below, I attempt to answer these questions by providing five **mini-case** studies, drawn from the Cambodian-American community. I illustrate how the welfare state has attempted to govern the lives of Cambodian welfare recipients by imposing various forms of **discipline**, including demoralising work, cheapening labour, curtailing reproductive rights, condemning single-parenting, and policing. The case studies, selected because of their illustrative and informative qualities, offer important insight into what impact the 1996 act has had on the lives of families and individuals. These case studies also reveal the insidious nature of liberal governance disguised as ‘welfare reform’. While these case studies are neither representative nor exhaustive of how the American welfare state disciplines its citizen-subjects, they, nevertheless, help capture the intricate and dynamic character of Cambodian-American experiences of public assistance – traits that tend to remain submerged in statistical descriptions of the group.

Before moving to the findings, a brief note about research method is in order.

Interview data included in this article come from a larger project, wherein I interviewed 50 public assistance recipients (from 12 different families) from Southeast Asian backgrounds living in Southern California over a course of a two-year span, starting February 2001. The families chosen for this study were a result of referrals from refugee resettlement organisations, community organisations, personal contacts and subsequent referrals from

interviewed individuals themselves (snowball sampling). Often, I was introduced to these families as a 'student' working on 'a school project about poverty and welfare'. Here, I chose to focus on the Cambodian families living in Long Beach (a suburb of Los Angeles County) exclusively because they were the majority of the interviews, and they constituted a good sample for a case study. Interviews with these families were conducted in their native language for the most part with the help of translators. Frequently, the English-speaking, American-born/raised children of these families helped translate, explain and clarify what their parents were trying to express to me. The interviews were informal, relaxed and conversation-based. The individuals who were ultimately included in the study were those who were most willing and open to talk with me about their experiences of being on public assistance and those whose insights were directly relevant to the topic at hand. As with any projects that involve interview data, there is always more information collected than can be used. The interview materials included below are selectively chosen primarily because of their usefulness in illustrating key concepts and ideas concerning how recent welfare reforms discipline the bodies of its citizen-subjects. Thus, there were many interesting but less integral issues raised from interviews that were eventually omitted from this final report.

A related and broader methodological concern is why the focus on Cambodian-Americans and how they are uniquely impacted by the consequences of liberal welfare? Often lost in welfare discussions about the reliance of Southeast Asian in general and Cambodians in particular on public assistance is the fact that their poverty was not of their own making. We have to remember that their sudden and stark emergence on the contemporary American scene was a result of decades of failed U.S. foreign policy and military involvement to contain Communism in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, discussing Southeast Asian 'welfare dependency' without also implicating the state only served to

exonerate the U.S.'s role and responsibility in creating and sustaining their "refugee conditions" in the first place.

Since the mid-1970s, the relationship between the American welfare state and Southeast Asians has dramatically shifted from one of intense scrutiny to one of gross neglect. Unlike past U.S. refugee policies that were forged in the crucible of the Cold War and fuelled by the regard that victims of Communism were especially deserving of rescue, in today's post-Cold War and post-Civil Rights era concerns for the displaced and the disadvantaged no longer warrant the same kind of national attention. Southeast Asian refugees are no longer useful in helping America recover from its own internal conflicts over Vietnam. In the words of one former Vietnamese refugee:

No longer do images of boatloads of Vietnamese refugees safely arriving in American cities and suburbs work to ease a guilty national conscience. In the post-Cold war era, it has been all too easy to forget the Southeast Asian refugee community entirely, to terminate virtually all refugee assistance programs, to allow refugee families to slip deeper into urban poverty (Tang, 2000: 1).

Indeed, forgetfulness and **selective** amnesia are increasingly common practices utilised by the American welfare state to erase and distant itself from the past plight and current poverty of Southeast Asian communities. Although all Southeast Asians inevitably lose their refugee status, most continue to endure poverty conditions.

Demoralising work

Many Cambodian-American families on public assistance have become victims of coerced labour, whereby they are pushed into low-wage and demeaning work. In a poignant documentary, 'Eating Welfare', producer Eric Tang shows how Cambodian communities in New York's Bronx area have been impacted by the 1996 act (Tang, 2000). Tang documents how PRWORA's work requirement as a condition for cash aid has actually pushed many Southeast Asians into low-paying and unwanted jobs. In the documentary, one Cambodian lady, Sok Yin, in her early 50s, is shown picking up trash, sweeping leaves and cleaning bathrooms at local parks. After completing six months of English classes, Yin was assigned as a sanitation worker cleaning parks by her social worker, who reasoned that it was a 'good fit' due to her limited English and lack of employable job skills. Yin explained her job.

When I got to the park site, I was unable to communicate with the supervisor. He handed me instructions that I could not read. Finally, he just placed a broom in my hand and pointed to the area that I was supposed to clean. He never spoke to me ever again. Every day, from that point forward, he just pointed to what he wanted cleaned. Some of the areas were filthy with trash, feces, and other unpleasant waste. The WEP [Work Experience Program]⁴ workers who spoke English were able to protest these very filthy cleaning assignments. This left me, the only one who did not speak any English, to take up the most unsanitary tasks (Applied Research Center, 2001: 29).

⁴ Work Experience Program (WEP) is a workfare programme under New York's TANF.

Due to her inability to speak English, Yin was vulnerable to unfair treatment by her supervisor and co-workers. The fact that she could not communicate prevented her from protesting and speaking up against the unequal assignment of the most undesirable tasks. Furthermore, Yin said she was not provided with adequate work equipment.

I was not provided any gloves, boots, or work clothing. In the winter, I did not have a heavy coat. When I got sick, I asked my son to tell the supervisor that I needed a day or two off from work. The supervisor told my son that if I took a day off I would definitely be sanctioned [from welfare]. I felt like a slave (Applied Research Center, 2001: 29).

The demoralising job that Yin was assigned made her feel like a ‘slave’. Even if Yin were able to protest and complain, the threat of sanction was always a real underlying concern. The fact that she could be fired simply for complaining or standing up for her rights made her live under constant fear. Moreover, the fear of being sanctioned inhibited her from challenging unfair/unsafe labour practices or exercising her rights as a worker, such as taking sick days.

In the Khmer language, participation in welfare is translated ‘eating welfare’. For Yin, ‘eating welfare’ is a hard and humiliating life. She reflected:

It became very clear to me that the changes in the law that forced me into this program were not meant to help me find a real job. The new laws were only meant to see how much hardship and harassment I could take, to bring enough hardship into my life that I would no longer want to be on welfare (Applied Research Center, 2001: 28).

At its core, Yin’s plain and poignant words capture well the essence of what ‘welfare-to-work’ (WTW) signifies; it is a deliberate campaign to make the lives of welfare recipients so

difficult and so demanding that they will no longer want to be on welfare. Yin is just one of over 20,000 Southeast Asians residing in New York who are on public assistance. As long as they want to receive cash assistance, they will have to face humiliation similar to Yin's.

Curtailing reproductive rights

Government-funded programmes for the poor have historically interfered with the reproductive rights of poor women (Abramovitz, 1988; Gordon, 1994; Mink, 1998). The 1996 welfare act was no different. The systematic and institutionalised curtailing of reproductive freedom has been a central component in recent public assistance programmes to aid the poor (Roberts, 1997). Plans to distribute birth control, laws to penalise women for bearing children and welfare reform measures to cut off assistance for children born to unwed welfare mothers all point to the same message: The key to solving America's welfare dependency is to curtail the fertility of welfare mothers. For three decades, Cambodian mothers have faced attempts by the welfare state to regulate their bodies and limit their reproductive rights, but the loss of their children to starvation, disease and war during the Khmer Rouge years has only increased their desire to have more children in the United States. Thus, there is a constant struggle between Cambodian mothers on welfare wanting to exercise their reproductive rights and their eligibility workers who want to curtail those rights.

The average number of children among the Cambodian families I interviewed was five, with two being the fewest and eight being the most. When Mr. and Mrs. Chea were first sponsored by Catholic Charities to come to the U.S. in 1981, Mrs. Chea had only one child, the one that was still in her womb. Now, 22 years later, in addition to her own six children, Mrs. Chea also has custody of her oldest daughter's two sons, making her a 'supermom' of eight children ranging between 2 and 24 years of age. Like many other Cambodian families in the area, the Chea are now in their third consecutive decade of reliance on public assistance.

Except for the oldest son who joined the Army a few years ago and the oldest daughter who is currently on the east coast, Mr. and Mrs. Chea live with their four children and two grandchildren in a modest two-bedroom apartment, located in a complex of mostly African American and other Cambodian tenants. Mrs. Chea told me that her eligibility workers have repeatedly told her to stop having children after her first two, but she simply did not listen because her children were an important source of her livelihood.

In her study of how the modern welfare state attempts to curtail the reproductive rights of Cambodian mothers vis-à-vis refugee medicine, Aihwa Ong showed how Cambodian families negotiated the imposition of family planning. Ong wrote:

A Japanese American nurse who makes home visits says her instructions about reading body signs for pregnancy are often met by silence... She urges Khmers to family planning. After the birth of a sixth baby in a Khmer family, she said to the father, 'Papa, no more babies'...but the next time she visited, there was a new baby...Through their passive pose as clients of the state, this Khmer family has subtly negotiated a space for making their own decisions and yet still maintain official connections that do not threaten their family security (Ong, 1995: 1252).

Ong noted how Khmer families were able to 'maintain official connections' with the state but at the same time passively resist 'family planning' pressures by keeping their silence and by disregarding medical advice. Through their 'passive pose', they were able to exercise their liberty in reproductive rights and redefine what 'family planning' means. In this manner, the Chea family, under the guise of the welfare state, have 'subtly negotiated a space' that has allowed them to define family planning on their own terms. Furthermore, Ong suggested that

Cambodian women exercising their reproductive rights were not only deflecting the state's discipline, but also ensuring the survival of their family. Ong explained:

There is a stark reality that having more children in the United States will ensure greater government aid, in a context where few husbands have the skills to be employed. Thus although pregnant women attempt to deflect medical discipline, they wish to retain their claims on health care, and through their babies, on the wider welfare support system that will ensure the survival of her families (Ong, 1995: 1254).

Mrs. Chea's concern and hope for her children's future well-being speak volumes about her desire to exercise her motherhood. She explained, '*Our [she and her husband] relationship with the children are peaceful... We want to raise our children the best we can... We want them to have good jobs... We want them to have the best life possible.*' Like any loving and caring mothers (welfare or non-welfare), Mrs. Chea and her husband want the best for their children, but due to their limited socioeconomic means, their ability to fulfil those wishes are increasingly uncertain.

Condemning single-parenting

When Ms. Sharon Nin came to the United States 15 years ago, she was 14 years old. She was the oldest of four siblings, so she had to take care of her younger brothers and sisters while her parents worked in sweatshops. Due to the financial responsibilities placed on her by her parents, Ms. Nin was allowed to finish high school only, and had to go into the workforce upon graduation. While working at a retail store, she met her future husband. They got married within a few months, and in their first three years of marriage they had two children. When the youngest son turned one, Ms. Nin's husband suddenly abandoned her and their two

children. Since Ms. Nin depended on her husband's salary to raise her two children, when he left she was economically devastated and unable to support her family. She was unsuccessful in getting alimony from her husband because he was nowhere to be found. Ms. Nin thinks that her husband moved out of the state and possibly out of the country. Left with two children to support, she had no other option but to resort to applying for welfare. Currently, her two sons are ages 6 and 8. The younger one just started first grade and the older one is in third. When asked what life is like raising two children as a single-parent on welfare, Ms. Nin replied:

It's hard to live with so little money. It's hard to be a good mother when I can't even provide for my kids. I want a better life for my kids, but I can't find a job. I want to work, but I don't have any opportunities.

Ms. Nin desires to be a 'good mother' but admits it is hard when she does not have enough money. She agrees that getting off welfare and working is much better by far, but since she cannot find a job, she is unable to improve her family's economic situation, making her feel like a 'bad' mother who does not care about her family. Ms. Nin informed me that many poor Cambodian families she knows have expressed similar frustrations. In fact, she tells me that there is a popular saying known among the Cambodian-American neighbourhood: '*Chinese parents want to help their kids, but Cambodian parents don't.*' She explained, '*It's not that Cambodian parents don't want to help their kids, they simply can't. They are too poor to do anything for their kids.*'

Being a single-mother on welfare brings much social stigma, and Ms. Nin has personally experienced her share of harassment, especially from her social worker. She remarked.

Every time I meet with my social worker, he asks me really bad questions like, did you hit your kids, why don't I have a job, or did you buy alcohol with your welfare check...He doesn't really care whether or not we have enough food to eat or enough money for the rent...He wants me to work, but he doesn't help me find a job...He's useless...He only wants to check on my kids and see if I am taking care of them.

Moreover, when her social worker conducts home visits, Ms. Nin informed me that he often criticises how her apartment 'stinks' and accuses her of not taking 'good care' of her children. Ms. Nin genuinely believes that her social worker is not there to help her achieve economic independence, but rather is there to tell her how poorly she is living her life.

Moreover, Ms. Nin shared that her social worker is a traditional Cambodian-American man, and he does not seem to approve of her position in life as a single-mother. On more than one occasion, he has told her to find someone to marry. *'He says that a woman like me should not be by herself. He says I need a husband, who can help raise my children.'* However, Ms. Nin, still traumatised by her separation from her husband, does not feel that marriage is the answer.

I don't want to get married just because my social worker tells me I should...I know having someone to help pay the bills would be nice, but I want to get marry for the right reasons, such as having someone who will love me and my sons. For now, I don't want to get married...I just want to focus on learning English and getting a good job so I can raise my children well.

Ms. Nin gently reminded me that the reason she got into her current situation is because she got married to the wrong person. She intends not make the same mistake twice.

As law professor Dorothy Roberts argued, the imposition of marriage upon single-mothers on welfare rolls may ‘compel victims [battered women] to remain in violent homes out of economic desperation’ (Roberts, 1997: 223). Moreover, this type of welfare policy, Roberts claimed, insists on a normative model for family. She explained, ‘This is a normative decision which prefers encouraging women’s economic dependence on husbands over providing aid for child care directly to women or improving women’s own economic opportunities in combination with state subsidies’ (Roberts, 1997: 223). The push for the normative family is so strong that various state governments have enacted ‘bridefare’ programmes whereby single-mothers are given monetary rewards for marrying.⁵ When public assistance is tied to the imposition of marriage and a normative family, single-parents, especially unwed mothers, and their children become the greatest victims.

Year 2004 was the sixth year since Ms. Nin’s husband left the family. Thinking about these years, she reflected:

I never would have imagined that I would be a single-mother living on welfare. I thought I was starting a new life when I married my husband and had my kids. But life is unpredictable...In these past five years, I’ve had to learn many things on my own. I’ve had to work hard to make sure my sons have food to eat and a place to stay. Life is very hard. But I am still grateful, so I don’t complain.

⁵ The New Jersey Family Development Act, e.g., allows families to earn income up to 150 per cent of the poverty-line income and still keep their AFDC benefits, Medicaid and emergency housing assistance if, and only if, the mother marries.

As clearly revealed in the case of Ms. Nin, being a single-mother on welfare has a high social and emotional cost. She has to continually defend and prove herself to her caseworker, who often accuses and criticises her for being a 'lazy' person and a 'bad' mother. Her 'deservedness' of government support is constantly questioned. Similar to the imposition of demeaning and low-paying work, harassment tactics used by welfare caseworkers are intended to make public assistance participation a highly undesirable and unpleasant experience in hopes of discouraging prolonged dependence. Ms. Nin did express a desire to withdraw from welfare to avoid the harassment of her social worker, but apart from finding a liveable-wage job, she knows that there is no viable alternative for economic support.

Liberal governance and its consequences

The case studies above clearly reveal that recent welfare reform is less concerned about economic support than it is about social control. According to welfare advocate Gary Delgado and Rebecca Gordon of Applied Research Center, PRWORA has

... transcended its original purpose of providing support for poor women and their children to become a purely ideological and disciplinary instrument driven more by moral than economic considerations... The 1996 act replaced a system of entitlement to financial benefits based on economic need with one that provides limited aid, contingent on recipients' state-mandated responsible behaviour (Delgado & Gordon, 2002: 25).

In other words, government-based public assistance has shifted from an entitlement programme based on economic needs to a regulating institution based on social behaviours. This new regime of liberal governance has resulted in major material and ideological

consequences, namely the overall reduction of welfare rolls and the redefining of the terms of social welfare.

Dramatic welfare caseload reductions

Through work requirements, restrictive eligibility, sanctions, time limits, diversion programmes and other disciplinary strategies, PRWORA has been extremely effective in helping reduce welfare rolls (namely AFDC/TANF recipients). When the act passed in 1996, there were 12.6 million individuals receiving cash-based public assistance (Delgado & Gordon, 2002). By 1999, just three short years after its passage, the number of TANF recipients was cut by 50 per cent down to 6.2 million recipients. By 2003, only 4.9 million individuals were receiving TANF – a 61 per cent overall reduction since 1996. According to one report from The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank organisation, ‘States with initial full-check sanctions (where a TANF participant’s first infraction results in a loss of all benefits) have had a 41.8 per cent caseload decline’ (Rector & Youssef, 1999: 3). Time limit policies have reduced Wisconsin’s caseloads by 35 per cent and New Jersey’s caseloads by 49 per cent (Delgado & Gordon, 2002: 4).

In a very short period, between 1996 and 2003, over 7.7 million welfare recipients lost their benefits. What happened to those seven million people? According to Delgado and Gordon, there are troubling indications that many of those who have left are not doing very well (Delgado & Gordon, 2002). In their national study, they found that 61 per cent of those who left welfare found jobs, but among them, only 21 per cent of the households had earnings above the poverty line, leaving 40 earning below the poverty line. In other words, only 1 out of 5 former welfare recipients was able to find a job and earned wages above the poverty line. The remaining 4 out of 5 welfare leavers either had earnings below the poverty line or had no earnings at all.

The situation in California closely aligned with national trends. Six years after the passage of PRWORA, the total number of CalWORKs (California's version of TANF) recipients in the state of California plummeted by half from 986,710 in 1996 to 479,174 in 2002 – a 51.4 per cent drop. During the same period, the total number of Asian welfare cases also decreased by half (51 per cent) from 85,016 to 41,616. Southeast Asian cases decreased from 53,805 in 1996 to 31,155 in 2002 – a 42.1 per cent drop.

What has contributed to the reduction of Southeast Asian welfare recipients? According to an important study published by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) of Southern California, PRWORA created four major barriers that have kept Southeast Asians from receiving the aid they need (Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, 2001). First, the changes under PRWORA created a complex and confusing labyrinth of rules and regulations, as illustrated by the Nhib family's situation where they had to hire someone to help them fill out their paperwork. The report noted, 'The whole CalWORKs process is very confusing for the client. It's almost impossible for the client to understand the whole process' (Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, 2001). Moreover, since the majority of Southeast Asians have limited English proficiency, the report observed, 'They are unable to understand and successfully navigate the system intended to help them into self-sufficiency' (Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, 2001). As a result, many Southeast Asian recipients who were unable to comply with new requirements (i.e. filling out the appropriate forms) were dropped from public assistance rolls.

Second, the report stated that participants with limited English are significantly disadvantaged when it comes to accessing welfare-to-work activities and supportive services: 'All of the clients are either illiterate or limited English clients; therefore, they have a hard time understanding what the job search or job training process involves' (Asian Pacific

American Legal Center, 2001: 4). Under PRWORA rules, if individuals do not participate in work or work-related activities, they will not receive benefits. As seen in all of the case studies discussed previously, especially Mrs. Nhib and Ms. Nin, many Southeast Asian recipients were unable (due to limited English) to take advantage of job training/search services, leaving them vulnerable for assignment to demeaning jobs.

Third, the APALC reported that over 83 per cent of Southeast Asians were placed into low-wage industries, including food service (i.e. fast food restaurants), service sector (i.e. janitorial, beauty industry, grocery, restaurant), light manufacturing (i.e. garment), and low-skilled healthcare (i.e. homecare). These industries are characterised by part-time work, high turnover rates, few or no benefits, limited opportunities for improving employment skills and high incidence of labour law violations (Asian Pacific American Legal Center, 2001). The case of Mrs. Yin, who worked as a sanitation worker, and Mr. Pheng, who worked as a security guard, resembled this trend. The study found that on average, Southeast Asians whose English is limited earned about US\$328 per month, compared with US\$545 per month for English speakers. Within the new welfare-to-work regulations, once recipients are placed into jobs, their benefits will be reduced accordingly (based on their wage) or eliminated altogether (if their wage exceeds the qualifying limit). As Southeast Asians were pushed into low-paying, dead-end jobs, their numbers on welfare roles declined.

Lastly, the study also indicated that many Southeast Asian welfare recipients had difficulty working with their caseworkers, as typified by Ms. Nin's overcritical caseworker. The report found that many caseworkers provided incorrect and inconsistent information and were often abusive and intimidating. Consequently, caseworkers were often ineffective in helping their clients properly access available services, or clients were so frustrated that they simply gave up and stopped seeking government aid.

In short, the APALC report concluded that by using these insidious strategies, PRWORA in general and CalWORKs in particular have effectively and systematically reduced the overall number of Southeast Asians on welfare rolls. Moreover, due to the failure to recognise the unique needs and concerns of the Southeast Asian welfare population, PRWORA has done little to help current Southeast Asian recipients achieve long-term and lasting economic self-sufficiency.

Redefining social welfare as social control

Liberal governance has resulted not only in the reduction of welfare rolls, but also in the redefinition of the terms of social welfare (to social control). Prior to the 1996 act, public assistance served as an economic safety net, available to anyone who simply exhibited a need (whose income was below the poverty line). Since the passage of PRWORA, participation in public assistance is contingent, not only on one's income, but also on a whole host of other factors, including acceptable family ethic, willingness to engage in workfare activities, mandatory job training and other commitments. In the words of Dr. Robert Lowe of the San Diego Department of Health and Human Services, '*PRWORA offers no free lunches*' – welfare recipients are expected to 'earn' their benefits by adhering to a regimented list of requirements and activities.

This ideological shift is reflected in the funding structure of public assistance. In 1996 over three-quarters (76 per cent) of the entire public assistance budget (US\$32.4 billion) went to cash payments (Weil, 2002). By 2000, the cash-payment component dropped to 41 per cent (of the overall budget of \$26.4 billion). The reduction of cash payment as a per cent of public assistance spending has resulted in the reshuffling and redirecting of funding, mainly into systems that support paid employment and family support, including transportation vouchers, tax credits for low-income families and programmes to promote marriage or reduce non-

marital pregnancies. According to Alan Weil of the Urban Institute, PRWORA's shifts in funding priorities reflect a 'work first' and 'family first' welfare system (Weil, 2002). In other words, the new welfare system is designed to achieve 'rapid labour force attachment, with less emphasis on skills development or long-term education' as well as to discourage 'teenagers from having children, non-marital child-bearing, and sex before marriage' (Weil, 2002: 1, 5). As discussed earlier, these funding measures are intended not to address the economic plight of individuals but to modify and control their social behaviours.

The welfare state's governing of citizen-subjects through the use of various disciplines has grave consequences, including labour exploitation and the denigration of their cultural citizenship. Hawkesworth explained:

The availability of the unpaid labour of a group of persons who possess no employment rights will be used by employers to lower payrolls, will reduce the effective prevailing wage rate, and will keep workers now in the lowest-paid, lowest status jobs from asserting their rights to traditional employment benefits. Controlling the work habits of the unemployed, then, is perceived as a means of disciplining the labour force in order to lower their expectations and demands and thereby contribute to increases in profits (Hawkesworth, 200: 275).

In effect, public assistance programs and policies under PRWORA based on the imposition of work envisions a world in which non-workers are considered 'deviant' who 'must be subjected to rules, habits, and orders to transform and improve them, to make them productive members of society' (Hawkesworth, 2001: 276). Thus, recipients of public assistance are ~~not~~ no longer seen as 'deserving' individuals in need of government aid, but rather as 'deviant'

members of society in need of bureaucratic intervention to ‘normalise’ and ‘reconstitute’ their personalities.

Responding to the social stigma attached to public assistance recipients, Dr. Lowe (oral interview) explained:

What PRWORA did was brought our society's attitude back to the fundamentals...If you look at the historic origin of social welfare, you will find characteristics of rugged individualism, self-determination, and other similar social values...Over the last half a century, our country drifted away from those values, and now we're seeing a reclaiming of those roots...Yes, it's wrong to stigmatise the poor and those relying on government assistance, but it's also wrong for people to keep living off of the government.

Dr. Lowe went on to suggest that perhaps the social taboo of being a public assistance recipient can serve as a ‘good moral guide’ because it keeps people conscious of the need to be self-reliant. Using Dr. Lowe’s framework, the use of sanctions, time limits, work requirements, the normative family and other regulating factors are essentially seen as welfare state tools to inculcate certain brands of morality and cultural citizenship. Those who abide by them will be honoured and praised as ‘law-abiding’ and ‘compliant’, and those who fall short will be shamed and ostracised as ‘abusive’ and ‘deviant’. Ideologically, these various markers have redefined social welfare, shifting attention away from the economic needs of individuals and redirecting the focus on the individuals’ social behaviours. In other word, the American welfare state is more concerned about whether or not its citizen-subjects are compliant with the various rules and regulations of public assistance than whether individuals are getting adequate economic support in dealing with poverty.

Once social welfare becomes a form of social control, Hawkesworth claimed, recipients of public assistance cease to exist as free individuals and become 'subjected' and 'normalised' citizen-subjects. She explained:

The individual who has been subjected does not ask questions about what kinds of work might be fulfilling, more interesting or more conducive to the development of one's full potential. The subjected individual obeys. The individual who has been 'normalised' does not conceive of work as a means of achieving dignity or as a means of expressing creativity; work is accepted as a form of discipline which extorts the body's forces in order to optimise the capacities which society finds useful (Hawkesworth, 2001: 276-277).

Conclusion

In *Welfare's End*, sociologist Gwendolyn Mink (1998) claimed that the 1996 welfare act essentially moved poor families from the welfare state to a police state. Under the new regime, families on public assistance are denied not only income security but also basic civil rights. They are subjected to stringent and intrusive moral and social regulations in exchange for meagre and temporary assistance. Mink explained:

In this new welfare police state, poor single mothers must purchase their families' short-term survival by sacrificing basic rights the rest of us take for granted. The welfare police state provides cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid to poor single mothers, but only if they reveal their most intimate relations and only if they agree to associate with the men whom government designates as their children's

fathers. Worse yet, it provides cash assistance to poor single mothers only if they forfeit the right to care for their own children (Mink, 1998: 133).

As I have illustrated in this article with the situation of Cambodian families on public assistance, the contemporary welfare ‘police’ state is focused on governing the social behaviours of its citizen-subjects and disciplining their bodies in hopes of decreasing welfare rolls. I also showed how the hegemonic regulations faced by recipients of public assistance are stifling their liberty and freedom to live as they choose. In short, the American welfare state through its various strategies – whether it is to ‘push’ them into dead-end jobs (through work-requirement), to ‘expel’ them (through time limits), to ‘penalise’ them (through sanctions), or to ‘harass’ them (through abusive caseworkers) – have succeeded in reducing the number of public assistance caseloads. However, at what cost to the individuals who now have to face poverty without the help of the government?

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