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New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37717111
Welfare use and political response:
Urban narratives from first- and second-generation Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in New York City

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ABSTRACT
This research studies Puerto Rican and Dominican labor migrations and the processes by which low-wage workers end up on public assistance. By revisiting the social mobility and segmented assimilation literature, which speaks to the downward mobility trends of newcomers who identify with native minorities, I re-theorize notions of incorporation by describing political responses by low-income communities about the welfare discourse. In this way, I introduce a more refined picture of how public assistance is perceived by low-income communities and demonstrate the significance of legal status for redefining membership and entitlement in an era of welfare reform.
In distinction from much of the extant literature, this article takes up the theme of downward mobility of newcomers via native minority influence by framing the discussion within the context of the political economy of welfare. Instead of highlighting the downward mobility of low-income immigrants who associate with native minorities and welfare, a much more complex relationship between the urban poor, the welfare state, and low-wage labor is explored. Through urban narratives offered by first- and second-generation Puerto Rican and Dominican welfare recipients, this work offers a more nuanced portrayal of entitlement, membership, and mobility. This article proceeds as follows: We begin with a discussion of the role of federal transfer payments to Puerto Rico and resulting ties to welfare in Puerto Rico and New York City. A look at welfare expansion is framed within the study of the City's economic shift from a manufacturing-based to a service-oriented economy beginning in the late 1970s. Through a discussion of labor succession we look next at the role Dominican labor has played in filling the low-wage labor sector Puerto Ricans exited. It is argued that the welfare state accommodated groups as they gained entitlement status, thereby maintaining the continual supply of needed cheap labor while appeasing native-born groups who had gained civil and entitlement rights through the dispersal of government aid. We conclude with urban narratives by first- and second-generation Puerto Rican and Dominican welfare recipients, who discuss their relationship to the welfare system, as a way to accentuate the eschewed political voice of the welfare recipient. Viewed collectively, these narratives demonstrated how macro forces, embodied in the globalization of production and nation-state relations, have shaped labor migrations and ties to the welfare system and how these global changes resonate at the micro level in terms of how people negotiate their place vis-à-vis the state in contemporary America.

**Federal transfer payments to Puerto Rico, migration, and Dominican labor succession**

Welfare use in the Puerto Rican community of New York City needs to be contextualized within the history of US-Puerto Rican relations. Puerto Rico’s relationship to the United States has resulted in a pattern of dependent industrialization, massive displacement of the labor force, and large-scale outmigration (Baerga and Thompson 1990). In the aftermath of misguided economic policies toward the Island, such as in the well-cited failures of Operation Bootstrap and later economic incarnations, federal assistance to...
Bonilla and Campos (1986: 148) offer an explanation of the role of federal transfers to Puerto Rico:

Food stamps first came to the Island in a recession year (1975) . . . Four years later, more than half the population—about 1,720,000—was in the program, receiving ... helped by these transfers were among the idle reservesthat are the hallmark of modernized Puerto Rico. [Those denied work] learn to accept their exclusion from work, pass officially into the ranks of the "discouraged" or willfully not working, and cease to count in official calculations of the unemployed.

In a similar vein, Baerga and Thompson (1990: 664) depict the island's relationship to federal welfare:

In 1977 social security and food stamps were the two principal forms of income for one third of the families on the island. It seems evident that one of the principal strategies for the institutionalization of unemployment on the part of the federal and local government during the last two decades. In this way, the restructuring of New York's economy by the mid-1980s made other economic options available to the impoverished native-minority sectors, such as work in the expanding public sector or aid through government welfare, and to the sometimes more lucrative informal economy.

At this time, which was also characterized by a fully mobilized civil rights movement, native minorities also began negotiating "entitlements" to public aid, which the undocumented labor force or newly entering legal residents were ineligible for or unaware of how to access. What is highlighted here is the historical process by which market forces have maintained a continual source of cheap labor while a conciliatory welfare state has aided the native poor through barely livable entitlements.

To recap, as the global economy expanded in search of cheaper labor in the Third World, many of the native poor in New York City were left unemployed or unwilling to return to the postindustrial labor market, which had now been occupied by cheaper and younger immigrant workers willing to work for minimum and often subminimum wages. The segmented assimilation discourse speaks to the reluctance of some immigrants to associate with native minorities given fears of downward mobility association. In this analysis, we see a flip view where natives are unwilling to take subminimum wage jobs immigrant counterparts take, thereby reframing the criteria of mobility standards and accompanying inter-ethnic associations. What we see is that asserting and affirming legal, social, and economic rights is a reflection of a communities' political posture vis-à-vis the state. In time, as Dominicans have also carved out a space of entitlement in the welfare discourse as even newer immigrants take the lowest paying jobs, we see a renegotiated space constructed by Dominican immigrants who have turned to the state to assert entitlement rights. It is not that Puerto Ricans "conditioned" Dominican downward mobility but that structural conditions situated both groups in marginal positions where welfare has been a viable alternative.
Dominican first-generation story reflected a view that welfare rights are to be earned. In this way, claims to welfare entitlement came after prolonged periods of low-wage work, long work hours, and subsequent frustration over the inability to supervise children given long daily absences. In effect, the narrative was that Dominicans came to the US to work, but were unable to achieve economic mobility. After work-related injury or burnout at low-paying jobs, some turned to public assistance for an alternative source of income. There was a view of gratitude toward the availability of government provision and a desire to naturalize to secure benefits in the future. Despite the disgruntled tone of the former and the apologetic tone of the latter, in both cases government aid was seen as a welcomed and necessary source of personal and family income. These respondents tended to favor big government and worried over their ability to make ends meet at a time of state restructuring. Many had done time at low-wage jobs and saw the return to long work hours at minimum and subminimum wages as a step backward. They also felt it was becoming more difficult to compete with a younger labor force.

The second-generation Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives present a departure from the views held by their parental generations and a convergence in views evidencing a singular voice. Urban narratives over a fourteen-month period from June 1999 to August 2000, I interviewed 80 welfare recipient households to determine the effects of welfare reform laws on large segments of New York's inner-city poor and to the larger discourse on welfare entitlement. Essentially, the first-generation Puerto Rican profile offers a perspective that access to welfare has been a quid pro quo exchange of sorts for political meddling in the home nation. Here what is evidenced is that accessing welfare benefits stems from a government obligation to the poor and that these benefits are not conditional on a parent's or grandparent's status as refugees. The immigrant profile portrays a view that it was their right for having been "kept down." In contrast, the second-generation profile tend to favor big government and worried over their ability to make ends meet at a time of state restructuring. Many had done time at low-wage jobs and saw the return to long work hours at minimum and subminimum wages as a step backward. They also felt it was becoming more difficult to compete with a younger labor force.

The second-generation Puerto Rican and Dominican narratives present a departure from the views held by their parental generations and a convergence in views evidencing a singular voice regarding entitlement. Often framed in conspiratorial terms, their narrative presented a desire to distance themselves from welfare and to break from ties to government altogether. As citizens, they emphasized that they believed in better paying jobs, not government assistance, as a way out of poverty. The younger generations favored obtaining secure employment with benefits (often reluctant to work for less than $10 an hour), and adamantly opposing sub-minimum wage jobs the immigrants in their communities were taking or that their older generations might have once held. They made demands on government as citizen insiders expecting basic government social service as a deserved right. Many looked favorably at welfare reform and adopted the new legal language of personal responsibility as their personal mantra.
Back in the days it just seemed like everyone was on it. Everyone was getting something, be it food stamps, help with the rent or whatever. That is the way it was at the time. They were giving out welfare to keep everyone in their place...and our place was to stay in the bad neighborhoods, with bad schools and falling buildings.

During our lengthy afternoon discussion, Geri elaborated her views on politics, the economy, and her daily struggles in managing a seven-member household. Like the above respondent, Geri referred to public assistance as "rightfully due," often through statements that "government owes us," particularly as the sense of entitlement related to Puerto Rican contributions in fighting US wars and paying taxes to the US government. But such notions were not always neatly linked to political quid pro quo associations. Claims were also made on the grounds of economic deservedness. The pervasiveness and accessibility to public assistance, particularly in the form of food vouchers, during Geri’s early arrival to the United States compelled many families like hers to seek recourse to public assistance. The respondent continues:

If you are going to have public assistance then that means help the public. So a lot of people took it. It is like, I’m going to take what’s mine...like I felt like the government had it and we really needed it so I took what I could. A lot of people were laid off so they had to do whatever to get by. The government handed out food stamps to help poor families and they took it...no, they didn’t hesitate...it is like, you know, that is the least [the government] can do. I’ve worked. I’ve paid taxes. They are supposed to help us out.

These statements highlight a prevalent notion among the first-generation Puerto Rican respondents, namely, that government had the resources to provide basic goods and services, and consequently, low-income sectors demonstrated little shame or guilt in using such assistance. To some extent, these attitudes reflect the social processes that contributed to the expansion of welfare state protections in the post-war period, embodying anti-poverty programs especially from 1960 to 1975 (Katz 1989). This was also a time of social unrest, triggered by the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. During the civil rights era, government had to come to terms with the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and the historical oppression of minority groups. The civil rights movement stimulated ethnic pride among minorities, including Puerto Ricans in New York at the time, the response to their social reality translated into a politics of independence that was compounded by the historical political memory of US-Puerto Rican relations, which elicited a quid pro quo of reciprocal benefits. In the exchange or quid pro quo relationship of welfare to state relations, feelings of mistrust of government often surfaced. Anger and frustration over the individual’s relationship to the larger welfare system often brought out strong criticism of the US government. For instance, a 49-year-old mother of six, Geri, who had recently left public assistance and began receiving Social Security disability, stated:

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We [Puerto Ricans] feel we have been discriminated and mistreated and have not been able to accomplish our goals because of our nationality — if we have a job we get stuck at the job and we don’t grow like white people do and I have noticed that Hispanics get discriminated at jobs. That’s why many Puerto Ricans go on welfare because we don’t get the opportunities we deserve.

The above quotes illustrate a rationale for welfare use premised on political views about nation-state relations and low-wage work, translating into a politics of entitlement and deservingness. These politicized, dissenting voices were often accompanied by a view that public assistance, along with work in the informal sector, was their only viable economic solution. What is highlighted is that the older generation of Puerto Rican welfare respondents, who had experienced the “golden years” of welfare distribution, believed that government aid was necessary “ayuda.” In this way, despite the restrictive measures of the welfare reform laws, many respondents continued to look to welfare for help in managing their household income needs. For example, some respondents had appeared at fair hearings as a way to continue to dispute their welfare claims. They hoped to continue to maintain their public assistance even if their welfare budgets were reduced. Many wanted to collaborate with the new welfare to work programs, thereby demonstrating their continual appeal to government for assistance, even under its new guidelines.

First-generation Dominican respondents

Translation: It is almost impossible to overcome the barriers that is put in front of you. That is why I want citizenship so that way I have more security in this country.

In contrast to the first-generation Puerto Rican profile, the Dominican first-generation story generally reflected low claims to welfare entitlement. Their stories ranged from frustration over their food stamp reductions to statements of gratitude for receiving whatever basic government aid came their way. Sometimes loose
requirements, almost all respondents had applied for citizenship. Most were waiting for their appointments to take their exams (civics test and language exam) and struggled with English classes, often for the first time, fearing failure. Since most of the first-generation Dominican respondents spoke very little to no English, their greatest concern was not to be able to pass the citizenship exam in English, now required even for applicants over 65 if they have resided in the US for at least 15 years. Many claimed they wanted their “blue passport,” or American passport, to have more rights to travel and secure their place in “este país.”

Recipients whose public benefits were reduced or whose cases were closed discussed different ways of coping with the cutbacks. Besides the option of applying for citizenship, which required a payment of $210 and a lengthy backlog wait, some considered sending children back to the Dominican Republic to be raised by relatives. Others went into debt or increased their work hours in the informal economy, including home child care, cooking meals or baking party cakes, and other odd jobs. Other families pulled resources together by sharing apartment expenses or renting a partitioned room in their already cramped living spaces. Others began relying more on other networks, organizations, and churches in their immigrant communities. Still others shrugged their shoulders and endured their “fates.”

One woman spoke about coping with the cuts:

Translation: Now I have become more economical. I never had to freeze rice, not even in the Dominican Republic, but now I have to be more economical. Some way God will help me.

Some newly naturalized residents and others on waiting lists to take their citizenship exams (there is a backlog of two years in naturalization proceedings) expressed doubt that their new legal status would translate into economic and social rights.

Translation: Here the whites see us as inferior. Discrimination is very evident. Look at the blacks and Puerto Ricans — they have citizenship but they don’t get treated equally as whites. So I don’t know how much citizenship will help me but it will let me travel and that is what I want to do — travel back and forth to my country. An unsettling feeling of despair plagued households with undocumented members. Understandably, these families were the most reluctant to seek aid from government agencies for fear of being labeled a threat. Still others shrugged their shoulders and endured their “fates.”

Conventionally there is a public narrative that immigrants contribute to the entrepreneurial spirit of America, take the unwanted jobs, and don’t make arrogant claims to welfare entitlements. In ... (see Chavez 1991). Many studies argue that immigrants do not come to the United States for public assistance benefits.

Other times, entitlement was qualified as “having to be earned.” For example,

Translation: I came here to work…. My sister was already here and she got me a job in a sewing factory. I worked a lot when I came but the factory closed down. I didn’t seek an interview here in the US. I came here for the money. After 7 years later. I really tried, but I would get laid off and it just wasn’t easy... so I had to ask the government for help.

But I worked for many years for this country [emphasis mine].

A household member whose relative receives public assistance offered commentary on the subject. The Dominican people on welfare I believe is mostly a matter of being poor, not that they wanted to go on welfare per se. Responsibility is a matter of being poor. How are you to go to the government to seek public assistance when you are poor? When you are poor you don’t even press, but it is the people who have press, most of the people who press. What I am saying is, responsibility is a matter of being poor, not that they wanted to go welfare per se. That is a fallacy. In order to meet the financial need of a family with children, it is necessary for both parents to work. If they get welfare it is because they need it, most of them. What they think is it is survival for the moment.

When speaking on low-wage work, first-generation Dominican respondents noted that working low-paying jobs was bearable when accompanied by some type of “perk” or benefit such as gratuitous food or low transportation costs.

Translation: One has to constantly evaluate what is best for you and your family. I work at [a fast food outlet in Newark]. I make $200/ week working 40 hours a week. It is not a lot but you have to eat. Sometimes you hear people making $8.00/hour and that sounds good but I eat at work and that saves me money.

What is emphasized is the way individuals negotiate the highest reward possible in order to sustain themselves and their families. To some, turning to public assistance was a viable option in the pre-1996 reform era. For others, it was a way to secure future social rights in the United States. Despite their reluctance over the new fingerprinting requirement, almost all respondents had applied for citizenship.
entity capable of changing patterns of economic and racial inequality, they often found it to be the source of much of what was wrong in their communities. They looked instead to local role models and to popular culture idols, who, coming from backgrounds similar to their own, had now “made it.” Having grown up hearing and feeling the brunt of attacks, frustrating delays, and stigmas about receiving welfare, many expressed disappointment about resorting to public aid and sought to redefine the parameters of welfare use by offering their understanding of the role welfare has played in their lives and households. In this way, they attempted to justify their welfare use by making claims of deservedness and offering a political response to the perceived finger-pointing directed at them. Through their narratives, they told a story of both government and individual responsibility.

An interesting political view to emerge in their explanation for welfare use was in the distinctions made about types of public assistance. For example, second-generation respondents spoke about degrees of attractiveness for receiving different types of government aid. Getting public housing or Section 8 was among the most desirable benefit, although the extremely long waiting lists made it unobtainable for most. Disability insurance or Supplementary Security Income (SSI) was also viewed as an attractive program because of its federal funding, relatively larger compensation, and security. By qualifying different government assistance programs, respondents often assumed defensive postures about their indirect welfare use. For example, there was the case of one respondent whose mother was on public assistance and the respondent herself was on her mother’s budget, yet she didn’t see herself as “receiving welfare.” She was proud of the fact that she didn’t have a case despite the fact that she lived in the same household as her mother and ate food purchased with food stamps. Her distancing of any direct association with welfare demonstrated her desire to break from the welfare stigma and shield herself from the loaded stereotype of the proverbial welfare queen who takes advantage of the system. Growing up in the United States and being made aware of the socially stigmatizing language of welfare use, the respondent defended herself against direct association. Similarly, another respondent who lived in public housing argued that she was not on “welfare”:

“Low income housing is not welfare. Welfare is when you get cash money.”

In this respondent’s view, welfare was correctly defined in a strict sense as cash benefits for the needy. Any other type of public aid, such as public housing or even food stamps, was seen as a government responsibility. In the words of 26-year-old Ines:
I see the government breastfeeding a lot of people in the welfare system, so many people depend on it. You get your little check once a month and happy with that. That is not for me. I want to be able to say I work hard for my money. I’m going to tell you straight up the best man is the working man. It is good to have that feeling. I am trying to survive too I’d rather be working a JOB and work 19 20 hours a fucking day, come home late at night have the feeling that I work hard for my money. I have a daughter mind you. You got to bust your ass…you can’t blame nobody but yourself… I think everyone can do it.

In this way, the second-generation youth evidenced the adoption of the liberal democratic values of individual responsibility and personal accountability, which the new welfare reform language is premised on. By adopting these American core value ideals, they positioned themselves as citizen insiders, whose claims of social rights are framed within a politics of deservedness.

In addition to commenting on their “justified” welfare use and their plans to exit public assistance once they completed their education and work training programs, some respondents reflected on the low-wage work that awaited them:

People around my way won’t work at McDonald’s. Cause it will take them 60 years to make any money… who can really support themselves on minimum wage? We are trying to get out of here. We are trying to improve our lives and our situation. Maybe some people who come from other countries think it is such a great deal to be here, but to us when you got your girlfriend, your responsibilities and stuff like that, you just can’t make it working fast food.

Another respondent evaluated her future exit from welfare, expressing fear over not having the monthly financial security public assistance offered her.
But poverty, after all, is about wealth and its allocation and distribution (Katz 1989). Fundamentally it is a discussion about the fact that some people receive a great deal less than others and that profits are earned through the exploitive social relations in which they are embedded. At the very basis of this discussion is the need to address the nature of our economic and political systems and the prosperity of some at the expense of many. In this way citizens and immigrants and their children, who make tremendous contributions to society's overall wealth, would not have to scuffle over meager welfare crumbs.

Conclusions

A new contract between the government and the poor was enacted in 1996. As a result of the welfare and immigration reform legislation, the welfare state has renegotiated its obligation to...
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