

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION
THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WELFARE AND WORK

Low-wage work apparently must be mandated, just as a draft has sometimes been necessary to staff the military.

LAWRENCE MEAD, *BEYOND ENTITLEMENT*¹

If I were President . . . I'd start paying women a living wage for doing the work we are already doing—child raising and housekeeping. And the welfare crisis would be over. Just like that.

JOHNNIE TILLMON, NATIONAL WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION²

PUTTING WELFARE REFORM IN ITS CONTEXT

Walking from Walnut Street to Capitol Avenue on Milwaukee's near north side on a weekday afternoon, one is struck by the absence of adults in the neighborhood. Teenage boys work on cars and talk on cell phones, and teenage girls walk their little brothers and sisters home from school. An occasional grandmother supervises kids at yard work. But there are no working-age adults in sight. Brightly painted day care centers tucked between grocery shops and storefront churches provide a clue to their whereabouts. "First and second shift," the signs announce. "Six a.m. to midnight. Four weeks to 12 years. Free transportation available." With names like Pristine Child Care, the Early Childhood Academy, and Imagination Station, the centers offer upbeat slogans: "Where young minds possess a bright future" or "Where faith and learning come together to build strong families." They also speak to the end of welfare and the widespread movement of the neighborhood's mothers into work.

The year 1996 marked a sea change in our nation's system of welfare provision.³ In that year, the U.S. Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)—a law that ended the

statutory entitlement to welfare for people in need and tied benefits, for those who continued to rely on them, to work. A year later, state officials in Wisconsin implemented their own vehicle for the new policies, known as Wisconsin Works, or W-2. Many who promoted these reforms held them to be a step toward fiscal responsibility; others considered them morally necessary to restore self-reliance and personal accountability, values that they perceived to have eroded among the poor.⁴ But welfare reform was intimately connected to gendered changes in labor force participation and to profound underlying shifts in the responsibilities of family, firms, and the state. The reforms were tied to the movement of women out of the home and into the workforce in unprecedented numbers, the growth of a racially and gender-segregated service sector that depended heavily on women's labor, and the withdrawal of corporations and government from the business of providing a safety net for workers. These trends have generated new forms of economic insecurity that are felt by most wage-dependent American households. This book documents how welfare reform has intersected with such changes for poor, single-parent families, eroding their social rights in ways that affect their ability to care for their members and undermining their civil rights and labor protections.

The chapters that follow recount the experiences of a number of women living and working in Milwaukee and Racine, Wisconsin, in 2004. These women had all relied on welfare at some point in 2003, but most had also worked a great deal over the past few years. All were mothers of young children. Our book tells the story of their struggle to balance child care and wage-earning in poorly paid jobs with inflexible schedules, and the moments when these jobs failed them and they turned to the state for aid. We write about these experiences not just to provide a window into the harsh reality of conditions at the low end of the labor market. There are numerous books by journalists and social scientists that document these conditions eloquently and effectively.⁵ Rather, we place these women's accounts in the context of two profound institutional shifts: first, the growth of the low-wage service sector and its particular productivity and profitability challenges, and second, the erosion of the bargains between workers and employers, on one hand, and citizens and government, on the other, that led to the end of the "family wage system" that stabilized working-class life in the twentieth century. We show how new political rationalities based on free market principles enabled these shifts. Perhaps most importantly, we document how changes in the institutions of welfare and work came together to produce patterned challenges for the women we interviewed.

Even a casual conversation with women working in low-wage jobs reveals how tightly work and welfare are interwoven. As forty-three-year-old Ebony Walker told us:

My very first job—I was sixteen. And I worked for Burger King. I can sing the Burger King song—that's what got me hired. After that it was school bus, modeling, factory . . . not counting factory, I'd say I've had about twenty-five different jobs over the years.

Between many of Ebony's jobs were episodes on welfare, occasioned by illness, injury, and childbirth. As we shall see, the kinds of jobs in which she worked did not provide workers' compensation, maternity leave, or even sick leave, and welfare was the lifeline that allowed her to feed herself and her family as she recovered and regrouped. For women like Ebony, it was a source of support that, while punitive and insufficient, allowed them to deal with the inadequacies of jobs in the low-wage labor market and the absence of other, less stigmatized forms of assistance.

Consider the case of Natasha Castinelli, a twenty-three-year-old mother of two from Racine. She had turned to welfare twice between 1999 and 2004, once while recovering from a back injury sustained in her nursing home job and again at the time of our interview, just after the birth of her youngest child. Because she was not covered by a workers' compensation program when she injured her back, Natasha applied for welfare. After three months of physical therapy, her doctor said that she could return to work and her welfare case manager assigned her to a workfare job sorting clothing at Goodwill Industries. When a job opened up with her former employer, she returned to work as a certified nursing assistant. Natasha turned to welfare a second time two years later, receiving twelve weeks of caretaker-of-newborn benefits after the birth of her second child. The "absent actor" in both of Natasha's episodes on welfare was her employer, which relied on her work cleaning and feeding patients in its Alzheimer's unit, but did not give her steady enough employment to be covered by workers' compensation and did not offer maternity or sick leave. Without savings or a partner who could support her, when Natasha faced a health crisis or childbirth, she turned to welfare. As she struggled to summarize her experience at the end of her interview, she articulated what was wrong with this situation:

So how are you supposed to get ahead? You're gonna stay in one spot 'cause you get to a certain spot and you fall right back on your face, you

drop right back down. As soon as an emergency pops up, you're gonna be right back in the system again. And they're not giving you what you need.

In America, we tend to think of welfare as the opposite of work and to associate it with idleness and lack of moral fiber. In our national conception of civic virtue, we set those who receive welfare at one end of a continuum and "hard-working taxpayers" at the other. Yet history tells us that welfare and work often intertwine. Welfare rolls have expanded and contracted in inverse relation to employment—swelling in times when jobs were scarce and dwindling when they were readily available. And policymakers have often shaped welfare programs to serve the needs of employers. When Congress passed legislation authorizing Aid to Dependent Children in 1935, it allowed states to establish "employable mothers" clauses, insuring that localities could cut off mothers' payments during months when southern planters needed hands. Federal law allowed states to set benefit levels that would not undercut the local labor market—insuring that work would always be more lucrative than welfare, even for women raising children alone in very low-wage regions of the country (a principle known as "less eligibility"). But today, the connections between welfare and work may be tighter than ever before. Since Congress enacted the latest round of reform in 1996, welfare has literally become workfare. Its new rules compel all who are able to work to do so as a condition of receiving aid. Under these circumstances, welfare programs bump up against the lowest tiers of the labor market with mutually constitutive effects.

The crafters of the twentieth-century welfare state in the United States and Europe saw themselves as producing institutions that would compensate for the failure of labor markets. During the 1930s and 1940s, when many U.S. social programs were developed, Keynesianism—the concept that government should play a strong role in stabilizing employment and managing demand—offered a powerful vision of how the state and the economy could work together. Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" provided a rationale for the redistribution of some national wealth. Acting in response to the Great Depression and following these principles, lawmakers developed pensions and compensation for the injured and unemployed. Provision of welfare kept domestic markets functioning even as it responded to unrest among the unemployed.⁶ This welfare regime was linked to institutionalized compromises between capital and labor predicated on rising profitability, labor productivity, and real incomes. These compromises were premised on the notion

that productivity gains should be shared between employers' profits and workers' wages and on assumptions of relatively full employment, monopoly regulation, and the family wage. And it was assumed that the state could and should provide for those who could not participate in the workforce.

By the 1970s, however, the economy faced new challenges, which led some policymakers and legislators to rethink welfare state commitments. Beginning in 1973, for a variety of reasons, productivity gains fell short of what was required to finance the arrangements that had been worked out among capital, labor, and the state, and a series of economic shocks ensued. Oil price increases led to inflation, compounding the dilemma. In the face of these crises, employers began to look for ways to roll back their commitments to workers. Once Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, the state led the way by weakening the National Labor Relations Board and using the Taft-Hartley Act to fire striking air traffic controllers, setting an example that inspired employers to challenge labor in new ways that struck fear into the heart of workers. Meanwhile, capital flowed outward from the United States in search of new, more profitable investment opportunities. In transferring their capital, firms also escaped many of the regulatory arrangements that had been established at the level of the national state. By the 1980s proponents of a new brand of free market orthodoxy, promoting ever-expanding deregulatory projects and antunionism, had gained the upper hand. Under the influence of these new ideas, state actors began to construct and construe their own projects in market terms.⁷ New market rationalities became an increasingly important part of welfare policy as the reform project progressed from the passage of the Family Support Act in 1988 to its culmination in 1996.

One of the most serious attempts to specify how welfare intersects with labor markets in this new context is found in the work of geographer Jamie Peck. Peck argues that welfare is a "boundary institution of the labor market," meaning that it helps to regulate the flow of workers in and out of work as well as to prepare them for the kinds of jobs that are available. He says that welfare reform's workfare programs—which made benefits contingent on the performance of mandatory work assignments—represented the state's response to late-twentieth-century labor market dilemmas.

Peck argues that free market policies, applied to the sphere of welfare, shape the low-wage labor market in two ways. They serve "to numerically adjust the flows of workers into and out of wage labor, but also to remake the workers themselves, their attitudes toward work and wages, their expectations about employment continuity and promotion prospects, their

economic identities."⁸ With regard to the first of these effects, welfare systems have historically established a floor below which wages could not fall, and have provided a temporary or permanent alternative to labor market participation for those who were willing to subsist at this level. Their specific rules and practices determined who could and could not have access to support outside the market. Eliminating an "escape" option for those at the bottom of the labor market drives workers, even those who might have been considered unemployed in other periods due to disabilities or family responsibilities, into whatever jobs they can find. This makes life difficult for the workers who are directly affected by having state provision withdrawn, but its effects also reverberate throughout the labor market. Frances Fox Piven puts it bluntly: "As hundreds of thousands of women lose welfare benefits . . . they will stream into the labor market to compete with other women (and men) for less skilled and low-paying jobs."⁹

The second way that welfare can reshape the low-wage labor market, according to Peck, is by remaking expectations about hours and wages, stability of employment, the responsibilities of employers, and other aspects of work. Welfare programs, he argues, "define and enforce norms of labor market participation in ways that are inscribed into the very identities of contingent workers."¹⁰ They are a training ground for contingency, low wages, the loss of protective rules, and the absence of opportunity. Like the removal of a wage floor, this training reverberates beyond the lives of the workers directly involved. It demonstrates to others that these conditions are possible, dramatizing, and ultimately normalizing, workplace practices that had been unthinkable since the early twentieth century.¹¹ Peck's account generates provocative questions for our analysis, as we explore the ways in which welfare reform has reshaped the institutions and practices of the low-wage labor market, changing networks of support and accountability and altering women's work histories.

In the pages that follow, we suggest that the effects of welfare reform cannot be understood apart from the forces constituting demand for labor at the bottom of the labor market. The primary development in this domain is the growth of the service sector. Low-wage retail and service sector jobs—jobs serving burgers at McDonald's and TGI Fridays, emptying bedpans and bathing patients in nursing homes, and stocking the shelves at Walmart and Target—accounted for 70 percent of all new job growth between 1989 and 2000.¹² And the majority of these new jobs were filled by women.

What was paradoxical about this period was the fact that the growing demand for workers in low-end service jobs coincided with stagnant or declining wages. The entry of vast numbers of women into the labor market, and the increase in the number of hours they worked, was both a cause of the paradox and its consequence. Women's entry into the labor market created more competition for jobs at the bottom and thus played a role in keeping wage rates down. These low wages, in combination with a broader decline in working-class men's wages over the same period, reduced family incomes and made it necessary for more women to work.¹³ This was the context in which welfare reform took place, and yet it rarely enters national discussions.

It was not completely absent, however. It was there in the congressional testimony that preceded passage of the Family Support Act in 1988, when then senator Russell Long noted that "in practically every city in America there are jobs available as waitresses and dishwashers."¹⁴ It was there when a committee of influential "experts" who came together to offer recommendations on welfare reform wrote: "Among other kinds of work for which such mothers can be trained . . . are child care and pre-school education. In most cities . . . hotels and service establishments have many needs for entry-level employees."¹⁵ It was there when Lawrence Mead, one of the intellectual fathers of welfare reform, wrote in *Beyond Entitlement*, "low-wage work apparently must be mandated, just as a draft has sometimes been necessary to staff the military."¹⁶ But broader public discussions have rarely recognized that the need for labor in the expansion of the low-wage service sector has formed the context for welfare reform, focusing instead on welfare "dependency," "babies having babies," or the need for fiscal conservatism.

The term "service sector" covers a broad range of jobs, from the performance of sophisticated computer operations to mopping floors. While many ways of mapping the complexity of the sector have been suggested, Appelbaum and Albin have offered one of the most incisive. They suggest making a distinction between "knowledge and information intensive" and "labor intensive" subsectors.¹⁷ Despite media hype suggesting otherwise, growth in labor-intensive service sector jobs has been far greater than that in knowledge-intensive positions. As Katz points out, projections of the need for skilled service workers have confused numbers with percentages: "Employment in computer science and engineering will grow by 100 percent compared to 11 percent in food service. But food services is a vastly larger industry than computer science, which means that the smaller percentage yields a great many more jobs."¹⁸ The fact

that most new job growth has been in the labor-intensive branch of the service sector is key to our story.

The women in our study changed bedding and bedpans in nursing homes, pushed the elderly in wheelchairs, fed them, and changed their clothes. They supervised the daily activities of disabled persons in sheltered workshops and in group homes. They cared for infants and toddlers in day care centers, fed children in school cafeterias, and cleaned empty apartments, schools, government offices, and hotel rooms. They sorted clothing to be resold in thrift stores and packaged items distributed by food pantries. They worked in fast food: burger joints, pizza parlors, chicken shacks, and taco stands. They counted items in warehouses and grocery stores, stocked shelves, and processed returns. They drove school buses, assembled cookbooks in printing warehouses, and made telemarketing calls. They were receptionists, clerks, and waitresses. They processed parking tickets and worked as security guards. Sometimes repetitious and boring, often physically strenuous, usually face-to-face with customers or individuals needing care, their jobs kept key sectors of the economies of Milwaukee and Racine running.

In the pages that follow, we will argue that U.S. welfare reform intersected with the growth of the low-wage service sector in a variety of ways. In the tight labor markets of the late 1990s, when reform was enacted in a stepwise process, it provided new workers for the growing number of low-wage service jobs. Nationally, between 1994 and 2004, the number of individuals receiving welfare fell by twelve million.¹⁹ In Wisconsin, where reforms began earlier, caseloads declined by 270,000 recipients between 1986 and 2000.²⁰ Not all of these individuals went directly to work, but studies show that more than half did so.²¹ By any standard, this represented a large infusion of workers into the labor market.²²

Those women who remained on welfare after 1996, or turned to the system after the reforms were implemented, were confronted with strict work requirements. The reforms that were passed did not allow much room for training, and the few training opportunities that were provided were primarily for child care workers and certified nursing assistants—the kinds of jobs for which demand was high in the low-wage service sector. More often, however, the programs placed women directly in low-wage service jobs, where they worked in return for benefits. Peck's argument that welfare serves to remake workers' "attitudes toward work and wages, their expectations about employment continuity and promotion prospects, their economic identities,"

was not far from the stated goals of welfare reform's framers, who argued that "one purpose of social policy can be to discipline the poor."²³

THE SOLITARY WAGE BARGAIN AND DILEMMAS OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The free market advocates who designed welfare reform proposed programs grounded in a new vision of work and of workers. Their views stood in stark contrast to the union and civil service models of employment that had structured working arrangements for much of the twentieth century, both of which promised stable work, a living wage, and benefits.²⁴ Instead, they imagined a labor market in which each worker was "free" to pursue his or her best interest, and was on his or her own in doing so. They imagined this individual to be unencumbered by family responsibilities or disabilities. While conservative political thinkers did not give a name to this new paradigm, we have chosen to call it the "solitary wage bargain" to distinguish it from the "family wage bargain" that had been the goal and achievement of labor struggles over the past century and a half.

The family wage concept emerged during the 1820s and 1830s. As households became more separated from the livelihood supports of farms, trade unionists began to press the idea that employers should pay male workers enough to fully support both themselves and their families. By the turn of the twentieth century, this concept extended far beyond union rhetoric, as historian Martha May argues, to become a key standard that Progressive Era reformers used to assess poverty and standards of living.²⁵ Government support became an important part of the equation. New programs carved out a role for the state and employers in insuring the male breadwinner against injury through workers' compensation and offered pensions to widows caring for children. With the advent of the New Deal in the 1930s, the federal government protected workers against loss of work through unemployment insurance. Through Social Security the government also bolstered the male worker's ability to care for his family after his death or when he became too old to work. And it offered limited and means-tested aid to women who, due to family failures, did not have access to a male wage through Aid to Dependent Children. This arrangement was not a feminist's dream, but it acknowledged that society had an interest in the reproduction of its members and that the state, employers, and families all had a role in insuring it. While only a privileged

group of mostly white, unionized workers ever received a family wage, the arrangement provided an ideal vision of how responsibilities for the well-being of citizens should be divided among social actors.

This complex set of relationships structured what we might call a system of social reproduction. The concept of social reproduction has its roots in Marxist social science, where it refers to the renewal of classes and class relationships over time. Feminist scholars have reworked the term, using it to refer to the labor necessary to keep households and communities functioning and to allow them to send productive members out into the world to work. In this sense, it entails the activities involved in reproducing and supporting family members from day to day, as well as from generation to generation. While we often gloss social reproduction as child care, it also includes care for the ill and the elderly, the work of consumption, cooking, cleaning, paying bills, talking to teachers and doctors, taking children to activities, organizing transportation, and dealing with landlords, utility companies, and banks. In the words of Claudia von Werlhof, it is “the healing-all-wounds . . . the putting everything again in order . . . the helping out in all matters . . . the pulling the cart out of the mud.”²⁶ Or as Delia Carter, one of the women in our study, put it:

It's all the stresses in the world. You know what I'm saying? You have to do all these things and then you have to worry about child care, making it home in time to feed them, put them in the tub, clean up the house. . . . You're trying to do all this on your own, with no help. What's the word for it? I don't even know the word for it.

Accomplishing the work of social reproduction requires a societal division of labor. Political sociologist Claus Offe has written that there is no past or present society where, at any one time, more than half the members participate in the labor market. In his view, a society that does not permit children to be socialized and educated, the elderly to retire, the ill and infirm to refrain from work, and some individuals to care for others “would soon bring the institution of the labor market to an end. The reproduction of the capacity for work would be prevented.”²⁷ The concept of social reproduction underscores the fact that care is central to the continuing ability to labor—to society's productivity over the long term—and suggests that the responsibilities for that care should be socially distributed. It is a concept that reminds us of something we are prone to forget.

Feminist theorists have exposed the sleight of hand through which, historically, we have come to construe the labor of care as separate from the world

of wage work. Joan Tronto argues that this blindness has very deep roots. She traces it to the Aristotelian model of the citizen as an individual who participates in public life but whose public activity presupposes a separate realm of existence in which economic chores and the work of care take place. “The Aristotelian citizen,” she says, “floats his citizenship on previously accomplished work that is beneath the observance of political institutions, but nonetheless is essential for his life.” While we see the citizen as someone who contributes to society through waged work, the reproduction of citizens depends on the existence of family labor that can convert the wage into the care that humans need to survive. We thus need to redefine our conception of citizenship, Tronto argues, “and with it the boundaries between public and private life, to include caring.” Let us think of citizens as engaged in a citizenship act when they are engaged in processes of care.²⁸

Enlightenment-era paradigms that give pride of place to the individual contribute to the invisibility of social-reproductive labor. In *The Anatomy of Myth*, legal theorist Martha Fineman writes about our national obsession with concepts of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency. The ways we use these terms, she argues, reveal the value we place on not being influenced by or reliant on others, on providing for our own needs without external assistance. But this disconnectedness is a myth, a myth built on unwaged labor. As children we all require protection and care, as we do when we are ill, disabled, and elderly. Historically, the long working days and relentless schedule of industrial work were enabled by the presence of someone in the home whose efforts restored the laborer on a daily basis. We have long understood the family as a separate, private space where these tasks are performed without pay. Given this arrangement, caring for others creates what Fineman calls a “derivative dependency.” Because caregivers forego waged work to perform unwaged care, they become dependent on others for their sustenance and support.²⁹

In their powerful treatise on the concept of dependency, Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon argue, like Fineman and Tronto, that independence in the public sphere relies on care provided in private to restore and reproduce citizens and workers. They remind us that in earlier eras, people considered *wage earners* dependent because they did not own property and relied on their employers for their livelihood. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, workers had begun to forge new claims of independence based on their adherence to values of hard work. Fraser and Gordon point out that as workers transformed the meaning of independence, our understanding of dependency shifted also. As wage labor became the norm, those excluded from it came to personify

dependence; in particular, this stigma fell upon the pauper, the slave, and the housewife.³⁰ In the twentieth century, despite the fact that male wage earners depended on their employers, on government insurance programs such as Social Security and workers' compensation, on union-negotiated benefits like sick leave and pensions, and on the unpaid labor of their wives, the public construed them as "free laborers" and focused on poor single mothers who received state support as the emblem of dependency. By the 1960s and 1970s, it was common for racialized discourse—at odds with the actual demographics of those receiving support—to demonize and belittle African American mothers receiving welfare in ways that gave little attention to the social reproductive work they were performing.

As Fraser and Gordon point out, critics of welfare have frequently made their case by reviling poor, single mothers in the language of dependency, shifting the meaning of the term from a description of a relationship to a characterization of a personality flaw. From Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1973 proclamation that "the issue of welfare is the issue of dependency. It is different from poverty,"³¹ critics of welfare have argued that it stunts citizenship by preventing individuals from developing self-reliance. "For such persons," the drafters of the 1987 *New Consensus on Family and Welfare* proclaimed, "low income is in a sense the least of their problems; a failure to take responsibility for themselves and for their actions is at the core."³² The point here is not that welfare critics misapprehend the reality of mothers on welfare—although that is undoubtedly true. The point is that, by translating their critique of dependency into policy, welfare reformers created the situations that women described in our interviews. They crafted a set of policies that in radical, and perhaps historically unprecedented ways, have cut poor women off from societal support.

Welfare reform put into place a relationship among working families, employers, and government that was intrinsically different from the family wage system. Despite the fact that its policies were applied for the most part to single mothers of young children, the reform highlighted the individual as an actor in the labor market and as a responsible citizen. It envisioned a worker who was able to respond flexibly to the needs of employers, without requiring training, benefits, or even sick leave, in order to gain a foothold in the labor market. It emphasized a citizen who would not rely on government programs and therefore could enjoy autonomy and self-respect, while ignoring the labor she provided to care for those who depended on her. It is this new set of arrangements, in which both government and private employers have rolled back their contributions to social reproduction, that constitutes the solitary

wage bargain. As mothers of young children, the women in our study were not only required to work but were cut off from earlier forms of support for their family responsibilities. This is the first hand tied behind the back of women who turn to welfare.

CONTRACTUAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE EROSION OF CIVIL AND LABOR RIGHTS IN WORKFARE JOBS

As a "boundary institution," welfare abuts the labor market, but the relationships it manages and structures are between individuals and the state. Thus, changes in the meaning and structure of welfare imply changes in the meaning and structure of citizenship. Citizenship is a complex concept that can refer narrowly to *membership* in a polity—that is, to "nationality and the legal recognition that a person is a member of a state."³³ But it can also refer to various forms of inclusion in the polity, what political scientist Suzanne Mettler has called "incorporation" and "participation."³⁴ Laws govern each of these forms of citizenship, but so do public policies and institutions. As we shall see, welfare institutions mediate between individuals and the state in ways that powerfully shape the manner and extent of incorporation into political community.

The first evidence that citizenship was going to be a terrain of struggle in welfare reform came from the elaboration, in the 1980s, of theories of "welfare contractualism," or "new paternalism." These theories drew on long-standing and widely held notions that citizenship involved both rights and responsibilities, and reformulated them to argue that rights should be *contingent* on the performance of responsibilities. As political philosopher Stuart White has argued, there is a general presumption in most Western societies against restrictions on individual freedom—unless the individual can be shown to lack the capacity to govern him- or herself.³⁵ Many of those involved in the 1996 U.S. welfare reform premised their advocacy of welfare contractualism on exactly this argument. Lawrence Mead, in *Beyond Entitlement*, offered the clearest and most influential articulation of this approach to welfare. "One of the things a government must do to improve social order," he wrote, "is to use these programs to require better functioning of recipients who have difficulty coping."³⁶ He saw this "difficulty coping," in the post-Civil Rights era, as the main barrier to acceptance and success for the poor. Thus,

the role of public authority is precisely to make *obligatory* the norms that people commonly affirm but do not reliably obey, a gap that is

especially wide for the underclass. . . . Such standards require government to decide, not only who is needy, but who is able to function and who is not.³⁷

Legal theorist Patricia Williams, in "On Being the Object of Property," provides an alternative vocabulary for discussing the premises of contractual citizenship. She uses the term *will* to refer to the capacities that Western political theory has traditionally held to be required for citizenship; she labels their absence *anti-will*. Williams demonstrates how these concepts grew out of the history of slaveholding—slave owners claimed their charges were incapable of rationality or willful decision making. She shows how notions of will continue to inform legal judgments about such issues as the involuntary sterilization of poor women, who are presumed not to know their own interests. These same arguments underlie reformed welfare's behavioral requirements and curtailment of rights.

Williams points to another strategy by which rights may be constrained: when individuals are asked to enter into contracts in which they surrender basic liberties in return for something else. She raises the question of whether there are valuable items or rights that lie outside the marketplace that contracts regulate, thus rendering agreements to trade them "spurious" or "ilusory": "Traditionally, the Mona Lisa and human life have been the sorts of subjects removed from the fungibility of commodification, as priceless. Thus, when black people were bought or sold as slaves, they were placed beyond the bounds of humanity."³⁸ As we shall see in the chapters that follow, new theories of welfare contractualism are premised on the trading of civil rights for aid. By accepting assistance from the state, poor women are asked to relinquish a range of rights and liberties, from the freedom to decide whether to stay home with their children and to maintain ties to the fathers of their children, to the right to choose when and where to work and at what kind of job, to basic labor rights and protections while working at that job.

Welfare contractualism did not arrive on the political scene fully formed in the 1980s. Its historical antecedents emerged in debates over the shape and scope of welfare in the New Deal and post-World War II eras. This was the period when the British sociologist T. H. Marshall published his renowned essay "Citizenship and Social Class," in which he distinguished three types of citizenship—civil, political, and social—which he argued had emerged successively as Western society progressed. Marshall argued that civil rights, such as freedom of speech, association, and self-determination, were achieved in the

eighteenth century and political rights (voting and political participation) in the nineteenth. He portrayed social rights as the crowning achievement of the twentieth century. The premise of these new social rights, according to Marshall, was that the state should insure the minimum levels of economic security needed "to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society."³⁹

As Stuart White points out, Marshall's essay celebrated the new commitment of Western states to full employment and to protection during unemployment, ill health, and old age. It described these accomplishments within a narrative that White calls "a social democratic teleology"—that is, as the seemingly inevitable product of a progressive expansion and elaboration of rights that had been at work for centuries.⁴⁰ But, as White argues, this was not to be the case. At the very moment of the articulation of new social rights, there were forces afoot that would struggle against their expansion. These forces gained traction beginning in the 1970s and by the 1990s, they could be said to have definitively reversed the tide.⁴¹

The elements of a critique of social rights arose alongside new institutions of social provision even as they were being built during the New Deal era. Defenders of free market ideologies argued that regulation and state assistance to the poor stifled capitalism and infringed on human freedom (particularly the freedom not to be burdened by the cost of the resource claims of others). Friedrich Hayek took this view in *The Road to Serfdom*, published in 1944, touting the superiority of the free market to the forms of collective planning emerging in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Beginning in the 1950s, Milton Friedman became a key spokesperson for a society built around market principles. In *Capitalism and Freedom* and other works, he emphasized the need for free individuals to pursue their preferences and to produce wealth.⁴² With the economic dislocations of the 1970s, these perspectives gained a broader set of adherents among economists and policymakers, who began to argue that attaining economic stability and productivity growth would require rolling back many elements of the New Deal, including the favorable environment that had been created for labor unions and many social programs and entitlements.⁴³ Welfare was a key target for such rollback.

Conservatives began laying the groundwork for welfare reform in the 1960s, in direct response to the expanded social programs of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, but their views attained greatest prominence during the Reagan administration in the 1980s. George Gilder, whose 1981 book *Wealth and Poverty* was one of the key texts opposing the expansion of the welfare state,

argued that power, privilege, and property should be distributed according to morally meaningful criteria. Capitalism, he argued, requires disciplined and creative actors and should evoke and reward these characteristics. But racial integration disrupted the transmission of cultural traits required for success by denying white families the freedom to choose the moral influences that would surround their children. With reference to welfare, he drew on a rhetoric of "moral perversity," which suggested that aid harms the poor, writing that redistributive social programs break the link between reward and effort, and thus exclude the poor from the path to success. (He also suggested that such programs harm the middle class because the taxes required to fund them reduce income and thus push mothers into paid employment.)⁴⁴ Three years later, in *Losing Ground*, Charles Murray espoused many similar themes, casting black Americans as cultural outsiders who flouted moral principles by avoiding work and having children out of wedlock, and argued that transfer programs such as welfare should be eliminated because they fostered poor moral choices and forced middle-class Americans to "subsidize a lifestyle" that deviated from their own.⁴⁵

While Gilder advocated reducing aid to the poor, and Murray suggested abolishing it, Michael Novak was the first to suggest that welfare programs could be used to instill the self-reliance that he too believed was essential to a well-functioning capitalist society:

It is a problem of human potential. . . . Many of the poor, especially among the young, need help in learning skills and attitudes: how to read, how to apply for and hold a job, how to govern themselves and conduct themselves. Self-reliance is a virtue of many parts . . . and it can be taught.⁴⁶

This was an early articulation of welfare as a program of behavioral change—enforced through a paternalist state.

The notion that welfare could become a tutelary institution designed to instill proper values about work and family reached its fullest expression in the writing of Lawrence Mead. As we have seen, Mead's paternalist theory of welfare contractualism held that the state was responsible for disciplining poor parents and that, by conditioning benefits on proper behavior, it could make them self-reliant citizens. In *Beyond Entitlement*, published in 1986, he referred to the need for an "authoritative" social policy that would "enforce social obligations, at least for the dependent," by setting standards for their behavior and persuading them to "blame themselves" for their failures.⁴⁷ Most dictionaries,

we might note, define the word *authoritative* to mean "of acknowledged accuracy;" Mead here appears to be substituting it for *authoritarian*—"favoring obedience or subjection to authority"—which is closer to the sense of his argument. His sensitivity to potential negative reaction to his endorsement of authoritarian social policy emerges in the text:

The idea of programs inculcating values may nevertheless seem foreign to American political mores. It conjures up a brutal, Hobbesian image of government deciding what is good for people and then imposing it on them by force. For policy to involve itself in the personal competences of individuals is inherently sensitive.⁴⁸

But he resolves this dilemma by arguing that the competences in question are prerequisite to freedom and citizenship: "American political culture gives pride of place to the value of freedom. But a 'free' society is possible only when the conditions for order have been substantially realized."⁴⁹ Welfare recipients, then, are not entitled to equal citizenship until they acquire these values:

For how can the dependent be equal, except in the most metaphysical sense, with those who support them? . . . Those who *only* make claims can never be equal, in the nature of things, with those on whom the claims are made.⁵⁰

Mead later came to call his vision of government's tutelary function "paternalism," defining it as a situation in which the state makes demands on welfare recipients and "supervises them closely to make sure that they fulfill those expectations."⁵¹ Reading Mead makes it clear that when critics of welfare reform argue that its measures treat participants as less than full citizens and deny them equality, they are not observing a set of unintended consequences. Indeed, these were the basic premises on which the new program's reforms were constructed. Both in the nation as a whole and in the state of Wisconsin, reforms embodied Mead's paternalist ethic, rewarding both marketlike work and efforts at family formation. This shift to welfare contractualism represented, in the view of many, "a fundamental reorientation of the welfare state away from broadly emancipatory purposes" and its reinvention "as an institution for the maintenance of social order in the context of a highly unequal society."⁵²

Principles of contractual citizenship were the foundation for workfare programs like those the state of Wisconsin implemented. These programs tied cash assistance to mandatory work assignments for all who were able to

perform them. Policymakers, based on the erroneous premise that welfare participants had never worked, designed these programs to socialize women to the norms of the workforce. The assignments were meant to emulate the real world of employment but, in fact, they placed women in a never-never land of uncertainty. Quoting anthropologist Victor Turner, Chad Goldberg has written:

Because welfare participants are perceived to be in a process of transition, they are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial." . . . [They] are *anomalous* figures who seem to be situated on both sides of the worker/relief distinction. At the same time [they] are *liminal* figures who seem to be situated on neither side.⁵³

Welfare programs put women to work while labeling the wages they receive as aid. When a woman holds this type of job, she is considered to be receiving welfare. The "time clock" that limits her lifetime benefits under PRWORA is ticking. Agents of the state monitor her work attendance and dock her pay if she misses hours. This ambiguous status, eerily reminiscent of workhouses in the nineteenth century, denies women both the respect and many of the protections and prerogatives associated with wage earning since the Jacksonian period.

In Milwaukee and Racine, women who participate in welfare plant flowers and water shrubs on the islands of highways, and cut brush along the shoulders of roads. They clean public housing and the offices of private agencies administering welfare programs. They sort clothing for Goodwill and work alongside the disabled in sheltered workshops. These community service job placements—the centerpiece of Wisconsin's welfare program—send women to work for both public and private employers. These jobs pay only \$673 a month, and they count toward what is now a lifetime limit of sixty months of state assistance. But the worst thing many participants say is the lack of freedom to choose when, where, and under what conditions to work. As one woman put it, "You can't decide where you want to go. You have no opinion on any of this. It's like you're a child and your parents are running your life for you, because you don't have no choice."⁵⁴ This loss of freedom of contract and ambiguous status in relation to labor laws is the second hand tied behind the back of the women in our study.

Here is an example from Milwaukee. In 2003 Aurelia Knotts showed up at a welfare office there in a dejected state. When her caseworker asked her what

was wrong, she said she was working on her brother's funeral arrangements. He had been in a nursing home for the past three years, and she had power of attorney over his affairs. Moreover, she was destitute. She had broken up with her partner, who had been her main source of income. She had an eviction notice in her pocket. With all of this going on, she had started drinking again. The caseworker took all this in and methodically started working through the kinds of help that were available. She quickly established that Aurelia had a range of problems that made her eligible for the state's W-2 Transitions program, which provided aid to poor individuals who were unable to work due to illness or disability. She was suffering from depression, which had troubled her since her daughter was murdered twelve years earlier; she also had problems with the circulation in her legs, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, diabetes, and alcohol addiction. But there was a catch—Aurelia already had used up her twenty-four months of eligibility for Transitions. She had applied for federal Supplemental Security Income but was denied, and she had not known that she could appeal. Because the caseworker elected not to offer her an extension on her W-2 Transitions eligibility, all that was left was a community service job—that is, a welfare assignment.

Aurelia said she understood. "I like to take care of old people," she suggested, "or working in a group home." She and the caseworker quickly determined, however, that because of a prior conviction for assault, she was not eligible for nursing assistant positions. "I like cooking," Aurelia offered, "but I can't take standing for long hours." The caseworker told Aurelia she would assign her to a sewing position, which she would have to attend from 8 to 4 five days a week. "I'm not a seamstress, I'm a cook," Aurelia protested. "You've been here three years," she said, referring to the caseworker's own situation. "You like what you're doing." "We have food service, but you would have to stand," the caseworker replied. "I might as well live in Uncle Tom's cabin," Aurelia replied, "but I'm going to do what I got to do." Aurelia's reference to slavery reflects her understanding that a constitutional right to freely contract one's labor—to choose when and where to work—is at stake in such assignments.

The solitary wage bargain and contractual citizenship were key concepts structuring welfare reform. In the pages that follow, we will demonstrate how each, in distinct ways, impaired the functioning of women raising families in poverty. The solitary wage bargain rolled back social rights that had previously supported families, while contractual citizenship eroded the civil and employment rights of women who labored within the welfare programs that welfare reform established. Each of these losses represented a significant

blow to poor women, but as we will demonstrate, there is also a powerful connection between them. In a nutshell, the predicament is this: the ever-present and unmet need for time to care for families while engaged in low-wage work throws women back into a punitive and stigmatized welfare system again and again, while the loss of civil and labor rights in the context of welfare impedes their ability to defend their interests as workers and to gain the kinds of jobs and benefits that would allow them to weather these crises. Our title, *Both Hands Tied*, refers to this double dilemma. Without a new model of how social reproduction is to be accomplished—and without jobs that adequately support women in their dual roles as workers and mothers—this dynamic will solidify a caste of low-wage workers with attenuated rights at the bottom of the labor market, and punish them for attending to their families.

STUDYING WELFARE AND WORK IN PLACE: NOTES ON RESEARCH METHODS

Isaac Martin has observed that evaluations of welfare programs too often “limit their attention to the effects of the provisions on individuals rather than their effects on American society.”⁵⁵ Even studies that focus on individual behavior, Martha Fineman notes, often deal with abstractions, recognizing neither “an individual’s relevant history nor [his or her] location in the context of the greater society.”⁵⁶ In many cases they have imagined participants in the welfare system as abstract actors who will respond correctly to the right mix of incentives. In designing our research, we sought to replace abstract individuals with real ones and to place them in the larger context of their local labor market and the economy as a whole.

Our study reconstructs the work and family histories of thirty-three women who relied on social programs, showing how participation in the post-1996 welfare system affected their trajectories of work, their arrangements for their children, and their ideas about what to expect from employment. It traces the ups and downs of the labor markets of Milwaukee and Racine, Wisconsin, showing how these women’s struggles to make a living intersected with that region’s difficult transition from manufacturing to services; its deep-seated racial segregation and, thus, racially segmented workforce; and its gendered histories of craft unionism and service work. And it tracks the national, state, and local policies that shaped the availability of aid and jobs. In the spirit of Michael Burawoy’s “extended case method,” we have worked to draw links

between micro and macro domains, constituting each social situation “in terms of the particular external forces that shape it.”⁵⁷

We began by randomly selecting from the administrative database names of women receiving benefits in Milwaukee and Racine in December 2003, using a sampling frame that insured proportional coverage of differences in race and other important factors. Nearly 70 percent of the women we contacted agreed to be interviewed, and we met with these women in the summer of 2004. Thus, we feel confident in saying that what we report is representative of the situation for southeastern Wisconsin in 2004.⁵⁸

Two points about this representativeness need to be highlighted. The first is the racial composition of our sample, which was 58 percent African American, 22 percent white, and 20 percent Latina.⁵⁹ The disproportionate number of African American women on welfare (African Americans make up 37 percent of the population of Milwaukee and 20 percent of the population of Racine) reflects trends in participation that have arisen since the implementation of reform in 1996. Despite widespread perceptions that welfare served mainly African Americans, this was not the case prior to PRWORA. Nationally, in 1994, just over 37 percent of families on welfare were non-Latino white, around 36 percent were African American, and 20 percent were Latino.⁶⁰ While even these numbers may suggest a disproportionate participation rate among women of color, they are, as Mink has noted, commensurate with the racial distribution of poverty.⁶¹ That is, the percentage of women of different ethnic groups who are on welfare closely tracks their percentage among those in poverty. In Wisconsin, a series of welfare experiments that began in the late 1980s, and culminated in the W-2 program in 1996, pushed many women out of welfare. As Cancian and her coauthors have suggested, women with the most education and skills and the fewest barriers to work (such as illness, sick children, or addiction) left first.⁶² Because education, skills, and illness have all been shown to be linked to poverty, and to race, African American women were more likely to remain on welfare or to return to the rolls. This accounts for their higher participation rates in southeastern Wisconsin in 2003 and consequently their share of the interviews in our study.

A second issue of representativeness has to do with family size. There is a common stereotype that women who turn to welfare have more children than the average. Yet nationally, nearly three-quarters of welfare participants in 1994 had two children or fewer (the average was 1.8).⁶³ (Since the welfare benefits of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and later Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, were available only to parents, this figure is not

directly comparable to the mean for all families, which includes many childless households.) Among the women in our study, 62 percent had two children or fewer, and only 3 percent had four or more.⁶⁴

Many studies have looked at women who left welfare and have asked how they fared afterward.⁶⁵ Most have concluded that moving off the rolls did not much improve their circumstances. Around half of the women found work, but only a few worked steadily enough, at high enough wages, to rise above the poverty line. Policymakers have not been able to account for a substantial proportion of former welfare participants, who show up neither in unemployment insurance data nor on social service rosters. In any case, scholars conducted the majority of these “leavers” studies in the early days of welfare reform (1996–2000), when the economy was undergoing a spurt of unprecedented growth and unemployment was relatively low.

In this study, we look at a different group of women and ask somewhat different questions. We examine the work histories and social program use of a group of women who either entered, remained on, or returned to the rolls in 2003—after seven years of policies designed to discourage them from doing so. And we ask somewhat different questions than have most investigators: Who are the women turning to welfare, well into a policy regime meant to move them off the rolls? What are their reasons for seeking assistance from a program that is, by design, punitive and stigmatized? What made it difficult for them to work? How did their use of state programs affect their subsequent path through the labor market? Building on the accounts of the women we interviewed, we explore the ways in which Wisconsin’s reformed welfare practices both adjusted the flow of workers in and out of the labor market and remade workers.

Arguably, the most memorable insights into how society functions have come, not from detailed quantitative hypothesis testing, but from case studies, street-level ethnographic investigations like St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton’s *Black Metropolis* or Hortense Powdermaker’s *Affair Freedom*. These works provide incisive glimpses into social process—moments in which we come to understand, to quote C. Wright Mills, “how an individual’s troubles relate to the larger issues of the age.” It is their particularity that creates the value of case studies, the detailed empirical evidence they provide about how things happen in a given time and place.

Case studies of welfare reform allow us to explore the complex intersections of local labor market dynamics with particular state policy regimes and to investigate the effects of both on participants’ lives. These results are never

fully generalizable to other labor markets and policy environments, and they do not allow us to speak about how something we have observed is distributed across space and time. In fact, it is more accurate to speak of “transferring” insights from a case to other instances that share key characteristics. But if we understand what is special about our case, and where it sits in relation to other contexts, we can establish which insights are relevant to understanding particular other contexts.

Wisconsin is a policy environment of special interest because its reformed welfare programs are the most work-focused in the nation.⁶⁶ As Cancian and her coauthors have noted:

Since 1997, *no cash assistance* has been available to families unless they participate in work or work-like activities, or unless they have a child less than 13 weeks old. Moreover, cash benefits are only available after a period of program participation, to mirror the world of work. Wisconsin began work-based welfare reform in the 1980s, well ahead of the rest of the nation.⁶⁷

Moreover, these authors argue, other states have looked to Wisconsin as a model in crafting their own reforms, particularly to the state’s many and diverse “welfare experiments” in the ten years prior to the federal reform bill. As Republican congressional leader Newt Gingrich is reported to have said in response to welfare reform’s early skeptics, “we’re not talking theory here. . . . Go visit Wisconsin.”⁶⁸ Thus, Wisconsin is not a typical or “average” policy environment; it does not provide an accurate picture of welfare reform in every other state. Rather, it reveals what welfare looks like in its starkest form, and it is important because it serves, and has served, as a model for reforms across the nation.

In some respects, the labor market in southeastern Wisconsin resembles that in other deindustrialized regions struggling with problems of economic transition. The area lost many good manufacturing jobs in the 1970s and 1980s. Many service jobs have since emerged, but few offer comparable wages and benefits, and most are in the suburbs surrounding Milwaukee and Racine, not the urban core. But one feature is unusual: the 2000 census found Milwaukee to be one of the most segregated urban areas in the country, and this feature has deeply distorted the opportunities for poor black and Latina women to find jobs.

The timing of our study is also specific. As we have seen, the early days of welfare reform coincided with an unprecedented period of economic growth.

All analysts agree that this made it easier for women leaving the rolls to find work and that it kept wages in the lower ranks of the service sector from dropping dramatically in response to the influx of new workers. But the recession that began in March 2001 and ended in September 2003, and the “jobless recovery” that followed, changed the economic landscape for low-wage workers. Wages stagnated or declined during this period, and even the least desirable low-wage jobs became scarce, particularly in inner-city areas of Milwaukee and Racine. The situation had only begun to improve when the major economic downturn that began in 2008 pulled the rug out again, both nationally and in southeastern Wisconsin.

In addition to our interviews with welfare participants, our account is based on fifty-four interviews with welfare policymakers, “front-line” caseworkers, and local activists, and on participation in open meetings with welfare policymakers, Department of Workforce Development administrators, and officials in agencies contracted to implement reformed welfare. Victoria Mayer observed 109 appointments in welfare and child support offices and sat in on four job-preparation training programs. We reviewed local newspapers and scoured data collected by local think tanks and research institutions to help build our understanding of the labor market context, and combed the local business press to track employers’ responses to labor market changes and welfare reform. Each of these sources helped us identify the forces and contradictions in the low-wage labor market and in state policy that the women in our study confronted.

Moving back and forth between the worlds of policymakers and workers was sometimes disorienting. Advocates of reform had argued, for example, that welfare recipients must be taught the value of work. But with few exceptions, the women with whom we spoke had been working since their early teenage years. They had lengthy and diverse work histories punctuated with episodes of unemployment. They told vivid stories about work: quitting a job cleaning hotel rooms after encountering one too many vomit-spattered bathrooms, arguing with bosses who insisted they lift forty-pound bags of water softener salt, getting their own desk for the first time. They grasped the essentials of the new programs but had their own opinions as to what worked and what didn’t. They were often eager to tell their stories. “The reason I met with you,” Darla Tanner told us, “is because it’s gonna take people like me to do these interviews, to make suggestions, and to participate in things in order to make a difference.” Delia Carter echoed this motivation. “Going through all of this is the baddest feeling,” she said, “but being able to talk about it, to

speak up for people who might not be able to speak up for themselves, is good enough for me.”

At the time we interviewed these women, society had spoken, and it had said “only work shall pay.”⁶⁹ Pundits on the left and right lauded the returns in income, independence, and self-respect that welfare reform was bringing poor women. To hear many of those who advocated welfare reform talk, the new policies had successfully initiated poor women into the pride, satisfaction, security, and self-esteem that come from rendering a day’s work for a day’s pay. The women we spoke with had something to say in response. What they had to say was not just about hard times and struggles, although they documented those. It was an analysis of how the programs were out of sync with what was needed to prepare them to work productively in the new economy. But beyond that, it hinted at a larger betrayal. These women understood that they were being asked to do something that has never been the norm in the labor market—to be the sole breadwinners and the sole caregivers for their families, on wages that even the designers of welfare reform had acknowledged were insufficient, and in some of the least flexible and most punitively structured jobs the economy has to offer. They also knew that, by entering (or reentering) the low-wage labor market through the boundary institution of the welfare system, they were losing rights that American workers had always cherished. They were being asked to trade basic aspects of their citizenship for the meager help they received.