

Redistribution and its Discontents: On the Prospects of Committed Work in Public Mental Health and Like Settings

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Refusal of services has long been treated as prima facie evidence of a disordered mind; this paper inquires instead into the tainted nature of the offer. I first sketch the conflicted nature of relief in the American welfare state—hedged so as to ensure only the truly needy will apply—and the way symbolic means are deployed to that end. I then go on to suggest that refusal to accept aid on those terms (even among the street-dwelling, psychiatrically disabled homeless) may be a last-resort exercise of self-respect. This dynamic has an ancient pedigree, whose mythic prototype is Philoctetes. Equally striking is the legacy of the outlaw hero of the story, apparent in the ways frontline workers today contrive to outwit the system's structural constraints. These anomalous forms of "committed work"—acts of resistance delivering both effort and benefit that cannot be bought—are my real concern. I review ethnographic work suggesting that such acts of common ministry are well-documented exceptions to the broad commodification of care and take their toll on the workers themselves. The paper closes, ruefully, with an acknowledgment of the contradictory valence of system-sustaining resistance that is so easily co-opted and integrated as compensation for "institutional bad faith" (Bourdieu).

Key words: resistance, emotional labor, homelessness, care work, recognitions

*So distribution should undo excess
And each man have enough.*

King Lear, Act IV, Scene I

Anthropologists have been busy chroniclers of orders of regard in societies at varying degrees of technological achievement, economic inequality, cultural diversity, and political rule. Whether yams or yachts, shells or shaker furniture, pigs or Proust, we attend to implicit codes, their studied display and decipherment, and all that betokens in turn. Material resources matter, but their symbolic freight so confounds the invoice of distinction that to ignore it is to leave the job half-done. Even the simplest inventory of possessions must tally meaning as well as number; scarcity and envy speak to larger questions of prestige, position, and control. Goods are "less objects of desire than threads in a veil that disguises social relations under it" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:202).

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This article will argue that the same logic applies to the unearned, hand-me-down offerings of the welfare state. Even here, in the domain of redistribution, where basic need not frivolous desire is the issue, considerations of regard condition the offer of assistance. The frontline ranks of relief turn out to be notable not only for their insufficiencies, but for the way that attitude intensifies them. More remarkable is the presence in this same system of workers whose tender labors manage to redeem the debased coin of poor relief and public care. I want to explore what those labors amount to.

Provocations

I can date with some precision when I first realized how vital the distribution mechanism might be to local economies of relief: January 27, 1982. The day before, Rebecca Smith, a woman who lived in a cardboard box on the streets of Chelsea in New York City, had been found dead in her makeshift home. Ten days earlier, she had made news as the first person for whom the city was to go to court to obtain a 72-hour protective custody order, under a new law aimed at people found to be in immediate medical risk and unable to appreciate the consequences of their actions. For over a week, Ms. Smith had fended off a cavalry of would be interveners. Having exhausted outreach, city officials turned to coercion and filed the requisite court papers on the prior Friday afternoon. That ensured a weekend of inaction (when the courts are in recess) and that

delay would, in turn, prove fatal. Commentators (myself among them) rushed to read her death as emblematic of something larger—that “something” usually construed either as mental illness abandoned (outreach workers had diagnosed her as schizophrenic) or, in more sweeping interpretations, homelessness recalcitrant.

In the event, Rebecca Smith went down in editorial history as the woman “who said no,” but whose “no” was suspect because she “didn’t have her wits about her” (*New York Times*, editorial, 29 January 1982). It seemed to me then, as it does today, that to accept that formulation is to miss the more troubling lesson of her life (and the way, incidentally, its closing may echo that of an earlier fictional refusenik—Dickens’ character Betty Higden’s unyielding determination “to die undegraded”¹). In those final aid-resistant hours, it was as if she had chosen to make her stand, come what may, on the side of some kindred resolution. Put differently, it was as if she demanded—not justice at last—but injustice, consistently applied. No eleventh hour heroics, no last-minute salvage operation. Even the court calendar worked to her advantage.

What do such extreme instances of relief refused have to teach us about the terms that govern ordinary transactions of urgent aid? Set aside for the moment the exceptional circumstances of Ms. Smith’s death (though hers was not the first, or last, such street death). I want to explore the possibility, arguably embodied in Rebecca Smith’s unyielding “no,” that some aboriginal sense of self-regard is at work in these acts of refusal, however self-destructive the consequences. To do so, it will be necessary to examine what it means to accept assistance on the state’s terms.

Before doing so, let me reiterate that my intent is not to celebrate these acts of resistance but rather to decode the logic behind them and the contingencies that activate it, the better to inquire into how such contingencies might be thwarted, undermined, or circumvented, and with what consequences. In making the case for the instructive value of refusals, I mean to argue not simply that relief to the disabled poor is hopelessly conflicted (it is, manifestly), but also to explore a less obvious correlative: that there may be ways through the contradictions with their own instructive power.

The American Way of Relief

The cultural logic of distinction in the American class system is a double one of unequal resources and comparative station—“a matter of economic gradations of goods and privilege... embedded in narratives of snobbery and humiliation” (Ortner 2003:41). In such a system, the very poor pose special problems, not least because they are not supposed to exist. Poverty, yes; pauperism (contagious amalgam of straitened circumstances and suspect character), a supposedly anomalous relic of old Europe. With respect to social assistance, the still-operating principle of deterrence (derived from Poor Law notions of “less eligibility”) dictates that the lot of a supported dependent poor be recognizably worse off than that of their laboring counterparts. Work and requisite

household economies should always trump relief in the American way of welfare.

But the comparative logic of less eligibility runs into trouble at the lower extremities of need and livelihood. For the largely invisible poor, “getting by” is already a mean and demoralizing affair: anxious, makeshift, and slow grinding (Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003; DeParle 2004; Shipler 2004). If the material circumstances of emergency relief designed to compete with that de facto standard of living, they would amount to a return to the casual cruelties of 19th century practice. Both custom and formal protections—institutional regulation, the oversight of the courts—make that unlikely (although recent history gives one pause). Instead, the job of deterrence defaults to scorn and its symbolic trappings: stigma, the stain of disrepute that attaches to recipients of aid, and frontline “disentitlement”—the discretionary slights, procedural hoops, and strategic suspicion of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980; 1984; Bennett 1995). Put differently, it’s the *manner* with which requests for relief are received and the process of assistance set in train that bears the burden of discouragement. If dependence is to retain its last resort status, the logic of the system (active deterrence without resorting to material deprivation) effectively demands that such symbolic tools be deployed. Insult does what injury is barred from trying.

The upshot: even a besieged welfare state does a better job of ensuring a modicum of sustenance than it does the rudimentary “social bases of self-respect” (Rawls 1971). When deprivation is reckoned in the dual registers of material want and moral worth, the price of relief is paid in the currency of self-regard. Under such circumstances, what looks like a rejection of service or assistance, may actually be a refusal to pay the toll. It’s a classic Hobson’s choice: one can accept the aid and swallow the humiliation, or one can relinquish the aid but salvage self-regard in the bargain.

Or, to take the gloves off; to resist being treated as worthless, childlike, a loser, abject failure, object of pity, anvil of social action—or (to put it in technical anthropological terms) as penance, mutable raw material, or shit—may well be one of the last exercises of self-respect available to the conventionally powerless. A private stance in a public forum, “refusal of services” is a double-edged weapon of the weak (Scott 1990), an act of resistance that may exact great costs in exchange for what may seem bafflingly paltry benefits.

Ms. Smith is not the only example of sustained refusal to play by the rules of relief on the street. Consider Mitch Duneier’s detailed portrait of sidewalk book vendors in Greenwich Village (1999), a third of whom were homeless. Most of them, on their own account, were homeless “by choice”—that is, because the demands of their occupational niche demanded it. Some of this is nonsense: many routinely blew a day’s proceeds on crack binges, in amounts that could easily have secured them several days’ lodging and paid someone to protect their space on the sidewalk. But some of it was dead-on defiance: in these makeshift reclamation projects, considerations of self-determination and residual dignity

outweighed those of security. Lee Stringer offers up something similar in his memoir of living (“with less inconvenience than you might have imagined”) on the streets of New York City. A rootlessness that is a constant reminder of one’s own failure to connect or to belong hardly needs the added insult of shelter-based inquisitions as gratuitous confirmation. Stringer’s characterization: “I didn’t like the karma of the place, for want of a better way to put it—the guards, the pat-downs, the food lines, the whole watch-your-back, watch-your-mouth, watch-out-for-number-one jailhouse mentality. I figured I’d just as well take my chances on the street” (1998:42). Together, these two accounts identify a species of street homelessness that—much appearance to the contrary—is secondary to more basic choices and struggles. This homelessness traces its origin to a *lumpen* moral economy that traffics in self-respect, independence, decent work and reciprocity. What it asks of “the social” is less handout than in-kind subsidy: local laws hospitable to scavenging, street amenities like public toilets, and a certain civic tolerance. Even to articulate the demand in this way is to underscore its hopelessly dated, pre-neoliberal, sense of the social.

That Vexed Matter of Respect

The bright line running through these admittedly selected items is *respect*—or, more pointedly, the social and cultural matrices and practices needed to cultivate self-respect. The same subject has emerged, awkwardly, in critical assessments of the welfare state and service work in recent decades. One in particular raised the issue with what was then an unfashionably moral inflection. In *The Needs of Strangers* (1984), Michael Ignatieff bypassed the comparative logic of relief sketched above, and posed the question in its most generous terms. Suspending the structural constraints for a moment. Suppose we were serious about meeting the basic needs of the destitute and lonely, and unconcerned about taxing them for any assistance received. (Such, one might argue, is what’s at stake—or should be—in the extreme case of outreach to the street-dwelling homeless.) What is it about certain “needs of strangers”—specifically, those having to do with membership, fraternity, solidarity, civic kinship—that stubbornly defies the best efforts of relief agencies to meet them? Ignatieff’s answer goes to the conflicted heart of service work: because unpaid, uncoerced *gesture* is the culturally sanctioned vehicle for communicating genuine acceptance, the crude simulacra “delivered” under the auspices of “community support teams” (or even by skilled outreach workers) are bound to feel forced and artificial.

Consider the situation of homeless persons with severe psychiatric disorder. If some sib-like sign of “recognition” is what’s really needed, an affirmation of common kinship strong enough to stand up to the disfiguring register of serious illness and the alienation of wholesale displacement, then third-party provisions of surrogate assurance are likely to fall short. A cheap theater results, one that requires both parties to suspend belief and go through the motions of a mutual fraud.

As Rowe puts it: outreach work is filled with “impurities”—at once the most natural and most contrived of undertakings (Rowe 1999:79-80). Under such circumstances, hemmed in by exigency and charade, is it any wonder that some would-be subjects of assistance may refuse their assigned role and opt out of an unequal exchange?

Clearly, I’m laboring under a most forgiving mandate here, offering nothing in the way of a guarantee of representativeness and little assurance, for that matter, of documentary accuracy. Instead, I’ve seized upon an obscure theme in the annals of the quiet poor (whose silence, Paul Farmer has reminded us [2003], is a *conditioned* silence), to argue what seems to me an often unvoiced dimension of their predicament in the reports of their observers as well. My intent at this juncture is less the ethnographic fidelity of such a picture than its structural inertia. What I’ve sketched so far are the formulaic or rule-governed transactional realities of assistance, along with their historical precedents. But what’s really intriguing about the contrivances of everyday practice, I want to suggest, is how they sometimes manage to slip and cheat such conventions. Refusing to “reason the need” on the state’s terms, they opt instead to connect in ways that both defy the state’s rules and, paradoxically, may serve its purposes.

It is precisely the anomaly of that escape artistry (and the moral reasoning behind it) that interest me. Ignatieff exemplifies recent efforts to engage such complexities and the debate over how to incorporate a “politics of need” in contemporary public health’s mission continues (Robertson 1998). The quandaries themselves are durable ones in the western canon. The archetypal account of pride getting the better part of badly needed assistance is Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, and the lessons embedded in the bitter argonaut’s account are worth revisiting.

An Ancient Rhyme and its Disturbing Reason

Abandoned by his shipmates for his incessant “moaning and howling,” the wounded Philoctetes (his snakebit foot refuses to heal) leads a wretched life. Alone on the uninhabited island of Lemnos, he hunts, huddles, and braces himself for recurring bouts of searing pain. He has visitors from time to time, who are good for charity and company, but not for restitution. (“...if I mention it, a passage home—no, anything but that.”) Meanwhile, his erstwhile countrymen have run into difficulties a decade into their siege against Troy. In order to prevail, an oracle has advised them, they will need the enchanted bow of Heracles, which is in Philoctetes’ possession. Wily Odysseus is sent off to handle the negotiations and enlists young Neoptolemus in the effort. They locate the embittered Philoctetes, dodge his imprecations and arrows, and make their pitch. In exchange for the bow, they will escort him back to Troy where he will receive competent treatment. Crippled as he is, Philoctetes will have none of it. His bitterness at having once been deserted prevents him from accepting this eleventh-hour (and crassly self-interested) offer. But when he falls into a pain-induced swoon, Odysseus and Neoptolemus make off with the bow. So far, so good:

what the gods have ordained, chicanery has worked where negotiation failed. But, crass opportunism runs afoul of a common humanity awakened when a conscience-stricken Neoptolemus makes his way back to Philoctetes, confesses the treachery, and returns the bow. Himself now an outlaw, he sits down with the injured exile to review their options, including rejoining the siege.

There are two, co-animating epiphanies here: The first occurs when Neoptolemus' internal ordeal—"the agony of recognized agency" (in Martha Nussbaum's [2003] phrase)—ends with compassion edging out duty for control of his soul. In exercising choice, Neoptolemus disobeys his superior, scuttles a promising career, disgraces his father, and defies the gods. But transgression is the point of the story. Nussbaum wants us to read these "stark fictions" of the Greek tragedy as theatrical invitations to question the settled verities of culture itself—what the gods have been understood to decree—and to test, repeatedly, the line between inevitable and contingent. Meant as provocations to action not reconciliations to fate, they force issues of responsibility denied, choice unseen, genealogies undetected and unquestioned. The second epiphany occurs when Philoctetes, deeply moved by the young man's gesture of solidarity, agrees to cooperate and put his bow at the Greeks' disposal. (Well, the god Heracles makes an unannounced and persuasive appearance to move things along.) His own defiant pride bends to the light touch of an outcast humanity shared.

Whatever else the myth of Philoctetes might have to teach us (Wilson 1947; White 1985), this much seems pertinent: Certain borders—born of injustice, long-simmering grudges, compound accident, or the defensive postures of a besieged all-but-broken self—will not be breached unless *both* sides run the risks of doing so. Structural duty must occasionally yield to the dodgy business of extending the reach of agency beyond its habitual limits. Without that extension, the restoration of lapsed connections is likely to be contrived, an exercise in artifice. (One might well trick or persuade, but at what cost? With what likelihood of lasting effect?) The lesson is clearest in Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1991), the latest effort to re-imagine the myth. But even in the original version, a tormented Neoptolemus breaks free of custom to challenge what the gods have ordained. His moral ordeal (that "agony of recognized agency") both echoes Philoctetes' own suffering and enables him to connect (Nussbaum 2003:38).

Here, then, is the tie-in to Ignatieff: The paradox of service-work is that this delicate matter of reaching out to those left behind, made redundant or declared deranged, must somehow be managed by people *paid* to do it. So much hinges, however, on that "somehow" and the mischief it works on prescribed routine. Against all odds, connecting does happen. Among the ranks of service work one may find practitioners of an unusually engaged labor, people who have found ways to practice that "economy of kindness" (Heaney's phrase) built on gesture and commitment, even if that means working "off the clock." This suggests

that the service paradox—the therapeutic value of what can't be paid for—may yield to working resolutions in practice. Does this sort of "committed work" bridge moral engagement and salaried labor? If so, might it make refusal of services at the far margins of assistance less common? More generally, might a partial solution to welfare state's predicament lie in cultivating rather than stifling such improvisations?

The Anomaly of Committed Work

Recent reports from a number of ethnographic fronts (Diamond 1992; Kirschner & Lachicotte 2001; Robins 2001; Rowe 1999; Ware et al. 2000; Wax 2003; Lamphere 2005; Wagner 2005)—informally corroborated by two decades of conversations with frontline workers in myriad contexts²—attest to the vitality of locally configured forms of this practice. By *committed work*, I mean labor performed under the auspices of a service contract or salaried job that goes well beyond the call of duty.³ Under its auspices, if sometimes within the circumscribed bounds of a moral community, paid work betrays its own defining terms and actively misconstrues its warrant. Doing more or other than the wage contract requires, it resolves the service paradox by a kind of outlaw industry, and thus reaps the therapeutic benefit of what can't be paid for. Its practitioners tend to slip easily into the discourse of kinship, caring, labors of love; not uncommonly, too, they bear the scars of their dedication (Diamond 1992; Tronto 1993; Rowe 1999).

Committed work can take the simple form of unremunerated labor: providing unbilled clinical services, visiting sick clients or running errands for them on one's day off, working unpaid overtime, trading on hard-won social capital to arrange an otherwise impossible referral. It can also designate an intensity of effort or resourcefulness—tenacity coupled with an unwillingness to accept failure—that is both difficult to write into job descriptions and yet unmistakable in certain practice settings. It can also mean the casual shedding of official roles (or professional distance) in moments of unguarded companionship (a smoke on the back deck of the clinic, a cup of coffee, a hallway exchange about upcoming weekend plans, a fortuitous sidewalk encounter that spawns an extended conversation). However one chooses to frame it—as uncompensated time, unrequited gift, role slippage, corporal work of mercy, or mundane virtue—committed work fits uneasily in a service economy modeled on commodity exchange.⁴

Obviously, committed work (and the "ethic of care" it embodies) require a certain institutional tolerance if they are to flourish (or survive) in the interstices of prescribed routine (Lamphere 2005). Nor (and I will return to this point) can genuine caring do much more than blunt the impact of oppressive structures (Frank 1995:152). And even among practiced adherents, committed work is hard put to resist imposed administrative routines, even when the would-be resistance sees itself as simply "going through the motions" (Ware et al. 2000). A certain tempering may also be required: untried

caring does not easily endure a professional apprenticeship that puts one through the traumatic ordeal of clinical training, the outcome of which is a conditioned callousness, an inclination to see oneself as working in a “moral universe of limited liability” (Zussman 1992:43; cf. Bosk 1992). That a moral economy of kindness manages to survive at all and, in the hands of its adepts, can be even made *integral* to the performance of everyday tasks (Diamond 1992:162), is my (slightly astonished) concern here. How it might be better documented, more closely analyzed, and its implications for public service in a counterfeit welfare state more competently explored is the challenge I want to put forward.

Like the living alternatives embodied in vestigial religious practices that still intrigue discerning Marxist critics (Williams 1976:122), committed work is a counter-hegemonic force. If nothing else, it defies the commodification of caring inherent in state-provided (or outsourced) services. As with archaic religious practices, too, determining what it has to teach us is tricky. What kind of alternative, or saving corrective, does it represent? Are the examples celebrated above merely lively exceptions on the margins—committed work, the virtuous toil of otherwise unemployable saints? Or, if substantial, do they constitute a form of resistance better read (as Eagleton reads the wholesale renunciation of sequestered Carmelite communities) less as a demonstration of “what is to be done” than as a measure of “how much it would take” (2002:16)? What might the arguably hybrid example of pastoral care or chaplaincy (which combine livelihood with vocation) teach us about its dynamics—and its relation to state charity?⁵

Committed work may also bring to mind work in non-market sectors of the economy, especially the close, personalized charitable work that some commentators have urged ought to be revived as commonplace of civic life. In contrast to the many-times-removed, faceless “welfare” we support through taxes, Walzer argues that direct investments of our time and energy are needed to mediate (read: “humanize”) the otherwise invidious interface of “professional caretakers and helpless wards” (1983:94). This eases Ignatieff’s paradox by bypassing the cash nexus (a wage) and informalizing the provision of unskilled service work. Making it voluntary, however, does nothing to obviate the residual difficulty—an old one (Stedman-Jones 1971)—that a gift relationship in which one party is unable to reciprocate cannot help but humiliate.⁶

Still, the striking thing about much of the *extra* work at stake here is its simplicity. (Most of the cited examples [apart from doctoring] are decidedly lower-caste occupations.) Admittedly, it can be dirty, demanding heroic reserves of patience and fortitude. In some settings, too, the objects of its mercies are notoriously indisposed to gratitude. But on-the-job training is the rule, a willing attitude outweighs a clinical or social work degree, and resilience matters most. So it isn’t difficult to imagine “community service” apprenticeships, timed to coincide with that already liminal period between extended adolescence and formal adulthood (settling down), that would match willing youth with seasoned expertise and expand the

ranks of potential recruits. Formal (if embattled) vehicles exist: volunteers from the now threatened Vista*Americorps⁷ are regularly deployed to such community-based enterprises as Habitat for Humanity and the Red Cross.

If a contribution to the commonweal, how might the commonweal reciprocate (and thus formally support) such a program? Aside from fitful bursts of voluntarism, and the steady drumbeat from “communitarian” quarters, the record of public sector employment in the U.S. is dishearteningly uneven (Weir 1993).⁸ Cultural credit for interim sabbatical work, with the possible exception of Peace Corps, isn’t much better developed as a tradition. Mechanisms for recognition and support during and after participation (say, for further education or training) could be substantially strengthened. Politics is probably the biggest barrier, along with the complications newly introduced by welfare-to-work programs. And none of those objections touch on the concerns of critics who rightly wonder about the massive forces eroding community and the puny ranks of do-gooders so blithely hailed as its restorative agents (Rose 1999).

Yet that, in turn, raises a bigger problem. If such extraordinary efforts do, in practice, manage to repair or extend the reach of the crippled “left hand” of the state—that beleaguered part of it concerned with social assistance rather than security or safety (Bourdieu 1999:183)—is that, on balance, a good thing?

The Consequences of Caring

The clipped quote at the outset does Gloucester only half-justice: in *King Lear*, his call for redistribution is preceded by recognition that casual charity will not suffice—even when face to face with naked beggary, there are those who “will not see because [they do] not feel.” For giving’s prod to work, compassion must be presumed, even when (as Adam Smith noted) those who are its objects seem “insensible to [their] own misery” (Smith 2000 [1759]:8). Moral imagination provides what direct communication cannot. And moral imagination must reach past rejection (and beyond the job) if it is to prevail. The prudent course for Neoptolemus would have been to make off with the stolen bow; the moral one was to question all that made that the obvious choice.

As the recent ethnographies alluded to earlier amply demonstrate, such concerns not only drive the engines of classic tragedy, but also harry the day-to-day preoccupations of frontline street-bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), as well as ordinary men and women going about the business of livelihood and meeting the demands of kinship (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Sennett 2003; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Bourgois 1995). Respect cuts so deeply to the core of what it means to hold ourselves and others accountable as moral agents that some political philosophers have made that act of recognition the core affirmation of equality (Anderson 1999). Others debate the knotted problem at issue here: how its demands might be balanced with the seemingly ruder requirements of redistribution; how recognition might avoid the symbolic

entrapments of “identity politics” and serve the cause of more equitable resource allocation (Fraser and Honneth 2003).⁹ In such ambitious enterprises, respect finds focus as a vital force at the heart of both legitimate social order and its sometime mutinous offspring as well (Duneier 1999).

Perhaps the most difficult task facing applied anthropologists like myself, working in the unevenly hospitable terrain of public mental health, is to find useful ways of translating what may seem the arcane concerns of academics (with large dictionaries and the latitude to ask hard questions) into the unforgiving prose of public debate and program development. (This discursive ramble is both symptomatic of such difficulties and, implicitly, a collegial cry for help.) To think about restoring the “social bases of self-respect” to the psychiatrically disabled (to use Rawls’ well-earned phrase) is to broach issues of such subtlety and reach that one sometimes despairs of exposition and argument, settling instead for the persuasive power of exemplary instances (or egregious violations).¹⁰ To be concerned—not simply with the toll of “poverty and the ‘passive violence’ of economic and social structure” (entrenched, relentless, and corrosive as they may be)—but also with pervasive “moral suffering” that is “produced by all the small privations and muted violence of everyday life” (Bourdieu 1999:629),¹¹ is to throw fresh challenges to an apparatus of assistance that has trouble enough meeting its standing obligations. It is to ask institutions not known for their flexibility or improvisation to foster and trust precisely those capabilities in its frontline agents—or, in short, to stop “seeing like a state” (Scott 1998). Finally, it is to force service bureaucracies out of their own comfortable confines and into that unruly terrain, alternately contested and abandoned, known as the “de facto mental health system” (Lewis et al. 1989).

The odd thing is that it’s already happening. To say it again: the added measure of effort at issue here is the uncoerced/unpaid extension of self in order to connect with others.¹² But what exactly does this involve and how should it be bounded? Suppose we were able document the process: is it something that could be cultivated, normalized as part of local moral (organizational?) culture, without degrading it in practice, turning gesture into rote (and eventually alienated) acting? Such, after all, is the cautionary tale told by service economy analysts who study the “commercialization of feeling” required by new regimes of “emotional labor” and “relational work” (Hochschild 1983; MacDonald and Sirianni 1996). Not only does turning it to trade degrade the gift, that is, but the acquired skill also comes at great cost (burn-out, divided selves, an inability to leave work at “the office,” often poor wages) to the gift-givers themselves.

Should this still count as an instance of the “pragmatic solidarity” that exists only “when [medicine] is delivered with dignity to the destitute sick” (Farmer 2003:138)? Ignore for the moment that its roots lie in Liberation Theology, that Farmer and his cadres work for Partners in Health and not some government agency, that no little charisma fuels that unlikely venture in border-blind care: one must assume the

answer to be a qualified yes. Yet that is hardly the end of it. New Mexico’s latest regime of Medicaid Managed Care offers the necessary contrasting case in point. Among the providers who stayed, we see an assortment of clinical variants of “social banditry” (Hobsbawm 1981; or, the preferred term here, “going the extra mile”): artful distortions of “medical necessity,” makeshift expansions of the scope of clinical work when ancillary services (case management) are disallowed by managed care, “creative coding” to make health conditions reimbursable, strategic retreats from strength-based assessments to debility-keyed write-ups, revitalized “discourses of care,” extra educating of patients and families—all of which redound to the benefit of “making the [renovated, neoliberal, much more user-hostile] system work” (Lamphere 2005; Nelson 2005; Wagner 2005).¹³ It may even become normative: sociologists have coined the term “linking social capital” for the situated labor of creating “norms of respect and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society” (Szreter and Woolcock 2004:655).

Which brings me full circle to resistance, but this time from the other side. What’s at stake in these unheralded gestures of care and connection is nothing less than the quiet protests of the welfare state’s own workforce. In these pockets, at such moments, one can glimpse a restive moral sensibility at work, opposing the law of necessity in the name of compassion, questioning what slowly, inexorably, and falsely has assumed the status of fact, destabilizing convention by appeal to an old uncommon decency (Berger 2001; Bourdieu 1998; Ungar 2004). This is civil disobedience in the service of inclusion. But—and here’s the awful rub—such opposition redeems rather than undermines the state’s offer of assistance, and it does so without revealing its own secretly corrective ministry. It meets that refusal of the service-wary with which this article began with a refusal of its own: standing alongside them, not in judgment or simply in compassion, but (there really is no other word for it) in solidarity—and then working the system on their behalf. The upshot may be resistance co-opted, line workers hyper-exploited, and system betrayal delayed rather than averted. Or, put differently, a battered system keeps chugging along, secure in its “institutional bad faith” (Bourdieu 1999), riddled with tensions and antagonisms that work against collective action, and propped up by the secret ministry of its own reluctant agents.

Figuring out what to do next will not be easy. Madness can be unruly, disconcerting, and recalcitrant. The state has enough on its hands simply keeping (most of) such people housed. Smart people will say that this analysis is naïve, willfully ignorant of clinical realities.¹⁴ Neoliberals will applaud the resourcefulness of newly energized frontline workers. My street corps protagonists will misrecognize the way I’ve characterized their work here, as a recent exchange with outreach staff in Connecticut (first-responders to people like Rebecca Smith) suggests. I had just shared a version of this paper, stressing the uncompensated toll that such work demands of them. One seasoned street veteran rose to protest—in

what I take to be both misunderstanding and illustration of the central point—"I hear ya' . . . but I really love my work." I could only salute the claim (and all that it betokened in the way of committed work), and try gently to remind him how shamelessly the system counts on that fact.

Philoctetes recovered the bow, the Trojan war was re-joined. Moral crisis resolved, the march of history resumed.

Notes

¹On which, see Steven Marcus (1978).

²Even as a social worker in Los Angeles in the late '60s—a time, admittedly, when the then-burgeoning ranks of the profession were filled with part-time writers and musicians, war-weary Viet-vets and conscientious objectors, liberal arts majors eager to make a difference at home, and street-focused progressives of all stripes—I was impressed by what Lipsky would later call the "devotion" of these low-level civil servants (1980:xii).

³This has much in common with Folbre's notion of "caring labor" (2001), although she is concerned (it seems to me) chiefly with "reducing the burden of economic pressure" so as to enhance the quality of care that public assistance cannot provide" (2001:87), while I am puzzling over the extension of what she calls "family values" (love, obligation, reciprocity) into precisely that sphere of "cannot."

⁴What does fit—and all too neatly—is the therapist described by David Karp (1996:121), who drops in to visit a hospitalized patient and then, after he's been discharged, asks him to "try to find a way for me to get paid for those two visits." This was counterfeit committed work. As the patient remarks to Karp: "I thought . . . it was a compassionate thing. And then he wants to get paid." The more adept trick, evidently, is to impersonate interest so convincingly that the "client" simply doesn't notice, or forgets, the contractual frame.

⁵The parallel to contemporary debates over state support for "faith-based" ventures in social services is only partly accidental. The shadow argument here is that political progressives ought to develop the tools and evidence that would enable them better to participate in—rather than boycott—the public discussion.

⁶A fact that even some volunteers appreciate. Besides fretting over the effectiveness of their puny efforts in the face of huge structural changes, they worry that "simple acts of kindness" can also be "degrading" to their objects (Wuthnow 1991:237-244). This recognition raises fresh difficulties that cannot be pursued here. Briefly, it asks for a better argument showing why paid work is morally inferior to, and patently less effective than, other forms of obligated help. What makes the unquestioned compulsions of kinship superior to the deliberate decision to take a job in the helping professions?

⁷VISTA, the domestic version of the Peace Corps founded in 1964 to help "alleviate poverty and build community capacity," was joined with the new AmeriCorps in 1993 under the Clinton Administration's initiative to encourage voluntarism (Corporation for National Service 2000). Some 6000 are enrolled at any one time for terms of service of 12-18 months, some 60% logging educational credits that may be redeemed at institutions of higher learning.

⁸The attraction of the National Guard is considerably weakened now that weekend warriors are being called up to actual war.

⁹"Good must be distributed according to principles and processes that express respect for all" (Anderson 1999)—and that, Anderson is

quite clear, includes the basis on which assistance is offered: because those in need are the moral equal, not the damaged inferior, to those in a position to give.

¹⁰And so a throwaway line like this one from Rowe (1999: 78)—"The reason I trust you is that you never treated me like trash"—is the more telling because of what it suggests about the rule, not the exception at hand.

¹¹See also Nussbaum 2004. Compare, too, those unsettling and shaming moments in Ehrenreich's account of working in the service economy in which "something loathsome and servile" displaces one's habitual sense of quotidian justice (2001:41).

¹²Frank (1995) sees it as a form of testimony, the "communicative body" both acknowledging its own brokenness and connecting with that of another.

¹³The same theme—heroic work to blunt the worst excesses of a failing system—infuses the interviews Bourdieu's team conducted with community workers in contemporary France (1999).

¹⁴Consider Gadamer's take on a story attributed to Camus: A psychiatrist walking down a ward notices a patient "fishing" in a bathtub and asks: "Are they biting?" To which, the patient responds: "Idiot. Can't you even see that it is a bathtub?" Now, Gadamer sees the question as evidence of the doctor's "mindful[ness] of this indispensable partnership between two human beings. . . ." He "attempts to understand the patient's mania for fishing and . . . seeks to participate in the power of illusion which governs it., thereby seeking at least to participate in something." For his part, the patient's response "to the genial condescension intended in the doctor's jest" is "merciless" (1996:171). The moral: "The story reveals how dangerous it is to participate in the delusion of someone who is so disturbed, and how there is a permanent risk of becoming entangled there." An alternative reading seems to me equally plausible: resentment at a comment taken as the subtle sneer of an outsider with keys, matches, belt and white coat—an outsider who risked nothing with the irony and set up the patient to take him seriously, and thus confirm his deluded state. Equally plausible is his impotent anger at being made sport of. The point is, we can't tell without further attention to the lineaments of history, relationship, audience, context. Gadamer's own confident interpretation seems premature and clinically hijacked.

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