

Preface: States of Welfare

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IN THE HEADY DAYS OF NOVEMBER 2008, with the global financial crisis a recent phenomenon and Barack Obama's victory signaling an era of change, voices began to speak hopefully of a "new New Deal."¹ Reregulating the financial industry, ushering in a green economy, and providing health care for the American people seemed like viable first steps in reversing the neoliberal policies that the journalist William Greider has described as a "rolling back of the twentieth century."² That moment turned out to be all too short-lived. Although it is commonplace to observe that the financial crisis that began in 2008 is the worst since the Great Depression, the Obama administration has shown itself largely unable, and often unwilling, to offer public solutions on

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¹ The zeitgeist was iconically expressed by the November 24, 2008, cover of *Time* magazine, which depicted a smiling Obama with FDR-style spectacles, cigarette, and fedora (<http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20081124,00.html>). A writer for Fox News.com hastened to report the view of economists who alleged that Roosevelt's New Deal policies "extended the Great Depression by seven years" (<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2008/11/24/analysis-critics-warn-obamas-new-new-deal-economic-silver-bullet/>).

² See <http://www.thenation.com/article/rolling-back-20th-century>.



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anything like the scale of its predecessors in the 1930s and 1960s. The health insurance “reforms” of March 2010, marked by the absence of a significant “public option,” continue to draw consternation from both Right and Left. And while permanent joblessness has entrenched itself among workers who once considered themselves middle class, concerns over deficit reduction have already begun to trump unemployment, even among many Democrats.

The idea of the welfare state, to say the least, has yet to recover from Reagan era diatribes, Clinton era reforms, and the Bush era strategy of “starving the beast.”³ Renegade right-wingers organize Tea Parties, while their mainstream counterparts in the Republican Party bail out Wall Street banks but not the millions of people who have lost jobs and homes. Democratic leaders are only marginally different. Like their Republican counterparts, they too deem large corporations too big to fail, while leaving average workers to rely largely on individual and “free-market” remedies. In such an environment it is all too easy for critics to label the recent BP oil spill Obama’s “Katrina” without public discussion of the kind of government that would have prevented or mitigated both catastrophes. What Christopher Newfield, writing in this special issue, calls a “moon shot–scale effort”—a government investment of the scale that the Kennedy administration made in the space program—has yet to materialize on behalf of renewable energy, education, job creation, or any other public good.

Perversely, the financial crisis has decimated the welfare state in two ways: both by gobbling up taxpayer money for corporate bailouts and by forcing cash-strapped governments (whether states like California or countries like Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom) to slash public funding or face punishing interest rates. Unsurprisingly, higher education is a key target for such deep budget cuts: 2010 saw the United Kingdom’s universities unable to prevent the Labour Party’s government from ordering more than £1 billion in reductions. The United Kingdom’s new coalition government seeks to make cuts to government programs of 25 percent or more, which, if implemented, would shrink the British welfare state well beyond Margaret Thatcher’s reductions in the 1980s.⁴ As we write in August 2010, the actual unemployment rate in the United States nears 20 percent,⁵ while higher education is becoming less accessible than ever. Public education is under assault in states like California, Illinois, Maryland, Nevada, and Wisconsin. Employee furloughs at public universities (among other public employers) have become commonplace. Plans are afoot to raise tuition while implementing hiring freezes and large budget cuts. Graduate programs have been reduced and there is talk of eliminating programs that do not sustain themselves through undergraduate enrollments. Class size will increase and reliance on insecure non-tenure-stream faculty will grow. In the meantime, government loans finance worthless degrees at for-profit institutions, and Walmart plans an ambitious foray into higher education.⁶

To be sure, none of these trends is new. While recent budget problems across the United States were precipitated by the financial crisis, state economies have been under pressure ever since the Reagan years, when the federal government’s divestment from social services began. The broad impact of neoliberalism on social policy was already palpable in March 2006, when we organized a conference entitled “States of Welfare”—the germ of this special issue of *Occa-*

³ On the origins and use of this conservative term, see http://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_12_01_01_bartlett.pdf.

⁴ See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/18/british-budget-deficit-coalition-cuts>.

⁵ See, e.g., <http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/learn-how-to-invest/The-real-unemployment-rate.aspx>.

⁶ See <http://chronicle.com/article/Is-Wal-Mart-U-a-Good/65933/>.

sion—under the auspices of the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.⁷ Contemplating a number of devastating natural disasters—in Indonesia and Pakistan as well as in New Orleans—we were struck by the failure of governments to provide basic support for citizens even during the direst emergencies. Of course, these events overlapped with an ongoing “war on terror.” In the wake of the invasion of Iraq and detention camps at Guantánamo Bay, we were well aware that simple calls for strengthening state power could provide as many problems as answers.

The need, instead, was to explore the Janus-faced dimensions of the state. On the one hand, we noted the massive state disciplinary power that post-9/11 militarism had claimed to justify. On the other, we could see how neoliberal governments were failing to ensure basic welfare at multiple levels. A simple rejection of the state was clearly the wrong answer—theoretically, historically, and politically—to the contradictions of the moment. The modern state, in the terms set out by Bruce Robbins’s essay, has been responsible both for *orange juice* and *Agent Orange*: that is, it has been responsible for the affirmative provision of domestic welfare by state bureaucracies and for state violence—both internationally, through war, colonialism, and foreign intervention, and domestically, through the “prison-industrial complex” and other components of what Althusser called the “Repressive State Apparatus.” The need was clearly to think together both aspects of the state without succumbing to paralysis or oversimplification. That need has only become more profound as the global financial crisis threatens to devastate social welfare in almost every corner of the globe.⁸

Of course, much of the intellectual work of the last decades has been antistatist in tendency. This is not the antistatism of libertarians, tea partiers, and their corporate backers, but one spurred by some of the insights of poststructuralist, Marxist, Foucaultian, and postcolonial theory. Such theoretical writing construes the state as an apparatus of discipline that centralizes power, constrains labor, normalizes populations, advances capitalist agendas, and undertakes imperial adventures. The Bush administration’s actions in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, could only exacerbate this view: unsurprisingly, the relentless expansion of executive power (domestic spying, imprisonment of “enemy combatants” without trial or hope of reprieve, the waging of war without end) inspired somber accounts of the liberal state as an almost intrinsically totalitarian institution.

In fact, the neoliberal and right-wing pretense of shrinking the state has always been misleading. As a governmentality driven by the expansion of capital, neoliberalism has never prac-

⁷ The conference was the capstone event of a semester-long seminar, *Rethinking the State*, in spring 2006. A grant from the Mellon Foundation enabled us to organize an extended visit to the University of Illinois by Bruce Robbins, as well as the conference, associated panel discussions, and roundtables. Several of the present contributors took part in these events, and this special issue is indebted to the lively debates that ensued. During his visit to Illinois, Robbins was in the final stages of working on the book that is one of the inspirations for this special issue. See Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁸ Thus, the journalist Robert Samuelson writes in the *Washington Post* that Greece’s economic troubles illustrate “the death spiral of the welfare state.” Moreover, almost “every advanced nation” faces aging populations whose health and retirement benefits are economically unsustainable. The “overcommitted” welfare states of the world’s “developed countries” thus pose the threat of “worldwide economic collapse.” While these countries might “defuse the dangers by gradually trimming future benefits in a way that reassures financial markets” (emphasis added), they have not yet sufficiently done so. See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/09/AR2010050902443.html>. According to the economist Paul Krugman writing in the *New York Times*, such arguments for fiscal austerity dominate the political landscape in Germany as well as the United States: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/18/opinion/18krugman.html?src=me&ref=homepage>.

ticed the laissez-faire it preaches. To the contrary, the so-called free market relies on state power to defend and extend private interests within and across national borders. Still, the answer to capitalism's deployment of the state is not simple antistatism. The erosion of government's social democratic empowerment of citizens and enhancement of their well-being is but another means of strengthening private power. Over the last several decades, the dismantling of the welfare state has proceeded in tandem with the vast expansion of the state's war-making and surveillance capabilities.⁹

Bringing together literary critics, historians, political theorists, and social scientists, this special issue initiates a debate that moves beyond the knee-jerk antistatism of some academic thinking while also refusing to overidealize the welfare policies of the past. In the spirit of *Occasion*, a forum that refuses to hew to disciplinary boundaries and taken-for-granted political investments, "States of Welfare" challenges Left intellectuals in the academy to rethink the common sense that has attended many recent discussions of the state and seeks to set the agenda for a post-neoliberal outlook. Just as in its inaugural issue *Occasion* took on the discourse of rational choice theory and reevaluated it from the standpoint of the humanities, sociology, and feminist and progressive economics, so in the current issue we examine the seemingly contradictory coappearance of welfare and repression, beneficence and control, from equally diverse disciplinary standpoints. Attentive to the possibilities and perils of the state in both domestic and global arenas, the essays in this volume reach back to the nineteenth century and look ahead into the twenty-first. They range across disciplines, focusing on the transatlantic U.S. and British contexts that have been central to neoliberalism's imaginary while, as much as possible, also keeping the greater globe in view. Alert to critical calls for transnational and postnational ways of thinking, the volume asks how social welfare can be enacted without reproducing what Paul Gilroy has called the "camp mentality" of the nation-state, an exclusivist and often racist form of solidarity that stigmatizes minorities and immigrants and inhibits the international extension of welfare provision.¹⁰ Responsive to visions of a more equitable and sustainable New Deal for the twenty-first century, the contributors to this collection explore how the welfare regimes of the past delivered uneven effects: too often stigmatizing difference, marginalizing people of color, and constraining women's choices, and too readily complicit with entrenched divides between global haves and have-nots. Among other questions, we seek to explore how and why the mechanisms of collectivism, redistribution, and egalitarian entitlement once heralded to promote democracy have become objects of opprobrium or indifference throughout the political spectrum.

In declaring the pressing need to rethink the relation of welfare and the state, we do not assume that the social democratic state can be neatly disentangled from the work of neoimperialism and state violence. Nor do we assume a simplistic binary in which the state's "good" effects operate domestically while its "bad" policies occur in the arena of economic aid and foreign pol-

⁹ As William Connolly argues in *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), socioeconomic insecurity exacerbates the resonance between unregulated capitalism and vengeful and apocalyptic forms of evangelical Christianity.

¹⁰ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). In the United Kingdom, this book was published as *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures, and the Allures of Race* (London: Allen Lane, 2000). Also important for thinking about welfare beyond the frame of the nation-state is Bruce Robbins's work on cosmopolitanism in, for example, "Cosmopolitanism, America, and the Welfare State," in "Theories of American Culture/Theories of American Studies," ed. Winfried Fluck and Thomas Claviez, *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 19, no. 5 (2003): 201–24.

icy. Rather, by pushing the debate away from one-sided critique of the state and toward more generative discussion, this special issue zeroes in on the contradictions of our moment of crisis. The era of privatization, deregulation, multinational corporate power, and unregulated global finance implies a state that is lax and weak. Militarization, torture, spying, and the “state of emergency” entail a very different view. The time has come to confront these seeming incongruities and think beyond the impasse they create.

Although “States of Welfare” operates on the terrain of sociology, political theory, economics, and global studies, it also manifests the investments of its editors in the study of literature. As literary critics, our scholarship is especially alive to culture’s double-edged role in legitimating and resisting the reign of governmentalities. Given that much of the debate about the welfare state has taken place among social scientists and policymakers, we seek to restore the cultural dimension of this discussion. While the essays by Robbins, Claybaugh, and Szalay bring literature to bear on these issues, the work of de Graef and Gilleir, Lloyd, and Newfield uses literary critical techniques to read discourses of the state in a variety of historical and present-day contexts. Contributors hailing from history or the social sciences, such as Vernon, Smith, and Clarke, are also all keenly aware of the need to investigate the state from broadly humanistic perspectives. Such attention to culture, we hope, may facilitate much-needed self-reflexivity among humanities scholars about our own embeddedness in the state. Not least for academics whose research and teaching rely on public support—in California, Illinois, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere—“States of Welfare” begins a conversation that has long been waiting to happen.

Bruce Robbins sets out the stakes of the special issue in his introductory essay. Building on a discussion that enlivened the “States of Welfare” conference, in which the provision of orange juice came to stand in opposition to the delivery of Agent Orange as two poles in a debate about how progressives should orient themselves toward the state, Robbins takes up a range of literary and critical texts, including Carolyn Steedman’s hybrid memoir *Landscape for a Good Woman* and Don DeLillo’s epic novel *Underworld*. Articulating some of this issue’s fundamental concerns, he argues that humanists need to take the welfare state seriously, identifies the welfare state as an institution that progressives should defend, and asks how welfare should be thought in a globalizing, postcolonial world. Ranging widely across historical, cultural, and political debates, Robbins makes the case that the humanities in general—and literary criticism in particular—offer important contributions to a discussion that has often remained the province of policy-oriented intellectuals. More controversially, perhaps, he argues that humanists will succeed in making such contributions only when they abandon the disciplinary and theoretical prejudices that have led them to shy away from embracing the state as an agent for welfare.

Following Robbins, the special issue continues with a cluster of essays exploring discipline, biopower, and the welfare state. Responding directly to Robbins’s discussion of “orange juice,” historian James Vernon reopens discussion of the ambivalence of state intervention. As he re-reads the passages from Steedman’s memoir *Landscape for a Good Woman* that are central to Robbins’s analysis, Vernon emphasizes the tension between the stigmatizing and ameliorating tendencies of welfare. Turning to the history of “hunger” as a constitutive category of “the social,” Vernon, a historian of modern Britain, traces the long-term process through which human want became a target of intervention instead of the result of poverty or “nature.” While admitting that this shift marks a kind of progress, he cautions against simple celebration of the welfare state. He notes the discipline and normalization that accompanied provision for the poor as well as the colonial context that served as a laboratory for such provision.

In a contribution on prisons and prison protest during the struggles over Irish independence, David Lloyd draws on Foucault's account of discipline and biopower and sharpens the colonial question raised by Vernon. If anything, Lloyd is even less sanguine about the affirmative possibilities of welfare. Citing a key passage from Marx's *Capital*, he argues that the domain of welfare emerges as the state takes charge of both the costs and the institutions of reproduction for capital, thus becoming the "biopolitical" state. Situating his discussion in the British-Irish context, Lloyd further reveals how the state's capacity to "care" for its subjects helps to mask the colonial nature of the conflict by transforming political prisoners into "ordinary decent criminals." Lloyd draws on Agamben's distinction between *zoe* and *bios*—mere biological life and life inscribed in the polis, respectively—to map out the intersection of discipline and welfare in the modern prison as well as the possibilities for political prisoners to produce a politics of bare life by reworking the structures and architecture of colonial rule.

Anna Marie Smith, who also references Agamben's writings on sovereignty and bare life, contends that a central aspect of welfare involves the production of "flexible" workers for "rapacious" capital. While Smith finds Agamben's work suggestive, she argues against what, with a nod to Derrida's critique of presence, she calls its "metaphysics of governance," that is, its transhistorical social theory of the political. Focusing especially on the state's regulation of the sexuality of poor women, Smith maintains that Agamben can hold such a view of governance only by suppressing institutional specificity, including gendered and racialized dynamics. Against Agamben, she offers an alternative theory of contemporary American welfare policy as an expression of neo-eugenics. If this hardly represents a rapprochement with the state, it does insist that critiques of welfare pay careful attention to the nuances and transformations of a contingent history.

Amanda Claybaugh's contribution provides a deeper historical context for Smith's assessment of the contemporary racialized and gendered politics of U.S. welfare. Turning to the era of post-Civil War Reconstruction, Claybaugh offers both a prehistory of the modern welfare state and an account of why the state's provision of welfare has proven so enduringly controversial in the United States. By focusing on the Freedmen's Bureau, an institution created to address the needs of freed slaves, Claybaugh explores an early version of the American tendency, identified by Theda Skocpol, to racialize the distinction between "good" public provision (social security for veterans) and "bad" (welfare for freed people). Claybaugh adds further nuance to the story by contrasting the rapid disappearance of the Freedmen's Bureau with the relative success of freedmen's *schools*—a key example of the long historical process through which stigmatized "welfare" has been distinguished from more tolerable forms of state provision such as public education. In conclusion, she suggests that the success of the freedmen's schools might stimulate us to imagine more robust forms of welfare that transcend the opposition between state provision and voluntary association.

Ortwin de Graef and Anke Gilleir turn to Matthew Arnold's legacy to describe a different aspect of the welfare state's nineteenth-century provenance. Arnold is remembered for his resistance to Victorian era antistatism: as a public intellectual who called for a state that would control "individual wills in the name of an interest wider than that of individuals." Nonetheless, Arnold's conception of the state is frequently misunderstood, not least because scholars seldom ask why Arnold's writings were unable to persuade the British public that centralized governance could be suitably English. The authors argue that Arnold's refusal to anthropomorphize the state reflected his awareness of the growing feminization of culture and social service, as distinct from

the masculinization of science and industry. Arnold sought, unsuccessfully, to avoid the image of the state as a figure of domesticity whose oversight of “sweetness and light” was distinctly maternal. This problem persists in resistance to social democracy today, especially in Anglo-American contexts that criticize welfare provision as a “nanny state” that threatens mature individualism.

In an extended discussion of Lionel Trilling’s only novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, Michael Szalay provides another case study of ambivalence toward the welfare state. As Szalay demonstrates, Trilling’s Weberian antipathy to the allegedly deadening workings of bureaucracy—which anticipates aspects of Foucault’s discussions of biopower—coexisted with another, “existential” commitment to the state. Trilling’s investment in “states of welfare” involved, as Szalay argues, a promotion of “states of being”—an inculcated passive mode of subjectivity “central to the welfare state’s vision of social citizenship.” Reading literature as critical to the cultivation of that mode of heteronomous subjectivity, Szalay’s essay answers Bruce Robbins’s call for a literary history of the welfare state.¹¹ Trilling’s novel draws on English Romanticism to retrieve a mode of being, a Keatsian “negative capability,” that answers to the midcentury crisis in liberal culture. Szalay’s reading of *The Middle of the Journey* reveals that, despite Trilling’s antipathy toward bureaucracy, the novel affirms precisely the “actuarial” vision of probability, risk, and contingency that underwrites the New Deal welfare state.

Ebony Coletu’s essay moves this special issue from the New Deal to the Welfare Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Coletu uses what she calls a “biographical lens” to reconsider welfare bureaucracy and welfare activism during that period. This approach allows her to show how the framing of life stories in the context of welfare claims and policy becomes a site of struggle over material aid. She traces the construction of stigmatized stereotypes of the “welfare queen” and “welfare cheat,” while also demonstrating that claimants from stigmatized groups—especially women of color—as well as their advocates in groups such as the National Welfare Rights Organization redeployed life stories in order to contest the disciplinary bureaucracy of welfare provision. Redefining the written practices of social welfare and advocacy organizations as a genre of life-writing brings into view a new form of value, biographic currency, which arises from “approved descriptions of suffering.” While such a form of writing constitutes a functional genre susceptible to instrumentalization by the state and “flattening” of the complexities of individual lives and circumstances, Coletu also reveals how life-writing can be “re-functioned” by social movements to provide counternarratives in the form of *critical* biographic currency.

The final two essays bring the discussion of the welfare state up to our current moment in which the election of the Obama administration, despite obvious setbacks, continues to open the possibility of new states of welfare to some degree. Both John Clarke and Christopher Newfield reassess the present and chart its possibilities and already visible limits. Tracing the return of a progressive New Deal imaginary in both the United States and the United Kingdom, Clarke offers comparisons of two locations in the Anglophone heartland that other contributors take up separately. While recognizing that the crisis has provided a window for rethinking neoliberalism on both sides of the Atlantic, Clarke finds contemporary discourses stuck in the same institutional ruts and conceptual binaries that, for decades, have structured debates about welfare and its “reform.” In particular, he identifies three limits to liberal and neoliberal approaches to state provision: a work-centric view of welfare, a culturally conservative familialism, and a nationalist

¹¹ For another contribution to this history, see Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

framing of policy. In addition, he argues against the simplistic pro-state/anti-state rhetoric that almost always accompanies debate about welfare and warns that such oppositional thinking makes it more difficult to evaluate the changing form of the state. Clarke believes that by recognizing the state's "tentacular" nature (to borrow Engin Isin's resonant phrase), progressive critics can better identify more enduring and less stigmatizing forms of welfare.

Like Clarke and several other contributors, Christopher Newfield is also interested in locating possibilities for intervention in the current conjuncture. While Clarke calls for a *reconceptualization* of the state, Newfield suggests the need for new *narratives* of social production. Newfield, a professor of English who has been working on public higher education in the United States, identifies a "development crisis" behind the current economic contraction—that is, a crisis in support of the basic research and development that made the United States a global superpower. While Newfield finds the new Obama administration more supportive of science than the notoriously antiscience Bush administration, he does not find a fundamental change in how Obama describes the benefits of public investment. Through a case study of nanotechnology research, Newfield argues for the importance of narratives of scientific development that will reveal the social production of scientific knowledge and the social benefits such knowledge produces. Newfield's emphasis on the galvanizing force of stories adds another dimension to Robbins's notion of a literary history of the welfare state; cutting across the "two cultures" divide and focusing on the cutting edge of emergent scientific research, it reveals how the right kinds of narrative can promote the egalitarian vision of the common good necessary for reinventing welfare after the crisis of neoliberal capitalism.

In a closing meditation on this special issue and its purview, *Occasions* editor-in-chief David Palumbo-Liu frames a set of questions for future analysis. The paradox of representative democracies, he notes, is their built-in incapacity to satisfy the full spectrum of individual desires. This is why political economy is always inexorably embedded in the production of culture ("ways of life"). Unpacking the question of welfare states in today's global economy requires a scale and complexity that confute popular desires to grasp the knowable. Radical conservative movements know this one thing and thus seize the Palinesque local as their idiom. In contrast, liberal-minded Democrats and the scholars who wish for their success ask questions that are difficult even to articulate—much less answer. Such paradoxes doom a newer New Deal to almost inevitable failure—unless and until we learn more about "how 'ways of life' are imagined, narrated, enacted, and acted upon."

"States of Welfare" emerges from a dynamic situation that finds shifts in local and global economies intersecting with long-term trends toward neoliberal restructuring of what counts as the common good. Although academic scholarship does not always capture the vicissitudes of fast-changing material conditions, we hope that this forum in *Occasion* helps to spur continued conversations across academic disciplines and the boundaries of states and nations. If the real limits of cultural work to impact material politics are all too evident, the limits of material politics that develop in the absence of cultural and historical consideration are just as sobering. "States of Welfare" argues for—and, we hope, provides an example of—a practice that puts scholarly debate on culture and history into dialogue with the challenges of our present day. [A]