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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, a number of global social movements—among them the “Arab Spring,” Occupy, and the European encampments—gave voice to popular concerns about increasing economic, political, and social disparities. They also served as one response to austerity measures that followed the announcement of a global recession. Post-2008, a considerable amount of intellectual work was likewise dedicated to examining related questions of inequality, indebtedness, and precarity (see, e.g., Graeber 2011; Standing 2011; Lazzarato 2012; Mitchell, Harcourt, and Taussig 2013; Butler 2010; Allison 2013).

The new body of scholarship that emerged and the circumstances of its emergence comprise the starting points for this special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Inquiring into welfare conceived as the possibilities and impossibilities of human flourishing—that is, conceived in the broadest possible sense—the contributors to this issue are thoroughly aware of the moment in which they are writing and the ways in which both everyday practices and practices of intellectual inquiry must speak to the new conditions of recessionary and postrecessionary austerity. If

austerity measures in Britain, Spain, and, most recently, Greece, to cite but three examples, have been severe, parallel cuts to the US federal budget (or “sequestration”), though less serious, have not been without significant impact (see Sen 2015).¹ Yet, an exclusive focus on Europe and the United States, where welfare is understood as a very real responsibility of the state, already assumes something about the proffering and withholding of the conditions for well-being. As such, this special issue examines both the withdrawal of benefits (see, e.g., Prashad 2003) and the circumstances in which such benefits become essential—whether in the absence of work, given the rise of structural unemployment, or the turn to new modes of life and livelihood in the informal and postindustrial economies. Contributors also consider the role of *non*-state actors and the ways in which these shape experiences of lack and plenitude.

Over the past several decades, citizens of nation-states in the western hemisphere, especially, have struggled with the evisceration of formal benefits—essential resources and services such as housing, food assistance, education, and medical care (see, e.g., Franklin 1997; Wilson 1997, 2012; Venkatesh 2006; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Sharkey 2013; James 2007). Coinciding with transformations in industrial production and shifts in the regime of work and wage, such (Keynesian) formulations of welfare have become the subject of anxious debates over the role of government and waning social safety nets. To be clear, this collection in no way undermines arguments for robust, state-mediated social protections. Rather, contributors propose to broaden the definition of human well-being, need, care, and interdependency at a moment when individual lives are increasingly framed as fragile assemblages of people, environments, and technologies (see Amrute this issue; Crary 2013) that paradoxically threaten the very existence of living labor and productive activity as foundational conditions for material well-being (Invisible Committee 2009: 46–47).

To that end, this collection attends to both space and time. If contributors are keen to lend comparative perspective, thinking about welfare within and beyond American shores—in other words, comparatively in *geographical* terms—they also resist an otherwise dominant progressive historicism. In attending to the problem of history (see Peterson this issue), prehistory, and geological time, the notion of welfare is extended to all manner of living and nonliving forms whether “primitive animals, such as insects, or molluscs, or bacteria . . . plants [o]r machines” (Sumner 1996: 14; cf. Muehlebach n.d.). Notably, care of the Earth, care of the self, and care of others become co-implicated in ways that enrich our sense of not only what constitutes well-being

but how such a condition might be achieved. And as Bauer and Bhan (this issue) insist, acknowledging the time of the Anthropocene—thinking *geologically* in other words—forces the matter of environmentalism as one critical approach to human welfare in tandem with the well-being of the Earth.

If anthropocenic time challenges a rigid boundary between history and prehistory, the South Africanists in this issue stress the continuity across colonial and postcolonial periods, particularly as this relates to state and corporate paternalism (see Barchiesi and Rajak this issue). They emphasize the degree to which colonial histories both comply with and challenge the assumed sequence of modernity, the nation-state, and the time of capital as “empty homogeneous time” (Chatterjee 2011: 134). By the same measure, postcolonies are the culmination of political, economic, and social “lineages” quite out of sequence with modernity (Chatterjee 2011: 134; see also Mbembe 2001). To assume, for example, that Fordism is a particular phase in a longer sequence in the historical unfolding of capital presupposes a “worker citizen” (see Barchiesi 2011; Chakrabarty 2009) as the key subject of both political and economic intervention. Yet, in the global South the “worker citizen” hardly exists in the sense of a subject both implicated in cycles of commodity production and consumption, civic rights and responsibilities (Roitman 2005). This emphasis on the colonial and postcolonial periods also brings into question the timing of the emergence of the modern state and those forms of social assistance at its disposal (see, e.g., Comaroff 2002).

In emphasizing the dimensions of space and time, contributors look beyond the assumptions of both Keynesians and their critics instead focusing on the continuities across national geographies. For, as very recent events in Greece have shown, Greece’s position within the Eurozone—as a heavily indebted nation—bring it into line with nations in the global South that, beginning in the 1980s, were subjected to aggressive structural adjustment that diminished state functions, basic infrastructure, and GDP. In Greece, recent deep cuts to public spending have similarly shrunk that economy by approximately 20 percent, increasing unemployment significantly and reducing public services (see Sassen 2015).

Such interregional comparisons are already anticipated in the postcolonial literature. Illuminating instead the structural relationships between labor, industrial and postindustrial production, and the dialectic of advanced capitalism at both the center and the periphery of the world system (Wolf 1982), postcolonial theory addresses less the narrow concerns of Keynesians and anti-Keynesians (cf. Keynes 1937; Von Hayek 1994)—those advocates of public spending versus austerity, respectively—focusing instead on the

mutual entanglements between core and periphery. In so doing Euro-American modernity is reframed in terms of “both a universal project and a host of parochial emplacements” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011: 6; cf. Lewis 2011) suggesting the centrality of exclusion and marginality in the production of centers (see, e.g., Bayart 2000).

If extremes of inequality, the rise of mass indebtedness, and new forms of precarity (symptoms of a rapacious financialization) are dilemmas of our neoliberal present, the withdrawal of certain benefits not only marks a refusal of care, it also denotes a growing insistence on a stark separation between public and private domains—in itself a mark of neoliberalism. Yet, as feminist theory has long insisted, the private realm always operates as a complement to the market (see Amrute this issue; Engels 1971; Rubin 1975; Federici 2004). As such, arguably the politics of withholding social assistance derives, in part, from a wanton appropriation of the Aristotelian distinction between private and public life. For critics of welfare, who understand welfare to take the form of state handouts, material need is equated with the *oikos*—the realm of “mere life,” of pure animal need, and appetites—which ought to be subordinated to the domain of politics as a sphere of freedom and virtue (cf. Weeks 2013, *pace* Arendt 1993, 1998, 2006). Such powerful organizing schemas do little, however, to reconcile the intersections and overlaps between private and public domains, schemas much in need of disruption.

Beyond the formal domain—in spheres of affective labor, informal, and marginal work—new strategies are required for reconciling an increasingly wide gulf between want, desire, and human well-being. Yet even in the face of new forms of global violence, inequity, poverty, and racism, as Jane Bennett (2001: 8; cf. Sumner 1996) notes, there is still a space for a “marvelous erupting amid the everyday.” It is to such joyous eruptions in the midst of want that the contributors to this collection turn in theorizing human security in the face of precarity and “wageless life” (see, e.g., Standing 2011; Denning 2010). At the same time, if welfare, in its most capacious sense, can be variously defined as the good, as interest, or as a life lived well, increasingly, human viability is shaped by discourses of *self*-preservation, *self*-care, and *self*-imposed austerity (see, e.g., Makhulu 2015). Not unrelated to arguments about so-called colorblindness (cf. Alexander 2010; see also Gilroy 2002), which rest on the deniability of any collective obligation to address racism, “post-welfarism” denies the structural causes of inequality, instead arguing for self-responsibilization.

These are challenging times given the rise of neo-conservatism, the new racism, and a whole raft of antifeminist and anti-queer politics. Such

“isms” come with new forms of risk and vulnerability that beg the questions: What are the possible foundations of adequate welfare or well-being? Are the demands of our present such that we should focus on efforts to care for the self and care for others *beyond* the state as in the case of post-Fordist Italy in what has been described as the turn to a “national gift economy” (Muehlebach 2011, 2012)? What insights are afforded by considering the texture of contemporary life in a region whose growth and decline have depended on the economy of coal mining, where engagements with former institutions and solidarities might be seen as a mode of sensory attunement to the past and future (Peterson this issue)? What about care of the planet in the face of the Anthropocene? How are care of the self and care of the Earth brought together to define new concepts of welfare and the human (see Bauer and Bhan this issue)? What might be achieved by destabilizing the sequencing of Fordism and post-Fordism in a place like South Africa where Fordism and the welfarism that went with it were always already deeply exclusionary, playing to the white supremacy of the apartheid state and thereby defining the human via the logics of racism (Barchiesi this issue)? Or, for those still engaged in wage work, what are the new precarities that attend work in the mines and within industrial employment generally in a time of contingency and multiple dependencies? Most basically, how might we think about the reproduction of life itself, both as a practice of infant-welfare and as a vexed site of the production of future viable labor, and the world of work—conceived with the aim of creating surplus value—that the nurturing of future viable labor always presumes (see Amrute this issue)? We might question the degree to which new forms of corporate governance or responsibility redefine a sense of the good in the effort to manage illness in the workforce or, indeed, to calculate the actuarial relationship of profit and loss in the face of South Africa’s HIV/AIDS epidemic (see Rajak this issue). Finally, redounding on questions of welfare, conventionally understood, that is, in the provision of public housing, what might be discerned about the relationship between human welfare and infrastructure at a time of infrastructural neglect and breakdown, particularly in the United States (see Fennell this issue)? These are some of the many questions pertaining to the matter of human welfare that this special issue seeks to explore.

Note

- 1 “Sequestration” rhetoric is de facto quite misleading because it tends to conflate reductions to the *existing* budget and the limiting of annual increases—a point that Republicans and Democrats are only too keen to elide.

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