THE CONSCIENCE OF POVERTY: RHETORIC, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND WORK
IN CONTEMPORARY WELFARE REFORM DEBATES

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to demonstrate the importance of decoupling the idea of economic productivity from notions of human worth, arguing that these two ideas, when taken together, condemn a population of highly vulnerable people into a rhetorical space in which they are valueless and disposable. Taking as its object of study the deliberations surrounding the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (better known as Welfare Reform), I provide a history of welfare and poverty rhetorics in the Unites States, before turning to analysis of the contemporary welfare debates. Two theoretical perspectives aid in this analysis: Michael Calvin McGee’s ideograph, and the phenomenological hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger, with particular emphasis on Michael J. Hyde’s deployment of Heidegger. Coupling McGee and Heidegger to synthesize a phenomenological account of ideology, I conclude by suggesting potential directions available to critics of rhetoric to begin the work of breaking down the aforementioned degrading rhetorical space.
CHAPTER ONE:  
INTRODUCTION

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) was a monumental change in the manner in which the United States federal government administered relief to the poor. The leading story of the New York Times the following day opened by observing: “In a sweeping reversal of Federal policy, President Clinton today ended six decades of guaranteed help to the nation’s poorest children by signing into law a vast welfare overhaul requiring the 50 states to deal more directly with the social burdens and the budget expense of poverty.”¹ To believe the news reports of the day, the earth had shaken, the ground shifted, and, in the words of President Clinton himself, “welfare as we know it” had changed forever.

Despite protestations from the left, it was indeed the case that a significant political consensus had formed around the issue of welfare reform. More than a year before the passage of the final bill, as the newly established Republican majority in congress began its first hearing on welfare reform, the only real debate regarding the bill occurred around its edges. The ranking Democratic member of the House Subcommittee on Human Resources, Representative Harold Ford, kicked off the “opposition” to the bill by declaring: “We know that there are those who are trapped into this vicious cycle of poverty and welfare, we know that the system out there is not working.”² That welfare reform would happen in some form another was understood as fait accompli.

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The overwhelming necessity of reform was even recognized by President Clinton himself, who in his remarks upon signing the bill said: “while far from perfect, this legislation provides an historic opportunity.” Compromise was the theme of the day; an admittedly flawed bill was passed and signed into law, because *something* had to be done. Public opinion and political elites had overwhelmingly favored passage. The Brookings Institute’s Ron Haskins, one of the PRWORA’s principal architects, offers a remarkable illustration of the near-unanimity of support for the PRWORA:

[A]s the crucial welfare votes in Congress approached, the *New Republic* urged both Congress and President Clinton to support the Republican welfare reform legislation. It would be impossible to think of more striking evidence that important elements of the American left recognized the serious problems of AFDC and the need for a change in the entitlement mentality that had been almost the *sine qua non* of American liberalism. Some disillusioned liberals must have thought that Herbert Croly turned over in his grave the day the *New Republic* endorsed the end of entitlement and the beginning of mandatory work.\(^4\)

In the eyes of most observers, welfare reform was desperately necessary, it was all but inevitable, and even if imperfect, it was good.

Sadly, the debates about welfare reform in 1995 and 1996 did not ask some of the probing questions that might have illuminated the underlying causes of the crisis in the American welfare state. They did not ask why it was that so many of the politicians,\(^3\)

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speakers, and experts on welfare reform maintained a distinction between those individuals who were thought to be merely poor and people who were described as part of the so-called “culture of poverty and dependency.” Moreover, they did not contemplate why it was that these same speakers were so quick to excitedly declare that welfare reform would help the poor to learn “the dignity of work.” While welfare reform addressed a handful of structural and motivational causes of the problem of America’s underclass, it did not interrogate the underlying rhetoric of the culture of poverty. By only focusing on the presence or absence of work and the meme that cash welfare benefits created dependency, reform did little more than reduce welfare rolls by pushing some of the most vulnerable persons in America even deeper into the underclass.

If we take the time to carefully look at the way that work is rendered in discussions of poverty and welfare, we can gain a better understanding of why it is that many Americans feel the way that they do about the poor. Moreover, if we more closely examine the emergent rhetorical linkage between work and self-worth, we can hope to gain the capacity for better judgment about what sorts of rhetoric we should endeavor to promote in the public sphere. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that it is of importance to de-couple the idea of economic productivity from notions of human worth, since, together, they permanently condemn a portion of highly vulnerable people into a rhetorical space in which they are valueless and disposable.

In order to demonstrate these rhetorical phenomena, I shall attempt to answer a fairly direct, but nonetheless complex question: By what rhetorical means did the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) come to be the law of the land? Of course, no question is ever so simple as it might appear at first
glance; indeed, little can be said if not the claim that the revolutionary welfare reform legislation of 1996 was a result of a complex intersection of multiple rhetorical trajectories, images, and political histories. While a number of stories about the 1996 welfare reform have been written, I intend to shed light on a different narrative: the story of the story of welfare reform. This thesis endeavors to trace the conspicuous manner in which the trajectories of terms such as “welfare,” “poverty,” “work,” and “dignity” came to intersect in 1996 and, in so doing, gave rise to a seismic shift in the way that American government administered poverty relief.

When President Bill Clinton closed his public remarks on the signing of the PRWORA by declaring: “today we are ending welfare as we know it,” he was not engaging in a moment of spectacular rhetorical invention; rather, he drew to a tentative close a rhetorical cycle kicked off some four years prior when he gave his acceptance speech at the Democratic Party convention. However, to claim that Clinton was the prime mover or leader of welfare reform is to give him too much credit for the changes that occurred in the PRWORA. Conversely, it is equally rash to suggest that these were inevitable transformations that simply took place under the passive watch of President Clinton and the Republican congress of Newt Gingrich. Instead, a complex and interwoven dance of rhetorical interests helped give rise to the moment which Clinton and Gingrich were able to seize. In his compelling rhetorical history of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, David Zarefsky writes:

The facts of an episode in political life are not “given” or univocal; they are not present in the external world awaiting discovery by political actors. To be sure,

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5 Clinton, "Prwora Signing Statement"
certain conditions exist independently of the will of any public official. . . . But the
*meaning* of those events depends upon how they are characterized in public
discourse. The person out of work may be a “casual job seeker” or a victim of “the
worst recession since World War II.” . . . These alternatives suggest quite different
attitudes about the situation and appropriate public policies which might respond
to it. And yet no alternative is intrinsically the “right” way to view the situation.
Which alternative prevails will depend upon the *choices* made by political actors
themselves, as they define situations in their own minds and exchange their views
with others.6

The rhetorical elements of the political actors embroiled in contest over welfare — those
choices that they have made in the depiction of welfare and poverty — form the primary
focus of my study.

The many acts of speaking about welfare, when imbued with this notion of choice,
neither can nor should be viewed as a neutral activity with merely descriptive power. It is
equally shortsighted to assume that the words of the political actors in question are purely
animated by political calculation. It is necessary to understand the various messages and
words that circulate about debates over welfare as a set of texts. These texts do not merely
demand analysis of the given meaning or intent of the persuaders involved, but also
deserve analysis as something that is received and *understood*. A robust study of welfare
reform, then, engages more than just the legislation and its outcomes; it asks questions
about the cultural, historical, and rhetorical exigencies from which this legislation arose.

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While it is arguments surrounding welfare reform that form the principal objects of my study, the object of these arguments deserves attention as well. But from the standpoint of rhetorical study, legislation itself, that is, the actual text of bills and laws, are often largely uninteresting. They are rather bland and mechanistic, adding, striking, or changing the language of a particular regulation or piece of legal code, and rarely providing any direct or obvious insight into the mental states, motives, or actions of the persons who debated and wrote the bill. Unlike legal decisions rendered by courts, pieces of legislation do not possess written dissent, nor do they make any attempt to chronicle the disagreement or debate out of which they were born. The “hermeneutic challenge” presented by such texts can arise in any number of contexts, but nonetheless creates a situation in which the text itself is incapable of speaking with any degree of directness as to its origins or intent. Instead, the critic must necessarily consider the constellation of voices and arguments that surround the legislation.

The primary objects of analysis for this study are congressional hearings held before the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Ways and Means and its Subcommittee on Human Resources. Taken primarily from the 104th Congress (1995 and 1996), these hearings constitute the most significant and concise archive of political deliberation over welfare reform and help to offer insight into the process by which the PRWORA came to be.

There is no shortage of primary material to analyze regarding poverty and welfare reform. In particular, the leadership of President Clinton on the issue, taken with

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7 For an example of this phenomenon at work in historical contemplation of the Federalist Papers, see James Jasinski, “Heteroglossia, Polyphony, and the Federalist Papers,” *RSQ: Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1997).
Zarefsky’s admonition that “any such analysis must begin with the realization that in modern American society the presidency is the primary source of symbols about public issues,” makes the selection of congressional hearings conspicuous. A few important features of the PRWORA, however, distinguish it from earlier welfare debates such as FDR’s New Deal or LBJ’s War on Poverty (of which Zarefsky writes).

First, unlike FDR and LBJ, President Clinton passed the PRWORA without the help of a large congressional majority from his own party. Haskins explains: “Clinton’s real problem was that there was no single proposal that could unite Democrats. . . . Clinton needed Republicans to pass welfare reform because liberal Democrats simply would not support the kind of bill Clinton and his task force was brewing up. Republicans and the public demanded mandatory work, sanctions, and a time limit, all of which split the Democratic Party, especially in the House of Representatives.” The result of this historically peculiar situation was that Clinton exercised significantly less leadership on the issue than he could, had there been Democratic majority in congress. Given that Clinton had suffered an immensely embarrassing electoral defeat in the 1994 midterm elections, such that Republicans controlled both the House and Senate, he was essentially forced to accept whatever compromise congress was going to send him. While he was able to exercise his veto twice to kill even more punitive bills before accepting the PRWORA, President Clinton had nonetheless ceded a large amount of the rhetorical soapbox to Newt Gingrich and the congressional Republican leadership. Clinton’s fear of the electoral repercussions dominated his approach to the PRWORA. R. Kent Weaver tells the story of

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how Clinton, confronted with the question of whether or not to sign the final bill, “held a long meeting with his cabinet and top political advisors,” amid predictions that his signature or veto could “turn a projected fifteen-point Clinton victory over Dole in the fall presidential election into a three-point loss.” Clinton’s electoral calculations cannot be understated. Chief strategist Dick Morris is said to have declared upon the bill’s signing: “That’s it. The election is over.” With Clinton on his electoral heels, Congress, not the President, controlled the welfare debate.

Congressional hearings also provide a more robust, polyvocal perspective on legislative debates. Presidential rhetoric, while unquestionably important, offers one perspective on a debate: namely, the President’s. The President’s voice is certainly the loudest and most recognized, such that it draws the most media attention, commentary and counter-reaction, all of which can help to create a more fully-formed picture of the entirety of a debate. However, the format of congressional hearings gives a much better picture of a legislative debate-in-progress, contrasted with what I shall term the decision-oriented perspective of Presidential rhetoric. Congressional hearings give a bird’s-eye-view of the agonistic, back-and-forth negotiations and contestations that help to create the actual legislation itself. They help to inform why and how certain choices are made regarding the contours and particular provisions that become law. Moreover, they offer extensive records of the expert testimony that helps to shape bills. Presidential speech, on the other hand, is both brief and far more focused on the question of whether a particular

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bill is, on balance, good or bad. There are only two ways a President can react to legislation: veto or sign. Even in the case of the PRWORA, where two previous bills were vetoed on account of some of their provisions, the image presented is of a President either in support or opposition to the general principles embodied in the bill. The electoral calculations of Bill Clinton’s decision to sign the PRWORA provide ample evidence of this claim. Finally, exclusive focus on the rhetoric of the President gives only the Democratic or Republican perspective; Congress gives both, in every variation and nuance imaginable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While no shortage of histories and commentaries of the New Deal, Great Society, and the PRWORA have been written, surprisingly scant attention has been directed to welfare within the discipline of Communication, particularly within the sub-area of Rhetoric. Multiple searches of the EBSCO database Communication and Mass Media Complete revealed the shockingly limited amount of scholarly work on the question of welfare and poverty. The searches were restricted to peer reviewed academic journals within the fields of Communication and Media Studies and drew from among EBSCO’s subject headings of “Public Welfare” and “Poverty,” the main classification headings for publications that addressed either governmental welfare policy or poverty more generally. In addition, full-text searches were conducted of key terms such as “New Deal,” “Great Society,” “Welfare,” and “Welfare Reform.”

The combined results of these searches are, to say the least, disappointing. In total, only fifty-five articles appeared in peer-reviewed publications that could be reasonably considered affiliated with the Communication discipline. Given the high degree of salience that the issue of welfare holds within the public, as well as other disciplines, it
would not be unreasonable to expect a significantly larger number of publications on the topic. Perhaps more surprising, given rhetorical theory and criticism’s general interest with social formations and power, only seventeen peer-reviewed publications were found within the EBSCO Communication and Mass Media Complete database.

The earliest and most seminal work in rhetorical criticism of welfare policy is a series of articles and a subsequent book by David Zarefsky on Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” Beginning with 1977’s “President Johnson’s War on Poverty: the Rhetoric of Three ‘Establishment’ Movements,”¹² Zarefsky argues that Johnson’s War on Poverty provides an effective artifact from which to challenge the orthodoxy of social movement criticism. Zarefsky explains how the majoritarian legislation and rhetoric of the Great Society was co-extensive with and largely the result of what he calls establishment movements. Contrasted with social movement criticism’s focus on so-called insurgent movements, Zarefsky argues that the establishment movements represented in the War on Poverty succeed by using traditional and majority-held opinion to bolster already existing cultural views and policies.

Zarefsky’s subsequent article, “The Great Society as a Rhetorical Proposition,” expands his analysis of Johnson’s welfare policies beyond social movement analysis and into a more direct theorization of the means of persuasion employed by Johnson to gain assent to expansion of the welfare state. Zarefsky characterizes the formulation of a “Great Society” by Johnson as a “rhetorical proposition”: an assertion advanced in response to a problem in persuasion.” Johnson engaged in the creation of a metonym of sorts, in which

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a broad set of principles about social justice and governmental goals came to be represented by a flexible phrase. A Great Society was a trope into which any number of desirable ideas could be condensed and, as a result, it became a rhetorical tool with which Johnson could evoke any number of positive notions and feelings in his audience. According to Zarefsky, the ability of Johnson to wield this discursive tool was one of the primary reasons that he was able to marshal sufficient support for his welfare policies in a short period of time.

Zarefsky’s analysis of the Johnson presidency comes to a zenith in *President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History*, a 1986 book in which he endeavors not only to explain Johnson’s success in expanding welfare, but also the failure of the Great Society to sustain support for anti-poverty programs or to have a lasting effect on poverty in the United States. Zarefsky posits that his study “locates the problems of the War on Poverty in its discourse. . . . The central thesis of this book is that . . . rhetorical choices [were] helpful to the Johnson administration to obtain passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 but that each also contained the seeds of its own destruction.”

Proceeding to analyze five different symbols and metaphors used by Johnson in support of his agenda and the subsequent aftermath, Zarefsky crafts a book that is likely the most definitive work relying on a disciplinary rhetorical method of analysis.

The second scholar in the field of Communication who has invested significant effort into researching questions of welfare policy is Robert Asen. Taken with Zarefsky, Asen’s writings on welfare and poverty help to constitute the bulk of the peer-reviewed literature on the topic.

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writing on the topic (a little more than a third). Asen approaches welfare from a different perspective, in his own words: “examining collective imagining about poverty and the poor in the institutional forums of public policy debate.”

The tragedy of what Asen describes as the “retrenchment era” of welfare is the manner in which, over time, “the vision of debate participants has narrowed considerably,” such that society is barely, if at all, able to imagine the poor in any but the most degrading ways. Both Zarefsky and Asen’s work will play a significant role in my subsequent analysis and will be explained in more depth as appropriate.

Outside of Communication, there is, to be sure, a robust literature to be found in numerous other disciplines. In reviewing this literature, one can see an interest in rhetoric and rhetorical criticism. With this thesis, I aim to satisfy that growing interest.

PLAN OF STUDY

The analysis will proceed in five chapters. Following the first (this introduction), Chapter Two provides a rhetorical history of welfare and poor relief in the United States. While few living Americans are capable of remembering a time without the existence of an extensive federal welfare system, even the most limited federal excursions into the realm of poor relief are little more than 100 years old. The geneses of modern

17 Ibid.
governmental approaches to poverty are found in two English laws: the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 and the Victorian-era Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Together these two laws established the guiding principles of British and, by proxy, American views toward poverty and welfare. The overriding principle that emerges from both of these laws — and subsequently forms the backbone of American discourse toward welfare — is the necessity of work. While several binaries come to characterize the rhetoric of welfare, work forms the axis that divides the most powerful of these binaries: the idea of deserving and undeserving poor.

The centrality of work to conceptions of poverty comes to maturity during the unprecedented economic growth of the American “Guilded Age” of the late 1800s. The widespread use of forced labor in poor houses and the mythology of heroic novelists such as Horatio Alger show how the rugged individualism of American frontier culture came to inform understandings of self-reliance that develop amongst the rapid industrialization of the post-Civil War era. The shockingly widespread poverty and degradation that accompanied the unfettered excess of the Gilded Age would, in turn, give birth to the Progressive movement in American politics. Combined with the sensationalist writing of Muckracking authors and journalists, Progressivism would give birth to the earliest forms of welfare in the United States. The meager mother’s pensions provided by state governments after the turn of the century would, over the course of the next 100 years, evolve into the cash payments that are known as “welfare” today.

The evolution of mother’s pensions largely occurred during two major expansions of the American welfare state. The first, the Great Depression, saw an unprecedented explosion in the scope of the federal government in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New
Deal. The second, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, would expand welfare in an attempt to respond to the rhetorical and sociological discovery by America of a “culture of poverty.” Chapter Two explains how, from the birth of the American welfare state in the early 20th Century to its zenith in the 1960s, work remained the central rhetorical principle around which welfare was organized and understood.

Chapter Three begins the analysis of the contemporary rhetoric of work by detailing the retrenchment of welfare. President Ronald Reagan’s cuts to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1982 and 1983 mark the first significant reduction in welfare services and benefits since its inception. Reagan’s subsequent forays into work requirements in the Family Support Act of 1988 (FSA) provided the surest signal that attitudes about welfare and the poor were changing and other major reforms were around the corner.

The primary subject of this thesis, the enactment of the PRWORA, comprises the remainder of this chapter. Relying heavily on the account of Ron Haskins, the staff director of the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Committee on Ways and Means in 1995 and 1996, I hope to demonstrate the surprising lack of meaningful controversy within congress over the work requirements of the PRWORA. The chapter then devotes the bulk of its pages to a detailed rhetorical criticism of the use of “work” in the text of the hearings themselves.

The rhetoric of work is criticized by taking up the previously cited work of Zarefsky in which he explains how “meaning . . . depends on how [events] are characterized in public discourse” and how the particular meaning which “prevails will depend upon choices made by political actors themselves.” I couple Zarefsky’s theory of
symbolic creation and exchange with Michael Calvin McGee’s theorization of ideological criticism to broaden the way in which the particular symbol or work can be understood.\textsuperscript{18} By providing a sociological perspective on the meaning and use of symbols, ideological criticism will expand the understanding of work beyond its use by members of the federal government to the role it plays throughout all of American society. “Work,” properly understood in relation to poverty, is not a symbol invented by a few Republican congressmen in the last quarter-century, but is a signifier of a powerful rhetoric that is picked up by opponents of welfare and used to great effect throughout history.

Chapter Four undertakes the second half of the rhetorical analysis around which this thesis is based: the discursive linkage between work and dignity. Despite the fairly widespread acceptance of the notion that “‘dignity’ is something that is essential to humankind’s well-being and spiritual welfare,”\textsuperscript{19} it is notoriously difficult to define. Borrowing heavily from the work of Michael Hyde, the first part of the chapter will explore some tentative definitions of dignity before settling on an admittedly imperfect, but operationally useful one. The chapter will subsequently explain in greater detail how, given nearly any definition, dignity is indeed an essential part of human welfare (welfare understood both as well-being and as governmental poverty relief).

With a working understanding of dignity in hand, Chapter Four will conduct a criticism of a second pattern within the congressional hearings on the PRWORA: the rhetorical linkage of work as a necessary condition of human dignity. Turning once again

\textsuperscript{18} Although McGee develops ideological criticism across a number of different publications, the most concise summary is likely found in Michael Calvin McGee, “The “Ideograph”: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology,” \textit{Quarterly Journal of Speech} 66, no. 1 (1980).

to Hyde, this linkage is analyzed using his self-described “trilogy” of conscience, acknowledgement, and perfection. The underlying theme to this analysis is the immense danger that comes with the elevation of an activity (work) to the status of a constitutive element of an ontological state (having dignity). The result of this elevation is the unavoidable conclusion that modern day rhetorics of poverty portray the poor as not only ethically deficient, but ontologically defective. By instituting work requirements and time limitations on welfare benefits, the PRWORA casts off a significant number of non-working poor. By discursively linking work with dignity, present-day rhetoric of poverty transforms these cast-offs into a social “remainder:” they are people who are left behind once the rhetorical work of dividing society by merit is complete, bereft of even the possibility of, in the words of Hyde, “humanity’s well-being and spiritual welfare.”

Chapter Five draws this thesis to a close by attempting to chart future trajectories and interventions that can be made by rhetorical critics, in hopes of rejoining this human remainder to the social world. Two suggestions are made. The first is that critics of rhetoric must engage in a reconstruction of “work,” so that society no longer understands it in the strictest terms of economically or socially productive activity. Instead, I offer the notion of work as the task of everyday living with others, such that the most productive and principled work is the act of acknowledgement of the other. Second, I suggest that a more stable recognition of dignity is necessary to prevent its use in a degrading manner. It is unlikely that a consensus-based definition of dignity can be formalized, especially within the limits of this thesis. However, rather than engaging in the normative act of defining dignity, I propose that critics should seek to recognize dignity as the way of being human. When dignity is understood as something that inheres in the human struggle of
being in the world, it holds the potential to be an inalienable foundation on which future, more just relationships to poverty can be formed.
In the words of President Clinton, “welfare as we know it” is a surprisingly recent phenomenon within the United States. In fact, federal involvement in the provision of significant assistance of any sort has only existed for roughly 100 years.\(^\text{20}\)

**EARLY POOR RELIEF: RAGS, NO RICHES**

Early poor relief in the United States was a decidedly local affair, with scant involvement by even state governments. Much like many other features of American society and governance, attitudes and policies regarding poor relief were largely carryovers from England. The landmark English legislation on the question was the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. Four broad principles were established within that law, the echoes of each of which can still be felt in attitudes toward welfare today. Michael Tanner summarizes these principles:

1. care for the poor was a public responsibility;
2. care for the poor was a local matter;
3. public relief was denied to individuals who could be cared for by their families; and
4. children of the poor could be apprenticed to farmers and artisans who would care for them in exchange for work.\(^\text{21}\)

Many of the same Protestant reforms of the 1700s would also see their way to the colonies, as settlement laws arose on both sides of the Atlantic.\(^\text{22}\) Protestantism provided a new outlook on the phenomenon of poverty, as it transformed public notions of charity, such


that “[t]he old kind of charity left it to each individual to alleviate, according to his means, the suffering he saw about him. The new kind, born of Protestantism, was less instinctive, more rational and systemic. It made of charity a matter for social action rather than the exercise of a private virtue, and it transformed it from a moral obligation to a legal right.”

The Poor House

The combination of Protestant approaches with the principles of the Poor Law helped shape the boundaries of American poor relief before the 1900s. By the 1800s, they had become manifest in far more technical means than the feudal auction of the poor to artisans and farmers, but they nonetheless closely hewed the line of the Elizabethan principles. Broadly speaking, aid was administered in one of two ways. The first, known as outdoor relief, focused on providing aid to the poor in their own homes, providing small amounts of cash, food, or fuel during the winter months. The second, far more common form of relief was the poor house. Poorhouses were institutions in which the poor were forced to live and work, typically on incredibly menial or pointless tasks. As early as the 1830s, many localities were required by their state governments to create poorhouses, which would be the dominant form of poor relief for the next 75 years. The tasks that the poor in these houses performed were often basic and tedious, as simple as moving rocks from one corner of a yard to the other, and back again the next day. The central organizing principle of the poorhouse was work, reflecting the Poor Law’s norm that able-bodied individuals should be denied outright charity or assistance (outdoor relief). Tanner explains: “Poorhouses were seen as superior to outdoor relief because they

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were less expensive and because they provided a deterrent to able-bodied people’s applying for relief. Conditions in poorhouses were harsh. Long hours of work were mandatory. Whipping and other punishments were common for infractions of the rules. The poor were often housed together with the insane, prostitutes, and petty thieves.”

The harsh conditions of poorhouses were no mere coincidence or curiosity. Absent a permanent debilitation or injury, the uniform social expectation was that all individuals must work, even if the work in which they were engaged was pointless and advanced no social good beyond the fact of its existence.

**The Gilded Age**

The second half of the nineteenth century saw massive changes in the American economy, as rapid industrialization took place in the wake of the Civil War. The growth and concentration of industry in urban centers led to two associated phenomena: growth and concentration of urban poor and individuals of marvelous wealth. This was the era of J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie, i.e., the “Gilded Age.”

A rhetorical mythology emerged within the Gilded Age, one that sought to explain both the extravagance of the wealthy and increasingly destitute conditions of the poor. Horatio Alger’s novels, some of the most popular of the time, told fanciful stories of poor boys who would grow to wealth by way of dedication and hard work. Concomitantly, an increasingly common meme of public address appeared, preaching a “Gospel of Wealth” in both secular and religious contexts. Asen explains:

> [T]he proponents of the Gospel of Wealth confronted and celebrated the economic conditions of the Gilded Age. Drawn from a title subsequently appended to an

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26 Ibid.
essay by Andrew Carnegie, the Gospel of Wealth represented the social theory of the Gilded Age. Its proponents saw the unequal distribution of wealth as an ineluctable phenomenon with both natural and divine sources. . . . Though the unequal distribution of wealth sometimes was hard on the individual, it was best for the race because it ensured the survival of the fittest. And society rightly rewarded those possessing the skills that advanced the cause of humanity. . . . Like the Alger hero’s new suit, the outward displays of the wealthy capitalist signaled his inner virtue. . . . Both Carnegie and Sumner suggested that if the rich man exhibited a natural superiority, then poverty arose as a consequence of individual character flaws.27

The Gospel of Wealth espoused a set of beliefs about the organization of the world that was largely unconcerned with structural or individual explanations of poverty, but instead accepted the world as it was and placed the onus on the individual to strive for the untold fortunes of the industrial magnates that society and the Gospel valorized. Failure to achieve wealth was a failure to heed the call of the Gospel, tantamount to the rejection of God that rhetoric of gospels invokes. Blame thus lay at the feet of the non-believers, persons who were so flawed that they were incapable of hearing the call of something so evident as ostensibly divine words.

The earlier Elizabethan explanations of poverty had merely divided the poor into two broad camps, the deserving and undeserving. The deserving poor were befallen by either bad luck (sickness, accidents, etc.) or could not reasonably be expected to work (elderly, orphans). The undeserving poor “were those who could be self-sufficient but

were not because of personal or 'moral' failings; that group included drunkards, layabouts, and profligates.” The Gospel of Wealth redefined and broadened the scope of individuals who would be considered among the undeserving poor. As mythologies about the opportunity available to each and every member of society gained ever-increasing traction, so too did the notion that poverty was not only a failure, but a refusal on the part of individuals to hear the Gospel.

The results of this narrowing sense of desert, coupled with the aforementioned growing systematization of attitudes regarding governmental roles in poverty relief are remarkably offensive by modern standards. One of the most pernicious practices was family breakup, which would remove children from the homes of poor parents, in the hopes of preventing the children from taking on the inherent laziness and moral flaws of their parents. Once more, Asen explains how:

Its widespread use stemmed partially from increasing concerns about the hereditary nature of poverty. The most infamous articulation of this view may have been Richard L. Dugdale's study of a poor family he called the "Jukes." Dugdale identified two kinds of pauperism: hereditary and induced. . . . Dugdale's study suggested an approach that focused on children already born, and it appeared to justify the attempts of others to bar the "feeble-minded" from marriage and even force sterilization. . . . In an article published in 1900 in the Charity Organization Review, J. J. Kelso, a Canadian reformer who argued that his country adopt the CAS treatment method, wrote that "unfortunately there is a

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28 Tanner, Poverty of Welfare, 15.
class who, from inherent laziness, will not work or make any effort to improve the condition of themselves or their children.”

The irony of this horrific practice is that no such enthusiasm existed for government in other spheres of public life. In fact, “the philosophy of government of the Gospel of Wealth rested on noninterference in the economy, save the protection of property.”

Nevertheless, the Gilded Age would not last in perpetuity. The outrageous excess with which believers in the Gospel of Wealth lived was economically unsustainable. When combined with the exploding poverty and squalor found within the urban centers of the United States, the seeds of the modern welfare state were ironically sewn by the Gospel’s very indifference to suffering.

PROGRESSIVES AND PROBLEM SOLVERS

The arrival of the Progressive Era heralded major changes in attitudes regarding the role of the federal government in society and the arrival of a deep skepticism toward the unrestrained corporatism of the Gilded Age. Muckraking authors and journalists such as Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens, Ira Tarbell, and Ray Stannard Baker published frequent criticisms of the behavior of major corporations and the conditions under which urban workers toiled. The works of Steffens, Tarbell, and Baker were often featured in *McClure’s* magazine, focusing on the anti-competitive business practices of trusts and major corporations, such as John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil. Along with the shift in media and public sentiment came shifts in political sentiments, as Presidents Teddy

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29 Asen, *Visions*, 34.
30 Ibid., 32.
Roosevelt and William Howard Taft threw their weight behind Progressive causes such as “trust-busting.”

Numerous social reforms were also afoot during the Progressive Era, as the influential works of American pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey began to inform social and political practice within the United States. Among the most influential of Dewey’s wide-ranging contributions to American intellectual life is his passionate advocacy of “progressive education,” a repudiation of the then-dominant model of classical education in favor of teaching and learning based around a belief that students were best served when made to “learn by doing.” Also embedded within progressivism was the notion that education should focus on the creation of practical skills for students, rather than rote memorization of shop-worn texts. For the vast majority of American children, this would take the form of occupational education, focused upon the development of skills that would best suit the working life that awaited them.

Progressives spoke, wrote, and rallied in reaction to the explosive growth in the American population and economy during the Gilded Age and the growing antipathy toward the abuses that it had wrought. Left feeling powerless in the face of corporate trusts and proliferating social problems, Americans attitudes about the proper role of government began to rapidly change. Michael Tanner, a conservative critic of welfare, writing for the Cato Institute, aptly summarizes this change, remarking: “The rise of “modernism” and “progressivism” caused many Americans to believe that ‘experts’ were required to solve most problems and that only government could provide the needed
expertise. Previously, the purpose of government had been seen as protecting individual rights. Now, government was seen as a problem solver.”

While public support for government problem solving was, broadly speaking, one of the conspicuous changes ushered in with progressivism, problem-solving government itself was not novel. Numerous examples of federal government intervention exist from the 1860s forward. A fairly large system of pensions and benefits were provided by the federal government to significant numbers of disabled veterans from the Civil War; major flood relief was provided on at least four different occasions before 1890; and agricultural assistance payments to American farmers had already begun, the largest of which was a special appropriation for relief from a locust infestation in 1875. These early and comparatively small programs helped the government to, for lack of a better term, “get its feet wet” in the practice of social relief. They also helped provide evidence for subsequent progressive arguments favoring a problem-solving government. Nonetheless, they were limited in scope and very targeted. While none shattered the taboo against systematic intervention across multiple spheres of the economy, these limitations would not last for long.

Mother’s Pensions

One of the first significant federal interventions into the sphere of welfare occurred under the watch of President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1909, faced with a growing number of poor widows and single mothers with dependents, Roosevelt convened a conference at the White House to begin a debate about the role of local, state, and federal

31 Tanner, Poverty of Welfare, 16.
32 Ibid.
governments in a broader scheme of poor relief. Perhaps the single most important shift that would emerge in the findings of the conference was a move away from the poor house model and toward outdoor relief, a nearly forbidden practice under the 300 year old foundation of Elizabethan Poor Law. Asen places the origins and results of the conference in context, explaining:

the 1909 White House Conference called for a noninstitutional strategy centered on home life. Pres. Theodore Roosevelt convened the conference upon receipt of a letter from activists in the child-saving movement. In his opening address, Roosevelt emphasized the significance of the conference theme. Urging the attendees to adopt a progressive stance, he argued for reforms enabling single mothers to care for their children in cases "where the father has died, where the breadwinner has gone." Roosevelt stressed that "[s]urely in such a case the goal toward which we should strive is to help that mother, so that she can keep her own home and keep the child in it; that is the best thing possible to be done for that child."33

Beyond explicitly calling for outdoor relief, Roosevelt’s “progressive stance” includes two conspicuous features. First, it locates need as originating not from poverty, *per se*, but from the absence of a breadwinner. It is unremarkable that 1909 gender norms would hold women as either unfit or unwelcome for the position of primary breadwinner of a household. However, the need for reform is firmly rooted not merely in the absence of economically productive activity in the household, but in its functional impossibility. The second important feature is the abandonment of family breakup and focus instead on the

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33 Asen, *Visions*, 37.
preservation of the familial home. The integrity of the home matters to Roosevelt because of the fact that it is most effective at creating the third notable claim in his statement: holding the welfare of the child as the paramount value to be pursued.

With this brief statement, Roosevelt expanded the number of people who would qualify as deserving poor, arguing that circumstance had sufficiently endangered the welfare of these families to justify government intervention. However, despite the fairly bold and likely controversial nature of these rhetorical moves, he did so without disturbing the central axis along which the deserving and undeserving are divided: work. Single mothers could no more be expected to work than the disabled or elderly and were therefore among the victims of bad luck that characterized the Elizabethan deserving poor. The maintenance of this distinction — the impossibility of work — is meaningful because of the manner in which it places deserving poor outside of the realm of reasonable moral agency. The underlying laws of the Gospel of Wealth are left intact. The result is that these mothers are not so much innocent of the charge of violation of the laws of the Gospel of Wealth as they are “not guilty by reason of disability”. Ironically, by carving out this exception for individuals who might otherwise disprove the central thesis of the Gospel, Roosevelt only made it more ideologically coherent.

While Roosevelt’s reputation as a reformer may well exceed his results in many other areas, he effectively carried the proverbial big stick when it came to poor relief: in the wake of the 1909 White House Conference, mothers’ pensions rapidly grew. Starting with
Missouri and Illinois in 1911, mothers’ pensions would spread such that 41 of the contemporary 50 states had put them in place.\textsuperscript{34}

**Rhetorical Progression and Regression**

While the underlying tenets of the Gospel of Wealth may well have been in place, progressivism nonetheless introduced a contradictory dynamic into the way in which poverty and poor relief were rhetorically built. Tanner suggests that progressive reforms are reflected in the governmental rhetoric of the times, arguing:

> The changing attitude toward government welfare can also be seen in the era’s changing terminology. For example, as part of New York’s 1929 Public Welfare Law, “relief” was renamed “public welfare,” “almshouses” became “county homes,” “superintendents of the poor” became “commissioners of public welfare,” and the State Board of Charities was renamed the State Board of Social Welfare.\textsuperscript{35}

Tanner is certainly correct that this terminology reflects the progressive belief in problem-solving government, as well as a broader concern for the health of society as a whole. However, he gives too little due to the potential for causality to work in both directions. Rhetorical choices do not merely reflect pre-existing attitudes, they also have tremendous power to create new attitudes, legitimize nascent beliefs in times of social change, and reinforce existing mythologies that are threatened by that same change. All three of these functions are at work in the rise of “welfare” out of the mothers’ pension system. Roosevelt uses rhetoric to open up space for a new group of deserving poor and to challenge the opposition to outdoor relief. New York’s Public Welfare Law gives life to the

\textsuperscript{34} Tanner, *Poverty of Welfare*, 18.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 19.
progressive notion of a problem-solving government that is a custodian of the overall well
being (“welfare”) of society as a whole. Yet underneath these ostensibly radical changes,
the same foundation of work and self-reliance that underpinned both the Elizabeth Poor
Law and Gospel of Rhetoric is maintained.

From a historical perspective, it is likely both inaccurate and unfair to condemn
Teddy Roosevelt and the Progressive reformers for failing to demolish the Elizabethan and
Gospel rhetorics: it was neither their intent, nor within the realm of possibilities for them.
Contrasted to the nearly constant 400-year long trajectory of poor relief before
Progressive reformers, even the modest growth of mother’s pensions represents a
watershed change. Yet within rhetoric, perhaps even more than physics, it may well be fair
to claim that there is not action without opposite reaction. In opposition to the
development of mother’s pensions and an expanded, problem-solving federal
government, several familiar rhetorics emerged: “charity workers countered that
governments would be subject to corruption and political influence, would not attract
competently trained administrators, and would not provide adequate supervision. Charity
workers objected to the rights claims implicit in pensions, which they believed would
repress self-help, self-respect, and independence.”36 Here, the rhetoric of self-help is
evolving into a more complex rhetoric that reflects the presence of government relief in
addition to traditional notions of independence and work. This rhetoric of “dependency”
will play an important role in the story of welfare reform and retrenchment that follows.

36 Asen, Visions, 34-35.
NEW DEAL, NEW STORY?

Beyond slight modifications and tinkering about the margins of state and local welfare programs, the leadership of mother’s pensions would be the largest new federal efforts in the welfare arena for 20 years after the 1909 White House Conference. American involvement in World War I and the economic growth of the “roaring twenties” were sufficient to quell any substantial impulses toward or interest in expanded poor relief.

Of course, all of this would rapidly change in the aftermath of the collapse of the stock market begun on Black Monday, October 28, 1929. The beginning of the Great Depression would mark a period of such rapid social upheaval and change that the Pulitzer Prize winning Yale historian C. Vann Woodward comments that:

The brief period from 1929 to 1945 is unique in American history for its complexities of change and violence of contrasts. People who lived through the years . . . experienced more bewildering changes than had several generations of their predecessors. These changes included a transition from economic and social paralysis to unprecedented outbursts of national energy, the emergence from wretched years of poverty to unparalleled levels of prosperity, and the repudiation of a century-and-a-half of isolation as America entered World War II.\(^{37}\)

Principal among these “bewildering changes” was a massive expansion in the federal public welfare apparatus, the New Deal, launched by Theodore Roosevelt’s cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

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While Teddy Roosevelt’s 1909 White House Conference has been very successful in catalyzing the creation of mother’s pensions in most of the states of the union, it nonetheless kept close allegiance to the second principle to emerge from the Elizabethan Poor Law — that care for the poor was primarily a local concern. It is worthwhile to note that this norm enjoyed such strength that even federal rhetorical leadership, in the form of the 1909 Conference, was a novel occurrence. However, the depth and severity of the Great Depression were such that this local model of charity could not survive:

Both public and private charities were unprepared to deal with the sudden massive unemployment and poverty. The burden was huge. . . .

Local governments found that providing relief was a serious drain on their resources and created financial crises. Several cities went bankrupt. Detroit and Chicago found themselves without enough money to pay their schoolteachers. Private charities found it equally difficult to cope. In New York City alone nearly 400 private charities went under between 1929 and 1932.  

38 Tanner, Poverty of Welfare, 22.

The collapse of local charities, the only source of outdoor relief other than state mother’s pensions, would cause a predictable cascade of demands for action up through government. Tanner continues:

Local governments, not surprisingly, looked to state governments for assistance. Among the first to respond was New York’s governor Franklin Roosevelt, who called a special session of the legislature. . . .
Demands for federal action began to mount. There were marches on Washington, protests, even riots.\textsuperscript{39} These demands for federal action would culminate in the election of FDR to President in 1932. His first 100 days in office were marked by such a flurry of legislative activity that the first “100 days” of a Presidential term has become the benchmark by which all other Presidents have subsequently been judged.

FDR’s New Deal was focused on three major priorities: federally funded public works programs that would provide work for a portion of the millions of working age men who were unemployed; direct, outdoor relief for women; and a system of social insurance for the middle class, particularly unemployment insurance and a broad, national old age pension plan.\textsuperscript{40} While all of the major social programs that were enacted during FDR’s presidency are often casually grouped into the “New Deal,” it is analytically worthwhile to distinguish between those programs enacted in 1933 (the First New Deal) and those enacted in 1935 (the Second New Deal).

**The First New Deal**

The First New Deal was, for the most part, focused on a variety of reforms to the banking and agricultural sectors. Roosevelt’s “Bank Holiday,” the passage of the Emergency Banking Act, creation of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and suspension of the gold standard for US currency were but a few of the massive number of reforms hurried through Congress in the early days of the administration. Among these financial reforms were the first two employment related reforms that Roosevelt would

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 24-25.
advance: the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).

Both of these work relief programs were practically revolutionary, insofar as they provided direct monetary compensation to unemployed workers, in exchange for their labor on various projects of national importance. The CCC employed more than 3 million men in various environmental and conservation projects around the country. FERA provided more than $200 million to states to create their own work relief programs. David Kennedy writes in his Pulitzer Prize winning history of the Roosevelt Presidency, *Freedom from Fear*, that the “CCC and FERA . . . constituted important steps along the road to direct federal involvement in unemployment relief, something that Hoover had consistently and self-punishingly resisted. Roosevelt showed no such squeamishness.”

FDR’s preference for federal aid over locally administered aid was not merely based in beliefs about charity or a Progressive faith in the expertise and capacities of the federal government. His tenure as governor of New York and extensive experience with the urban political machine of Tammany Hall led him to believe that federal administration was not only necessary to circumvent the rampant corruption of local political bosses, but could also help to undermine the power of those bosses altogether: “like Hamilton’s scheme to secure the loyalty of creditors to the new national government by federal assumption of state debts, so would Roosevelt artfully transfer the primary

political allegiance of the unemployed from their local political club to Washington D.C.,
in the process breaking forever the historical drive shaft of the urban political machine.”  

The Second New Deal

While institutions such as the FDIC are part and parcel of the everyday life of modern Americans, they are not the most well recognized components of Roosevelt’s New Deal. In fact, very few of the programs created by the First New Deal continued to exist for more than ten years beyond their enactment. In contrast, the most lasting accomplishments of FDR’s first term as President were contained within the Second New Deal, another flurry of legislative activity undertaken in 1935.

The Second New Deal was comprised of three major pieces of legislation: the Wagner Act, the Emergency Relief Appropriation Bill (ERAB, or simply the “Big Bill”), and the Social Security Act.  Each of these would enjoy immediate controversy and notoriety, and leave a lasting impact on the American economy and government. The Wagner Act is not known so much by its name as by the organization it created, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and the movement that it allowed: “the organizing [of] millions of unskilled workers in the great mass-production sectors, especially steel and automaking, into powerful industrial unions.”

The Big Bill was the single largest peacetime appropriation of spending in the history of the United States until that time. Among the hundreds of programs that it created was one of the most memorable of the New Deal: the Works Progress

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 249-257.
44 Ibid., 289.
45 Ibid., 249.
Administration (WPA). The size and scope of the WPA left it open to enormous criticism, ironically, both from the left and right. On the left, labor leaders and reformers raised objections “fueled by a new militancy about the rights of the disadvantaged;” from the right came a “traditional skepticism about the “undeserving poor.””\textsuperscript{46} Even in the face of overwhelming congressional and popular support, the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor came to the foreground. It did so in some surprising places, not only within the rhetoric of conservatives.

In pressing for the single largest relief expenditure in the history of government, Roosevelt himself goes to extraordinary lengths to distinguish between relief and gainful work. Delivering the Annual Address to Congress (now known as the State of the Union Address) in which he urged congress to adopt his Big Bill, he says:

The stark fact before us is that great numbers still remain unemployed.

A large proportion of these unemployed and their dependents have been forced on the relief rolls. . . . The lessons of history, confirmed by the evidence immediately before me, show conclusively that continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fibre. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit. It is inimical to the dictates of sound policy. It is in violation of the traditions of America. Work must be found for able-bodied but destitute workers.

The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 253.
I am not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped by the giving of cash, of market baskets, of a few hours of weekly work cutting grass, raking leaves or picking up papers in the public parks. We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination. This decision brings me to the problem of what the Government should do with approximately five million unemployed now on the relief rolls.

This passage is a statement that seems practically ironic when considered in context. Within a speech delivered with the intent to secure passage of a massive welfare program and with an eloquence that could only be expected of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he has laid out the central memes and rhetorical blueprints for opposition to welfare in the years that will follow.

Three arguments arise from these few paragraphs. First, Roosevelt suggests that direct relief inspires dependency on its recipients, in such a way as to “induce a spiritual and moral disintegration.” Second, he most directly states that it is not the business of the federal government to give such relief. Third, and most relevant to the purposes of this analysis, he names the corrective that can protect the well-being of the poor, not only physically, but also in terms of “their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination”: work.

Excessive criticism of Roosevelt’s focus on work is probably unfair; after all, nationwide unemployment had been as high as 29% in the year before this address. Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of the notions of self-help, independence, and the centrality of work to American notions of self are amply demonstrated by his address.
Even during the depths of the Great Depression, it was simply beyond the pale for any American public figure to contradict the same mythology that sustained the Gospel of Wealth decades before, and the Elizabethan Poor Law more than 300 years prior.

Midway through his speech, Roosevelt outlines what he considers to be “three factors of security:” “1. The security of a livelihood through the better use of the national resources of the land in which we live; 2. The Security against the major hazards and vicissitudes of life; 3. The security of a decent homes.” The first of these factors is to be secured by the work relief programs of the Big Bill and the CCC. The second and third, however, necessitate a much larger system of social security. Rather than lay out the details of this program, Roosevelt only announces that he will provide congress with legislation in short order: “I shall send to you, in a few days, definite recommendations. . .” As one might expect from Roosevelt, these recommendations were delivered in the form of a national address.

The Social Security Act

As much as the WPA has become as an emblem of the New Deal, no single piece of legislation has had as enduring an effect as the Social Security Act of 1935. To Roosevelt, the work relief programs of the CCC and WPA were but pieces of a larger puzzle: “he regarded . . . three . . . elements—work relief, unemployment insurance, and old-age pensions—as parts of a unitary whole, a comprehensive strategy to put the country on a pathway to sustainable economic and social stability. . . . The longer-term features of Roosevelt’s grand design— unemployment insurance and old-age pensions—were incorporated in a separate piece of legislation, a landmark measure whose legacy
endured and reshaped the texture of American life: the Social Security Act. While the term “welfare” has come to encompass any number of programs and benefits that are provided by federal, state, and local governments, the Social Security Act is the bedrock legislation on which the vast majority of those programs were built.

While the onset of the Great Depression helped to create an atmosphere more conducive to federal relief efforts, they were not programs or advocacies that sprang up overnight in the wake of the stock market collapse. For many years prior, old age pensions and benefits had been a problem and issue of focus within policy and political discussions. As early as 1912, the Progressive Party had called for old-age pensions in their party platform. In 1930, FDR gave a speech to the Governors Conference advocating for some form of pension plan for retirees and in 1932, the Democratic platform “pledged Roosevelt’s party to “unemployment and old-age insurance under State laws.”

Working life and economics before the New Deal would appear practically unrecognizable to a contemporary reader: “For the great majority of workers, who lacked any pension coverage whatsoever, the very thought of “retirement” was unthinkable. Most elderly laborers worked until they dropped or were fired, then threw themselves either on the mercy of their families or on the decidedly less tender mercies of a local welfare agency.” The result was that individuals who would be retirees in post-depression society were working until they were literally so physically or mentally infirm as to be unproductive. This severely restricted the number of jobs available to younger workers and pushed up the cost of labor for employers. With the extraordinarily high

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47 Ibid., 258.
48 Ibid., 261.
49 Ibid.
unemployment figures of the Great Depression, Roosevelt was not only desperate for any measure that would help to relieve suffering, but saw an opportunity to effect a lasting transformation on American society.\textsuperscript{50}

More than creating a system of old-age pensions, Roosevelt’s SSA established a number of benefits for a variety of people of all ages that, taken together, defined the American system of welfare for the next 60 years. The major component, the system of federally guaranteed old-age pensions, was unsurprisingly controversial, as was the second major piece, unemployment insurance. In order to help speed the transition to the new system, an immediate $50 million was provided to states to help elderly individuals. The old-age pensions (Social Security) and federally funded, state administered system of unemployment insurance exist today in largely the same form as those created in 1935.\textsuperscript{51}

In contrast to the pensions and unemployment insurance, the last piece of the SSA was relatively small: $25 million was allotted for a new program named Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). ADC was a last minute addition considered a “new departure . . . that was “imperative” for “rearing fatherless families,” a particular concern in a decade when so many work-seeking fathers had abandoned their families and taken to the road.” \textsuperscript{52}

While practically an afterthought to the broader SSA, ADC would become the nexus of the controversy and public debate over welfare for the remainder of the century.

Only two weeks after announcing the programs of the “Big Bill,” Roosevelt again addressed congress to unveil the Social Security Act. Turning back to an address a year earlier, he begins the address by summarizing “the main objectives of our American

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
program. Among these was, and is, the security of the men, women, and children of the Nation against certain hazards and vicissitudes of life. This purpose is an essential part of our task.” This phrasing, calling forth “security” and the “hazards and vicissitudes of life” is not an unfamiliar one; indeed, Roosevelt used it repeatedly and to great effect in his addresses to congress and the nation. On June 8, 1934, he spoke to congress to report on the objectives of his administration, claiming “people want decent homes to live in; they want to locate them where they can engage in productive work; and they want some safeguard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated in this man-made world of ours.” Two weeks prior to his announcement of Social Security, he had outlined his three factors of security, of which “the Security against the major hazards and vicissitudes of life” and “the security of decent homes” were the final two. Once again on January 17th, he invokes the “hazards and vicissitudes of life” to make the case for the final piece of the New Deal’s puzzle.

The rhetorical force of this phrasing cannot be understated, nor can the challenge facing Roosevelt. C. Vann Hoffman, describing the attitudes of the American public, explains:

More surprising than the people’s despair was their prevailing submissiveness. Their creed of individualism may account for much of this: If success and prosperity were due to merit and striving, failure and poverty must be due to the lack of them. Much more common than rebellion among Americans of those years
was a sense of shame and a loss of self-respect. Year after year of depression went by with little or no sign of the recovery promised by politicians.\textsuperscript{53}

The stubborn persistence of traditional individualism and desert in the face of unprecedented poverty and economic catastrophe created a significant barrier to the SSA. The failure and poverty of the Great Depression, when combined with the age-old Elizabethan notions of deserving and undeserving poor, had created an enormous class of ostensibly undeserving poor: individuals who were physically able to work, but were nonetheless unemployed. Roosevelt was faced with the challenge of either finding a way to make his New Deal programs fit within the schema of deserving and undeserving poor or disrupting that way of thinking altogether.

FDR ultimately succeeds by partially accomplishing both of these tasks and drawing sufficient distinctions between the various programs so as to eliminate the need to accomplish either task in its entirety. The overwhelming majority of the New Deal programs were work relief, such that they can be described as the exchange of an honest day’s work for wages and therefore a form of aid to the deserving poor. Moreover, Roosevelt, in the previously cited passage from his 1935 Annual Address to Congress (State of the Union Address), argues that the alternative to some form of employment for the “great numbers [who] still remain unemployed” is that a “large number of these unemployed and their dependents have been forced on the relief rolls.” Public opinion might, in a vacuum, be negative toward government-provided work, but when considered against the alternative of relief rolls (outdoor relief), work always wins. Finally, he argues that the fact of these people’s unemployment is not due to some inherent laziness on their

\textsuperscript{53} Woodward, "Editor’s Introduction," xiv.
part, but that they are the “victim[s] of a nation-wide depression caused by conditions which were not local but national.” He continues: “The Federal Government is the only governmental agency with sufficient power and credit to meet this situation.” Two arguments thus directly address the obvious objections that Elizabethan poor law or the Gospel of Wealth would raise: aid is given only to deserving poor, and local control over poor relief is insufficient to solve a problem with national causes.

The SSA, on the other hand, could not be justified as a work relief program. It provided cash benefits to people that were either unemployed or unemployable. Unemployment insurance was the antithesis of prevailing views regarding legitimate aid to the deserving poor and old-age pensions. Expanded old-age pensions had been included as part of the 1932 Democratic Party platform, but that inclusion did not make them uncontroversial. This fact is evidenced by Kennedy’s contention that the SSA “fell far short of [Roosevelt’s] grandest design. . . . For all its limitations, [Frances] Perkins shrewdly assessed the final bill as “the only plan that could have been put through Congress.””

While the rhetorical challenge in front of Roosevelt was large, he was an accomplished and shrewd arguer and masterful speaker. In his fireside chats and in the early addresses to congress, he had repeatedly made reference to the three factors of security, with particular emphasis on the “hazards and vicissitudes of life.” This phrase, repeated once more in the very first sentence of his SSA address, lays the groundwork for his argument that most people bore no responsibility for the economic collapse and that

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54 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 270.
some form of federal governmental security was therefore necessary to combat a problem
that was simply beyond the reach of anyone else.

The uncertainty of the Great Depression had given rise to a decidedly rhetorical
situation. Whether one adopts Bitzer’s exigence of “an imperfection marked by urgency,”55
Blumenberg’s formulation of a moment in which one is “lacking definitive evidence and
being compelled to act,”56 or any other definition of a rhetorical situation, Roosevelt was
able not only to respond to the apparent call to rhetoric before him, but also to convey the
sense of urgency and need for action within his audience. “Hazards and vicissitudes” are
neither predictable nor a result of the actions of the people whom they befall. They imply
a powerlessness that demands relief from a power or authority greater than one’s own.
Having repeated this phrasing and argument in numerous earlier speeches in support of
programs that had already won congressional approval and the favor of the public,
Roosevelt only needed to demonstrate that the Social Security Act qualified as another
piece in a puzzle of which the country already approved. He does so shortly thereafter,
arguing that the previous portions of the New Deal were successful, not because they were
stunning successes at alleviating suffering and poverty, but because “there is evident a
restoration of that spirit of confidence and faith which marks the American character.”

The move to define the success and failure of the New Deal in terms of its ability to
rehabilitate the “American character,” rather than provide jobs or reverse the Great
Depression is a masterful one. Roosevelt is clearly anticipating the principal argument

56 Hans Blumenberg, ”An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of
Rhetoric,” in After Philosophy: End or Transformation?, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and
against the SSA or, more specifically, the underlying assumption that gives it force: that
the programs within the SSA contradict the values of character of America. By offering
the “restoration of that spirit” as evidence of the success of the earlier portions of the New
Deal, he has preemptively answered these arguments by taking possession of the moral
ground of character. In essence, he has suggested that American character has become so
degraded by the Great Depression that only radical changes give it any hope of
resuscitation.

Through moves like this, Roosevelt effectively controlled the terms of comparison
by which his proposals would be judged. Similarly, he held out the threat of more radical
reforms in the future, should nothing immediate be done: “Roosevelt has prepared the
ground well. His transparent allusions to less responsible schemes helped convince
congressional doubters that the president’s measured radicalism was far preferable to the
dread . . . alternatives.”

Aid to Dependent Children

Roosevelt claimed to be skeptical of direct relief; in speeches he warned that the
dole could become a narcotic. He nevertheless continually expanded the
programs. By the winter of 1934 there were 20 million people on the dole, and the
biggest expansion was yet to come. As part of the Social Security Act of 1935,
Roosevelt created Aid to Dependant Children, a program of matching grants to
the states, which essentially federalized state mothers’ pensions. Little remarked
upon at the time, ADC would eventually become AFDC and remain the mainstay

57 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 271.
of the welfare system until it was replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families in 1996.\textsuperscript{58}

Michael Tanner explains the curious contradiction in the inclusion of Aid to Dependent Children in the SSA of 1935. Roosevelt’s speeches repeatedly stressed the “narcotic” qualities of direct cash assistance, yet the SSA was nothing if not a massive cash assistance benefit. FDR was largely able to dispel criticisms of the programs by making the old-age pensions self-funded through payroll taxes and by pointing to the unemployment insurance program as a very temporary relief measure demanded by the exigence of the Great Depression. In the case of ADC, however, neither justification would hold.

In spite of this fact, little resistance was mounted to ADC during the debates over the SSA. A large part of this is due to the fact that Roosevelt’s cousin, Teddy, and the Progressive movements had already done much of the rhetorical work in establishing state mother’s pensions years before:

The [ADC] program was a noncontroversial component of the [SSA]. Its noncontroversial status signaled the continued saliency of images and assumptions of the 1909 White House Conference. . . . [T]he executive director of the CES, Edwin Witte, “accepted as given, from the moment he first heard the Children’s Bureau plan, that there should be federal contributions to the state and local mothers’ aid programs and left the design to the bureau.\textsuperscript{59}

Given the widespread acceptance of mothers’ pensions, the only work that was needed in support of the ADC was justification of the federalization of the state pensions, work that

\textsuperscript{58} Tanner, \textit{Poverty of Welfare}, 25.
\textsuperscript{59} Asen, \textit{Visions}, 42-43.
had already been done in nearly every single prior debate over other parts of the New Deal. The CES report that formulated the final version of the SSA “observed that recommendations regarding security for children do not set up any new or untried methods of procedure, but build upon experience that has been well-established in this country.” The summary noted differences in participation, coverage, and benefit levels among states and recommended supplementary federal funding.\(^60\) The ADC was designed, packaged, and sold as a mere continuation of the status quo state system, with extra federal dollars to help confront the shortfalls caused by the collapsed economy.

Given the minimal amount of fanfare surrounding the ADC, particularly in contrast to the near vitriolic conservative outcry over the other provisions of the SSA, it is hard to believe that it would one day evolve into the central point of contestation over American welfare policy. Asen suggests that “by incorporating mothers’ pensions and their contradictions uncritically, Title IV of the Social Security Act prefigured the inferior position of ADC in comparison to other components of the expanding US welfare state. . . . Ever since, this bifurcation of federal social welfare policy into public assistance and social insurance programs has positioned the recipients of “assistance” as clients while reserving the honorific title of citizen for recipients of “insurance” programs.”\(^61\)

While he is certainly correct that this bifurcation places ADC and “assistance” in an inferior position to Social Security’s “insurance,” Asen errs in suggesting that the incorporation of the ADC into this scheme occurred “uncritically.” To the contrary, ample evidence exists suggesting that Roosevelt, along with the vast majority of American

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\(^{60}\) Ibid., 42.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 45.
society at the time, was highly critical of assistance programs. Roosevelt’s rhetoric of narcotics and portrayal of relief as a “subtle destroyer of the human spirit” should leave little doubt to precisely what he thought of such aid. The inevitability of ADC’s inclusion in the final SSA can likely be attributed more to feelings of necessity than any true love on the part of FDR, congress, or the Committee on Economic Security for direct relief to single mothers and widows. These were people who needed to be fed and clothed and were beyond the reach of the far more massive and popular work relief programs of the CCC, FERA, and the Big Bill. What’s more, ADC was a drop in the bucket compared to the expenditures on the other programs – the Emergency Relief Appropriation Bill (Big Bill) used $4 billion in new funds and reallocated $880 million from older projects; the ADC cost $25 million.\footnote{For a sense of the sheer size of the ERAB/Big Bill, Kennedy provides a comparison: “The bill asked for the largest peacetime appropriation to date in American history. It authorized more spending than the sum of all federal revenues in 1934.” Kennedy, \textit{Freedom from Fear}, 249.}

Taken as a whole, the SSA can only be considered a fundamentally transformative piece of legislation. While less costly than the ERAP, the effect that the SSA would have upon American politics is immeasurable. William Leuchtenburg explains at length in his Bancroft Prize winning history of the New Deal years of the Roosevelt administration:

In many respects, the law was an astonishingly inept and conservative piece of legislation. . . . The act not only failed to set up a national system of unemployment compensation but did not even provide adequate national standards.

Yet for all its faults the Social Security Act of 1935 was a new landmark in American history. It reversed historic assumptions about the nature of social responsibility, and it established the proposition that the individual has clear-cut
social rights. It was framed in a way that withstood tests in the courts and changes of political mood. "I guess you're right on the economics," Roosevelt conceded when told that the employee contributions were a mistake, "but those taxes were never a problem of economics. They are politics all the way through. We put those payroll contributions there so as to give the contributors a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions and their unemployment benefits. With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program."  


GREAT SOCIETIES AND THE MARGINS

Taken in whole, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal represents an unprecedented change in the manner in which American government responded to poverty. The massive growth of the federal government into the arena of poor relief put the United States on par, if not ahead, of the emerging socialist democracies of Europe. As Roosevelt himself predicted, no politician has since been able to so much as touch the entitlement of Social Security. Yet support for many other parts of the New Deal quickly waned. The earliest and deepest portions of the depression helped to catalyze the transformation of public opinion such that the massive expenditures of the Big Bill were politically feasible. As the depression wore on, however, the continued economic stagnation began to wear thin public support for Roosevelt’s economic agenda. Leuchtenburg explains:
By Roosevelt’s second term, as it seemed that the country might never wholly recover, the burden of the unemployed had become too exhausting a moral and economic weight to carry. Those who held jobs or drew income from other sources could hardly help but feel that the depression had been a Judgment which divided the saved from the unsaved. Increasingly, the jobless seemed not merely worthless mendicants but a menacing Lumpenproletariat. America, Harry Hopkins wrote in 1937, had become "bored with the poor, the unemployed and the insecure."64

Roosevelt’s rhetorical skills had been enough to generate temporary support for his programs; however, they were not sufficient to permanently displace the work-centered notion of deserving and undeserving poor within the public mind. FDR had sold the ERAP and Social Security by explaining the ways in which they avoided the deserving/undeserving dichotomy, not by taking the dichotomy on. As with anything else so entrenched in the public consciousness, it was only a matter of time until the dichotomy won.

The persistence of the SSA programs (old-age pension, unemployment insurance, and ADC) was the one exception. Given the manner in which they were structured, with Social Security creating a functional right to benefits, they resisted early attempts at repeal. ADC, in particular, experienced rapid growth. While it was originally conceived as an afterthought to old-age pensions that would help states cover the cost of mother’s

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64 Ibid., 273-274.
pensions, by 1939, more than a million individuals participated in the program with its costs quadrupling to $103 million.  

The irony of ADC’s growth was that most legislators assumed that it was a program that would simply go away on its own over time. Many assumed that the growth of social insurance programs like Social Security and unemployment insurance would “engender the “withering away” of public assistance.” The willingness of politicians to let ADC simply wither away was not borne out of any particular affection for it or any of the other parts of the New Deal. Tanner explains that by the 1950s “the massive public works programs of the New Deal were long gone, leaving direct relief, primarily ADC, as the main vehicle for welfare.” Through the 1950s, dissatisfaction with ADC grew, even among Democrats. In 1961, Senator Robert Byrd issued a report which claimed that more than 60 percent of the ADC recipients in the District of Columbia were actually ineligible for support. He was subsequently treated as one of the Senate’s resident experts on welfare, despite the fact that he was an outspoken opponent of it.

The early 1960s were a period of fairly strong economic growth and one that featured declining levels of concern about poverty. “Americans did not consider poverty and welfare urgent or deeply troubling problems. . . .” writes James Patterson, “People were confident about the future of the economy, and with good reason, for those were years of great economic growth and prosperity. Economic progress forced down the

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65 Tanner, Poverty of Welfare, 25.
66 Asen, Visions, 48.
percentage of poor Americans from around 22 percent in 1959 to 17 percent in 1965.”

That having been said, disinterest in welfare sprung forth not so much from a total disinterest in poverty, but a growing public dissociation of poverty and welfare, with the former viewed as relatively urgent and worth government efforts, the latter an undesirable waste. Public opinion polling demonstrates how the rhetorical framing of these two closely related issues played a large role in this development: a 1961 poll found 60 percent of Americans in support of increased spending for the needy. A 1964 poll found that 68 percent desired that the government “see to it that no one is without food or shelter.” Yet the very same poll found that 64 percent believed that “welfare and relief make people lazy.”

This disjunction between beliefs about poverty and beliefs about welfare would re-emerge throughout the next 40 years; in fact, it would increasingly grow stronger and stronger.

The War on Poverty

In the midst of this growing public anger toward welfare, another seemingly contradictory current began, as Americans “rediscovered” poverty for the first time since the Great Depression. A series of opportunely timed studies and publications catalyzed a new public interest in the difficulties and degradations suffered by society’s least well off.

Perhaps the most well documented and discussed of these publications was Michael Harrington’s 1962 book, The Other America. Harrington endeavored to reveal and explain how, during the most sustained period of economic growth that the world

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69 Ibid., 108.
70 Ibid., 107.
had ever seen, a growing number of Americans were living in increasingly concentrated and deplorable pockets of abject poverty. Despite the rapid growth and intensity of the extremely poor, Harrington felt as if they had slipped from the attention of most Americans. Asen explains that: “Harrington’s books signaled a modern paradox of seeing the poor. . . . Large numbers of poor people lived in relative invisibility at the margins of public debate. Harrington’s book contributed to a rediscovery of poverty that brought poor people into view where they have obtained, at times, an almost hyper-visibility.”

However, Harrington’s book and the other studies like it did not instantly explode into the American consciousness. They slowly, but surely penetrated into different parts of American media and politics, most notably with an extensive review and discussion by Dwight McDonald in the January 1963 *New Yorker*. Patterson details how “within the next few years a virtual avalanche of books and articles on poverty rolled off the presses,” but most importantly, “President John F. Kennedy read both Harrington and McDonald and set his advisors to study the problem.”

In the wake of Kennedy’s assassination, Lyndon Johnson, having inherited the reports of the Kennedy advisors and sensing an opportunity to move forward with an otherwise unpopular issue, launched the “war on poverty.” The odd combination of rising expectations of Americans about the wealth and prosperity that the economy ought to provide, Kennedy and Johnson’s focus on the issue, and the best-selling publications by Harrington and others helped to create momentum for a new legislative assault on poverty. In addition, it sparked one additional “unintended consequence: the arousal of

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72 Asen, *Visions*, 5.
73 Patterson, *America’s Struggle*, 97.
the poor themselves.”74 Finally, Patterson explains how this new war on poverty was bound with an optimism and energy that distinguished it from the New Deal some 30 years before:

During the Depression the architects of the welfare state, struggling desperately to save the nation from disaster, fashioned new ideas and tools as they went along. By the 1960s the planners no longer perceived a Malthusian world. . . . Continuing economic growth was assumed. This affluence made people confident, indeed cocky; they congratulated themselves on the professionalism of social science. . . . The advisers explained that “conquest of poverty is well within our power.”75

This nexus of political momentum, cultural awareness, and scientific optimism opened a unique window for the expansion of the American welfare state.

The welfare policies that would come from this window were referred to as the “Great Society,” taking their name from a similarly titled speech delivered by President Johnson. They would constitute the last intentional expansion of the American system of social welfare. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the Great Society is not even the conditions under which it arose, but the way in which it “displaced for a time the contradictions of poverty discourse by highlighting inclusion as a means of alleviating poverty without undermining normative judgments about the relations among personal success, diligence, and virtue.”76 Contrary to the work relief programs of the New Deal and the minor afterthought of ADC or the begrudging acceptance of mothers’ pensions in the Progressive era, the Great Society appeared to emerge from a genuine, emergent

74 Ibid., 122.
75 Ibid., 132-133.
76 Asen, Visions, 53.
national consensus that “poverty presented a grave national problem.” What’s more, this was a somewhat enduring consensus as both Democrats and Republicans and Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter largely worked to preserve Johnson’s legacy.

**Rhetorical Transformations and Stagnations**

Despite the peculiar consensus that had formed in support of expanded federal welfare programs, the rhetoric of the war on poverty was not as unique or distinct from the rhetorical trajectory of poverty discourse before the 1960s. While it did, in fact, possess some novel rhetorical developments, these new discourses did not function to disrupt the binaries of deserving/undeserving and agency/dependency that had characterized previous speaking, writing, and thinking about poverty. New to the rediscovery of poverty in the 1960s was the audience from which and to whom the new debate about poverty was addressed. The optimism over the possible conquest of poverty followed from the Progressive era’s faith in problem solving and expertism, but was given even more force by the explosive post-war growth in American research universities and social science.

The newfound academic interest in poverty and welfare manifested itself by beginning an ongoing debate that I broadly describe as “structure vs. culture.” This debate, not unlike the nature/nurture debates that have perplexed psychology for ages, asked a simple question: “was poverty a culture or an economic condition?” Proponents of structural explanations of poverty focused primarily on economics and the lack of

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77 Ibid.
79 Patterson, *America’s Struggle*, 133.
80 Ibid., 112.
genuine opportunity for the poor. They viewed the concentration and depth of poverty within inner city ghettos as a result of the flight of jobs and industry from the city to the suburbs, and the consequent economic collapse that followed. To structuralists, the sociological crisis of poverty was an effect of the economic collapse, rather than its cause.

Conversely, cultural explanations of poverty followed a more anthropological approach, arguing that certain patterns of behavior and norms had emerged within so-called lower-class culture, the most pernicious of which was the “culture of poverty.” Murray Edelman explains how these dueling theories of the origin of poverty gained rhetorical cache in the form of two banal, necessarily contradictory patterns with which Americans respond to poverty:

One pattern defines the poor as responsible for their own plight and in need of control to compensate for their inadequacies . . . while authorities, including concerned professionals, cope more or less competently with the deviant and protect a basically sound social structure from the threat they pose. . . . This view justifies regulation of the poor, while leaving it unclear in what sense governmental and professional interventions are social control and in what sense they are “rehabilitation.”

An alternative recurring reaction to poverty defines the poor as victims of exploitative economic, social, and political institutions: people deprived by circumstances. . . . Liberal and leftist politicians, many sociologists, and helping
professions who dissent from the conventional ideology of their professions lean toward this view.\textsuperscript{81}

In Edelman’s eyes, it is not the case that one of these patterns represents the truth of poverty, the other a false consciousness. Rather, it is in their contradictory relationship to one another that apathy toward poverty can be sustained. Because each of these political myths is internally consistent, they do not demand cognitive revision or questioning among those individuals who hold them. Yet it is only in the presence of the contradictory, but consistent myth that myth itself can be sustained, by providing an opposing referent to be rejected. By denying the ostensibly “false” myth of poverty, supporters of one myth or the other is capable of recognizing their own as true, without any meaningful reference to material conditions.

One consequence of this contradiction became manifest in outcome of the social scientific debates of the 1960s: even the staunchest adherents to structural explanations of poverty were nonetheless compelled to concede the presence of sociological implications to poverty. In essence, regardless of how a person explained poverty, they were unable to look at the urban poor of America without inevitably resorting to some description of a culture of poverty.

While Harrington’s \textit{Other America} was highly effective at raising consciousness regarding poverty in America, it did so with heavy reliance on the notion of the culture of poverty. Asen offers a summation of the image left by Harrington’s depiction of America’s poor:

A viciously circular "culture of poverty" has entrapped the poor. Poverty twists the body and spirit. It destroys aspiration: "The American poor are pessimistic and defeated, and they are victimized by mental suffering to a degree unknown in suburbia." Contrary to Alger tales, poverty does not function as a way station to prosperity. It has become "a culture, an institution, a way of life." Harrington explains that the family structure of the poor differs from the rest of society. Poor people view authorities, such as the police, differently. Languages, psychologies, and worldviews distinguish the poor from more affluent citizens. Harrington maintains that "[t]here is, in a sense, a personality of poverty, a type of human being produced by the grinding, wearing life of the slums."82

The image of a culture that creates despair and apathy among its members is a double-edged sword. It is highly effective at offering a persuasive explanation for the ways in which mainstream Americans perceived the poor to be so vastly different, hopefully in a manner than invokes some degree of sympathy. However, it also casts the problem of poverty as one that is so entrenched and intractable as to create little hope of any effective action at averting it. The result is that in the presence of binaries such as deserving and undeserving, persons who live in a culture of poverty are, by nature of the values that the culture transmits to them, necessarily undeserving poor. The culture of poverty thus became, rather than a neutral explanation or object of scientific investigation, a pernicious and enduring damnation of the American poor.

Of course, Harrington and the overwhelming majority of social scientists involved in the study of poverty had no such intentions. Unfortunately, the reservations that their

82 Asen, Visions, 50.
work included did not travel throughout the popular imagination with the same ease as a persuasive mythology like the culture of poverty. Patterson elaborates: “If these carefully reasoned messages had transcended the bounds of academe, they might have swept away some tired stereotypes about the poor and sensitized policymakers to the durability of cultural traditions. Instead, the messages had to contest the more popular notion of a deviant culture of poverty. Ironically, it was Harrington, a determined structuralist, who unintentionally popularized this notion.”

Ironically, one major influence on Harrington’s thinking on the matter was the avowedly Marxist anthropologist Oscar Lewis. Together, Harrington and Lewis “became virtually synonymous with the culture of poverty argument.” Lewis and his academic school “attributed to poor people a variety of unflattering, though not always compatible, traits.” Two major themes emerged in Harrington and Lewis’ description of the culture of poverty. First, that the culture of poverty was capable of producing psychological characteristics in its members. The poor were, at best, likely to be “present-minded,” but more likely described in a matter that explained an inherent laziness that bordered on mental illness. Second, this culture was “familial and intergenerational,” such that it was not merely a value set shared by the poor, but a condition that was passed from parent to child. James T. Patterson’s commentary on the insidious nature of this theory provides a most appropriate connection to the brutality of poor relief a century before: “Lurid phrasing such as this came close to matching the quasi-hereditarian jeremiads of nineteenth-century writers who had perceived poverty as an infectious disease. Edward

83 Patterson, America’s Struggle, 114.  
84 Ibid., 115.  
85 Ibid.
Dugdale, describing the deviant world of the Jukes family, could not have done much better. While Harrington’s rediscovery of poverty and explanation of the culture of poverty was intended to draw public attention and sympathy for those who were mired in it, the fact of the matter is that the broad middle class felt no such pain. Numerous polls from the 1960s showed most Americans as largely optimistic about the future and even in the wake of Johnson’s war on poverty, the public did not appear to “detect a social crisis in the country. That perception occurred to some extent only amid the racial turmoil of the late 1960s.”

The Great Society

Given that public attitudes were turning against welfare, if not the poor in general, it is somewhat surprising that President Johnson was able to oversee a relatively massive expansion of the welfare state. Much like FDR before him, he did so not by challenging the dominant themes of welfare and poverty, but by using them in support of his agenda.

First and foremost, Johnson’s Great Society was a work society. Rather than argue for welfare as something that was given in the absence of work, or in opposition to it, he constructed it as a sort of bridge to the inclusion of the poor in the mainstream society of working America: “LBJ highlighted opportunities, not guarantees. He did not call into question the principle that citizens had an obligation to be ‘self-supporting.’ The president expressed his own unease with unqualified assistance.”

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86 Ibid., 116. For a more detailed account of Edward Dugdale’s study of the Jukes family, see Asen, ibid., note 29.
87 Ibid., 102.
88 Asen, Visions, 54.
that established the Great Society reforms was dubbed the “Economic Opportunity Act” (EOA); the new bureaucracy charged with the EOA’s administration, the “Office of Economic Opportunity” (OEO). The notion of welfare as relief was expressly avoided. Of course, the question remains as to what sort of opportunities were provided. The answer, as always, is the opportunity to work.

Johnson’s advocacy of the Great Society carried with it an additional rhetorical burden when compared with Roosevelt’s New Deal. Given the centrality of work to American thinking about poverty, it was essentially impossible to expand government assistance without significant linkages between welfare and the dominant ideography of work. For FDR, this was a relatively easy task, since so much of the New Deal was work relief (the CCC, WPA, etc.). Johnson, however, was not in the midst of the Great Depression, giving him no such easy recourse. Even in light of the rediscovery of poverty and the rise in consciousness about its ills, the tension between charity and work was still present, as Patterson explains: “this change aside, the ambiguities were not new. The philanthropic impulse had always coexisted uneasily with the work ethic, as had the vague distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor. The polls of the 1960s merely revealed the continuing power of these unquantifiable, often contradictory values. There was not reason to expect sudden changes in historically durable attitudes toward the poor.”89

In order to overcome these contradictory values, Johnson resorted to the ratification of the existing meme of dependency and the characterization of his program as a means of overcoming it: “LBJ insisted that the ‘war on poverty is not a struggle simply

89 Patterson, America’s Struggle, 108.
to support people, to make them dependent on the generosity of others. It is a struggle to give people a chance.”

While Johnson was able to secure passage of the EOA with this move, it was not without consequences. While spending and eligibility for the AFDC and other programs had been increased, Johnson, unlike Roosevelt, had not done sufficient work confronting the overly negative public image of welfare, instead latching on to those sentiments with his rhetoric of opportunity. Whereas FDR appealed to the “hazards and vicissitudes of life” when advocating for the Social Security Act, Johnson instead gave credence to the culture of poverty by adopting it as his impetus for reform. Unfortunately, in so doing, he left in place the notion that the culture of poverty was an intractable sociological phenomenon, such that welfare would no longer be in the business of supporting people or providing them insurance against harm, but was now tasked with the rehabilitation of the “present-minded,” lazy people trapped in the American underclass. While the Great Society brought more benefits and assistance to a greater number of people than ever before, it also marked a turning point in the American welfare debate.

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90 Asen, Visions, 54.
CHAPTER THREE:
WORKING OUT THE MEANING OF WORK

The passage of the PRWORA was both monumental and entirely predictable. While it did represent a sea-change in the actual law of welfare and the structure of welfare benefits, it was a change that occurred on the basis of a somewhat unique confluence of political events and a ubiquitous, long-running rhetorical theme: work.

Little doubt can be cast on the claim that Americans like work. We are a working society; one of the least regulated and most labor-hostile developed nations of the world. The American public’s love affair with work can help to explain its relative hostility toward AFDC, as well. Six major federal entitlement programs existed at the start of the Clinton administration: Social Security, Unemployment Compensation, Disability Insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, and AFDC. Of those six, the first four were immensely popular, whereas the last two were massively unpopular. The major difference between them is the presence of a linkage to work in the former group. After gaining power in 1994, the Republican congress sensed an opportunity to create major change in one of their most despised federal programs, AFDC. According to Ron Haskins, the tool that was almost singularly employed to dismantle AFDC was work: “Work became the cannonball of the Republican welfare reform agenda, blasting straight ahead through all obstacles. As other issues – time limits, block grants, illegitimacy, child care – developed, work remained the central issue of the debate.”

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92 Ibid., 10.
In spite of its overwhelming motivational appeal to both the public and politicians, work itself remains a relatively enigmatic concept. At first glance, it seems safe to assume that work meant “paid employment” within the rhetoric of the 1995 and 1996 welfare reform debates and to move on to greener critical pastures. However, this is a premature and risky assumption. University of California, Los Angeles Professor of Law Noah Zatz explains how a more careful analysis of the meaning of work can open new opportunities for meaningful debate about welfare:

[A]nalysis [of work] offers the potential not only to prompt new debates but also to advance some old ones. Longstanding conversations about work, welfare policy, and distributive justice have been distorted by an oversimplified equation of work and employment. This focus on employment unites those who urge cutting existing benefits to nonworkers with those who urge expanding protections or resources for those who do work. Critics of employment-based policies usually are no different, aiming their critiques against the premise that benefits should be tied to work, not against the idea that work means employment.93

Keeping in mind the openings that a more rich understanding of work could provide, this chapter will engage in an extensive analysis of the rhetoric of work. A theoretical exposition will give way to a history of work, of sorts, in an attempt to explain the origins of American feelings toward work and labor. Two detailed criticisms will follow, both focused heavily on the rhetorical utilization of work in the primary congressional hearings for the welfare reform legislation that would evolve into the PRWORA. The first examines the unanimity of support for work requirements among both Republicans and Democrats

and attempts to explain how this consensus crippled any hopes of Democratic resistance to the Republican plan. The second analysis will ask what defects were present in that rhetoric and what opportunities were missed during the debates over the PRWORA.

THEORETICAL EXPOSITION

This chapter employs two somewhat complementary theoretical approaches to the study and criticism of rhetoric: David Zarefsky’s theory of political communication and rhetoric as a process of “symbolic choice” and Michael Calvin McGee’s theorization of ideological criticism, particularly his theory of the “ideograph.” For the sake of readers who are unfamiliar with these theories, I will summarize the relevant aspects of each in turn.

David Zarefsky’s Symbolic Choice Theory

Readers may recall the excerpt of David Zarefsky’s President Johnson’s War on Poverty from the introduction (abridged here):

The facts of an episode in political life are not “given” or univocal; they are not present in the external world awaiting discovery by political actors. To be sure, certain conditions exist independently of the will of any public official. . . . But the meaning of those events depends upon how they are characterized in public discourse. . . . Which alternative prevails will depend upon the choices made by political actors themselves, as they define situations in their own minds and exchange their views with others.94

Zarefsky proposes a symbolic theory of politics, one in which meaning is not pre-figured or fixed, but in which it is co-constituted by the actors in political life through the

exchange of symbols. Put more plainly, political actors make meaning when they use language to speak and write about the world.

This creation of meaning occurs as a result of a nearly countless number of choices. Because the facts of political life are neither given nor univocal, meaning must be chosen: “By selecting which symbols indicate the situation, people define what it means. They do so first by making indications to themselves, making sense of the world by creating a symbol system which defines and explains it.” The first act, then, of a subject who encounters the world is an act of naming whatever phenomena they encounter. Citing J. Robert Cox, Zarefsky continues: “Through the naming of social objects, then, actors construct the basis for understanding a situation.’ This understanding will determine the appropriate response to the situation.”95 It is by creating a common rhetoric, an assemblage of names and definitions that humans are able to engage in the process of communication. By controlling the way in which rhetoric symbolizes the world, a given actor is able to ensure that their preferred response is the one adopted by the other actors around them. Zarefsky offers the example of, conveniently, poverty: “If the phenomenon of a person lacking work is symbolized as indolence, sloth, or sinfulness, then stern admonition might be called for. . . . Conversely, if the same phenomenon is seen as a specific manifestation of a maladjusted economy, then moralizing or temporizing would seem ineffective if not hypocritical; the situation clearly calls for public action.”96

95 Ibid., 3.
96 Ibid.
Of course, it is not so simple as merely asserting a particular meaning with sufficient force and waiting for the rest of the world to fall in line. An aphorism attributed to William Pitt offers good guidance: “Eloquence is in the assembly, not merely in the speaker.”97 In this sense, symbolic choices are not arbitrary: “Interaction with others both influences the individual’s choice of symbols and tests and refines that choice.”98 To Zarefsky, language is a highly dynamic system in which signification is constantly being changed by the force of countless symbolic exchanges. However, radical change in symbolization is extremely unlikely: “Definitions of a situation which cannot square with experience will be modified or rejected. . . . On the other hand, definitions which are congruent with experience and world view will come to be accepted, incorporated into the world view even as they modify it.”99

Under this view, the political world is an especially electric place. Citizens are not constituted as an audience, a relatively passive set of message receivers who compute and respond to stimuli in patterned and predictable ways, but instead co-constitute one another and, most importantly, the very sphere of the political that they occupy.100 The result of theorizing the world of politics as a symbolic space is the elevation of persuasion (rhetoric) to the position of prime mover of political change:

To view a question of public policy as a problem of rhetoric, then, is to focus on the creation and exchange of symbols through which issues are perceived, defined, addressed, and resolved. In a government based on consent, any policy proposal

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98 Zarefsky, President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History, 3.
99 Ibid., 3-4.
100 Ibid.
can be examined from a rhetorical perspective. Ways must be found to persuade relevant audiences to support the proposal. . . . What is involved here is . . . an active process of mutual adjustment. Both the audience and the proposal are somehow changed as a result. A rhetorical perspective on events focuses on what happens to ideas and to people in the course of such transformations.

While this model of public policy is nominally centered in persuasion, rhetoric becomes far more than the orthodox “means of persuasion;” instead, rhetoric itself comes to symbolize the interplay between the audience, the proposal, and the people by whom the proposal is made.

Put another way, persuasion is not the alignment of pre-existing desires to coordinate action that subsequently changes the material world. Instead, successful persuasion causes change in the world without any other entailments, precisely because it necessarily includes modification of patterns of creation and exchange of symbols, which themselves constitute the meaning of the world. Zarefsky argues: “While there certainly may exist an objective world independent of the human will, the events of that world are given meaning and significance through the exercise of human choice. Truth may be ‘given,’ but reality is socially constructed. People participate actively in shaping and giving meaning to their environment. What any element in that environment ‘is’ will depend on what it means.”

Michael Calvin McGee’s Ideograph

No one has ever seen an “equality” strutting up the driveway, so, if “equality” exists at all, it has meaning through its specific applications. In other words, we establish

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101 Ibid., 2.
a meaning for “equality” by using the word as a description of a certain phenomenon; it has meaning only insofar as our description is acceptable, believable.\textsuperscript{102}

While the somewhat tongue-in-cheek invocation of “an “equality” strutting up the driveway” may well inspire a chuckle, it is not nearly as out of place as one might image at first thought. What McGee is describing in this excerpt is an \textit{ideograph}, a word/concept that he has theorized in an attempt to bridge the gap between two seemingly incompatible theories of “the trick of the mind which deludes us into believing that we ‘think’ with/through/for a ‘society’ to which we ‘belong.’”\textsuperscript{103} The first of these theories, \textit{ideology}, originates in the writings of Karl Marx and subsequent Marxist thinkers. The second, \textit{myth}, emerges from a group of thinkers whom McGee dubs “symbolists,” including Kenneth Burke, Ernst Cassier, and Michael Polyani. The difference between these two theories is the manner in which they attempt to explain the phenomenon of mass consciousness, explained by McGee as the “brute, undeniable phenomenon” with which “[w]e are presented . . . : Human beings in collectivity behave and think differently than human beings in isolation”\textsuperscript{104}

Marxists conceive of ideology as a phenomenon rooted in materiality, even though its effects are arguably psychological. An ideology is a norm preached by the upper class, disseminated via the power of that class’s practically complete control of social institutions, which “infects” the members of the proletariat with a “baneful seduction,” such that they are unable to recognize their oppression and, in many cases, happily

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\textsuperscript{102} McGee, "Ideograph," 10.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.: 4.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.: 2.
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participate in it. Symbolists, on the other hand, espouse the idea of myth, in which the whole of society, irrespective of class, engages in a collective suspension of disbelief, believing a falsehood of some sort of another due to the “purely poetic phenomenon” of symbolization.

While disputes between Marxists and Symbolists had typically revolved in an unyielding chicken-egg dilemma over the primacy of symbolic or material explanations of false consciousness, McGee’s theorization of the ideograph moved to reconcile the two. Rather than paraphrasing McGee’s highly detailed explanation of ideographs, it is best to simply excerpt it:

If a mass consciousness exists at all, it must be empirically present, itself a thing obvious to those who participate in it, or, at least, empirically manifested in the language which communicates it. . . . Such consciousness . . . is always false, . . . because “truth” in politics, no matter how firmly we believe it, is always an illusion. The falsity of an ideology is specifically rhetorical, for the illusion of truth and falsity with regard to normative commitments is the product of persuasion. . . .

Ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents. . . . [T]he political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a vocabulary of “ideographs” easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy. An analysis of ideographic usages in political rhetoric . . . reveals . . . “structures” of public motives. Such structures appear to be “diachronic” and “synchronic” patterns of political consciousness which have the
capacity both to control “power” and to influence . . . the shape and texture of each individual’s “reality.”

The Symbolist elements of ideographs bear a strong relationship to Zarefsky’s symbol choice theory – with the exception of the argument that any mass consciousness or ideology is necessarily false, by nature of the fact that it is rhetorical/symbolic. While McGee’s starting point is a description of an ideology, about which he subsequently explains symbolic characteristics, it is important to note that, in practice, ideology is nonetheless a “political language,” characterized by slogans that McGee dubs ideographs.

Unlike purely Marxist ideologies that are focused on power, ideographs do not coerce their subjects with brute force. Instead, McGee explains that it is the symbolic sway over language that enables ideographs:

. . . [S]ocial control in its essence is control over consciousness, the *a priori* influence that learned predispositions hold over human agents who play the roles of “power” and “people” in a given transaction.

. . . No individual . . . is forced to submit. . . . Human beings are “conditioned” . . . to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons or excuses for behavior and belief. When a claim is warranted by such terms . . . , it is presumed that human beings will react predictably and autonomically.106

Here we see a nearly Foucauldian turn, explaining the quiet, soft, and voluntary submission of people to the repetitive symbolic shaping of their world. The power of

105 Ibid.: 4-5.
106 Ibid.: 5-6.
ideographs is in their malleability and that they represent a generic, positive, political concept, the desirability of which (in purely theoretical terms) nearly no reasonable person would dispute. Contrasted with far more specific (and therefore contestable) statements of principles, ideographs can take on whatever qualities are needed in a particular situation:

Though words only (and not claims), such terms . . . are more pregnant than propositions ever could be. They are the basic structural elements, the building blocks, of ideology. Thus they may be thought of as “ideographs,” for, like Chinese symbols, they signify and “contain” a unique ideological commitment; further, they presumptuously suggest that each member of a community will see as a gestalt every complex nuance in them.107

Ideographs, because of their seemingly innocuous contents, are nearly possible to resist. Who could reasonably object to such slogans as “equality,” “liberty,” “religion,” the “right of privacy,” or “freedom of speech?” While the raw coercive power of materialist false consciousness no longer compels belief in ideology, ideographs compel belief because society, in a manner of speaking, holds these truths to be self-evident: “[One is not permitted] to question the fundamental logic of ideographs: Everyone is conditioned to think of “the rule of law” as a logical commitment just as one is taught to think of “186,000 miles per second” is an accurate empirical description of the speed of light even though few can work the experiments or do the mathematics to prove it.”108

107 Ibid.: 6-7.
The Ideography of Work

While no one has ever witnessed “the right of privacy” and “freedom of speech” battling for the chance to lay waste to Tokyo, anyone in the proximity of more than one of two other people or a television has probably witnessed work within the last hour. The question thus becomes: under what conditions have we witnessed plain, old “work,” contrasted with the ideograph, \textit{work}? \textsuperscript{109} McGee explains that “many ideographs ("liberty," for example) have a non-ideographic usage, as in the sentence, ‘Since I resigned my position, I am at liberty to accept your offer.’”\textsuperscript{110} Similarly, work has non-ideographic usages, such as “running a marathon is hard work” or “I really hope that my thesis defense will work out.” However, within the context of welfare reform, there is little doubt that when Mary Jo Bane, one of President Clinton’s key welfare advisors, testified before the House Subcommittee on Human Resources that “[w]e all agree that the current system undermines work and parental responsibility. Our approach emphasizes work, it emphasizes responsibility, and it emphasizes reaching the next generation,”\textsuperscript{111} she most certainly was using \textit{work}. This is not to say that her use of \textit{work} was intentionally manipulative or nefarious; to the contrary, the opposite is very much the case. Ideographs are effective precisely because they slip undetected into everyday language, smuggling with them ideological commitments.

\textsuperscript{109} Henceforth, I will use the typesetting \textit{work} to denote ideographic usage of the word “work,” unless it is used in quotation, in which case I will leave the original formatting in place.
\textsuperscript{110} McGee, "Ideograph," 12.
However, the question still remains: What makes *work* an ideograph, rather than a normal word? Recalling McGee’s invocation of “equality” strutting up the driveway, he explains how:

... [I]f "equality" exists at all, it has meaning through its specific applications. ... If asked to make a case for "equality," that is to define the term, we are forced to make reference to its history by detailing the situations for which the word has been an appropriate description. ... Earlier usages become precedent, touchstones for judging the propriety of the ideograph in a current circumstance.\textsuperscript{112}

Ideographs are extremely effective at defying any normative definition, for the very same reason that they “are more pregnant than propositions ever could be”: they are heavily loaded with ideological baggage.

Deborah C. Malamud, Professor of Law at the University of Michigan Law School, distinguishes between “instrumental” and “symbolic” usages of “talk and action” within the law. *Instrumental* refers to “talk and action aimed at identifying and solving problems,” *symbolic* to “talk and action aimed at describing or representing the world”; correspondingly, she refers to instrumental approaches to definition as *purposive* and symbolic approaches as *descriptive*.\textsuperscript{113} Using the hypothetical of a government expert (REX) drawing the boundaries of an administrative scheme, she says: “If REX’s orientation were descriptive, his exemptions . . . would correspond to the dividing lines

\textsuperscript{112} McGee, "Ideograph," 10.
\textsuperscript{113} The distinction that Prof. Malamud creates between problem-solving instrumental definition and world-representing symbolic definition risks creating unfortunate confusion with David Zarefsky’s use of the word *symbolic* in his theory of Symbolic Choice as well as other instances of *symbolic* throughout the text. With the exception of this instance, the reader should assume that *symbolic* implies any symbol use and is not limited to world-describing or –representing as in Prof. Malamud’s usage.
that already exist in society. . . . In this sense, the descriptive approach is hierarchy-neutral; the government purports to be merely describing the social hierarchy that exists independent of the government’s decision to describe it.” Conversely, if REX were oriented purposively, he would “not decide that his job is to discover preexisting classification schemes ‘in the culture,’ or even to find the most ‘accurate’ description of the social world . . . Instead, he could decide that the government’s job is to adopt whatever classification scheme most closely fits the government’s substantive goals.”

Ideographs work as well as they do because they are typically defined and identified descriptively and, as such, express neutrality toward existing hierarchies. In the specific case of work, University of California, Los Angeles Professor of Law Noah Zatz explains his attempts to create a purposive definition to offer an alternative to the largely incoherent descriptive approaches thusly:

One might think this appeal to purpose wrong-headed from the start. . . . If we could identify descriptively something called “work,” then the real questions might not involve how to define work but simply what to do about it . . . or how to identify it accurately in particular cases.

In contrast to a purposive approach, most discussions of welfare work requirements, and of work and social policy more generally, approach the meaning of work descriptively. This is true of both the scholarly literature and the political debate, and of work-requirement proponents and opponents alike.

Even if it is the case that work can be defined purposively, Zatz’s research leads to the conclusion that descriptive definition dominates the discursive terrain. As Zatz indicates, this is true of both proponents and opponents of workfare and applies equally in both scholarly and political spheres.

The ubiquity of the business-as-usual approach to defining work allows for an extraordinarily limited understanding of the phenomenon. Zatz remarks: “Despite the practical and theoretical importance of clarifying what work is, the scholarly literature on work-based welfare reform largely neglects this question. Instead, the literature generally starts from the premise that work means paid employment, and it proceeds from there to debate the morality, effectiveness, and need for work-based policies.”

ORIGINS OF WORK RHETORIC

As Chapter Two explained, the establishing piece of law for the overwhelming majority of attitudes toward poverty in the English-speaking world was the Elizabethan Poor Law. The four principles of relief (public responsibility, local control, family care, and apprenticeship of children) would persist largely unchanged until some 230 years later. Faced with an explosive growth in the poor population, Queen Victoria oversaw the passage of the 1834 “New Poor Law.” As opposed to the informal and patchwork network of poorhouses and workhouses that existed before the law, the New Poor Law established a broad based system of poor relief throughout England. The poor were divided into three groups. There were two groups of the “impotent”: individuals who were either too old or too ill to care for themselves, or widows with children. Those that still had homes were given outdoor relief in their home. The homeless were cared for in poorhouses. The third

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group was comprised of all of the able bodied paupers. They were required to live in the brutal workhouses described in Chapter Two. An important principle came with their employment in workhouses: the principle of “less eligibility.” According to less eligibility, their salaries and living conditions could not be better than any workers who held paying jobs outside of the poor house. In spite of the harsh attitudes held toward able bodied paupers, the English nonetheless felt morally obliged to care for them. According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, it was written that “anything less . . . would be ‘repugnant to the common sentiments of mankind.’”\textsuperscript{117}

Workhouses existed well before the New Poor Law of 1834, but the principle of less eligibility had not existed prior to that time. The creation of the principle was for one clear and simple function: “preserving the distinction between the ablebodied pauper and the independent laborer, so the latter would not be tempted into a state of pauperism.”\textsuperscript{118} Thus, the first workfare program was born, and with it the first notable codification of the binary of deserving/undeserving poor, a prominent and constant feature of welfare and poverty discourse ever since. Early sparks of the dependency meme begin to appear in the intended deterrent policies, as well.

As regards nascent American attitudes toward welfare and poverty, much is often made of the highly defensive, unbridled individualism that characterizes the American persona, so much so that Tocqueville himself wrote extensively about his fear that it would

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 81-82.
poison the American polity. Martin Gilens, in his book *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, attempts to test the proposition that individualism and self-interest are behind the extraordinary hostility toward cash benefits in the United States. Quite remarkably, few conclusions could be less true. Using extensive public opinion polling data asking questions about a large number of potential causes, Gilens discovered that Americans display what he terms a “bounded individualism”: “Are Americans . . . principled opponents of welfare? Do they reject it because . . . giving money to working-age poor people violates the norm of individual responsibility? Individualism does have important implications for Americans’ welfare views, but it does not appear that this commitment is strong enough to preclude support for welfare.”

Yet, in spite of the admitted willingness of Americans to invest in poor relief and the limited reach of individualism, we will see that congressional rhetoric nonetheless seizes upon much of the ideological baggage that accompanies work into the House chambers for the hearings on the PRWORA. Early in the six-day long hearing, Republican Rep. Mac Collins of Georgia remarked: “Thankfully, it appears that we now have reached consensus on the belief that just giving things away is bad. Rather, we must expect people to return something to society when society extends a helping hand. Today, requiring ablebodied adults to work is recognized as good policy for welfare recipients and taxpayers.” Testifying later in the same hearing, Lawrence Mead, perhaps the most

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120 Ibid., 37.
influential conservative academic voice in favor of work requirements for AFDC recipients, demonstrated just how extensive the right’s understanding of the history of welfare and poverty was, as well as the depth of their animus toward the welfare state:

The nation may be returning to the situation at the beginning of the century, when Republicans also ruled Washington and the Progressive movement worked to expand social programs mainly in states and cities. The welfare state expanded from the local level to the nation only when Democrats took over Washington in 1932. Now that Republicans again hold national power, they should use it to chasten the overblown welfare systems that still exist in liberal states.122

WORK WINS A UNANIMOUS DECISION

In January of 1995, the triumphalism in Washington, D.C.’s air was palpable. Fresh off the single largest mid-term swing in total House and Senate seats in the history of the US, Republicans arrived on Capitol Hill with the Contract with America in their hands and a freshly seated majority in both houses of congress. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, the mastermind of the electoral victory and undisputed leader of the GOP, had made the bold promise that the House of Representatives would consider all ten of the Contract With America’s bills within the first hundred days of the Congress. In order to reduce the burden on the tremendously powerful Committee on Ways and Means, Gingrich and Ways and Means Chairman Bill Archer decided to move the hearings on the new Republican welfare reform package to the Subcommittee on Human Resources,

whose Chairman, E. Clay Shaw, had maintained a particularly strong interest in welfare throughout his tenure in the House.\textsuperscript{123}

In an unusual move, the Subcommittee opened the opportunity to testify at the Hearings to any of the members of congress \textit{as well as the public}. The Hearing that would result, \textit{Contract With America – Welfare Reform}, would be one of the longest in the history of either chamber. Spread out over a month’s time and consisting of six full days of testimony, the hearing would generate more than 1700 pages of transcripts and written testimony, creating the most substantial and diverse archive of debate over the merits of the Personal Responsibility Act (the initial name of the PRWORA).

While detailed analysis of every argumentative interplay and rhetorical artifact from the Hearing handily exceeds the scope of this thesis, I will isolate one particular rhetorical current that evidences the ideography of \textit{work}: unanimity. Unanimity demonstrates the stunningly pervasive degree to which Congresspersons of both parties spoke to the defects of the entitlement benefits of AFDC and hailed its transformation into a program in which work would be required.

While most observers point to the 104\textsuperscript{th} Congress and the Contract With America as the watershed time in workfare reform, the vast majority of the proposed changes to the American welfare state had been attracting an increasingly strong consensus as early as 10 years earlier. In 1986, even before the passage of the Family Support Act, the American Enterprise Institute organized a policy research group called the Working Seminar. The Working Seminar was a bipartisan commission of 20 highly experienced welfare policy experts, split evenly between liberals and conservatives, including the controversial

\textsuperscript{123} Tanner, \textit{Poverty of Welfare}, 108.
conservatives Charles Murray and Larry Mead, and similarly controversial liberals Alice Rivlin and Barbara Blum. After a year’s work, the Working Seminar produced working papers, many of which presaged the same reforms that would be passed in 1996. Haskins elaborates:

The report from the Working Seminar . . . shows that the big issues, including mandatory work and time limits, were clearly on the table almost a decade before the welfare reform debate of 1995–96. . . . Perhaps it is too much to claim, as the Working Seminar report did, that there was “consensus” on welfare reform provisions. . . . It does seem fair, however, to conclude that both liberal and conservative policy intellectuals were convinced that welfare dependency and other behavioral problems were the major issues that had to be addressed by welfare reform. At the very least, there was a willingness to seriously consider radical reforms.”

Whether or not this limited and tentative agreement over reform constitutes the proverbial “writing on the wall” is difficult to say. While support for reforms was likely stronger on both sides of the aisle than Democrats were willing to admit, Reagan’s stinging defeat on Social Security and the weakness of the Family Support Act suggest that the backing for workfare had not yet fully coalesced amongst the relevant players on Capitol Hill. Nonetheless, given the continued growth of AFDC, traditional American hostility toward cash entitlement benefits, and the way in which the Republican Party was becoming increasingly effective at translating that anger into electoral gains, Haskins is

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124 Ibid., 13.
likely correct that work requirements were likely to win Congressional approval sometime sooner than later. What is most surprising is the fact that a Democratic President would be the final piece of the puzzle that enabled the GOP to capture the majority and gain a signature on their signature bill. By the time E. Clay Shaw’s gavel brought the Contract With America hearing to order on January 13, 1995, the question of workfare had long since ceased being “if” and was now “how much?”

Republican Rhetoric

Republicans wasted little time deploying ideographic themes during the Hearing. Chairman Clay Shaw of Florida’s opening remarks began:

We on the Human Resources Subcommittee have a historic opportunity. . . . We, as Republicans and Democrats, have an opportunity to work together . . . to change the world as we know it, today, here in the United States, to take a program which has grown and grown many times to the detriment of the people that it is trying to help, without any proper attention being given to it.\footnote{E. Clay Shaw, Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, \textit{Contract with America - Welfare Reform}, 104th Cong., First sess., January 13, 1995, 6.}

The first paragraph’s worth of words from Shaw’s mouth made two powerful moves, particularly given that Shaw had yet to use the work ideograph by name. First and foremost, Shaw established the exigence of this hearing, declaring that it constituted an “historic opportunity.” These are remarkably strong words and, although hyperbolic declarations of historic opportunities are a good deal less unusual in Washington, D.C. than most anywhere else on Earth, in this particular instance, Shaw was likely not overplaying his rhetorical hand. He was an influential member of the leadership of a
commanding congressional majority who, while dealing with a President from the opposing party, chaired the committee responsible for legislation for which the President had campaigned strongly. There was little doubt that Republicans would be successful in moving legislation to the President’s desk and Shaw had a better than average chance of seeing it signed.

The second major move made by Shaw was an invitation to Democrats for bipartisan efforts on the bill. While facile gestures toward bipartisanship are so obligatory that they likely constitute a generic expectation for any words uttered on Capitol Hill, once again, Shaw may well have had the opportunity to realize this elusive goal. He had a large GOP majority at his disposal and was in charge of signature legislation. Unlike most partisan issues, the possibility certainly existed that he could attract a significant number of Democrats in the hope that they might join the “winning team” in an effort to at least have some small degree of influence over its final form. Even without such political maneuvering, Shaw had at least two more moves to make, both of which came from a position of rhetorical strength.

The first of these moves was an appeal to the unanimity of support for reform. Despite protestation from the largely powerless liberal wing of the Democratic Party, Shaw understood as well as anyone that the American public overwhelmingly supported work requirements, as did a similarly overwhelming number of Congresspersons. Shaw said: “We are on the fast track. The American people are behind us. I think from listening to Democrats and Republicans that we all want to accomplish the same thing even though we may have substantially different ideas as how to go about it and as to some of the details. I find a consensus of what brings us together and that is the realization that the
welfare program we have is the cruelest program of all because is pays people not to succeed.” Shaw’s arguments are particularly effective when considered in light of Zarefsky’s reflection that “[b]y selecting which symbols indicate the situation, people define what it means.” By selecting symbols that characterized the situation as an “historic opportunity” to “work together” on a “fast track” with the “American people behind [them]” to “accomplish the same thing,” Shaw had firmly established control of the symbolic choices in this hearing. While it is obviously the case that persuasion could not happen without the assent of the numerous audiences watching and listening, the reality is that all of those statements are incredibly hard to refute. They were, quite frankly, taken as understood by any marginally informed audience. Returning once more to Zarefsky can punctuate the value of this symbolic choice: “[the basis for] understanding will determine the appropriate response to the situation.”

Shaw’s final move came moments later, when he stated: “if you raise your expectations and believe that these people can accomplish something, they also will not disappoint you because they will have within themselves self-esteem and they will work to levels that they did not think possible.” After having already delivered what amounted to a highly effective speech, Shaw finally used the most powerful rhetorical tool he had available: WORK. In addition to invoking an ideograph that is functionally unassailable on its own, Shaw had also rattled off a list of rhetorical entailments, starting at the beginning of his speech. These are words that are typically associated with WORK and/or have

127 Ibid.
128 Zarefsky, President Johnson’s War on Poverty : Rhetoric and History, 3.
129 Ibid.
130 Shaw, House Subcommittee, Contract with American - Welfare Reform, 6.
ideographic functions of their own: HISTORIC, OPPORTUNITY, FUTURE, FREEDOM, SELF-ESTEEM. Invoking HISTORIC in association with WORK highlights the vertical structuring of the ideograph, the manner in which it is descriptively defined. The manner in which it is vertically contextualized into time activates WORK’s diachronic meaning, enabling “us to witness one present being replaced by another, the succession of the static figures of the language.”¹³¹ The result is that the ideography of WORK calls forth WORK as a historical concept, such that its changes and evolution are available as a persuasive device. The utterance of the entailed ideographs helps to motivate the synchronic function of WORK.

The horizontal, rhetorical structure of work is what gives it force – the fact of it being engaged in ideological argument causes it to, in McGee’s words, “do work in explaining, justifying, or guiding policy” such that “the relationship of ideographs changes” and it is no longer “taken for granted [as] a simple connector.” Having been called forth into argument, the ideograph, “in Burke’s vocabulary, becomes the ‘title’ or ‘god-term’ of all ideographs, the center-sun about which every ideograph orbits.”¹³²

Democratic Rhetoric

Having decisively gained control of the symbolic characterization of the space of argument, the history of work, and the ideology of the argumentative space, Shaw’s speaking time expired, at which point he ceded the floor to the Ranking Democrat of the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Harold Ford of Tennessee. His opening comments began:

¹³¹ Jose Ortega y Gasset, quoted in McGee, "Ideograph," 12.
¹³² Ibid.: 13.
I, too, as Ranking Minority Member of this Committee would like to join you and the Republicans in hopefully some type of bipartisan spirit to fashion a welfare bill that will respond to those human needs of people in this country. We know that there are those who are trapped into this vicious cycle of poverty and welfare, we know that the system out there is not working and responding to many of the human needs of our children and those women who are trapped at this dead end of the welfare cycle itself.\(^{133}\)

After a brief argument in which he disagrees with the Republican proposal to devolve authority to individual states via block grants, he continued:

Democrats will support responsible work requirements before this Subcommittee to be reported in the welfare reform package. It is clear that we must assure the welfare of our children and let it be a national responsibility to respond to many of those human needs and we meet those human needs in the welfare population. We know that the welfare population is over 14 million people in this country and we know that they are in need of changes in the system itself.

Ford can not be accused of inefficiency - in exactly 275 words, he managed to agree with the central framing of work, concede the key argument that the welfare system is irreparably broken, and make an argument about block grants that is, given the framing accomplished by Shaw only seconds earlier, utterly inconsequential.

Not to be outdone, during the questioning of the day’s first witness, Democrat Sander Levin of Michigan suggested: “Maybe we should start by clearing some of the debris from the debate. I think, Governor Engler, as you said about the status quo, I think

it is gone. The status quo is over. I don’t really think there is a conspiracy in this town to
keep it. If there is, no one here is a part of it. No one at this table.”\textsuperscript{134}

All told, three of the four Democrats in attendance at the hearing had gone out of
their way to reaffirm their commitment to work as well as to concur with the claim that
the welfare system was broken . . . before the second panel of witnesses had so much as
begun their testimony.\textsuperscript{135}

Unfortunately for the Democrats on the Subcommittee, the second panel of
witnesses did not prove any more fruitful in creating meaningful points of contestation
\textit{(stases)} between the Republicans and themselves. The second panel of the day featured a
fairly heavy hitter from the Clinton Administration, the Department of Health and
Human Services Assistant Secretary for Children and Families and Assistant Secretary for
Planning and Evaluation, Dr. Mary Jo Bane and Dr. David Ellwood. Bane and Ellwood
were highly influential figures in the welfare debate, not so much because of their
positions within the Administration but because of a study they had published some ten
years earlier while associate professors at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at
Harvard University.\textsuperscript{136}

Bane and Ellwood’s study attempted a new means of examining the dynamic of
poverty by studying “spells,” the length of time that individuals were on welfare as well as
how frequently they would come on or off of federal assistance. The results of Bane and
Ellwood’s research were shocking, not so much because of some definitive conclusion in

\textsuperscript{135} The lone hold out was Rep. Charles Rangel of NY. Rep. Pete Stark of CA was not present.
\textsuperscript{136} Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood, “Slipping into and out of Poverty: The Dynamics of Spells,” \textit{The Journal of Human Resources} 21, no. 1 (1986).
one direction or another regarding the efficacy of welfare at moving people out of poverty, but because they were extensively cited by both Democrats and Republicans as evidence of the superiority of their respective approaches to poverty. Once again, we can turn to Republican Ron Haskins, one of the primary architects of the PRA, for an incredibly complimentary depiction of both the research and the two individuals who served as President Clinton’s point-woman and –man on welfare issues, but who were so outraged at Clinton’s signature of the PRWORA that both would resign in protest:

The Bane and Ellwood study is one of the most influential scholarly studies used in a major congressional debate on social policy in the last twenty years or so. Ironically, for university scholars, who are mostly left of center, one of their most creative and definitive products was used by Republicans to drive home the point that welfare dependency was real – and a primary argument in the debate that led to the demise of a major New Deal program. I doubt this outcome is what Bane and Ellwood had in mind when they initiated their study, but like the principled scholars they are, they published their results anyway.\(^\text{137}\)

Bane and Ellwood were appearing as the main representatives of the White House before the House Subcommittee. They appeared as enormously respected researchers, arguably two of the finest social scientists in the country on questions of welfare and poverty, the white knights of the White House, ready to make the Democrats’ case. After a few initial pleasantries and obligatory statements regarding how enlightening the hearings were shaping up to be, Bane began her testimony in earnest:

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As you know, Mr. Chairman, last year the President submitted a comprehensive welfare reform proposal that addresses serious flaws in the current welfare system. We all agree that the current system undermines work and parental responsibility. Our approach emphasizes work, it emphasizes responsibility, and it emphasizes reaching the next generation.\textsuperscript{138}

She continued:

As we move forward to consider comprehensive welfare reform, several questions are raised regarding the proper balance between national objectives and State flexibility in the design of the Nation’s welfare system. We believe that several key goals should govern our efforts to redesign the welfare system: Achieving national reform objectives of work, responsibility, and accountability; ensuring stability in funding over time and cushioning States and individuals against economic cycles; and preserving basic protections for needy Americans, especially children.\textsuperscript{139}

The White Knights’ horses, it seems, had come up a bit lame. Having been essentially reduced to a pair of mouthpieces for the conservative welfare agenda of Bill Clinton, Bane and Ellwood reiterated the Administration’s recipe for reform: \textit{work}, a dash of responsibility, and more \textit{work} (along with the obligatory Democratic lines expressing concern for children and suspicion toward block grants). Ellwood would resign within a year in protest over President’s Clinton’s decision to back the PRWORA without job


\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 48-49.
provisions or other benefits to people who reached the two-year cap. Bane’s resignation would come shortly after Ellwood’s.\textsuperscript{140}

With lone liberal stalwart John Rangel becoming increasingly apoplectic as panel after panel of witnesses continued to repeat the mantra of work, responsibility, and self-sufficiency, the stunning lack of meaningful resistance to the rhetorical standards established by the Republicans on the committee came into sharper and sharper focus. Ironically, no two statements before the entire committee better reflect the near-unanimity with which work was supported than those of Democrats Harold Ford and Sander Levin. During later days of hearings, Levin argued with Republican Senator Hank Brown of Colorado that “there is much more common ground here. . . . I think there is a rather strong, if not consensus, near consensus that the chief aim has to be able to get people into the work flow, to get them off welfare, to break cycles of dependence.”\textsuperscript{141} Giving the opening statement for the minority before the third day of hearings, focused on “welfare dependency and the welfare-to-work programs,” Ford boastfully declared that “Democrats and Republicans can certainly agree on one thing: Working at a job that supports your family is far better than working to rely on welfare. Where we sometimes differ is with the means we must use to achieve that goal.”\textsuperscript{142} What Ford failed to recognize

\textsuperscript{140} In Bane's defense, she did wait until a few days after the bill was signed. Ellwood left before Clinton so much as had time to pick up a pen. Mary Jo Bane, "Presidential Address--Expertise, Advocacy and Deliberation: Lessons from Welform Reform," \textit{Journal of Policy Analysis \& Management} 20, no. 2 (2001): 191. "In 1996, I left the federal Department of Health and Human Services 'with some drama,' as one friend described it, after the Congress passed and the President signed a welfare law . . . that I believed represented an abdication..."

\textsuperscript{141} Levin, \textit{House Subcommittee, Contract with American - Welfare Reform}, 524.

\textsuperscript{142} Ford, \textit{House Subcommittee, Contract with American - Welfare Reform}, 250.
was that the rhetorical concessions that the Democrats had already given the GOP made their differences over the “means [used] to achieve that goal” utterly meaningless.

While modern rhetorical theory such as McGee’s Ideograph help to demonstrate the particular symbolic mechanisms with which the Republicans were able to exert control, the magnitude of the damage that the Democrats had done to themselves is perhaps best demonstrated by ancient stasis theory. Quintillian explains that there are four stases through which argument takes place: conjecture, definition, quality, and procedure. These stases, derived from the Ancient Greek word for “stands” upon which a fight would occur, correspond to the logical progression through four essential questions in which most deliberation occurs. Conjecture contests if there is an issue to be considered (“Is there a problem?”). Definition contests the nature of the issue (“What kind of problem is it?”). Quality contests the severity of the issue (“How bad is the problem?”). Procedure contests the solution to the issue (“What should be done about the problem?”).

Quintillian emphasizes that the first two stases, conjecture and definition, are by far the most important. Contemporary rhetorical theory has amplified this to suggest that definition is vastly more important than the other steps, insofar as it can create an absolute constraint on the sorts of problems considered, as well as the potential actions to solve them. If, as Zarefsky suggests, “by selecting which symbols indicate the situation, people define what it means,” then rhetorical competency and eloquence, i.e., the selection of the most appropriate symbols, can be deployed to devastating result.

\[143\] Quint. Inst. 3.6
An analysis of the *Contract With America – Welfare Reform* hearings through the lens of stasis theory does not bode well for the Democrats’ chances of seeing their legislation adopted:

- **Conjecture:** “Is there a problem with welfare?”
  - Republicans: “Yes”
  - Democrats: “We Agree”

- **Definition:** “What is the problem with welfare?”
  - Republicans: “Work, Responsibility, Dependency”
  - Democrats: “We Agree”

- **Quality:** “How severe are the problems?”
  - Republicans: “Horrific”
  - Democrats: “We Basically Agree”

- **Procedure:** “What should be done about the problems with welfare?”
  - Republicans: “Work Requirements (among other things)"
  - Democrats: “Work Requirements + Jobs - Block Grants”

The power of definition is clear when examined through the frame of stasis theory. Once the Democrats in the Subcommittee ceded control over *what* the problem with welfare was, the need for restorative action that heavily emphasized work followed logically. The ideographic usage of work introduces an even more damning element to the debate for the Democratic minority. If we recall that ideographs are extraordinarily resistant to definition, the concession by Democrats of stasis of definition by a highly malleable rhetorical conduit to an equally malleable piece of ideology essentially allows the Republican majority to manipulate work’s meaning to suit their ends at any given time.
in the debate. As Noah Zatz succinctly explains: “‘Work’ is a term applied to bewilderingly varied activities.”

The hegemony that WORK exerts over all other issues in the debates over welfare reform is illustrated nicely by two different pieces of testimony, one by John Engler, a former Governor of Michigan who had administered a workfare pilot program during his tenure as Governor; the other by Nathan Deal, a Democratic Congressman from Georgia. Engler was the first witness called before the Subcommittee on the first day of hearings, one of only nine witnesses for the day. Deal spoke on the fifth day of hearings and was one of over 40 witnesses. Deal’s oral statement and question and answer time was limited to five minutes. Engler, along with Delaware Governor Tom Carper, testified for over an hour.

Midway through Engler’s testimony, Phil English, a Republican Congressman from Pennsylvania, engaged in an exchange with Engler, posing a question to the former Governor that could only charitably be described as a “softball”:

Mr. ENGLISH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. During this debate, we have seen the notion that, overall, levels of spending equal compassion in the welfare system. And I wonder if the two of you would comment on whether you regard aggregate levels of spending as the best indicator of how compassionate a welfare system is?

Engler’s reply not only answered the question, but adroitly engaged in two acts of stasis using work:

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Governor ENGLER. Congressman, again, I think the evidence is clear it has no relationship. I mean, we reduced spending in general assistance and I think that was a compassionate thing to do. We said, go to work if you were single and able bodied. Again, it isn't a contest to see who can have the best welfare program being defined as perhaps the most generous grant or the total spending that is the highest for a welfare program. I think it is how many people move from dependence on the State to independence, taking control of their own lives and being able to raise a family, that will in turn be independent, can go to a quality school and get an education. I think those are the measurements.\textsuperscript{146}

Engler used work to capture both the stasis of definition and, if not to decide the stasis of procedure, to at least set the terms by which any proposed procedure would be evaluated.

Seventeen days later, Democrat Rep. Nathan Deal testified before the Subcommittee and presented an alternative workfare plan he had co-authored with Blanche Lincoln. Explaining the benefits of their bill (procedure), Deal said:

Our bill addresses this issue of work in several ways. First of all, we believe that our reform bill will move more people into work programs than any other comprehensive bill that is going to be placed before you. In fact, we think that it will be over four times greater than those who are currently in the JOBS Programs.\textsuperscript{147}

In the time that had elapsed since Engler’s testimony, Republicans had so thoroughly controlled the first three stages of conjecture, definition, and quality that the best answer remaining to Congressional Democrats was to introduce an alternative bill, largely similar to the GOP bill, and to argue that it would be more effective at meeting the criteria that the Republicans had already established — within the first 30 minutes of the first hearing, seventeen days earlier. The rapid acquiescence by the Democrats on the Subcommittee to the Republican framing of the debate — their recognition and ratification of the ubiquity of work — rendered the next 7 days worth of testimony largely perfunctory from a deliberative standpoint. The fate of the AFDC had already been sealed.

WHEN RHETORIC BETRAY DELIBERATION

The failures of the Democratic members of the Subcommittee on Human Resources to contest successfully the manner in which Republicans deployed timeworn and battle-tested arguments about unanimity are quite clear when viewed at a tactical level. Unfortunately, the Democrats’ failure runs much deeper than the fact that they were simply outmaneuvered on a few key arguments. The strategic approach that Democrats brought to the debate over welfare reform was also flawed from the outset. While the PRWORA has been the law of the land for nearly fifteen years, the missteps taken by the Democrats, particularly the moderates seated on the Subcommittee and those who testified, can be quite instructive for future conflicts over the proper role and scope of the federal government.

Losing the Battle for Control of Ideography

The extraordinary display of eloquence, rhetorical competence, and persuasion shown by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933 and 1935 as he systematically transformed
America into the dominant force of the next 100 years seemed long forgotten by the party that otherwise proudly guards his legacy. FDR carefully nurtured the rhetoric of fairness, protection, and safety through nearly every speech he delivered until it evolved into his explanation of “the main objectives of our American program . . . the security of the men, women, and children of the Nation against certain hazards and vicissitudes of life” and propelled the Social Security Act into law when he confidently declared that “this purpose is an essential part of our task.”

Roosevelt’s command of ideographic rhetoric is nothing short of amazing. Not only does he deftly deploy positive ideographs such as fairness, protection, safety, American, security, children, and nation, but he strategically uses negative ideography as well, summoning the “hazards and vicissitudes of life.” While most rhetorical critics focus on the ideology transmitted through the positive ideographs of political liberalism, McGee reminds us in his conclusion that “ideographs such as ‘slavery’ and ‘tyranny,’ however, may guide behavior and belief negatively by branding unacceptable behavior.”

When Roosevelt offers the *HAZARDS AND VICISITUDES OF LIFE* as something to be feared, the strength his rhetorical force gives it in concert with the facts of the Great Depression elevate one otherwise pedestrian word (hazards) and another that is exceedingly ornate and elevated (vicissitudes) into ideographic status. By creating a rhetorical montage of old age, unemployment, and widowed mothers with orphaned children, Roosevelt was able to animate the *HAZARDS AND VICISITUDES OF LIFE* in 1935 to a phrase with ideographic standing. Just as no two people in America today experience liberty the same way, but any reasonable persons would concur that it has deep value, Roosevelt rhetorically

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constructed a world in 1935 in which no two people had experienced hazards or vicissitudes in the same way, but all reasonable people agreed that they were to be avoided at all costs.

Sixty years later, the Democratic Party emerged from the midterm election badly beaten, and quickly consented to the Republican ideography that dominated at the time. Is it any surprise that a President who campaigned on a pledge to “end welfare as we know it” dismantled one of the pillars of Roosevelt’s crowning legislative achievement? The simple fact is that Democrats were playing with rhetorical fire by attempting to indulge themselves in an ideography that had been Republican territory since the Presidency of Ronald Reagan.

Lest we forget, McGee admonishes his reader that no one is “permitted to question the fundamental logic of ideographs. Everyone is conditioned to think of ‘the rule of law’ as a logical commitment.” Recognition of the logical commitment to a given ideology does not necessarily entail the use of that ideograph in one’s rhetoric. Just as numerous Republican politicians are doubtless convinced of the necessity of logical commitment to ideographs such as equality and justice, they are also capable of logically deducing that excessive use of those ideographs only serves to empower a politics that benefits Democrats far more than Republicans. They have been largely effective at avoiding them.

Democrats in 1995 were woefully inadequate at that same task. We have already seen how their failure to contest the terms of the debate and move it away from work created a set of stases that made them extremely unlikely to win the larger debate about welfare.

149 Ibid.: 7.
An exchange in the first day’s testimony between Robert Greenstein of the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Robert Rector of the conservative Heritage Foundation illustrates how the existence of the strong ideograph of work enabled Rector to overcome what would otherwise seem like highly intelligent and compelling arguments.

Answering a question from Rep. Harold Ford, Greenstein commented that he was fully supportive of modifications to AFDC that would help move people “off of welfare into work” but that he and several Governors of states that would be in charge of administering TANF were “very fearful of what would happen in a recession if these programs, AFDC, especially food stamps, were blocked and could not respond to the increase in need in a recession.”\textsuperscript{150,151} While this was an argument that was raised by several other witnesses (although rarely by any of the Congresspersons themselves), few had the credibility of Greenstein, the founder of one of the most reputable non-profit think tanks in Washington and a MacArthur Fellowship (Genius Award). Reactor, speaking immediately after Greenstein and ostensibly intending to address Greenstein’s argument, said:

I would say that basically, though, putting the caveats that Mr. Greenstein puts on there, there is some validity in those caveats, but . . .

\textsuperscript{151} Beyond being a compelling argument at the time, Greenstein’s fears were largely confirmed during the most recent recession. As early as December 2008, economists saw the PRWORA and TANF beginning to unravel. Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman wrote: “It’s no surprise that … the end to welfare as we know it” in favor of “workfare” — is fast fraying at the edges. States are reporting a surge in applicants for the limited short-term cash aid allowed under the workfare rules. And the program’s emphasis on shunting the poor toward low-paying, start-up jobs is becoming increasingly pointless as the job market ossifies.” Paul Krugman, "Welfare as We Knew It," \textit{New York Times}, December 26, 2008.
that is because, in welfare, as in most other things, you get what you pay for and the current welfare system pays for nonwork, and nonmarriage. Rector’s comments are such a non sequitur that they would ordinarily draw laughter, but here they are merely the highest profile example of an exceedingly common argumentative pattern within the hearings: a Democrat or reluctant Republican raises a potentially valid argument or concern and, in response, a supporter of workfare reiterates the existence of moral hazards within the status quo, circling back to work multiple times throughout their response.

Losing control of arguments such as ideographs as early as the Democrats did made even enormously powerful arguments such as the unfortunately vindicated warnings of highly credible experts like Robert Greenstein largely irrelevant to the discussion. Fearing the strong public backlash against AFDC, Democrats attempted to triangulate their position and, in so doing, gave near complete control of stasis to the Republicans. The result was that arguments that had traditionally been extremely successful for Democrats in past welfare debates failed miserably.

One of the major advantages that supporters of welfare had been able to leverage in the major welfare expansions of the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the Great Society was social science. The rise of Progressivism and trust in problem solving government and the concomitant birth of Social Work as a discipline, contrasted with pure religious charity or “calling,” directly led to the 1909 White House Conference that catalyzed the mothers’ pension movement and helped establish state pensions. During the

1930s, the vast collection of committees, working groups, and Roosevelt’s Brain Trust helped to ease the transition into a vastly different federal government and economy by offering the image of carefully considered and deliberate policy emanating from the White House, contrasted with a principled, but nonetheless comparatively uninformed opposition on Capitol Hill. The explosion of research universities and the massively expanded purview of the social science departments within them helped to identify and publicize the plight of the severely poor urban underclass in America to great effect. The raft of information and publicity that they created helped enable President Johnson to declare war on poverty and see the Economic Opportunity Act signed into law barely six months later. Medicare and Medicaid would follow less than a year on the EOA’s heels.

Of course, liberals were not likely to hold a monopoly over social science forever, and conservatives were able to bring their own research to the table in the debates over OBRA and the Family Support Act to a reasonable effect. Ron Haskins even suggests that the Bane and Ellwood study of 1983 largely withstood attempts to politicize it and provided definitive scientific evidence in favor of the dependency thesis. But the striking difference between the debate over the PRWORA and all of the welfare debates before it was the self-reinforcing feedback loop between researchers and politicians that created a crassly political environment in which social scientific research oftentimes exacerbated or triggered hysterical pronouncements of doom. Mary Jo Bane, author of the 1983 study and the woman Haskins describes as a “principled scholar” published a retrospective piece on the PRWORA debates and the uncomfortable relationship between science, politics, and their respective practitioners, in which she laments:

Weaver . . . reminds us that in 1988, policy research, especially the evaluations of welfare to work programs conducted by MDRC, was extremely influential in the formulation and passage of the Family Support Act. By that time, there was some consensus among the researchers that Congress paid attention to about what the data showed and about what should be done, and—though this is no doubt overstating the history—it more or less was. Then a number of things happened. Welfare caseloads grew dramatically starting in about 1988. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton discovered in 1992 that when he said “end welfare as we know it” his focus groups applauded and his poll numbers went up, so he kept saying it. The welfare issue was back on the agenda.

The policy research industry grew and became much more diverse, including, for example, policy research units that were part of both liberal and conservative advocacy organizations. Policy researchers also . . . published in opinion magazines as well as in scholarly journals; they learned how to write press releases and to network with reporters. They also became more sophisticated in reinterpreting and discrediting research that suggested other conclusions.\footnote{Bane, "Presidential Address--Expertise, Advocacy and Deliberation: Lessons from Welform Reform," 193.}

The growth of the policy research \emph{industry}, particularly explicitly biased researchers, only serves to poison the well for all scientific research, no matter how reputable a particular research may be. The decline in trust in social scientists does not mean that public policy controversies will go away, though. The unfortunate effect of
those two facts is that the role of demagoguery and of ideology is only likely to become comparatively larger.

Degrading Deliberation

In addition to handing liberals a defeat that was nothing short of humiliating, the ubiquity of the work ideograph also had the effect of severely degrading the quality of the deliberation that occurred within Congress. It is unlikely that Democrats would have been able to hold off Republican efforts to implement work requirement and restrict cash welfare benefits, given the large GOP majority, not to mention the support of the President. No rhetorical practice short of the rise of FDR from the grave to speak in defense of the SSA himself was likely to change the facts on the ground. But small differences in the dynamics of the debate could have had immense effects in a nation of 300 million people where even at historically low levels supported by a strong economy, more than 3 million people a month received TANF benefits. In an interview in 2000, David Ellwood, now the Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, spoke to the question of the choices that were made at the margins during the final negotiation of the PRWORA:

The president wasn’t willing to fight for the original conception of "two years, and you work" and indeed was comfortable with a more pure devolution . . . The loss of the House and Senate [for Democrats] made it a much more difficult situation. The president, being a [former] governor, adopted a strategy that pretty much lets states do what they want. I’m very disappointed because I think what was lost in
this process were some protections for people for whom work is going to be very
difficult.”¹⁵⁵

Even in 2000, Ellwood was sounding the same alarm bell regarding a recession heard
earlier from Paul Krugman: “the issue of ‘two years, and you work’ versus ‘two years, and
you’re off’ is mitigated when there are plenty of jobs in the private economy. The real test
is twofold: What happens in the next recession, and what about the folks who can’t find
jobs even in a good economy?”¹⁵⁶

Even in the face of inevitable reductions in the generosity of the federal welfare
system, a more effective rhetorical strategy on the part of Democrats may well have been
enough to capture more concessions on benefit levels, job training, or even the job
provision in President Clinton’s original “two years, and you work” plan. The manner in
which the Democrats practically capitulated to the GOP, particularly in the early months
of the debate, had an effect on their initial bargaining position, as well as the overall
trajectory of the debate itself.

Additionally, the limited amount of *actual, agonistic debate* (beyond terse
exchanges between experts on different sides of the issue at the same testimony table)
does not merely effect the up or down vote of any particular bill. On an issue of such high
public salience and historical import, quality debates and deliberation within the highest
(and most visible) parts of the government help to produce more informed policy, more
informed policy makers, and, most importantly, more informed voters who can
subsequently reward the aforementioned policymakers with votes, creating positive

Prospect* Online (2000).
¹⁵⁶ Ibid.
feedback. When debate resembles a slightly tense discussion and does not involve the legitimate interplay of ideas, it does little to advance the deliberative process. A parade of experts, politicians, not for profit leaders, and ordinary citizens through the testimony in front of the subcommittee would typically be an opportunity for most committees and subcommittees. But when that vast majority open their testimony by engaging in the rhetorical equivalent of genuflecting at the alter of work, two-parent families, and self-reliance, it causes apathy toward the process by anyone without an unabiding love of CSPAN, regardless of programming.

What Made Work Work?

The initial knee-jerk reaction of a liberal opponent of workfare might well to become furious at the Democrats for essentially surrendering the terms of the debate to the GOP and, as a result, the debate as a whole. However, this is, as just written, a knee-jerk reaction. All three of the Democrats in question (Harold Ford, Barbara Kennelly, and Sander Levin) had been serving in the House of Representatives for at least ten years. All were given seats on the Human Resources Subcommittee precisely because of their experience, acumen in hearings, and the importance of the legislation with which the Subcommittee would deal. They were not, under any stretch of the imagination, interested in capitulating to their Republican counterparts. Instead, they were in a rhetorical situation that was essentially impossible for them to overcome.

Ideographs have numerous characteristics that render them powerful rhetorical phenomena. As explained in the theoretical exposition, they are malleable: they possess an almost Protean capacity to take on whichever form is most pleasing to the particular audience member; and do so for each and every member of the audience at the same time.
Ideographs also resist definition, insofar as they are deeply embedded cultural practices that can be descriptively isolated in only one of two ways: diachronically (by reference to past instances of the ideograph) or synchronically (by reference to the other ideographs with which the one in question typically “clusters”).

I propose that definition itself is an inappropriate moniker for a process that is, more accurately, an attempt at description. Even description belies an encounter with ideography. Ideographs lack substance, at least in the Aristotelian sense of the word — even the metaphysics of ideographs create unique quandaries. Nominalist metaphysics prove a non-starter, insofar as ideographs already have names, it is referents that they lack. Realist metaphysics create a quandary of the opposite sort: because the ideograph itself lacks form, it can only be described by reference to its level of similarity to past instances (diachronic) or some other thing with which it shares a number of qualities (synchronic) – at best, they are some bastard form of social universal. In the end, the best description that can be offered of a particular ideograph, other than its symbol, may well be Justice Potter Stewart’s oft-repeated concurring opinion in Jacobellis v. Ohio (1954), regarding obscenity: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.” Justice Stewart’s keen observation helps to elucidate one final characteristic of ideographs that explain their power: while they largely defy definition and description of any meaningful kind, all or nearly all ideographs can be clearly experienced. An encounter with an ideograph, in that sense, harkens to something primordial or pre-linguistic, but nonetheless real. Ideographs, while resistant to
attempts at categorization by rationalist metaphysics, may well be susceptible to a phenomenological analysis, a task that I will attempt in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER FOUR:

THE PHENOMENA OF WORK, DIGNITY, AND CONSCIENCE

- When we are confronted with empty words, what should we do? Heidegger’s answer is always, “return to the phenomena.”

Michael Hyde introduces his 2006 book, *The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgement*, by posing a question: “What would life be like if no one acknowledged your existence?” I introduce this chapter with a variation on this theme: “what would life be like if everyone denied your existence?” Hyde implicates his question thusly:

The question confronts one with the possibility of being isolated, marginalized, ignored, and forgotten by others. The unacknowledged find themselves in an “out-of-the-way” place where it is hard for human beings, given their social instinct, to feel at home. The suffering that can accompany this way of being-in-the-world is known to bring about fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, and sometimes even death in the form of suicide or retaliation against those who are rightly or wrongly accused of making one’s life so lonely, miserable, and unbearable.

Compare Hyde’s description of that tortured soul with the person described below:

[A] type of human being produced by the grinding, wearing life of the slums. The other Americans feel differently than the rest of the nation. They tend to be hopeless and passive, yet prone to bursts of violence; they are lonely and isolated, yet often rigid and hostile. To be poor is not simply to be deprived of the material

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159 Ibid.
things of this world. It is to enter a fatal, futile universe, an America within an
America, a twisted spirit.\footnote{Harrington, \textit{The Other America; Poverty in the United States}, 121-126.}

Based on the descriptions offered above, both of these people lead similarly miserable
lives. They both exist out-of-the-way, in worlds that seem to lack redeeming qualities of
any sort. They live in worlds of violence: directed at them from others, from themselves at
others, and self-directed. They live in a world of fear, anxiety, sadness, and anger – a fatal,
futile universe.

The first excerpt is Hyde’s description of the hypothetical person whose existence
goes unacknowledged, such that they live in a world of ethical and ontological damnation.
The second excerpt is drawn from Michael Harrington’s \textit{The Other America}, the 1962
book whose publication helped launch the rediscovery of poverty in the United States and
the Great Society. Absent some minor changes to mask their respective contexts, the two
descriptions are practically interchangeable, such that the authors could simple replace the
pages in one another’s books no one the wiser. The primary difference between the two is
that whereas Hyde is attempting to theoretically epitomize the “bad life,” Harrington is
reporting the results of a 1958 study of the poor in New Haven, CT.

Before we react with horror to the possibility that the life of actual people can so
closely mirror one imagined as the most miserable person in existence, one additional
hypothetical should be addressed: What if neither person is real? What if, in the
adaptation of August B. Hollingshead and F.C. Redlich’s 1958 study, \textit{Social Class and
Mental Illness}, Harrington mistakenly abstracted the life of a person who is quite
pathologically mentally ill to describe the life of all of the nation’s poor? What if he did so purposefully?

The myriad implications of these comparisons demonstrate the enormous implications of poverty in the United States, not only in its actual instantiation, but also in the manner in which we write, read, speak, and listen about it. The answer to the previous questions is almost assuredly “all of the above”: doubtless some of our nation’s poorest people live perfectly joyous lives and will do so through their final days. Others likely exist in a material state that matches the existence of the ontological damnation described by Hyde. The overwhelming majority of America’s poor exist somewhere in between.

Chapter Three offered a somewhat positivistic investigation into the rhetoric that was used to pass the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. This chapter will take up the far more difficult question of the implications of the use of that rhetoric.

The dominant rhetoric of the PRWORA debates was centered on “work.” Chapter Three applied Michael Calvin McGee’s theory of the ideograph to explain the extraordinary effectiveness of work in overcoming any and all objections to the workfare provision and benefit reductions in the PRWORA. Work carried so much power for the Republican advocates of welfare reform that one subsequently observed: “[W]ork became the cannonball of the Republican welfare reform agenda, blasting straight ahead through all obstacles.”¹⁶¹ It is an apt metaphor for the devastating effect it had against any other arguments that stood in the way of the PRWORA.

¹⁶¹ Haskins, Work Over Welfare, 10.
While effective at blasting straight ahead through obstacles, cannonballs are shockingly inept tools if one hopes to do anything other than knock down walls. Like any explosive, it risks a good deal of collateral damage. In the instance at hand, while the cannonball only exists metaphorically, the damage inflicted by the ideograph of work can be just as real. The comparison between Hyde and Harrington is capable of working both ways. Harrington described the misery endured by America’s forgotten poor, and we are shocked to discover how closely it parallels Hyde’s hypothetical devastation. But if the rhetoric used in our contemporary welfare debates create the conditions that give rise to the state described by Hyde, such that they create more people living in the world depicted by Harrington, they deserve every bit as much concern as the converse.

To investigate this possibility, I open this chapter by exploring a rhetorical peculiarity of the debates about work, welfare, and the PRWORA: the manner in which a significant number of the proponents of work argue for a causal relation between work and dignity. I argue that the assertion of this linkage dramatically raises the stakes of the debate over work and poverty, transforming an ethical claim about the undeserving poor (work should be required of recipients of poor relief) to an ontological claim (the absence of work among the undeserving poor impairs their ability to experience a fully realized humanity). Having entered the territory of ontology, I will then outline the set of theoretical tools with which I shall evaluate ontological issues. First, I briefly summarize Michael Hyde’s rhetorical “trilogy,” three books, each of which adopts a phenomenological method of inquiry toward rhetoric: *The Call of Conscience, The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgement*, and *Perfection*. All three draw heavily on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, such that a brief discussion of key points of his theories is warranted.
in advance of the discussion of Hyde’s work. After completing these theoretical explorations, I will return once again to McGee’s theory of the Ideograph as well as to a few select artifacts from the PRWORA debates and other discourses of poverty in America. When analyzed in the combined context of these aforementioned theories, the negative consequences of the discourses surrounding the PRWORA become manifest. An elucidation of these consequences will close the chapter.

ENGAGING THE ESSENCE OF HUMANITY: ARGUMENT FROM DIGNITY

Although Chapter Three included an explicit appeal to the salience of congressional rhetoric to the study of the PRWORA (particularly in a field overwhelmingly dominated by the study of Presidential rhetoric), I am nonetheless unable to resist the temptation to point to a few examples of Presidential rhetoric that epitomize the “argument from dignity” that I wish to identify. Once again, unanimity is the order of the day; the following three quotations come from three Presidents who have little in common beyond the office that they held and the rhetoric that they use. First, Bill Clinton, shortly after Senate passage of the PRWORA, announcing his intent to sign the bill:

This legislation . . . gives us a chance we haven’t had before to break the cycle of dependency that has existed for millions and millions of our fellow citizens, exiling them from the world of work that gives structure, meaning, and dignity to most of our lives.¹⁶²

Next, George W. Bush, in his State of the Union Address to Congress at the opening of his second term in 2005:

In America’s ideal of freedom, citizens find the dignity and security of economic independence instead of laboring on the edge of subsistence. This is the broader definition of liberty that motivated the Homestead Act, the Social Security Act, and the GI bill of rights.\footnote{George W. Bush. \textit{Inaugural Address, in Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush, 2005} (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), 1:68.}

Finally, in lieu of a speech by Barack Obama, an excerpt from an advertisement run by Obama during the 2008 Presidential election campaign:

He worked his way through college and Harvard Law. Turned down big money offers, and helped lift neighborhoods stung by job loss. Fought for workers’ rights. He passed a law to move people from welfare to work, slashed the rolls by eighty percent. Passed tax cuts for workers; health care for kids. As president, he’ll end tax breaks for companies that export jobs, reward those that create jobs in America. And never forget the dignity that comes from work.\footnote{“Dignity.” Barack Obama Presidential Campaign Advertisement. Quoted in: Ben Smith, “Obama: ‘Dignity”, Ben Smith: A Running Conversation About Politics, June 30, 2008, http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0608/Obama_Dignity.html (accessed May 5, 2010). While a quotation from a speech might have been more congruent with the previous two quotations, a campaign advertisement offers rhetoric in its purest sense and, in the case of this excerpt, an artifact \textit{par excellence}.}

All three of these quotations arise from extraordinarily rhetorical situations. Bill Clinton held hours of consultations with his cabinet and most trusted advisors before deciding to sign the PRWORA. The same day, Clinton hastily addressed the press to explain his decision, in the hopes of mollifying furious indignation from the left while attempting to
score political points and recapture the news cycle from the Republican congress that had just passed the bill. George W. Bush was delivering his Second Inaugural Address, having miraculously escaped public anger over the Iraq War, with determination to advance an ambitious legislative agenda. Barack Obama’s campaign aired the “Dignity” advertisement in the midst of the Presidential campaign, the same month that he overtook Hillary Clinton to secure the Democratic nomination, but well before the Wall Street meltdown in October cemented his lead over John McCain.

All three of these quotations make aggressive use of ideographs, the most obvious of which is work. All three also invoke a particular rhetoric: the connection of work and dignity. This move creates an explicit linkage between the act of working and finding a sense of dignity. Put another way, it could be said that working, within the rhetoric of speeches, is a necessary step toward the experience of feeling human. A citizen, in the words of President Bush, comes to be an autonomous “agent of his or her own destiny” only through work and employment. The secondary, unstated implication to this claim, of course, is that individuals who do not work are therefore not moral agents in a meaningful sense.

Using the case study of euthanasia in his book *The Call of Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate*, Hyde attempts to outline the contours of a reconstructive rhetoric by focusing his attention “primarily on a specific matter that no one involved in the debate can afford to leave unattended and undefined: ‘human dignity.’”  

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advanced in this chapter: “To control the discourse that is used to clarify and demonstrate what this matter [human dignity] is all about is to maintain an advantage of power in the debate; for as should become clear as this chapter continues to unfold, ‘dignity’ is something that is essential to humankind’s well-being and spiritual welfare.”

In the analysis at hand, dignity lands squarely in the midst of a difficult contradiction. Dignity is notoriously difficult to define, so much so that a recent President’s Council on Bioethics publication, *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, included the caveat in its introduction that the diverse number of opinions on dignity in the volume “make it clear that there is no universal agreement on the meaning of the term, human dignity.” Despite the warning of the PCB’s Director over lack of consensus, a vociferous critic of the PCB, Steven Pinker, accused the Council of having stacked the deck, with as many as “three-quarters of the invited contributors [having] religious entanglements,” such that an *unequivocal* notion of dignity emerged from the report.

The stakes of the contest for control of dignity’s definition must be amply high if a profession of discord is answered with an accusation of premature consensus. Hyde directs us to the importance of definition, writing: “Definitions are created by using symbols ’to draw a line around’ (*definire*) something so to mark its meaningful borders. Hence, to define a given object or subject matter is to set forth a proposal or argument for what something *is* (or at least thought to *be*). Definitions, in other words, are symbolic

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166 Ibid., 155-156.
168 Steven Pinker, quoted in: Ibid.
(rhetorical) constructions whose most honorable purpose is to direct people toward the truth.”^169 In a world of symbols, control of definition is control of truth.

In the same piece, Hyde subsequently explores the etymological root of dignity, the Latin *dignitas*. *Dignitas* speaks to worth, merit, desert, or character, not in an everyday sense, but with a meaning that connotes greatness, majesty, and excellence.^170 Writing of Leon Kass, the man whom Pinker accused of being at the center of the religious conspiracy on the PCB, Hyde argues:

Kass emphasizes that the true ground of the possibilities for human excellence (*dignitas*) is a human being’s “will to live.” Human dignity manifests itself with the “realization of these possibilities.” Granting this to be the case, one would also have to grant that freedom of choice must play a crucial role in the life of this will. Assuming the ethical responsibility that comes with this freedom is, of course, a prerequisite for actualizing one’s excellence. Following Kass, then, one must understand the definition of human dignity as designating at least a three stage process: first there is the will to live, followed by the potential for human excellence, and then resolute choice.^171

Kass’s definition of dignity concludes in resolute choice, such that, in Hyde’s eyes, dignity becomes a “question of ontology.” In the *Call of Conscience*, Hyde invokes resolute choice once again, responding to another definition of dignity that speaks to the power of

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escaping the ill that threatens oneself: “And what is this power? I think it is fair to say that it is nothing if it is not at least that . . . ability that both Heidegger and Levinas analyzed in great detail: the ability to assume the ethical responsibility of affirming one's own freedom through resolute choice.”¹⁷² Let us tentatively accept Hyde’s definition and wholeheartedly accept his invitation to explore this ontological challenge.

BEING-IN-THE-WORLD, SPEAKING-IN-THE-WORLD: HEIDEGGER AND HYDE

Summary of the major themes of Martin Heidegger’s ontology of human being (Dasein) is beyond the scope of this thesis, much less a few pages of one chapter. Heidegger’s magnum opus, Being and Time (Sein und Zeit) is, by any reasonable account, one of the most important philosophical works of the past century.¹⁷³ I will explore the specific aspects of Being and Time that bear relevance to my object of study in detail throughout the remainder of this text, as necessary. However, a few general observations and themes merit elaboration at this point, because of the way that they inform all of Heidegger’s writing and thinking.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Hyde, Call of Conscience, 158.
¹⁷⁴ While John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson’s 1962 translation of Sein und Zeit is generally regarded as the authoritative English version of the text, many scholars of Heidegger have offered their own translations and interpretations of certain key terms. While I have strived to maintain a consistent usage of any given translation throughout this text, I have also chosen the particular translations that I feel provide the most clarity, in a bit of mixing and matching. Appendix A provides a list of these terms in German, along with all of the English translations used either in this thesis or in sources heavily referenced by this thesis.
Heidegger

The object of Heidegger’s interest in *Being and Time* is *Dasein*. Dasein is a compound word that combines the German words for “being” (*sein*) and “there” (*da*), literally meaning “being there.” Dasein is Heidegger’s all-purpose term for human beings. Macquarrie and Robinson elaborate on the sense of this word, writing that “in everyday usage it tends to be used more narrowly to stand for the kind of Being that belongs to persons. Heidegger follows the everyday usage in this respect, but goes somewhat further in that he often uses it to stand for any person who has such Being, and who is thus an ‘entity’ himself (sic).”

One of Heidegger’s primary goals is to distinguish between our everyday mode of being and a mode of being that represents “owning who and how one is,” which he calls “authenticity” (*die Eigentlichkeit*). Counterposed to authenticity is what he describes as “being lost in the ‘they’ (*das Man*)” (“Losing itself in the publicness and the idle talk of the ‘they,’ [Dasein] fails to hear its own Self in listening to the they-self”). *Das Man* is one of the most vexing words to translate from Heidegger’s German to English, because English lacks a word that functions in the same way as does *das Man* in German. A literal translation of “the one” is unsatisfactory, since “one/man” in this context is an indefinite pronoun, as in “one would be well advised to start work as early as possible on one’s thesis.” In modern English, “you” is used more commonly, whereas German more consistently uses “one/man.” Macquarrie and Robinson translate *das Man* as “the ‘they’,” however, I prefer William Blattner’s modified translation of “the Anyone,” since it better confers Heidegger’s intended sense that *das Man* is not a person or people outside of

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Dasein, but is at once both everyone and no one in particular. The main thrust of any of these translations, though, is that the Anyone is Heidegger’s way of describing social normativity, a concept that figures heavily in the remainder of this thesis and will be explored in much greater detail throughout the remaining chapters.\footnote{176 Blattner, Heidegger’s Being and Time: A Reader’s Guide, 15.}

The final Heideggerian concepts that merit immediate attention are \textit{anxiety} and the \textit{call of conscience}. Given the importance that they play in Hyde’s work, it seems best to treat them alongside Hyde’s development of a theory of rhetoric that accompanies them.

\textbf{Hyde}

Michael Hyde’s major work in communication ethics takes the form of a trilogy of books, each of which builds upon the previous. In order, they are \textit{The Call of Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate}, \textit{The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgment: A Philosophical and Rhetorical Inquiry}, and \textit{Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human}.\footnote{177 Hyde, Call of Conscience.} All draw heavily from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, particularly Heidegger’s theorization of the “call of conscience” in \textit{Being and Time}, from which the first of Hyde’s books draws its name. While all three books and the phenomena that they describe (conscience, acknowledgment, and perfection) bear heavily on this thesis, I will discuss each in proximity to the issues that they best address. As a result, this chapter will primarily limit it’s discussion of Hyde to \textit{The Call of Conscience} and the next will take up \textit{The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgment} and \textit{Perfection}.

Writing recently in \textit{The Review of Communication}, Hyde and Nancy King offer a succinct summary of \textit{The Call of Conscience}: “The first book explores how human
existence discloses a moral directive, a ‘call of conscience,’ and how this call is further facilitated by humankind’s communicative and rhetorical abilities.”¹⁷⁸ This statement outlines two claims: First, the manner in which Dasein is a being in the world (in-der-welt-sein) “discloses” the call of conscience (disclose in this sentence has a much more specific meaning than in everyday usage); Second, that human being’s possibility for eloquence can provide a means of heeding and answering the call. Let us investigate each in turn.

The conscience of which Hyde and Heidegger speak is quite distinct from our typical use in familiar discourse. Both usages find their root in the Latin con-scientia, “knowledge with,” and both certainly imply a certain morality. Michael Inwood traces each to Aquinas, who outlines three functions, the first of which is “Witnessing: I judge that I have (not) done something morally relevant.”¹⁷⁹ The word for conscience used by Heidegger, Gewissen, is a German replication of the Latin compound that forms conscientia (“wissen, ‘knowledge,’ and ge-, ‘together with’”) such that both have the same sense of witnessing. Heidegger, however, goes to great pains (so much so as to warrant a footnote from Macquarrie and Robinson explaining it as such) to distinguish his use of the word from the meaning ascribed by Aquinas, one of reasoning about morality and responsibility. Applying a phenomenological method, he writes: “[T]he ‘good’ conscience has been defined as ‘an Experienced lack of bad conscience.’ . . . But how is such a lack Experienced? This supposed Experience is by no means the experiencing of a call; it is

rather a making-certain that a deed attributed to Dasein has not been perpetrated by it and that Dasein is *therefore* not guilty. Becoming certain that one has not done something, has *by no means* the character of a conscience-phenomenon.”

For Heidegger and Hyde, conscience is a phenomenon that occurs interior to Dasein, even though it can be brought about by external occurrences. But the fundamental experience of conscience is related to the nature of being itself and the infinite horizon of possibilities that being-in-the-world can entail. Hyde and King restate it: “Human being is its own evocation and provocation, its own exigence: it calls for the resposiveness of concerned thought and action, for that which enables us to take charge of our own lives as we assume the moral responsibility of affirming our freedom through resolute choice and thereby become personally involved in the creation of a meaningful existence.”

If we recall the concept of authenticity from above (the notion of “owning who and how one is”), a rough sketch of the resolute choice that answers the call of conscience emerges, particularly when imagined in opposition to the idea of losing one’s self in the Anyone. There are moments in Dasein’s existence in which its very being is called into question; moments in which being itself is an issue for the being that is called Dasein. This state, called “anxiety” (*angst*), gives rise to the call of conscience, a call that is not a question of our responsibility for our choices in the direction of others, but instead demands that we resolutely act to make our own world meaningful, casting away the Anyone and its demands of conformity. Bringing to bear the choice between resolute

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181 Hyde and King, "Interface," 159.
affirmation of freedom and the demands of the Anyone invites a return to the subject of Chapter Three, the ideograph.

IDEOGRAPHS, SOCIAL LIFE, AND MASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Heidegger’s philosophy is easily mistaken for a solitary and lonely one, insofar as he is primarily concerned with the experience of Dasein in the world. He offers, at first glance, little in the way of a social theory or account of society writ large, aside from the somewhat derogatory stance he adopts towards the manifestation of society found in the Anyone/”They”/das Man. Even less than social theory, Heidegger displays, in the words of Blattner: “[a] tin ear for moral philosophy. Moral philosophy is conspicuously absent from Being and Time, which is supposed to be a treatment of the existential dimension of human life, that is, the way in which our self-understanding and what matters to us are constitutive of who we are. If anything, one would think that moral philosophy would lie at the center of his considerations.”182

Blattner suggests that Heidegger’s disavowal of moral philosophy rises from two currents: his belief that it is an account of human conduct in concrete situations, counterposed with his interest in the existential condition of Dasein; and his Nietzsche-esque worry that morals were the province of the herd mentality, “an expression of the Anyone’s subjection, leveling down, and domination of human life.”183

Mass Consciousness and das Man

It is the manner in which the Anyone dominates human life that the contours of a social theory are displayed within Heidegger’s philosophy. Das Man does not represent a

183 Ibid., 159.
genuine mass consciousness in the sense that Marx would have us think of one, but it nonetheless represents an aggregate mean, of sorts, of the beliefs of the broader social order. The difference between Marx and Heidegger is that while Marx’s mass consciousness has concrete form in an other, Heidegger’s the Anyone only has form, if at all, in the phenomenon of Dasein living as the anyone-self (das Man-selbst). Put another way, Marx’s focus is on “power,” in the words of McGee: “the capacity of an elite class to control the state’s . . . establishment, to dominate the state’s information systems and determine even the consciousness of large masses of people.”184 In Marx’s (and McGee’s) theories, someone is doing something to another someone. For Heidegger, it is not someone who is controlling Dasein, instead, it is the Anyone, das Man. Heidegger uses das Man precisely for the reason of its anonymity and universality:

These others, moreover, are not definite others. . . . "The others" whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one’s belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part "are there" in everyday being-with-one-another. The who is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The "who" is the neuter, the Anyone.185

The Anyone is more conceptual than physical or real – it does not possess substance, nor can it be identified in the manner that we might consider a social organization such as the proletariat or the religious right. It is at once the totality of all of these social forces and empty of them, because the Anyone is manifest not in what it does, but in how Dasein lives in the world according to it.

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184 McGee, "Ideograph," 3.
185 Heidegger, Being and Time, MR164/MH126 (Blattner 168-169).
That having been said, while Heidegger’s theorization of the Anyone is quite novel and effective for his purposes, his cup does not runneth over with respect to details of how the Anyone comes to exert force on Dasein, nor how Dasein comes to know the dicta that the Anyone provides. Moreover, Heidegger must account for McGee’s intuitive empirical observation of another “brute, undeniable phenomenon: Human beings in collectivity behave and think differently than human beings in isolation.”

The force exerted by das Man, even if largely normative, nonetheless has external manifestations.

Blattner explains:

Heidegger’s principle concern is to establish that what and how things are an issue for us is governed by the social patterns in which we live.

These social patterns are what we today would call social normativity. . . . There is a way one does things. There are ways to hammer, ways to drive, ways to drink coffee, and ways to be a teacher. Proximally, and for the most part, we do things the way one does them. . . . We can think of these social patterns as a set of “expectations,” as long as we do not take the word “expectation” too narrowly to refer to psychological states of expecting.¹⁸⁷

Conceived as social normativity, the Anyone exerts influence over the behavior of each and every Dasein, not through force of violent coercion but through whispered suggestion. Briefly returning to Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation of das Man (“the They”) can allow some insight. The “They” are the always absent, ideational subject of cultural directives: “they say you shouldn’t smoke,” “they say you should pay your taxes,”

“they say you should start working to support yourself.” The “They” are not present in any way, “They” are merely imagined by Dasein as the wielder of the knowledge that greases the wheels of everyday life, making it operate as smoothly as possible.

McGee suggests that ideographs operate in similar ways, such that they can help to explain the manner in which Dasein comes to be influenced by the Anyone. It is social control, but it is not the chains of the proletariat — it is an existentiale, a way of being for Dasein.\(^{188}\) There is a lack of coercion and power in the strictly materialist sense, instead, a more benign adherence to social normativity:

Because there is a lack of necessity in social control, it seems inappropriate to characterize agencies of control as "socializing" or "conditioning" media. No individual (least of all the elite who control the power of the state) is forced to submit in the same way that a conditioned dog is obliged to salivate. . . . Human beings are "conditioned," not directly to belief and behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief. When a claim is warranted by such terms as "law," "liberty," "tyranny," or "trial by jury," in other words, it is presumed that human beings will react predictably and autonomically.\(^{189}\)

McGee’s contention that human beings (Dasein) will react autonomically to the invocation of an ideograph deserves closer attention. Different readings of the word autonomically can lead to distinctly different understandings of the phenomenon at hand.

Taken as meaning “involuntary,” an autonomic response to ideographs seems to

\(^{188}\) For existentiale defined, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, MR70/MH44, MR79-84/MH54-57. For das Man as existentiale, see ibid., MR167-168/MH129-130.

\(^{189}\) McGee, "Ideograph," 6.
contradict Heidegger’s account of the Anyone. The path offered by the Anyone in a moment of anxiety is the easy path, in that it does not require the exercise of resolute choice. But it is a choice, all the same. Adherence to the social normativity of the Anyone is simply the *easy* choice for Dasein.

**UNPACKING THE PHENOMENON OF THE IDEOGRAPH**

McGee’s description of the mass consciousness manifest in ideographs has a good deal of nuance and complexity, despite the straightforward way that he writes about it. In order to explain some phenomenological insights regarding McGee’s hypothesis, I have excerpted his fairly extensive hypothesis below, and will attempt to unpack it piece by piece, in order:

I will elaborate the following commitments and hypotheses: If a mass consciousness exists at all, it must be empirically "present," itself a thing obvious to those who participate in it, or, at least, empirically manifested in the language which communicates it. I agree with Marx that the problem of consciousness is fundamentally practical and normative, that it is concerned essentially with describing and evaluating the legitimacy of public motives. Such consciousness, I believe, is always false, not because we are programmed automatons and not because we have a propensity to structure political perceptions in poetically false "dramas" or "scenarios," but because "truth" in politics, no matter how firmly we believe, is always an illusion. The falsity of an ideology is specifically rhetorical, for the illusion of truth and falsity with regard to normative commitments is the product of persuasion. Since the clearest access to persuasion (and hence to ideology) is through the discourse used to produce it, I will suggest that ideology
in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the
capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior. Further, the
political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a
vocabulary of "ideographs" easily mistaken for the technical terminology of
political philosophy. An analysis of ideographic usages in political rhetoric, I
believe, reveals interpenetrating systems or "structures" of public motives. Such
structures appear to be "diachronic" and "synchronic" patterns of political
consciousness which have the capacity both to control "power" and to influence (if
not determine) the shape and texture of each individual's "reality."\(^{190}\)

While there are moments in which McGee's analysis of ideographs seems to move in
lockstep with Heidegger, there are also places in which they deviate significantly. This is
not necessarily unexpected: McGee is attempting to combine two ostensibly incompatible
theories (Marxist ideology and Symbolist myth) and, in so doing, must perform some
theoretical gymnastics. Some of these moves were discussed in Chapter Three, but a few
merit further investigation here.

**Empirical Presence**

McGee begins by declaring that if it is the case that mass consciousness exists at
all, then it must be empirically present and "obvious to those who participate in it."  
Heidegger would not disagree outright with the first half of this claim, insofar as a
phenomenological investigation of Dasein is concerned exclusively with that which is
empirically present. However, the claim that this consciousness is "obvious to those who
participate in it" runs afoul of Heidegger's theories. It may well be that it is on account of

\(^{190}\) Ibid.: 4-5.
this fact that McGee immediately adds the reservation that mass consciousness, at a minimum, is empirically manifested in language.

Let us return briefly to Blattner’s description of social normativity: “Proximally, and for the most part, we do things the way one does them.” The everydayness of Dasein is thus characterized by regularity and conformity, a state created by the Anyone. Heidegger elaborates to emphasize once more that the Anyone is not a thing: “The Anyone, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.”191 The regularity of the everydayness of Dasein is characterized by the lack of noteworthy occurrences or disruptions to the smooth operation of the normativity of the Anyone. It is only in the dysfunction of some part of the everyday that the world becomes conspicuous: “Because that man is drinking a coffee as one drinks coffee, his presence is unobtrusive, obvious. I ‘know what he is doing,’ because he is doing it as one does it. If he is drinking coffee abnormally (say he is lying on the floor of the coffee house while he drinks), then he obtrudes, stands out, and requires interpretation.”192

When the norms of the Anyone are maintained, when we drink coffee as one drinks coffee, those norms, and by relation, the Anyone itself, is not present. In this way, the Anyone resembles the mode of being of equipment or the ready-to-hand:

The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it

191 Heidegger, Being and Time, MR164/MH126-127.
were, withdraw [zurückzuziehen] in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically. That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves [die Werkzeuge selbst]. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work-that which is to be produced at the time; and this is accordingly ready-to-hand too. The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered.\textsuperscript{193}

This contrast between the everydayness of world-as-withdrawn and the moments of life in which these beings (including, but not limited to Dasein) become obtrusive demonstrate one of the key aspects of Heidegger’s theory of being. Being-in-the-world for Dasein is, on average, a relatively mundane affair until something obtrudes in an act of presencing.

Hyde offers an account of everydayness as a way of being in which “we show ourselves to be the purposive and pragmatic creatures that we are. In the world of everydayness our fundamental way of understanding existence consists of knowing how to deal with the immediacy of our everyday, goal-directed tasks.”\textsuperscript{194} We move about the world largely oblivious to the multiplicity of being(s) that it contains, since in this state of know-how, “things first manifest themselves as ‘equipment,’ as instruments and materials of work.”\textsuperscript{195} The authentic state of equipment is withdrawal, such that Dasein is largely oblivious to its being. This experience of withdrawal creates friction with the terminal implications of McGee’s obvious empirical presence.

McGee seems to resent an account of the world in line with symbolist conceptions of myth: “The falsity presupposed by myth . . . is amoral because it is a purely poetic

\textsuperscript{193} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 99/69.  
\textsuperscript{194} Hyde, \textit{Call of Conscience}, 27.  
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 27-28.
phenomenon, legitimized by rule of the poet’s license, a ‘suspension of disbelief.’” In what appears to be some sort of residual affection for Marxist/materialist theories of the world, McGee admonishes purely symbolic theories for their “neglect of the non-symbolic environment and the consequent inability of symbolist theory to account for the impact of material phenomena on the construction of social reality.” But despite his attempts to theorize a means of social control that rests on conditioning rather than coercion, he can not offer an explanation of how an empirically present ideograph, given the manner in which it divides populations into nations and harshly punishes non-adherents, is not so obtrusive as to disrupt the everydayness of life beyond recognition. Heidegger’s account of withdrawing and presencing, on the other hand, provides just such a theory. We shall return to the idea of withdrawal and presence in short time, but other aspects of McGee’s hypothesis demand attention first.

**Truth and Falsity**

McGee’s next “commitment” is to the fact of mass consciousness necessarily being false. His support for this argument does not arise from a sense of poetic delusion or capitalist control of information flows, but from the plainly stated claim that “‘truth’ in politics, no matter how firmly we believe, is always an illusion. The falsity of an ideology is specifically rhetorical, for the illusion of truth and falsity with regard to normative commitments is the product of persuasion.” McGee here is attempting to have it both ways by rejecting the “strong” theories of Marxist ideology/false consciousness and symbolist myth but endorsing a notion that, at a minimum, takes up a “weak” version of

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197 Ibid.: 37-38.
symbolism. Regardless of the hairs that he splits to accomplish this move, what matters is that McGee strongly endorses the view that normative commitment is a rhetorical charade, a product of persuasion.

Heidegger would most likely disagree with this claim, largely on the grounds that he believes that truth is possible. It is important, however, to realize that by “truth” Heidegger most assuredly is not casting his lot with any Correspondence Theory of truth, i.e., that truth is the condition under which a mentally held ideal in the subject matches with a real object in the world. Instead, truth, like everything else for Heidegger, is understood phenomenologically.

Hyde and King clarify the way that truth is understood by Heidegger as a double move:

The validity of any truth claim (e.g., “It is raining.”) presupposes at least two specific acts of disclosure (showing-forth): (1) the presence of some subject matter disclosing itself to a witness, and (2) the ability of the witness to disclose in some symbolic manner this original disclosure. Truth thus shows itself as an event of disclosure, an act of revelation, of something “that is the case,” something that shows some aspect of itself in the openness of the light of day and thereby makes itself available for critical assessment and deliberation.\textsuperscript{198}

Note the emphasis on disclosure, understood in relation to presencing as an act of self-presencing. Two acts of disclosure must occur in order for a claim (or assertion) to be true. The Correspondence Theory of truth has no such acts, merely an alignment of an already existing object with the subject.

\textsuperscript{198} Hyde and King, "Interface," 160.
Clearly, McGee is capable of rejecting the correspondence theory insofar as the symbolic mediation between subject and object (to say nothing of subject and subject) necessarily places distance and “noise” between them. But to Heidegger, the failure of the correspondence theory is an ontological one, based in the ancient dualism of body and mind: “Is it accidental that no headway has been made with this problem in over two thousand years? Has the question already been perverted in the very way that it has been approached – in the ontologically unclarified separation of the real and the ideal?”¹⁹⁹ The result of the (in Heidegger’s eyes) ontologically untenable division between subject and object is a reduction of the language of the ideal to so-called empty words. As Blattner offered in the inscription to this chapter: “When we are confronted with empty words, what should we do? Heidegger’s answer is always, “return to the phenomena.”²⁰⁰

The repudiation of the metaphysics of subject and object returns us to Heidegger’s (and Hyde’s) phenomenological method of inquiry. McGee, despite repeatedly describing ideographs as phenomena, is unwilling to embrace the possibility of truth.²⁰¹ Even Zarefsky, a significantly more orthodox scholar than McGee, hedges his bets when it comes to truth: “While there certainly may exist an objective world independent of the human will, the events of that world are given meaning and significance through the exercise of human choice. Truth may be ‘given,’ but reality is socially constructed. People

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²⁰¹ See McGee, “Ideograph.” at 1 (“Burke . . . announced his preference for the notion ‘philosophy of myth’ to explain the phenomenon of ‘public’ or ‘mass consciousness’”); 2 (“We are presented with a brute, undeniable phenomenon: Human beings in collectivity behave and think differently than human beings in isolation.”); 3 (“Errors arise when one conceives ‘myth’ and ‘ideology’ to be contraries, alternative and incompatible theoretical descriptions of the same phenomenon.”); 10 (“. . . we establish a meaning for ‘equality’ by using the word as a description of a certain phenomenon”)
participate actively in shaping and giving meaning to their environment. What any element in that environment ‘is’ will depend on what it means.” McGee, in effect, believes so strongly in the power of language, particularly ideographs, that he is unwilling to concede the possibility of any “pure” access to truth. Borrowing Ortega y Gasset’s distinction between *usage* and *ideas* (“what Ortega would call ‘pure thought’”), McGee argues that truth and ideographs are issues that belong to entirely different enterprises, such that they have no business being considered alongside one another:

In effect, ideographs — language imperatives which hinder and perhaps make impossible “pure thought” — are bound within the culture which they define. We can *characterize* an ideograph, say what it has meant and does mean as a usage, and some of us may be able to . . . speculate as to what ideographs ought to mean in the best of possible worlds; but the very nature of language forces us to keep the two operations separate: So, for example, the "idea" of "liberty" may be the subject of philosophical speculation, but philosophers can never be certain that they themselves or their readers understand a "pure" meaning unpolluted by historical, ideographic usages. . . . Ideographs cannot be used to establish or test truth, and vice versa, the truth, in ideal metaphysical senses, is a consideration irrelevant to accurate characterizations of such ideographs as "liberty." Once more, McGee seems to be trying too hard to have it both ways: early in his essay he rejects the possibility of truth, but subsequently takes “philosophers” to task for speculation on the “idea” of “liberty” and other ideographs. Implicit within McGee’s

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accusations, however, is the detritus of the Correspondence Theory. McGee engages in the very same “ontologically unclarified separation of the real and the ideal” that Heidegger tells us has “perverted [the question of truth] in the very way that is has been approached.” McGee seems cognizant of this criticism, claiming in a footnote that “Husserl’s recognition of praxis and contradiction in his doctrine of ‘self-evidence’ confirms Ortega’s critique.” Yet this gesture by McGee does not account for the turn taken by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Heidegger levels the accusation that the “ontologically unclarified” relation of real and ideal has polluted the very question of truth to the point where “there is no theory behind the language that explains what the ideal contents are, what it is to be ideal, and how ideal items can stand in relations with real objects.” Put another way, the metaphysical dualist’s bifurcation of the world into real and ideal is not only a fruitless endeavor on account of linguistic interference (as McGee and Ortega would have us believe), but is itself a wholly inaccurate and counterproductive way to even ask the question.

Heidegger argues that truth does not go much farther than a phenomenological experience of Aristotle’s basic intuition that “to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what it that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.” Heidegger’s formulation of this basic intuition is: “To say that an assertion ‘is true’ signifies that it uncovers the entity as it is in itself. Such an assertion asserts, points out, ‘lets’ the entity ‘be seen’ in its uncoveredness. The *Being-true (truth)* of the assertion must be understood as *Being-uncovering*. Thus truth has by no means the structure of an

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204 See note 19, Ibid.
206 *Metaphysics*, Book 4, 1001b25
agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the Object).”

Because language uncovers the world (Heidegger’s notion of disclosure), it has a bearing on the manner in which we perceive the world in its whole. It is tied into our entire concept of the world. Blatter offers an outstanding example of this linguistically driven conceptual change:

. . . the use of the word "witch" in the early modern period involved a way of looking at some groups of women, an entire conceptuality that intersects with accounts of gender, non-conformism, and mental illness. When we say today that there are no such things as witches, we are not just asserting that it is false that there exists a witch today. . . . Rather, we are saying that the concept of a witch gets no grip on the world. The conceptuality in which it inheres distorts the world, rather than discloses it. . . .

Blattner continues, implicating this observation about conceptual change with Heidegger’s notion of language:

. . . for Heidegger language is not just a tool for saying things, but rather a form of communicative and expressive articulation of the world. This expressive articulation of the world allows us to share the world with one another, and what is more, it structurally articulates the world as well. The assertions we make do their

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work not just as part of a language of assertions, but more deeply as part of our expressive-communicative behavior.209

It is at this point that we should return to Hyde and King’s claims about valid truth claims. A valid claim discloses truth first and foremost; it is a bipartite act in which the truth first discloses itself, after which Dasein engages in another act of disclosure: the disclosure of that truth already disclosed. Insofar as ideographs have no definition, no truth at their core, this first act of disclosure is itself foreclosed. There is not truth in ideographs, at least in Heidegger’s phenomenology, since they do not ever disclose themselves. They do not disclose themselves since they have nothing to disclose but an assemblage of know-how – they are a condensation metaphor for any number of social norms imposed by the Anyone.

A phenomenological account of ideographs explains that they do not disclose truth, not because, per McGee, “the illusion of truth and falsity with regard to normative commitments is the product of persuasion,” but because they are an ineffective (if not destructive) way of disclosing the world. They do not persuade people in the sense of creating a false correspondence between some ideal in their mind and a reality in the world; instead, they do not disclose the world at all in the first place. Returning to the hypothetical witches, “[w]hen we say that the Puritans, for example, were ‘wrong’ that there are witches, we do not just mean, as we saw above, that the assertion ‘There were witches in seventeenth century Massachusetts’ is false. We mean that the entire way of

209 Ibid., 124-125.
looking at the matter in which the Puritans indulged was distorted, misguided, false. Understandings, disclosures of the world can be distorted or not, true or false.”

RE-THEORIZING IDEOGRAPHIS

Taking into account the above shortcomings of McGee’s theorization of the ideograph, a restatement of a phenomenologically-inspired ideograph would require some minor revisions. Provisionally, I propose that the following changes be made:

Obviousness/Withdrawal:

McGee: If a mass consciousness exists at all, it must be empirically present, itself a thing obvious to those who participate in it, or, at least, empirically manifested in the language which communicates it.

Restatement: If a mass consciousness exists at all, it must be empirically present, but largely oblivious to those who participate in it, yet nonetheless empirically manifested in the language which communicates it.

Truth/Falsity:

McGee: Such consciousness . . . is always false, . . . because “truth” in politics, no matter how firmly we believe it, is always an illusion. The falsity of an ideology is specifically rhetorical, for the illusion of truth and falsity with regard to normative commitments is the product of persuasion.

Restatement: Such consciousness cannot be assumed to be false, because “truth” in politics depends upon both the disclosure of the subject matter to the observer and the disclosure by that observer of the first disclosure.

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210 Ibid., 125.
The falsity of a disclosure can be rhetorical (but is not necessarily rhetorical), for communication can do better or worse jobs of disclosing the world.²¹¹

These revisions reflect two phenomenological insights about the ontological workings of Dasein: First, that whatever essence or name we ascribe to “mass consciousness,” its effectiveness as a form of social control is not based in its obviousness, but in the way in which it withdraws into the background noise of being-in-the-world. Adherence to ideographs is a practically unconscious process, precisely because of the way that their prevalence has a constitutive function in everyday political identity. McGee himself suggests as much when he writes: “No individual . . . is forced to submit in the same way that a conditioned dog is obliged to salivate. . . . Human beings are “conditioned,” not directly to belief and behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief.”²¹²

In the previous paragraph, I took much care to use the words “practically unconscious,” so that the reader would not be given the wrong impression. Recall that adherence to the demands of the Anyone is a choice. When anxiety and death sound the call of conscience, human beings are faced with a choice, by definition: they can answer the call by assuming “the personal and ethical responsibility of affirming [their] freedom through resolute choice,” or they can answer it by embracing the Anyone, seeking comfort in the way that “the supposition of the ‘they’ that one is leading and sustaining a full and

²¹¹ For a more extensive discussion of the ability of communication to disclose the world, see Blattner, Heidegger’s Being and Time: A Reader’s Guide, 125: “Forms of communication can do a better or worse job of disclosing the world, hence can be true or false in a philosophically extended way of using the words.”
genuine 'life', brings Dasein a tranquility, for which everything is 'in the best of order' and all doors are open.”213

The second major change distinguishes McGee’s notion of rhetorical falsity from Heidegger’s phenomenological formulation of the basic intuition. This distinction is necessary in order to give force to the manner in which language is an expression and articulation of the world. At best, McGee is agnostic on the possibility of “truth” in the world and, regardless of his thinking on the subject, he most assuredly believes that the contaminating powers of language make truth inaccessible. The distinction between these two accounts of truth is not semantic: while McGee may believe that language impairs our understanding of the world, Heidegger argues that language structurally articulates the world. Whatever permutation of the Marxist and Symbolist accounts of ideology and myth McGee employs, the fact remains that it describes some sort of obscuring function, as if a discursive fog has descended over political relations. For Heidegger, there is not an alternative vision or obfuscation – what is, is. The language of the Anyone may well impair Dasein’s capacity to heed the call of conscience, but the consciousness of Dasein in its inauthenticity is not false – it is a fact of Dasein’s being.

THE RHETORICAL PHENOMENON OF WORK

The world of the Anyone is described by different scholars with numerous different phrases and translations. Hyde calls it the “everyday world of know-how,” Hubert Dreyfus “inauthenticity,” and I have described it as simply “the world of the Anyone.” I use these phrases interchangeably, insofar as they refer to the same phenomenon, the background condition of the everyday existence of Dasein.

213 Heidegger, Being and Time, 222.
One of the characteristics of this world of know-how is the way in which it entails a relationship with equipment and other beings as withdrawn: “Our successful involvement in the everyday world of know-how also has much to do with how well equipment goes unnoticed as it is being used. A ‘good technology’ does not call attention to itself; rather, it ‘withdraws’ in use and becomes transparent so as not to impede the endeavor that it is helping to facilitate.”

Paradoxically, the state of everydayness and withdrawal is the state of highest authenticity for equipment, unlike Dasein, for whom the world of know-how is most inauthentic: “The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw [zurückzuziehen] in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically.”

Heidegger tells us that truth operates in the same way. In day-to-day conversation and discourse between people, truth is rarely at issue or conspicuous. We speak the truth to one another with remarkable regularity. Even when we begin to stray from the truth, it rarely reveals itself as obtrusive to the everyday regularity of a smoothly functioning world. Our ways of talking about un-truth evidence this: we tell “fibs,” “bend the truth,” and offer “little white lies.” All of these phenomena are accepted as largely harmless precisely because of the fact that they do not disturb the order of the world in any significant manner. The importance of this fact, as Blattner explains, is that “like other background conditions in Being and Time, truth is normally self-effacing, only salient in breakdown situations.”

Disclosive failures, that is, situations in which the world has improperly disclosed itself to Dasein or in which Dasein fails to properly disclose it to

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214 Hyde, Call of Conscience, 28.
216 Blattner, Heidegger’s Being and Time: A Reader’s Guide, 122. (emphasis mine)
others, matter because they are breakdown situations. We never even notice unless the
equipment of our everyday world breaks down, such that our know-how is no longer
sufficient to help us “make it” in the world.

**Ideographs, Work, and the Anyone**

The groundswell of support for welfare reform, specifically workfare, arises from just such a breakdown situation, one in which the various assumptions and normative commitments contained within the ideograph of work stopped being withdrawn and unobtrusive. Instead, American society was confronted with a crisis that demanded judgment (*krisis*).

In a later interview, McGee offers an insight into the etymology of crisis/*krisis* and the manner in which it is best understood:

> Our word “criticism” comes from the Greek root *krisis*, which is the label for the point at which thesis and antithesis join in equal and opposite force. . . .

> We must think about *krisis* or crisis the same way we do when we’re in a hospital and calling a patient “critically ill.” The patient is at the moment of being suspended between life and death. What we do or don’t do will conceivably cause the life or death of the patient. It’s *krisis*; it’s critical. We must make a choice, come to a conclusion. And what we come to is either right or wrong – there are no choices. When we perceive a *krisis*, we have a contradiction.\(^\text{217}\)

Judgment is necessitated by an intractable conflict – a happening that cannot be ignored and conspicuously demands our attention. Choice is demanded in crisis/*krisis*, precisely

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because the self-effacing background conditions of Dasein’s everydayness are no longer withdrawn. Know-how just won’t do. It is in these moments that the call of conscience is sounded.

In spite of the fact that know-how is no longer sufficient, the Anyone (They) will not give up so easily. For while Dasein stands in the crisis/krisis/call of conscience forced to make a choice, the Anyone has the capacity to divorce itself from responsibility. Hence the manner in which the Anyone is the easy way out of resolute choice: “The ‘they’ is there alongside everywhere, but in such a manner that it has always stolen away whenever Dasein presses for a decision. Yet because the ‘they’ presents every judgment and decision as its own, it deprives the particular Dasein of its answerability. . . It can be answerable for everything most easily, because it is not someone who needs to vouch for anything.”218 This is the manner in which the Anyone disburdens us of the weight of resoluteness when we are faced with choice. And because the Anyone can disburden us, “the ‘they’ retains and enhances its stubborn dominion.”219

Because ideographs condense some of the deepest commitments of our political consciousness, I argue that they constitute some of the most powerful representations of the know-how of the Anyone. They are practically indefinable, yet gain nearly universal assent – assent that is largely unconsidered. Ideographs, with their self-referential power, epitomize Heidegger’s portrait of the Anyone: “The ‘they’ can, as it were, manage to have ‘them’ constantly invoking it.”220

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218 Heidegger, Being and Time, MR165/MH127.
219 Ibid., MR 165/MH128.
220 Ibid., MR165/MH127.
Discontinuity in the broad social adherence to an ideograph ruptures the smoothness of everydayness. Given the centrality of ideographs to American political identity, the presencing of any given ideograph to public consciousness represents a crisis(*krisis*) of gigantic proportions. The recognition of a significant portion of the American public defying the social normativity coded into one of the most dearly and widely held condensation metaphors necessitated action. The question, of course, is whether such action would entail embracing resolute choice or indulging in the disburdening dominion of the Anyone.

**Does Anyone Disagree with Work?**

Recognition of the disturbance in the ideography of work runs throughout the hearings of the 104th Congress and broader political rhetoric as well. Representative Clay Shaw opened the hearing with an act of recognition, suggesting: “In looking for new ideas and reaching out for new ideas as to what is wrong with welfare . . . we have to look no further than the States and what they are doing. We have a welfare system here in the United States that has *paid people not to work*, has paid people not to get married, has paid people to stay where the are in a life of poverty and not succeed.”

Shaw cast his weight behind work with a doubly powerful move: First, he recognized the fact that “people” are not working, a presencing of the ideograph. This rhetorical gesture is more than mere recognition or identification. As we have already seen, discourse does not correspond some external reality to an internal belief or ideal; rather, acts of communication structurally articulate the world. Shaw engaged in act of disclosure, “letting someone see with us what we have pointed out by way of giving it a

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definite character. Letting someone see with us shares with the other that entity which has
been pointed out in its definite character. That which is ‘shared’ is our *being towards* what
has been pointed out – a being in which we see it in common.”\(^{222}\)

Blattner frames this act of disclosing as the creation of a mood: “Much of what we
do when we express ourselves is set a tone. . . . To focus narrowly on the ‘symbol systems’
or ‘semantics’ of what we say and do is to miss the bulk of what goes on in
communication: joint orientation towards the world in terms of its possibilities and
imports.”\(^{223}\) The orientation to which Shaw points is the orientation of the Anyone; it is
the idle talk of work. Lest the possibilities of this orientation be in doubt, Shaw’s written
statement makes it clear: “To change this failed system of socialized compassion, we plan
to take [action]: We will require work of able-bodied adults receiving welfare.”\(^{224}\)

Republican Phil English of Pennsylvania made the connection between
ideography and social normativity even stronger during his questioning of Dr. Marvin
Olasky, a Professor of Journalism at the University of Texas – Austin:

> Mr. ENGLISH. Dr. Olasky, prior to the evolution of the modern welfare state, what
> was the approach taken to work illegitimacy and other issues of moral behavior by
> those who ran charitable institutions that provided services to the indigent?

> Mr. OLASKY. Well, they understood that just material help would not do it, they
> had to challenge people on values, that at times lifestyles had to change. They did
> not believe in one size fits all. They realized that you take a couple of people with
> the same material circumstances, one may need a pat on the back and some

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encouragement and material help, another may really need a push. And so they had different behaviors for different types of value problems.\textsuperscript{225}

Multiple aspects of this exchange conform well to the restated model of ideographs. First, the exchange attempted to root work in a historical context, “prior to the evolution of the modern welfare state,” establishing a diachronic understanding — definition by previous usage. Second, it created a contrast between the “wiser” charity organization of old and the modern welfare state, such that the modern welfare state appeared abnormal, since charitable institutions “understood that just material help would not do it.” Third, it embraced a derogatory tone toward the “indigent” who do not work, asking about “work illegitimacy and other issues of moral behavior.”

Gwendolyn Mink’s scathing criticism of the PRWORA, \textit{Welfare’s End}, argues that welfare reform demands that “mothers who need welfare . . . must pay for their improvident behavior through work, marriage, or destitution.”\textsuperscript{226} She identifies “the primary authors of these three principal strands of punitive welfare thought”: “Lawrence Mead who prescribes work to improve the character of the needy; Charles Murray who calls for negative incentives to reduce non-marital births which reproduce the needy; and Marvin Olasky who sees destitution as an opportunity to spiritually awaken the needy.”\textsuperscript{227} We have already heard from Olasky above. His desire to spiritually awaken the needy was in full display during his testimony, as he offered an alphabetical list of the seven points that were embodied by anti-poverty programs of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, a list that could just as


\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 146.
easily be described as comprising the first seven letters of the ideographic alphabet: “Affiliation, bonding, categorization, discernment, employment, freedom, and God.”

Lawrence Mead’s testimony came on a later day of hearings than Olasky’s, but is no less important. Adam Wolfson, the Executive Editor of one of neo-conservativism’s flagship journals, *The Public Interest*, placed Mead directly at the center of the workfare debate: “The thinking of Mead . . . is evident in the various versions of the Republican welfare-reform bill.”

Mead barely even attempted to feign confidence that work requirements would have any significant effect on the social problems with which congress was concerned. Instead, he mounted a defense of workfare as having primarily *symbolic* value. Cautioning that excessive cuts in benefits other than AFDC and time limits could run afoul of public opinion, he wrote:

> None of this means the Republican proposals are mistaken. Government may need to underline the value of personal responsibility even if the deterrent effect is doubtful. Most states have capital punishment because people feel it is justified for heinous offenses, even though one cannot show that it deters crime. Sometimes government has led public opinion rather than following it. I only say that if government cuts or time-limits welfare, it should realize that the main effect probably will be symbolic. Congress should not expect sharp improvements in the social problem.

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Mead’s admission that workfare would likely only constitute a symbolic change could not be more effective at evincing the ideographic character of work. The act of welfare “reform” is one that symbolically underlines the value of personal responsibility. It is a disclosure of an orientation toward personal responsibility (work); in the words of Heidegger, it is a “letting see [that] shares with the other that entity which has been pointed out in its definite character.”

Finally, the sheer unanimity of the ideography of work demonstrates its Anyone-ness. As shown in Chapter Three, it is practically impossible to find a relevant political voice during these hearings that raises a meaningful objection to work requirements; indeed, it is much more the case that every speaker goes to greater and greater lengths to exalt the importance of work to every imaginable value.

The implication of this “consensus” is demonstrated in Jamie Peck’s comparative study of workfare programs in the Unites States and Great Britain: “Once left-of-center parties join the workfare consensus the entire basis of political debate — and the range of policy options — shifts dramatically. The debate becomes less concerned with the relative merits and problems of welfarism vis-à-vis workfarism, focusing instead on the narrower terrain of exploring alternative paths away from welfarism and toward some sort of work-oriented regime.” The shortcoming of Peck’s analysis, at least with regard to the United States, was that the rise of welfarism occurred in spite of a historically extant workfare consensus. One must go to great lengths to find anything other than token opposition to work requirements, particularly within the rhetoric of the politicians and administrators.

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231 Ibid., note 222
whose words have helped to constitute welfare in the United States. It is nearly impossible to find a political leader who does not pay rhetorical homage to work when discussing welfare and poverty. Lest we forget, FDR — the architect of the modern welfare state — uttered some of the most direct words of condemnation, warning that giving cash relief “is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit. It is inimical to the dictates of sound policy. It is in violation of the traditions of America. Work must be found for able-bodied but destitute workers.”

Politicians are in the business of gaining the assent and popularity of their citizens. They best do so by ensuring that the worlds of their constituents operate as smoothly as possible. To this end, the language of ideographs, a rhetorical manifestation of the Anyone, provides a most effective tool. It is not a choice that is necessarily in the best or worst interests of these citizens, but once more, it is an easy choice, one that gains easy consensus and disburdens us from the extraordinarily difficult calls that lie at the core of how we think about one another and ourselves as a polity. It is no wonder then that rather than confront these calls, even politicians as eloquent as Franklin Delano Roosevelt will let ideographs do some work for them, preserving their most elegant rhetorical turns for other issues.

American political leaders, from FDR through contemporary politicians such as Bill Clinton, Clay Shaw, and Harold Ford, have long used ideographs to help them make arguments and persuade their constituents. Ideographs, as manifestations of the discourse of the Anyone, are, as we have already discovered, easy to use: they resonate with some of the most broadly held and cherished intuitions of American political life. In the case of work, they access a long, uninterrupted tradition of political language and beliefs, such that arguments from work are nearly omnipotent. Work was so strong a force in the *Contract With America: Welfare Reform* hearings that it demanded adherence in the form of rhetorical tribute from nearly every person who spoke to the Subcommittee on Human Resources. We should not confuse the effectiveness and ease of ideographs, however, with the notion that they are always positive, or even neutral, instruments of communication.

In this fifth and final chapter, I build on the exploration of the ideography of work in Chapter Three and the phenomenological analyses of ideographs and work of Chapter Four by investigating two related issues: First, I will briefly return to the phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger to explore the potentially harmful implications of the widespread ideographic usage of work, with a close eye on work’s usage in the 1995 hearings of the Subcommittee on Human Resources. Work ideographs will be contextualized in Heidegger’s theories of *idle talk* and *leveling-down*. Second, I will turn my attention to what correctives, if any, are available to critics of rhetoric to break the stranglehold that ideographic usage holds over the American imagination of work. Three
potential paths hold promise as means of relieving the degradative burden that the ideography of work imposes on the poor in modern American.

**IDLE TALK**

A brief return to the theories of Heidegger and Hyde is required before we once again approach the hearings of the Subcommittee on Human Resources. Recall that any act of communication involves two distinct instances of revealing: one in which some part of the world reveals itself to a person, the second that person’s revealing of the thing, *as revealed*. Heidegger would have it that most discourse is primordial; that is, the totality of what is disclosed by our basic familiarity with the world, the sum of all of the first acts/halves of revealing. The second act of revealing, in which *Dasein* discloses to others what has already been disclosed, is therefore necessarily *derivative* of the first, an *assertion*, explained by Hyde as “discourse . . . that *points out* something by *predicating* it in a definitive way such that what is being talked about can be *communicated* and shared with others.”

This predication founds the notion of the thing in a concrete and definitive manner, deriving *and* reducing it from the totality of its being-understood and disclosed in the silent world of know-how into something that the persons in communication can grasp and share.

Derivative predication has the effect of shrinking the totality of our understanding of the world: “What Heidegger finds especially noteworthy concerning an assertion’s . . . mode of operation is how it brings about what he terms a ‘leveling of the primordial.’”

Put more plainly, when humans take the primordial (original) disclosure of some thing or

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234 Hyde, *Call of Conscience*.

235 Ibid., 35.
person in the world and then engage in the second, derivative act of disclosure, they only disclose those understandings that are relevant to the particular act of communication at hand. This has the effect of rounding off the corners of the primordial understanding by discarding the unnecessary pieces of its full, originally disclosed understanding. Heidegger refers to this process as “leveling-down”: the tendency of human discourse to push the extraordinarily wide spectrum of primordial understandings of the world toward an average.

Of course, the necessity of humans, the symbol-using animals, to communicate with one another makes some leveling-down inevitable: “In our everyday being-with-others there is no getting away totally from the leveling-down tendency of discourse. No discourse can say it all; there is always something being concealed in the revelatory assertions of what one has to say about some matter of interest.”236 The discourse in which this leveling-down is most pernicious, however, is idle talk. Blattner elaborates on the way in which idle talk functions, albeit with an alternative translation of some of Hyde’s verbiage (“primordial” and “original” are interchangeable for one another, as are “derivative” and “positive”):

The function of discourse is expressively to articulate the intelligibility of the world. Our everyday navigation of the world involves an "original" or "primordial" understanding of some of this world and a merely "positive" understanding of most of it. To have an original understanding of a possibility of human life is to be competent at living or conducting oneself that way. . . .

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236 Ibid., 37.
The same may be said of our talk. Recall that communication is the "[expressive] articulation of being with one another understandingly" (197/155). . . . As Heidegger says, albeit with a twinge of disparagement: "Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own" (213/169). 237

We are “insiders” to the parts of the world of which we have a primordial (original) understanding. Professors at Wake Forest University share a primordial (original) understanding of teaching undergraduate students at a liberal arts college in North Carolina. However, a professor of chemistry and a professor of communication are capable of engaging only in what Heidegger calls idle talk about some of their most meaningful and important activities – the sort of discourse shared between individuals who hold only a positive understanding of the given aspect of one another’s world that is the topic of conversation. Should one professor of communication, in conversation with another professor of communication, mention their difficulty teaching Kenneth Burke’s pentadic analysis, it is likely that they will be able to offer one another suggestions and tips because both possess original understandings. Substitute a professor of botany for the second professor of communication and while conversation is still possible, it is limited to those original understandings that they share. The professor of botany will likely be able to grasp that the problem at hand is frustration with teaching undergraduates some form of analysis that involves five elements and was originated by Kenneth Burke, but will likely be unable to offer substantive help. 238

238 This example adapts Blattner’s description of conversation amongst bakers in Ibid., 132.
It is mistaken to assume that idle talk is always and necessarily bad. It is impossible for humans to have a complete original understanding of the entire world. Positive understanding is what gets us by with the overwhelmingly large portion of the world about which we lack the time or resources to become experts. However, Heidegger distinguishes between *positive* idle talk and *degraded* idle talk. Because degraded idle talk has “lost its primary relationship-of-being towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such a relationship, it does not communicate in such a way as to let this entity be appropriated in an [original] manner, but communicates rather by following the route of *gossiping* and *passing the word along*. What is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character.”

Hyde offers a forceful explanation of the appearance of the degraded forms of idle talk, writing: “Heidegger describes idle talk as discourse that ‘discourages any new inquiry and any disputation,’ encourages people to follow ‘the route of gossiping and passing the word along,’ and ‘releases [them] from the task of genuinely understanding’ how they are faring in their relationships with things and with others (BT 211-14). The scope of such discourse is far ranging: idle talk is the stuff of hearsay, innuendoes, and stereotypes.”

When the talk of the Anyone/”they” is heard, it almost assuredly arrives in the form of degraded idle talk, hushed rumors and innuendo: “they say that most women on welfare don’t work and have babies just to get bigger checks, . . .” “a reasonable American citizen should get a job and support their family; if they have any dignity, that is. . . .”

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240 Hyde, *Call of Conscience*. 

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At worst, the ultimate impact to this sort of idle talk is the silencing of the call of conscience; at best, it can still foreclose the possibility of answering the call with resolute choice:

Losing itself in the publicness and the idle talk of the “they”, [Dasein] *fails to hear* its own Self in listening to the they-self. If Dasein is to be able to get brought back from this lostness of failing to hear itself, and if this is to be done through itself, then it must first be able to find itself – to find itself as something which has failed to hear itself, and which fails to hear in that it *listens away* to the “they”.241

Recall the unanimity of work in the Subcommittee on Human Resources’ hearing. This sort of idle talk can be found spreading in wider circles and taking on an authoritative character as work becomes the operative and defining means of understanding the problem of poverty and welfare. The use of *understanding* is quite intentional. Heidegger rejects rationalism, cautioning that our world cannot be mastered and brought within the purview of logic, as the modern language of subject and object would have us believe. Instead, Heidegger endeavors to develop an ontology of the world through phenomenology (the world as experienced) and hermeneutically (the world as understood). The only access we have to the world is as it is experienced and understood – the use of idle, ideographic talk of work to understand poverty is exemplary of how “a merely positive and superficial understanding of some domain of human affairs can be degraded into a mis-understanding.”242 Blattner continues: “[W]hen [communication] is merely positive, it allows us to navigate in and around the domain without being able...
actually to participate in it. When such positive communication is uprooted from its connection to original discourse, discourse obstructs, rather than facilitates, positive understanding.” Ideographs, precisely because they are generalities with no primordial core, are the ultimate obstructions on the communicative path to understanding. The ideograph of work, as we shall see, erects a wall that alienates the poor from the rest of the world of being.

IDEOGRAPHS AT WORK

If idle talk consists of discourses that are derivative at best and completely disconnected from the primordial experience of the world at worst, then few forms of discourse seem more idle or potentially destructive than ideographs. Ideographs are political slogans that aggregate intuition and the dicta of the Anyone, yet have no definition or rootedness in the original, primordial being of Dasein. Hyde himself discusses the mentality of idle talk with verbiage that aptly describes ideographs, saying that it “announces itself in the well-worn and relied language of an ideology that is more easily and mindlessly repeated than it is truly understood and appreciated for what it is actually disclosing and concealing with its slogans and doctrines.”

Particular patterns of rhetoric in the welfare debate demonstrate this sort of sloganeering and ideology in play, as well as the manner in which they level down the experiences and lifeworlds of the poor people to whom idle talk is applied. I coin the phrase “ghetto work” to describe the rhetorical construction of a zone of activity that is contrasted by various rhetors from the “real work” of ideographic usage. While few

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243 Ibid., 133-134.
244 Hyde, *Call of Conscience*, 37.
speakers before the Subcommittee of Human Resources would ever explicitly name *ghetto work*, their invocation of *real work* levels-down the concept of work, casting off into the margins any understanding of work that does not comport with the ideograph.

The ghettoization of non-ideographic work can be seen throughout the debates on the PRWORA. Observe the statement of Minnesota Senator Rod Grams, who took the floor of the Senate to argue in favor of strict work requirements that did not excuse vocational education or other “alternative” work arrangements. Drawing on his life experience, he said:

> [W]ork does not mean sitting in a classroom. Work means work. Any farm kid who rises before dawn for the daily chores can tell you that. Ask any of my brothers and sisters what “work” meant on our family’s dairy farm. It didn’t mean sitting on a stool in the barn, reading a book about how to milk a cow. “Work” meant milking cows.\(^{245}\)

The irony of Grams’ argument is that insofar as it was not paid employment, what “work” meant on his family’s dairy farm would not have qualified as “work” in the PRWORA. But that obvious flaw notwithstanding, Grams still demonstrates the process of leveling-down in action, dissociating a primordial experience of work by engaging in an assertive disclosure that left other disclosures behind. “Work means work,” in the context of Grams’ assertion, also meant that the experiences outside of the idle talk of the Anyone *did not mean work*. The poor are enjoined to participate in the Anyone, by accommodating the Anyone’s ideographic disclosure.

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\(^{245}\) Senator Grams of Minnesota, speaking for the Work Opportunity Act, on September 19, 1995, to the Senate, S. 1120, 104th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record 141, S13788.
The testimony of Lawrence Mead, perhaps the single most important intellectual driving force behind workfare, demonstrates the preoccupation of workfare proponents with “real work.” Called to testify as to the specific requirements that a piece of welfare reform legislation ought to have, Mead told Congress: “[Y]ou have to favor actual employment or looking for work over remediation. Education and training can be a part of these programs, but . . . [b]etter have them work first and then undertake education and training.”246 In answer to the question of how a policy ought to classify work and encourage it, he says: “The best way to improve employment in this population is simply to have people work. That does more for them than anything else”247. As to the difference between the Administration and Republican proposals, he explained: “The Clinton proposal would raise the participation floor . . . to 50 percent using the existing participation measure. . . . The Republican Personal Responsibility Act demands more actual work.”248

Further evidence of the “ghettoization” of the work of the poor can be found in the writings of several of the conservative engineers of welfare reform. During 2002 debates about the reauthorization of the PRWORA requirements, numerous conservative commentaries appeared urging expansion of the work requirements. Consider the testimony of Jason Turner of the Heritage Foundation, who advised: “Real work should be made part of the weekly activity.”249 Ron Haskins, seemingly omnipresent in workfare histories or deliberations, counseled a compromise between Democrats and Republicans

246 Mead, House Subcommittee, Contract with American - Welfare Reform, 263.
247 Ibid.
248 Ibid., 268.
over the 24 hours per week requirement: “There is already agreement that twenty-four of these hours should be actual work, and this requirement seems to be much more important, especially for Republicans, than the requirement for total hours.”

In the context of welfare reform, work is demanded from the poor as a means of meeting the putative obligation that their receipt of relief creates. However, as Noah Zatz explained, there is no purposive content to the idea of work in welfare reform, beyond the intuitional consensus that work means paid employment. One of the arguments that underlies demands for workfare is the aforementioned notion of reciprocity; that people should have to exert efforts similar to those who are not undeserving poor “on the dole.” This demand for fairness is as old as poor law itself, manifest in the workhouses and less eligibility rules of the past.

The absence of paid employment, however, does not imply the absence of effort or exertion that is equal to, if not greater than, that put forth by the non-poor. One of the most obvious answers to the reciprocity claim is that there are few groups of people who exert themselves less than the extraordinary rich. Zatz explains how the rich also help refute arguments about dependency, as well as desert and reciprocity: “People living off the largesse of inheritance or family fortune often manage just fine without being haunted by self-loathing, many toiling desperately to earn their keep may find their jobs humiliating and insulting, and activities outside the labor market can be sources of pride and purpose.”

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In addition, the idea that exertion or effort constitutes a qualifying condition for a socially desirable account of work is belied by the work that many of the nation’s poorest do, but for which they receive no credit. William Julius Wilson, a critic of welfare whose book *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* was a piece of conservative gospel during the latter stages of the PRWORA debates, explains the sort of work that happens in the ghetto: “Housework is work, baby-sitting is work, even drug dealing is work, . . . [but] what distinguishes work in the formal economy from work in the informal and illegal economies is that work in the formal economy is characterized by greater regularity and consistency in schedules and hours.”

Wilson’s argument is both untrue and demonstrative of an overt rhetorical construction of ghetto work — an act of leveling-down right before our eyes. Wilson has little evidence to suggest that labor such as housework, baby-sitting, or drug dealing somehow inherently possesses less regularity than paid employment. I have never dealt drugs, but having been a baby-sitter as a teenager and begrudgingly performing housework for the majority of my life, I cannot say that either entails a lack of regularity or effort. Moreover, the appeal to the greater regularity of the formal economy is, quite literally, an appeal to leveling-down. It suggests that the most socially desirable forms of work are those that produce the greatest degree of consistency for the greatest number of people in the manner that they experience and understand what it means to work. One could not invent a better example of the phenomenological and hermeneutic aspects of the way in which work is treated.

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Zatz analyzes the rhetoric of “real” work while circling back to consider Wilson’s comments on formal labor market participation, arguing:

The very act of adding “real” to try to clarify what should count as work for a particular policy purpose acknowledges, albeit implicitly, that many activities are in some sense work and yet are not the relevant kind of work in this context. William Julius Wilson makes this point far more explicitly than most when he . . . acknowledges that “[h]ousework is work, baby-sitting is work, even drug-dealing is work.” He then goes on to give specific reasons for focusing on work “in the formal labor market” to the exclusion of these other types of work. Giving such reasons is necessary to select among activities that are work in some recognizable sense but not necessarily in the relevant sense.253

Once again, the act of distinguishing exemplary “real” work from the meritless “ghetto” work done by the poor is necessary to maintain fidelity to ideographic understandings of the word and, in so doing, levels away the poor. Heidegger lamented of the dangers of leveling-down: “In this averageness with which it prescribes what can and may be ventured, it keeps watch over everything exceptional that thrusts itself to the fore. Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed. Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated.”254 The leveling-down done by the work ideograph grinds down the experiences, efforts, and plight of the poor. It rejects the very possibility that their efforts at “getting by” in the world could ever

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254 Heidegger, Being and Time, MR165/MH127.
measure up to the standard asserted by the idle talk of work. In so doing, the phenomenological and hermeneutical content of the poor’s experience, the very content of their being, is also leveled away.

Blattner’s example of witches in the Massachusetts Bay Colony should be recalled: “When we say that the Puritans . . . were “wrong” that there are witches, we do not just mean that the assertion “There were witches in seventeenth century Massachusetts” is false. We mean that the entire way of looking at the matter in which the Puritans indulged was distorted, misguided, false.”\textsuperscript{255} Similarly, when academics, policy staff, and congresspersons in the hearings and debates about the PRWORA said that the poor are “wrong” about work and welfare, they were not merely repudiating an assertion. They meant that the entire worldview was distorted, misguided, and false. Lawrence Mead drove home the stakes of this distortion when he closed his testimony:

In the end, welfare reform . . . involves a statement about citizenship. Welfare defines what you get and what you have to do for it if you are an American. It is one of the ways in which we operationalize what citizenship means. That matter is of the highest national importance.\textsuperscript{256}

UNCONSCIONABLE CALLS

In the face of a pervasive and powerful rhetoric that denies citizenship in being to the most vulnerable and destitute persons in our community, it is natural to wonder what role critics could possibly play in generating positive change. While some degree of anxiety is inevitable when confronted with such a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, the

\textsuperscript{256} Mead, \textit{House Subcommittee, Contract with American - Welfare Reform}, 264.
grounds for our guidance have been well laid in the analysis that has already proceeded. McGee told us in Chapter Four that “our word ‘criticism’ comes from the Greek root *krisis*, which is the label for the point at which thesis and antithesis join in equal and opposite force.” McGee is correct that *one* usage was that place in dialectical analysis, but *krisis* (κρίσις) had numerous other related meanings, as well. Antiphon’s *Tetralogies* and Plato’s *Phaedrus* declare that a *krisis* was what was handed down by the judgment of a court; Aristotle’s *Politics* represent it as a choice or decision, whereas Thucydides wrote of it as an event to be decided. All of these meanings of *krisis* help provide direction to the critic who is faced with a *crisis*. Crises present themselves as events that must be decided, in which judicious choices must be made. No individual is more suited to deal with this call than the person whose name is drawn from the very same word, the critic.

The phenomenology of rhetoric that Heidegger and Hyde have developed is indeed a powerful tool for criticism of the world at large, asking questions about how individuals, standing before a world that has been laid bare, use words to respond to the call of conscience that they hear. While the tools of a rhetorical critic provide them with the ability to evaluate those words uttered in the call of conscience, that capacity does not absolve the critic themselves from the phenomena of being-in-the-world.

The *krisis* with which we are faced is one that must be decided with the application of judicious choice. As critics, we are not immune from anxiety, nor should we ourselves be deaf to the call of conscience that speaks when we have discovered that our everyday rhetorical know-how is no longer capable of making do in the world. Just as we urge the

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258 Antipho 4.4.2; Pl.Phrdr.249a; Arist.Po.1459b5; Th.1.34
subjects of our inquiry, we too must be attuned to the call of conscience and make a resolute choice.

In Hyde’s book that bears the name of the call, he offers two pieces of advice that can help guide our response. First, he cautions:

But let us not forget that when it comes to the call of conscience, deconstruction is only one half of the story; for this call also summons us to engage in the process of reconstruction, of building and rebuilding worlds of meaning, morality, and justice. For a being whose lived body is not everlasting, deconstruction without reconstruction is but the anxiety of Being- unto-death with no way out.259

Second, he quotes Hans Zbinden to offer this challenge:

Conscience has a language. It speaks. At times, it whispers, at other times, it cries out. What it says is influenced by the everyday, as well as by the artistic, language of the times. Whenever language loses its clarity, conscience also forfeits some of its power. Flat, worn-out words are blunt weapons for its use. This is why reverences for the word and education for a wide-awake and keen-eared sense of language are prerequisites for the formation of conscience.260

These excerpts illuminate two tasks for the critic of the idle, ideographic talk of welfare reform: they must reconstruct the rhetoric of welfare with a reverence for precise language and they must promote an awareness of the importance of language. I propose three ways in which critics of rhetoric can effect such affirmation: First, through careful and attentive listening to the voice of the other who has been leveled down. Second, by

259 Hyde, Call of Conscience, 153.
260 Hans Zbinden, quoted in Ibid., 152.
adopting a stance of acknowledgment toward their lives and plight. Third, by attempting to identify and highlight the reconstructive potential of the social meanings buried in the dissident rhetoric that has been suppressed and forgotten by the leveling-down of ideographs.

Listening as Opening

Even in presence of the unanimity of work, the impressive power that work brought to bear on the debate over welfare reform, or even the rhetorical ineptitude of the Democratic “opposition,” the most remarkable aspect of the congressional hearings for welfare reform was the nearly complete absence of anyone who was actually poor or on welfare. One would think that, given the bold claims made about the effects of welfare on the lives of its recipients, the congress might have wanted to actually hear from some of the people whom it endeavored to save. The Republicans and Democrats paraded a nearly endless line of “experts” past the witness table: academics, other congresspersons, former governors, religious leaders, community organizers, social workers, and so on. Yet in the eight days of testimony and debate, they only heard from three people who were able to speak to having received so much as a penny of federal welfare benefits: one a current United States Senator and two other former welfare recipients who, thanks to the “power of hard work and determination,” were no longer on welfare.

The Subcommittee’s near deafness to people on welfare belies their professed interest in the spiritual and moral well being of America’s poor. They listened to two women who had personal experience with poverty, and more than 100 who were experts on welfare and work. The exigence that gave rise to these hearings was clearly not a crisis
of poverty; rather, it was a crisis in work itself (or at least the prevalence of adherence to the social norms that the work ideograph represents).

Hyde points us to Heidegger’s explanation of the importance of listening and how “listening to . . . is Dasein’s existential way of Being-open as Being-with for Others. Indeed, hearing constitutes the primary and authentic way in which Dasein is open for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being – as in hearing the voice of a friend whom every Dasein carries with it.”

Listening matters because it is the way in which we can properly and authentically constitute a social space; in addition, it is most important because it is through listening that we allow ourselves to become open to authentic modes of being. If we are to hear the call of conscience, we must first be listening for the voice of the other.

When we listen carefully, we open ourselves to the personhood of others and their discourse and in so doing gain some knowledge about how they are faring in the world. Congress most assuredly was not listening very carefully, if at all. Equally important is the way in which “we must listen carefully to what is being said in the discourse of idle talk so as to determine how our prevailing ways of seeing, interpreting, and involving ourselves with the world might be changed for the better.”

In this advice we have the directive for the critic of rhetoric: first and foremost, the critic must listen. Listening not only allows us to diagnose the condition of the other people in our world, it also provides an opportunity to both understand and penetrate through the fog of ideographic idle talk that levels-down so many of their primordial understandings of the world. Listening empowers the critic with the “reverences for the

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263 Ibid., 37.
word and education for a wide-awake and keen-eared sense of language” that are prerequisite to the development of any meaningful conscience. In addition, listening allows critics to distinguish between the idle chatter of the Anyone and the call of conscience that emanates in their own being.

In the absence of considerate listening from political leaders, the importance of listening on the part of critics of rhetoric only grows. The imperative to listen to the other is rooted not only in the necessity of the analytic goal of precision, but also in the pragmatic work of reconstruction. Only through listening to human beings effected by welfare and poverty can we hope to know them as subjects who make their own discourse, instead of mute objects of our discourse. Listening before speaking allows us to suspend our rush to discourse and to create an opening, even if only momentary, in which the primordial (original) understandings of the world might once again disclose themselves. When we listen intently and sincerely to the other before we ourselves speak, we do not level-down the world, since we have no need to predicate the world or create a derivative understanding. Instead, we allow ourselves to receive the world as disclosed by the other.

Acknowledging as Empowering

Chapter Four opened with two descriptions of remarkably wretched beings whose conditions were remarkably similar as well. One was a description of the living conditions of the most destitute poor individuals of the 1960s, the other a person deprived of the acknowledgement, appropriately called a “life-giving gift” by Hyde. No critic can singlehandedly relieve the economic deprivation that America’s poor endure, but charting a course to ameliorate the suffering that they endure from being unacknowledged may well be within our reach.
The ideographic function of work wholly distances the so-called undeserving poor from the mainstream of society. The assertion that they do not work or, even worse, do not know the dignity of work such that they cannot find value in their selves, makes them as foreign as the Puritan witch hunters of colonial Massachusetts. We share no distinctive or primordial (original) knowledge that allows us to engage in anything more than the most cursory idle talk. The result is that our engagement with the poor is one constituted entirely by the discourse of the Anyone, purely depersonalized and completely anonymous.

The rhetorical critic is thus tasked with the reconstruction of a rhetoric that can restore the authenticity of the primordial (original), inclusive, circumspective understanding of the world. Hyde and King inform us that “Heidegger speaks to us of a discourse that is more original than anything he or anyone else has to say about it.”264 The name of this behavior of compliant listening and response to a phenomenological researcher is acknowledgement.

Hyde conceives of acknowledgment as a call and response to discourses of distress. Locating it within Levinas, Hyde writes: “[He] would have us think about acknowledgment as what is going on when we abruptly awaken to the presence of ‘otherness’ in our lives, especially when this presence is in need of a caring response. ‘Where art thou?’ ‘Here I am!’ Acknowledgment of otherness is a moral act that ‘accomplishes human society.’”265 That acknowledgment accomplishes human society and does so as a discourse of ultimate originality (primordiality) makes it a particular effective

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264 Hyde and King, "Interface," 160.
tool for the critic who seeks to reverse the alienation and leveling down of the ideographic idle talk. Authentic discourse (of which listening is the first and most important step) erects a bulwark against social death by “attuning consciousness toward others to make room for them in our lives.”\textsuperscript{266}

Acknowledgment shows itself as a special sort of rhetoric when distinguished from recognition. Recognition, as a rhetorical phenomenon, is an act of perception and identification of something or someone as essentially the same as what we already think about them. It is a discourse of correspondence, rooted in the same ontologically unclarified separation of subject and object of which Heidegger is so critical.\textsuperscript{267}

Recognition is the sort of discourse that one might expect to be oriented toward some thing or person’s disclosure or presencing, provided that the speaker anticipated that the thing or person would rapidly withdraw back into everydayness. Recalling Hyde and King’s model of validity involving bipartite disclosing (in which some thing discloses itself and that disclosure is subsequently disclosed to a third party), recognition takes the form of a dispassionate secondary disclosure. It is a casual wave to an acquaintance, or the annoyingly empty “F.Y.I.” It is speech that points something out, but does not encourage a response, often suppresses response, and, in many cases, resents response.

In the forms that recognition takes in everyday speech, it epitomizes the discourse of the They. It is perfectly idle talk, insofar as it only speaks with regard to what is already

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid.: 25.
\textsuperscript{267} See Ibid.: 25-26. (recognition entailing already-known); Hyde, \textit{Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgment}, 3-5. (acknowledgment distinguished by knowing-together); Calvin O. Schrag, \textit{God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift} (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 117-118. (how the epistemic turn in philosophy establishes the dominance of recognition, understood as a correspondent act of subject-object alignment)
known of a thing, leveling-down difference, variety, and most importantly, change. When we recognize someone, we engage in small talk and content-free banter. We may well ask: “What’s new?” as a pleasantry, but we could not be any less interested in the answer.

Acknowledgment stands in opposition to the disinterested correspondence of recognition. The principle characteristic of acknowledging rhetoric is the reciprocity of call and response: “Where art thou?” “Here I am!” As already explained, acknowledgment involves listening, oriented toward understanding. With reciprocity, listening, and understanding at its core, Hyde proposes that this is a form of rhetoric that offers the possibility of salvation for the wretched souls referred to at the beginning of Chapter Four:

Acknowledgment provides an opening out of such a distressful situation, for the act of acknowledging is a communicative behavior that grants attention to others and thereby makes room for them in our lives. With this added living space comes the opportunity for a new beginning, a “second chance” whereby one might improve his or her lot in life. There is hope to be found with this transformation of space and time as people of conscience opt to go out of their way to make us feel wanted and needed, to praise our presence and actions, and thus to acknowledge the worthiness of our existence. *Offering positive acknowledgment is a moral thing to do.*

**Highlighting as Resisting**

Doubtless, listening to and acknowledging the human beings whose lives have been buried under the weight of idle talk and ideographs is an imperative for the critic of rhetoric. While both activities create openings and spaces in which the poor might come

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to disclose a more vibrant and primordial understanding of their being, it offers little in the way of relief from the force of the Anyone. Ideographs still remain and the PRWORA still degrades. While the freedom and authenticity that accompanies resolute choice is the most precious ontological condition that Dasein can attain, the brute fact of material oppression still hangs above a poor Dasein’s head. Thus far, the proposed reconstructions seem only to counsel a phenomenological order of “to thine own self be true.” Our relation to being is one that is determined by the way that it discloses itself to us – it is, at its root, a personal understanding.

Nancy Leland argues that this extreme interiority highlights a defect in Heidegger’s theory of the Anyone. While Heidegger does attack the crushing conformism that the Anyone creates, he still maintains that they are an interior force, a form of self-conditioning in which Dasein pushes itself to stick to what “they” think. Ideographs operate as containers that carry with them the baggage of political liberalism and the social normativity it requires, but they still do not forcibly coerce compliance. The experience of many poor minorities, however, testifies to the presence of far more structural enforcers of conformity. The PRWORA itself creates many, the most obvious being the linkage of the provision of benefits with the performance of work.

Leland says “a failure to note that the social world in which we actually live is structured by relations of dominance and subordination may oversimplify and distort the complexities involved in authentic living for members of subordinate groups. The vastly different conditions under which multiple subordinate groups and cultures live from one

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another, in addition to even greater difference between the worlds of the superior and subordinate groups means, to Leland, that they all have been “thrown” in different ways and that they reflect a multitude of “different ways in which possibilities can be ‘leveled down’. ” In short, Leland accuses Heidegger of unfairly homogenizing the experiences of all human beings and of incorrectly asserting that even if every individual’s conformity takes different forms, that the mechanisms by which the conformity come to be are the same for all. Leland proposes that with regard to Dasein’s involvement in the Anyone, “being involved in a common set of historical practices does not entail that those practices involve us in the same way, with or within a common set of aspirations and assessments.”

The idle talk of work and the targets of welfare reform provide a clear example of Leland’s proposal in effect. The ideography of work applies universally throughout all of society, in the way that comports with the universalized banality that we would come to expect from the strict interpretation of *das Man*. Yet the manner in which work levels-down differently situated Dasein is quite varied. The push toward averageness that reduces all of life to a common denominator has a much stronger effect on those people who are not situated near the average. For the poor who have no jobs, few prospects of getting one, and face the equally low likelihood that any job they could get would sustain them, the “dictatorship” of *das Man* is a far more brutal regime than it is for a person with a middle class suburban lifestyle, hovering near the median income line.

\footnote{270} Ibid.
\footnote{271} Ibid., 121.
Leland’s solution to this quandary is to attempt to locate authenticity ontically, rather than ontologically. Heidegger’s nearly single-minded focus on the ontology of Dasein places him in the position of only asking questions about the nature and meaningful structure of being. Heidegger rejects an ontic orientation for being too concerned with the “plain facts” of Dasein’s worldly existence (such as its social location). Yet authenticity, because it is the mode of being affirmed by resolute choice, has a manifestly ontic component. While Heidegger’s preferred mode of investigation is ontological, Dasein’s resolute choice occurs in the material world. Even in a state of anxiety/being-toward-death during which Dasein’s very being is called into question, nothing demands that resolute choice be ontological. It is merely the case that authenticity demands it be resolute!

By Leland’s account, exploring the ontic characteristics of authenticity “displaces a focus simply on taking up and taking over the practices of an historical culture with a focus on the axes of domination and subordination that affect the construction of social identities . . . and the production and circulation of social meanings.” To a poor person faced with the degradation of work ideography, resolute choice could very well reflect a rejection of the axis of domination that is created by the ideograph, an ontic move.

The benefits of this new focus are two-fold. First, it allows for a greater multiplicity of views and understandings of the world, views that contain the insights of a particular social location, “[providing] conceptual space for competing moral maps, competing

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272 Heidegger’s resistance to ontic analysis likely bears a good deal of the blame for his deafness to moral and political issues.
273 Leland, "Conflictual Culture and Authenticity: Deepening Heidegger’s Account of the Social," 123.
stories and interpretations.”\textsuperscript{274} One more, we find the creation of an opening into which the understandings and interpretations of the world can conceivably be reconstituted.

Second, “we can link authenticity to struggles over social meanings and see it as taking shape as part of a political practice.”\textsuperscript{275} Black Nationalism provides an instructive example: the ontic movement to reject white racism (certainly the sort of innuendo and stereotype comprised by idle talk) and thus to reject inauthenticity also entailed an embrace of authenticity, but an authenticity that was rooted in a particular social circumstance. The shared experience of that circumstance was the link that allowed for political organization. The organization of the poor into a politically coalesced force would create myriad challenges to the dominant ideography of work.

The role of the critic in this circumstance is highlighting, a hermeneutical act in which the critic, possessive of the “reverences for the word and education for a wide-awake and keen-eared sense of language” that are perquisites to conscience, reveals the traces of ideographs and the Anyone. Just as important, it is the task of the critic to identify calls of conscience and resolute choice and action, and \textit{highlight} them. Existence in the everyday world of know-how and the Anyone does not imply that Dasein is the victim of a false consciousness, but that leveling-down and idle talk have obscured its capacity to understand the choices that it possesses. Even if Heidegger is correct that the primordial essence of language is “saying as showing,” such that those things pointed out must first let themselves be shown, there is no reason to believe that rhetorical critics, given their interests and expertise, are not some of the individuals best suited to perceive

\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid., 123-124.
the indication that the thing will let itself be shown. The banality of everyday life places a
go of war over Dasein, impairing its ability to make resolute decisions when it hears the
call of conscience, and undermining Dasein’s ability to hear the call in the first place. Just
as acknowledgment summons us to reply “here I am!” when called upon, highlighting
demands that we shout “there it is!” when we see traces of primordial being and
authenticity in the lives of the oppressed. The demonstration that being in the world need
not necessarily be as it is in everydayness can help rupture the power of the Anyone and
acknowledge the other’s struggle with conscience.

ANSWERING THE CALL

Writing in 2006, Ron Haskins summarized the effects of the PRWORA in “Ten
Years Later: The Triumph of Work,” the final chapter of his book, Work Over Welfare:
“Sweeping reforms have produced sweeping effects. The evidence that welfare use has
dropped, that work and earnings have increased, and that child poverty has fallen is
overwhelming.” Only two years after Haskins triumphant declaration of mission
accomplished, the “overwhelming” evidence of which he wrote had become more difficult
to find than actual welfare recipients in the Contract With America: Welfare Reform
hearings. The September 2009 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey reveals a set
of statistics that make pronouncements of workfare’s triumph appear startlingly
premature. As of 2008:

- One in five children is in poverty, one in twelve in extreme poverty.
- One in three Black children is in poverty, one in six in extreme poverty.
- Three in ten Latino children are in poverty, one in eight in extreme poverty.

These levels of poverty are only more disturbing when compared to the same study in the year 2000. From 2000 to 2008:

- Among all children, poverty increased by 2.5 million children (21.4%) to reach 14.1 million.
- Among Black children, poverty increased by about 297,000 children (8.3%) to reach 3.9 million.
- Among Latino children, poverty increased by 1.5 million children (42.2%) to reach 5.0 million.\textsuperscript{277}

That welfare reform could be pronounced a success in light of those numbers is quite literally, figuratively, and, as this thesis has argued, phenomenologically \textit{unconscionable}. Is it the case that the declarations of triumph sounded by writers such as Haskins may not be excessively concerned with the question of poverty? Even after declaring that the evidence that child poverty was declining was “overwhelming,” Haskins rapidly retreated to write, in the same paragraph, “little is known about the extent to which children were affected by these very substantial policy changes.”\textsuperscript{278} Why would Haskins, in spite of professed ignorance to the extent that the PRWORA affected child poverty, declare that the evidence was overwhelming? I have argued that it is because the purpose of workfare never was, nor ever will be, to reduce poverty or the suffering of the poor. Instead, as its name implies, the enactment of workfare legislation in the mid-1990s


\textsuperscript{278} Haskins, \textit{Work Over Welfare}, 362.
was undertaken for the sake of consolidating, sustaining, and securing the ideography of work.

The rhetorical relation of work and poverty predates the existence of welfare in the United States; in fact, it predates the United States altogether. Taking root in the English Poor Laws of 1601 and 1834, the rhetoric of work grew through the early Industrial Revolution and blossomed into a fully-formed ideograph during the Gilded Age of the post-Civil War explosion in the American economy and industry. Despite the fact that the American welfare state experienced exponential growth in the 100 years that spanned welfare’s beginnings in the mothers’ pensions of the Progressive Era, its federalization and massive expansion in the New Deal, and its renewed growth in the War on Poverty of the 1960s, none of those expansions in welfare were made without an explicit rhetorical commitment to work. Firmly worded support for ideographs like work is a prerequisite for participation in the American political world. The unanimity and relative ease with which the PRWORA passed in 1996 merely evidences the pervasiveness of work, particularly given that work, not poverty, was the central point of discussion in the extensive congressional hearings on the legislation.

Work, when understood as a phenomenological ideograph, is an instantiation of what Martin Heidegger describes as idle talk, the discursive currency of the force of social normativity called the Anyone. Because of the way in which it levels-down the discontinuities that dissident rhetorics of work create in everyday ways of discourse, idle talk impairs the ability of human beings to engage in thoughtful listening, reflection, and acknowledgement of the discourses of people other than themselves. Hyde theorizes the result of this impairment: the call of conscience, an invitation to resolute choice and the
affirmation of our human freedom goes either unheard, or unanswered. The world in which the calls of conscience of both the other and the self go unacknowledged is one where life is lonely, miserable, and unbearable, engrossed in the anxiety of a being toward death, with no way out.

Rhetorical critics of conscience must step into the void created by the ideography of work, identifying the leveling-down of the poor and highlighting the reconstructive opportunities present in the primordial experience and discourse of those in poverty. Calls of conscience arise in those moments when we find “our daily progress impeded, if not shattered to its very core, by occurrences that disrupt our accustomed routines and relationships . . . and thereby expose us to the uncertainty inherent in our temporal existence.”279 The call is heard in a world where the know-how with which we have lived a satisfying yet mundane existence is no longer sufficient to allow us to get by with our everyday way of being. It is a world in which more than 39 million people live below the poverty line, of whom more than 14 million are children.280 Most concretely, this is conscience calling us. Hyde explains the unavoidable decision that the call poses: “With this summons comes an option: we must either choose the way we want to live our lives or allow others to do the choosing for us; we either achieve integrity through resolute choice or lose integrity through a retreat from choice.”281

Resolute choice in the context of work, welfare, and poverty entails a two-fold commitment to a reconstruction of meaning and reverence for the discourse that gives

279 Hyde, *Call of Conscience*, 50.
281 Hyde, *Call of Conscience*, 45.
rise to authentic conscience. This commitment can take the form of *listening* (to the discourse and personhood of others); *acknowledging* (answering the call of these suffering human beings); and *highlighting* (dissident struggles over social meaning). These acts of reconstructive criticism can, even if only momentarily, create openings that allow the poor the opportunity to disclose their own discourse of being, engage in resolute choice, and affirm their own freedom. This, truly, is worthwhile work.
REFERENCES


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