“Selling Work-First”

Introduction

Common sense is not something rigid and stationary, but is in continuous transformation, becoming enriched with scientific notions and philosophical opinions that have entered into common circulation. —Antonio Gramsci, 1985, 421

PERHAPS the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason. —Thomas Paine, Common Sense, 1791

Have you heard about the Republican and the Democrat who were locked in the White House for 20 years? They agreed to reform welfare. During the 1976 presidential campaign, Republican Ronald Reagan’s stump speech introduced a story about a Cadillac-driving welfare queen from Chicago: “She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards. . . . She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over $150,000.” Reagan’s comments brought welfare criticism into the national spotlight. Over a decade later, Democratic candidate
William Jefferson Clinton made a campaign pledge to “end welfare as we know it.” Though efforts were made along the way, the convergence of Republican and Democratic platforms culminated in the 1996 welfare reform that was passed by a Republican Congress and Democratic president. Indeed, over those 20 years it seems that nearly everyone came to agree that welfare produced an unacceptable state of affairs. In an age where political partisanship and social polarization are the norm, we can learn a great deal from occasions when opposing agendas coalesce around shared ideas. In this case there are lessons to be gleaned about one of the most powerful tools in the arsenal of an institution—common sense.

People have both local and extra-local reasons for doing what they do. By local I mean the everyday decisions that we make about our work and leisure lives. They may be based on interests such as personal preference, needs, or values. Local actions, however, are not completely isolated from the actions of others. To the extent that individual actions are coordinated with each other, we can glimpse the extra-local reasons for our actions—such as national identity, economic principles, social values, or, of course, common sense. These extra-local reasons account for the trends in societal behavior that sociologists notice—people’s participation in holidays or civil rights movements, for instance. When individuals do not see any clear self-interest in a situation, it is quite likely common sense that will lead to the course of action chosen. Nevertheless, the social power of common sense to marshal support and action, and the role of institutions in forging it, is routinely overlooked.

We assume that common sense originates on its own and is somehow natural. As with “street smarts,” it seems to us an innate dimension of intelligence rather than the adroit perception of and acclimation to distinctively contemporary rules of the street. In other words, we overlook that common sense on the streets of Brooklyn several hundred years ago would be anachronistic in the same location today. Yet, even this realization does not acknowledge the degree to which common sense is socially constructed in concrete and observable ways, often via social institutions.

*Selling Welfare Reform* is about the U.S. welfare institution’s efforts since the 1996 reform to convince poor families to buy into a new common sense about what welfare should be. The common sense of work-first, the dominant version of welfare since the reform, has not been an easy sell; it has required a massive overhaul of the way administrators, staff, and clients are treated. Still, there are some in each of these groups who do
not fully buy in: some caseworkers insist, “I’m not in this for the welfare reform, I’m in this to feed my children”; some clients claim that work-first is “creating a workforce of slave laborers.” These individuals notwithstanding, work-first, as a national institution, has been phenomenally successful in forging a new common sense among the general public. Research portrays unprecedented support for work-first among both caseworkers and clients.³ Political leaders and the news media herald the 1996 legislation as a monumental achievement that has succeeded in reducing welfare caseloads by over 50 percent.⁴

This book, however, is more concerned with understanding what was intended than in judging the extent to which the reform achieved what was intended. It will show where the current “common sense” of work-first originated, why it has come to dominate, and how it is conveyed to the poor families whose lives it affects. It certainly was not the prevailing way of thinking under the pre-1996 system. I will argue that the common sense of the work-first approach is best understood as neoliberal; it is a new (or neo) take on how to structure society, and welfare, according to principles of economic liberalism. Liberalism’s perhaps best-known variant is the laissez-faire approach to fostering “free markets” by limiting governmental involvement. This “neoliberal” approach is at odds with the preceding Keynesian philosophy that dominated U.S. welfare since the New Deal. Keynesianism, championed by British economist John Maynard Keynes, advocated governmental protectionism for working people and markets.

Understood in this context, the selling of work-first common sense to those who would presumably buy into it is a creative enterprise. It enlists the innovative energies of social entrepreneurs to re-envision welfare. At the same time, however, work-first has a destructive element as it dismantles the prior work of Keynesian social engineers. In this changing of the guard, the inevitability of power is apparent. Macrostructural ideologies about how best to structure society are at odds; and in this case there is a clear victor. Though the ongoing battle between opposing liberal and protectionist meta-philosophies is a necessary backdrop for understanding common sense at the welfare office, it is not at this level that this book largely focuses. It is an instructive case study of institutional change and an opportunity to examine the structural power dynamics that institutions uphold. Most of all, however, this is a study of the way local and extra-local interests merge in the production of the nation’s foremost welfare program for poor families. To the extent that I am
successful, I will provide a window into the everyday lives of administrators, caseworkers, and clients in the nationally exemplary work-first program that developed in East County, New York. As I hope to illustrate, understanding their work and experiences requires attention to both local and extra-local ingredients of the common sense that is forged at the welfare office.

A Rising Star: Welfare Reform in East County

Welfare reform in East County was conceived in the back of a Toyota as local movers and shakers returned from a conference on curbing the spread of illegitimate births and welfare dependency. Less than two decades after Reagan’s campaign stump speech about Cadillac-driving welfare queens gave voice to a groundswell of anti-welfare sentiment, public administrators in East County set out to devise a way to reform the unpopular system. According to Roger, one of the top administrators in East County, “we could see the writing on the wall. . . . You keep your ear to the ground. You’ve got a new governor, a new president, Clinton, who made a big deal about how welfare reform was going to happen. You know something is going to happen and you know it’s going to emphasize work. You just don’t know how it’s going to sort of settle in.” There was a sense of urgency and a need to hit the ground running so as to be well-prepared by the time the federal government passed binding reform legislation. It was the calm before the storm that would become the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996. This would replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and set a new course for the nation’s primary cash assistance (welfare) program for poor families.

Roger, who eventually became director of East County’s program, recalls the years just prior to 1996 as a time of excitement and innovation in which synergy among local social entrepreneurs was aglow.

Starting our program was a highlight. I will always remember that as such a creative time, because we had a lot of energy, a lot of enthusiasm. We worked great together to create something from nothing. What’s not to like about that? We weren’t necessarily building on something; we weren’t having to fix something. We had a new building, we had new employees, we had a new direction! It was fun.
The idea behind East County’s program, and behind the national legislation that would follow within a few years, was that of work-first, or moving a large percentage of TANF recipients into work and work-related activities as quickly as possible. As a result, welfare services should not focus on long-term training, human resource development, or income maintenance. Rather, workforce preparation should involve activities that are “authentic and replicate to the greatest extent possible actual labor force conditions.”

Work-first was a change from previous approaches that had emphasized an entitlement of poor families to a safety net below which they would not be allowed to fall and long-term developmental programs, some of which had even paid for community college. As might be anticipated, East County’s program at first faced daily challenges from those who saw value in the previous approach. Roger recounts:

Sometimes it was a real challenge. If you were being asked by a quote unquote “liberal” group, what they were saying was basically to the effect of “isn’t this awful that you are making all these people work?” . . . People on the other side of the political aisle felt that welfare reform was terrible, that we were hurting people who already had tough lives, and making people work in unpaid work experience [workfare] was a terrible thing. And there were a lot of articles about all right what you are going to have is an increase in the prison population, an increase in food bank problems, all that kind of stuff—none of which ever happened. But the idea was that this was just such a terrible punitive system.

As Roger recalls, he had to diffuse this carefully. After all, this was not an extremist position; “I understood the thinking” and “I really had a lot of respect for people who wanted to help other people, and that’s what you were getting there—people who were trying to step up and help people, and sometimes they were right and we were doing things wrong.” He admitted, “I understood because I used to feel that same way. . . I grew up in the ‘60s.” “Looking at the [professional] things I had done before, I was certainly of that bent and I would never call myself a conservative now, I don’t know what I would call myself.”

Though Roger had not switched political parties, the common sense from which he viewed welfare had changed. In the midst of national and state discussions and excitement, he recalled: “You really start seeing it in a different way. You really start seeing yourself more as someone who
should be encouraging work as opposed to just making sure people get their benefits and get out of the way. That probably doesn’t sound like a big thing but it was a big thing.” As he explains, this forced him to re-think his position on requiring labor market participation.

Work had been sort of the bad thing before. It was like you don’t want to make anyone work in a minimum-wage job. And I totally changed my mind about that. When you really think about it, I worked at minimum-wage jobs. That’s how I learned all the basic work skills that everybody is still complaining that people don’t have, not just people on welfare, kids out of school. All of the basic stuff about being a professional at work, getting to work on time, knowing how to interact with your supervisor, being consistent, even going to work, you know those kinds of things. That’s how you learn that and a lot of these folks had never experienced that. So I kind of changed my mind about the value of work, even if it was minimum wage, or even if it was what was then called “unpaid work experience” [workfare].

Though work-first seemed like a pro-business answer to dissatisfaction with the existing welfare system, gaining the support of the business community was not without its own challenges.

They didn’t think that welfare reform was a big economic development issue. And I will never forget the look on their face when I explained to them that [taxes will go up if people stay on the rolls after the federal five-year limit], and I remember one of them looked up and said, “We need to make sure people know about this!” We were trying to get employers to see that this is to their benefit too, to give people a chance. . . . Some were really good, but the hard thing is—and this is still the balance—you want to get an employer who will be willing to take a chance on somebody, but you really have to send them some great people to begin with or they will never come back to you. And that is so hard; they need the soft skills, showing up on time etc. . . . So that was always a very delicate balance to keep.

Faced with a public relations challenge in relating to both potential employers and advocates for the poor, East County’s work-first program set out on a marketing campaign. “We knew what we wanted to do, the
concept was there, and we knew why we wanted to do it. The challenge was then to sell it to the county.” Strategizing with the marketing department at a local community college and relying on the work of a marketing person on staff, East County’s program “held receptions for everything.”

We had a lot of local publicity when we opened. We did that intentionally because we wanted to raise awareness; . . . we would emphasize both the educational and welfare reform portion. . . . We had a lot of innovative programming and one of our staff members had a background in marketing and I would be ready to just do it, but she would say, “No, you have to get some information out about this.” That’s why we had receptions for everything. I will never look at punch and cookies again. So I guess that’s how [we were discovered]. Because it brought awareness. And it was also the topic of the time. People were talking about welfare reform. We would get the press coming to us and say, “I need a story about such and such, what do you have?” So it really worked both ways. And we really did feel like we had some interesting things we were doing.

In addition to public attention, the program was performing as planned. The director recalls, “We had great numbers, we really did, our numbers were great.”

Stemming from the publicity and outcomes, others took note. A neighboring county executive unexpectedly flattered East County in her state of the county speech, by declaring, “Why can’t we be more like East County?” As the director recalls, “Then we started getting all these phone calls.” A national organization invited East County to present on the specifics of what they were doing, “and that kind of got us out there and we got a lot more calls of people interested in what we were doing. There were people from all over the country.” This led to a much broader than expected level of national outreach. Roger beams:

We did a lot of presentations at the national level. We had some ideas of what other places were doing from attending national conferences, but mostly people came to us. . . . We had a lot of people come and visit us. We did presentations, wrote an article in a journal, so we were aware of what other people were doing, but it was more because when they came to us we would ask them, “Well, how do you do this?” And if we heard a good idea, we would steal it.
All of this attention led to visits from the governor and from the president’s secretary of transportation. East County also received accolades as a “bold proposal” from then Health and Human Services Secretary, Donna Shalala. Even an international delegation from Namibia visited before they set out to replicate parts of East County’s program. Somewhat humbly the director commented, “I think once you are out there, it just happens.”

In the midst of East County’s rise to prominence, national welfare reform was enacted. The PRWORA was signed into law by President Clinton on August 22, 1996, with bipartisan support. It was activated on July 1, 1997, and replaced the AFDC program and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program with TANF. Combining the scopes of its predecessors, TANF’s overall mission was to “provide assistance and work opportunities to needy families by granting states the federal funds and wide flexibility to develop and implement their own welfare programs.” Thus, East County was well-situated. Abolishing family aid’s status as a guaranteed entitlement to all with low enough means, welfare reform also transformed the national welfare system by limiting lifetime receipt of benefits to five years, requiring participation in work-related activities as a condition of assistance, and giving states discretion over eligibility and program content through a new system of block grant funding.

The East County experience is instructive on multiple levels. First, it was a nationally recognized prototype on which other locales based their reform design. Second, the East County case highlights the paramount role of common sense in the institutionalization of a neoliberal perspective. Common sense has increased in importance in large part because the top-down hierarchy of the AFDC system, which had limited local discretion, was replaced. The decentralized structure of TANF, also known as the style of new federalism, allows states and localities to create their own welfare programs as long as they are within the PRWORA legislation’s guidelines. This has tremendous implications for the role and nature of common sense in welfare offices. In effect, local innovators rely on it to borrow “what makes sense” from other communities with whom they interact. Given a national mandate to innovate locally, and a plethora of “good ideas” that administrators can “steal” from other programs, direct influence of local caseworkers and administrators on each other has become the rule rather than the exception. Advances in travel and digital publication have enhanced these dynamics. The result is a climate that Jamie Peck has described as “fast
policy transfer,” in which local-level welfare offices like East County are “no longer merely the territorial outposts of a centrally managed system, they now have a role in making policy as well as implementing it.” Some have even pointed to innovative local communities such as East County as the likely sites of future transnational trends and “policy fix[es].” In this sense, East County’s visit from a Namibian delegation is not so surprising. In the estimation of some, governments all over the world are considering whether to follow America’s lead. As just one example of this, the Blair government moved to emulate U.S. welfare policy in its efforts to retool British welfare for a global economy. It even went so far as to lecture its more resistant European counterparts in a fashion Peck succinctly describes as, “this is the future; get used to it.”

TANF, however, is more of a work in progress than a finished policy. Even though TANF was enacted following years of local experimentation with AFDC waiver demonstration programs, much about the actual implementation of TANF has changed in the years between PRWORA’s passage in 1996 and its reauthorization in 2006. As with the East County experience, states and localities continue to tweak their programs, apply for grants to support auxiliary services, and strive to find better ways to meet federal benchmarking goals given local fiscal priorities. Work-first common sense, thus, is itself continuing to evolve.

As we forge ahead in the early twenty-first century, East County’s administrators are joined by social scientists, policymakers, and policy implementers as they continue to wrestle with the dilemma of how to restructure welfare in the midst of a global labor market. Relatively little has stayed the same in the more than 70 years since the U.S. welfare state was born in the wake of the Great Depression. It is true that the economy has been relatively stable between the time of the Depression and now in that we have not hit the same economic straits since, but the playing field that has emerged in the wake of the New Deal is hardly comparable to the labor market its policies were intended to stabilize. Downsizing, outsourcing, off-shoring, the rise of contingent labor—these problems hardly seem solvable within a solely domestic paradigm. Poverty, employment, livelihood, and social safety nets are all connected to international flows of commerce and population.

In the creation and re-creation of welfare states, several questions arise. What basic human rights should be guaranteed? Whose interests and needs should the welfare state ultimately serve? Who should bear the brunt of economic risk in the new international economy?
What role should the federal, state, and local governments play in matters of family structure, gender, race, income inequities, and class animosities? These questions are at the heart of welfare office common sense.

**Work-First Common Sense**

*Selling Welfare Reform* addresses the questions that continue to loom about the future of welfare by charting the complex and contradictory ways in which the dominant approach to welfare since 1996—work-first—responds to these questions. Under the mantra, “get a job, any job, then get a better job,” the “work-first” approach to welfare presumes a stepping stone career ladder in the low wage economy. It de-emphasizes education, training, and even career advancement under the pretext that motivating people to take any job they can get will jumpstart the long and arduous process of climbing the career ladder from the very bottom up. This, however, is a politically contentious assumption and there is little evidence to suggest that the work-first approach does anything more than leave poor parents permanently stranded in the low wage labor market. Regardless of which side of the debate is correct, it is clear that welfare as presently deployed opts not to create an infrastructure to support a “high road approach” to economic prosperity that would press career and wage advancement for poor workers as immediate goals. Rather, across nearly all states, welfare implementers have adopted what some have labeled a “low road/work-first approach,” committed to propelling clients into low wage jobs. Work-first proponents are undaunted by the potential vulnerability of their clients to exploitation by a global labor market seeking the cheapest and most flexible labor possible.

As with all policy decisions, work-first has political winners and losers. The existing literature on welfare reform to date has been nothing short of precedent setting in its volume and detail. The literature is also broad in scope. It includes a wealth of insightful program evaluations, caseload analyses, surveys of clients and workers, organizational case studies, and national statistical reports. Yet, most of the literature takes the “common sense” of work-first for granted. As a result, the implications work-first holds for the wider political economy of poverty in the global labor market have been largely unprobed. This book journeys to the core of these dynamics—examining welfare caseworkers at the many welfare offices and outposts that comprise one county’s welfare system, as well as the
applicants and clients of this program—to explore the complex, subtle, and obvious ways in which the post-1996 work-first approach charts a new course for welfare states in the era of globalization.

Work-first common sense is as much about destruction as it is about the creation of new and innovative program implementation. In order to move policy and society toward the neoliberal ideals of work-first, the barriers to this model must be undermined and removed. Preparing poor mothers to think about and sell their labor power as a true commodity requires elimination of the family protections that allow them to stay out of the labor market to raise their children. Shifting personal responsibility for economic survival to individuals requires an attack on union protections and entitlements to aid. Encouraging employers to utilize clients as low wage workers entails dismantling the previous bureaucracy that protected workers from market exploitation. The new structure must be nimble enough to respond to employers’ demands at the expense of uniform practice. Coaxing clients to buy into low wage jobs even against their own prerogative necessitates a contortion of client-directed social work ethos. Vital to the ability to carry out all of these necessary destructions is a dismantling of centralized federalism and the creation of space for market-driven policy innovation on the local level. The flourishing of local entrepreneurial spirit occurs at the expense of central planning and guarantees of equity. In themselves, these transitions are neither good nor bad, but they are political.

I am concerned with uncovering the dynamics of political economy underlying the common sense that prevails in work-first programs across the nation. These dynamics have a tremendous effect on the daily lives of needy families who have little if any political clout. In addition, the absence of a critical perspective on work-first’s common sense constitutes a significant absence in the literature to date. It has precluded comprehensive debate about the precedents the PRWORA sets for future welfare policy. Analytically, debates have been stalled at an impasse of diametrically opposed abstractions about whether poverty is due to structural or individual failings; in the current tenor of the time, individual arguments tend to win out. In this context, there is little room for concrete analysis of the ways in which neoliberal policy affects the material interests of all workers. Scholars and policymakers still do not have a clear picture of what caseworkers and administrators do to form the foundation of our contemporary social safety net and to enforce a neoliberal approach to social well-being. For this reason, it is critical to examine the transition
and reconfiguration of the welfare state through the eyes of the workers and clients who live it, and with attention to their material interests.

Finally, a wealth of scholarship focuses on institutions and the role they play in society. Recently, there has been growing interest, particularly in the area of institutional ethnography, in the subtle and complex ways in which local and extra-local interests interact within modern institutions. I see the social construction of common sense as crucial to this work. Here I draw on the work of other institutional ethnographers to make the case for the analytical and theoretical importance of common sense in our understanding of how social power dynamics and politics organize our everyday lives.

Politicizing Work-First Common Sense

In the midst of heated debates about welfare reform in the late 1990s, the Washington Post published a political cartoon that speaks to the heart of the macropolitics behind the welfare office. It features a downcast and bedraggled woman leading three children by the hand with a fourth on her back, through the streets of an urban jungle of looming office buildings, presumably searching for a job. A conversation can be heard from several stories up in a skyscraper labeled “Corporate Welfare” that towers overhead: “Don’t worry. . . . The idea is to get rid of welfare as they know it, not as we know it.” Corporate welfare in the forms of government subsidies and tax breaks to large and often transnational employers have garnered public concern as of late because their expenses in the billions dwarf the amount spent on welfare aid for the poor. This choice of diction invokes President Bill Clinton’s campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it” and makes it clear that it is welfare for poor families that TANF ended, not welfare for corporations. Quite to the contrary, the welfare reform seems to have expanded the aegis of corporate welfare.

The article accompanying the Post’s cartoon, entitled “Making Public Assistance a Private Enterprise,” suggests a new angle to corporate welfare—what I will call corporate-centered welfare. The idea is to make welfare for the poor also beneficial to corporate interests—a new frontier for profit that TANF adds to existing corporate welfare policies. Though the article deals with one aspect of this, allowing the privatization of welfare services so that commercial entities can turn a profit from welfare reform, it is not the only one. Throughout this book I will discuss corporate-centered welfare by examining the ways in which the work-first approach to
welfare serves to empower investment-savvy employers who are entrepreneurial enough to take advantage. This is an inherently political aspect of work-first that shifts the balance of social power away from poor families and toward employers.

Certainly at other points in U.S. history “work-first” would have been considered harsh, punitive, and draconian because it rejects food, shelter, and economic security as basic rights. Yet today, in the midst of global economic restructuring, one need only look at the vast majority of research literature and media publicity to see that the assumptions of work-first—that the free market is politically neutral and that only the poor who commit themselves to participation in the labor market are deserving of aid—are taken for granted as obvious and self-evident. I question whether these assumptions are themselves part of the ideological vanguard of an effort to dismantle welfare as a safety net and transform it into something else—a corporate-centered approach to welfare. This would not be the first time:

From Lochner to twenty-first century neoliberalism, opponents of a welfare state have aimed not simply to defend impartial market forces against government distortion, but rather to enlist the state in constructing a particular substantive version of the market in which the partisan interests of an elite appear as natural and necessary to the public interest.

The thesis of this book is that the 1996 welfare reform is an attempt to adapt the U.S. welfare system to the demands of the global economy by employing a neoliberal rather than labor protectionist strategy.

The ascendancy of neoliberal thinking, as one of the most dominant contemporary U.S. frames of interpretation, has pre-empted sustained skepticism of its underlying assumptions. It has also served to crowd out other perspectives to the point where, in the words of Gregory Albo, “central policy disputes in Washington [now] occur totally on the terrain of neoliberalism.” Embedded within welfare offices on the local level as well, the neoliberal approach carries a valence of being “natural” and “common sense.” The result is a phenomenon also observed by institutional ethnographer Ellen Pence in her research on domestic violence response systems:

Workers’ tasks are shaped by certain prevailing features of the system, features so common to workers that they begin to see them as natural,
as the way things are done—and in some odd way—as the only way they could be done, rather than as planned procedures and rules developed by individuals ensuring certain ideological ways of interpreting and acting on a case.20

But how did the neoliberal approach to globalization come to be adopted as the dominant strategy for adapting the U.S. welfare state to a global economy and how did it find its way to East County and other local communities?

Policy solutions do not originate in a vacuum. Sociologists such as Paul Burstein and scholars of public administration such as Anthony Downs argue that organizations and cultural constructs are critical to understanding policy domains and the inner workings of policy creation.21 Public policy analyst John Kingdon has presented a similar argument through his identification of what he calls “policy windows” that must open in order for a policy change to occur.22 According to Kingdon, a policy window is “an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions or to push attention to their special problems.”23 Such windows open due to national mood swings or administrative turnover. When they do, Kingdon asserts that it is policy entrepreneurs who take advantage of the opportunity.24 But how is it that policy windows open?

Members of society, like policymakers and implementers, approach society from a variety of standpoints. Common sense represents a convergence of these perspectives in certain places. I focus throughout this book on how a characteristically neoliberal common sense is socially constructed through a variety of means in the welfare office. To understand how this is possible, however, requires familiarity with certain societal trends. These trends both created the policy window for the 1996 welfare reform and fostered a common sense that begins not with lived experience of poverty but with suburbanization, racial politics, and globalization. More important, making sense of the daily experiences of local caseworkers and clients has required me to understand these larger trends.

The concentration of poverty in cities has led to suburban speculation about the deficiencies of poor urban families. Gender is an implicit part of this speculation, since women and children make up the vast majority of welfare families. Politics of race date back to before the New Deal, but popular understanding of the significance of race has changed. Race plays a considerable role in the common sense of dealing with welfare since
black families comprise a disproportionate amount of the TANF caseload. Finally, dominant perspectives on how to adapt to the global economy are influential because the work-first approach is one of integrating poor families into the labor market. Labor market integration is seen as a way to both adjust to a global labor market and facilitate its growth.

Suburban Common Sense

The critiques of welfare’s clientele that led to the 1996 reform are built on representations of the poor framed by ghetto ethnographies and individualizing discourse. This is evident in legislative debate and policy, which have served to “reinforce the idea that the family, not public or political institutions or the workplace, [is] the primary institutional location for intervention into poor life.” This perspective is not necessarily shared by work-first clients. Rather, the idea is grounded in and born of a homogeneous suburban common sense that was created by government actions such as the post–World War II Interstate Highway Act of 1956 and the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (including the GI bill and federal mortgage interest deduction). These bills not only provided roadways for suburban sprawl but also supplied 8 million free college educations and 16 million new suburban homesteads as they radically transformed the U.S. landscape. Supported by pro-suburbanization policies, suburbs grew “forty times as fast as cities” in the 1950s, and the national suburban population more than doubled between 1950 and 1970. With 83 percent of total national population growth occurring in suburbs in this time period, by 1970 more U.S. citizens lived in suburbs than in cities or rural areas, “a first for any society in recorded history.” Labor too was a part of this suburbanization of America as employers joined the exodus to these newly opening spaces. Suburbs became the main location of employers for the nation’s cities by the 1970s and became home to two-thirds of the nation’s manufacturing industry by the early 1980s.

The widespread suburbanization of the post–World War II period enabled “white flight” from cities just as more southern blacks were migrating to cities in search of jobs. The racial exclusions that accompanied suburbanization also created a nationally homogeneous suburban white population—what Michael Lind termed “the white overclass.” Describing this same phenomenon in Gramscian terms, Matthew Ruben asserts that a national hegemony was created, by virtue not only of its “high degree of sociopolitical homogeneity,” but also because its own outlook and life
experiences took over center stage and “had come to appear universal” or national. This completed “a three-way equation among location, whiteness, and American-ness” that re-constructed urban dwellers, especially non-whites, as “the other” and as aberrant to the extent that they failed to follow suburban white norms. This suburban hegemonic establishment ushered in the rise of neoliberalism. It joined conceptualizations of the two-parent, heterosexual, Standard North American Family (SNAF) with what Paul Luken and Suzanne Vaughan describe as the Standard American Home (SAH) to universalize the perspective and sensibilities of white, middle-class, suburban, nuclear families. In the suburbanized-neoliberal-context, “The nationalized suburban position is the necessary point of observation and enunciation for urban diagnosis, providing a vantage point from which the city may be apprehended precisely as a site of national otherness.”

The construction of a suburban, hegemonic, white, American, middle class (SHWAM) not only preceded the 1996 welfare reform; it also made the reform politically feasible. Previous attempts at wide-ranging welfare reform had been hindered, stalled, and even blocked by chronic and persisting “helping conundrums.” Policy expert David Ellwood examined how four basic values seem to underlie much of the philosophical and political rhetoric about poverty. The values of autonomy of the individual, the virtue of work, the primacy of the family, and a desire to provide economic security to all members of the community can never be mutually satisfied in a single poverty policy. With the rise of the SHWAM, autonomy and work were elevated over security, particularly economic security for aberrant urban others. Once urban welfare clients came to be seen as “others,” the SHWAM was able to mentally overcome the conundrums that had stalled previous reforms and be at peace with its decision to adapt a “tough love” approach toward the perceived “dysfunctionality” of poor urban families.

In the context of suburban hegemony, welfare reform appears as an endeavor of neocolonialism, an attempt not to end poverty but to “make them more like us.” Ironically, though, the SHWAM hegemony is also implicated in the creation of this otherness. As jobs followed the white majority out to the suburbs, they left a vacuum in inner cities. The ascendancy of classical liberal individualism and liberal feminism to mainstream sensibilities has been credited with overall national rises in female labor force participation and female-headed households. However, for urban African American women the narrative also includes the structural unemployment and resulting dearth of “marriageable” African-American men, precipitated by many of the same social forces that concurrently
brought about the rise of the suburbs. The suburban majority did not experience the daily realities of increasing joblessness among urban men and subsequent female-centered adjustment of families, as did urban families of color. As such, there is little to prevent SHWAM families from viewing poverty, joblessness, and single-parent households as the fault of those on whom such familial restructuring fell. This has allowed a critical mass of public opinion to support a shift in welfare policy from anti-poverty to anti-behavior.

As social commentators have noted, “today’s political rhetoric is vastly more concerned with ending welfare dependency than with ameliorating poverty.” The debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s which was led by such neoconservative thinkers as Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead, revived Oscar Lewis’s “culture of poverty” concept of the 1960s. A new thesis emerged of a stereotypically black urban “underclass” that was “isolated” and “dislocated” from the rest of society, rife with moral weakness, and in need of “tough love” attempts to shock them out of a “culture of dependency.” These arguments were based on suburban subjectivities and found fertile ground in the minds of suburbanites who had not experienced the flight of jobs out of cities just as they arrived, as did many nonwhite urbanites. Thus, a collusion of suburban hegemonic subjectivity and popular discourse of dependency paved the way for the common sense of tough love. This was also a new chapter in the ongoing politics of race and economic transformation.

The Politics of Race

Though publicly downplayed, race was also a substantial subtext of the 1996 reform. Welfare was a key political wedge that spanned the 1960s through the 1980s largely because of its racial and gender undertones. Built on the foundations of a growing literature that scrutinized an “underclass” of black Americans—helped along by stereotypes such as that of the Cadillac-driving black welfare queen—race had become so entangled in the issue of poverty that any mention of welfare conjured images of blackness in the public eye. Nicholas Lemann’s observations in 1986 epitomized this cognitive connection when he observed, “President Reagan has commissioned a major study of welfare reform, which is a polite way of asking what we should do about the black underclass.”

In the 1960s, an increasing number of blacks gained access to the welfare roles due to socially liberal efforts to ensure that the considerable
population of poor blacks was not systematically excluded from governmental safety nets. As a result, socially liberal Democrats who had supported Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs and racial equality in welfare became associated with poorer African-American and Latino voters. Given the growing concentration of nonwhites on welfare, the initial intent of the program to protect white mothers from having to leave their children to work in menial labor lost its political support. In addition, women of all colors were increasingly entering the labor market, which gave rise to a new way of thinking about the appropriateness of work that was critical to the undermining of support for AFDC. As some vocalized, “Wage earners get no supplement when they have another child, so why should welfare recipients?” In the tradition of what Mike Davis terms “the have revolution” of the 1970s, in which white middle-class suburbanites reacted to recession, high oil prices, inflation, and increased economic insecurity in part by obsessing about the “pathologies of the poor,” the work-first approach, and TANF in general, has been “based on the assumption that the cure for poverty is participation in the paid labor force for all able-bodied adults, including single mothers of infants and young and/or disabled children.” Collectively these political changes made AFDC “politically indefensible at worst, [and] unattractive at best, even among many committed to women’s equality (or racial justice).”

A backlash began in the 1970s with Nixon’s “silent majority” of white voters who, though they would never vocalize it for fear of being seen as racist, resented having their tax monies going to support the disproportionately nonwhite urban poor. Corresponding with Reagan’s caricature of Cadillac-driving black welfare queens, Republicans increasingly used welfare as a wedge issue in the 1980s in an effort to separate white voters from the Democratic Party. By the time of the 1992 presidential campaign, Democrats were in a bind such that they felt forced to do something to disassociate themselves and their welfare policies from race politics. As Ann Shola Orloff explains:

Democrat were put in the unenviable position of defending a deeply flawed welfare program in order to defend poor people and a safety net, and lost support among traditional white working-class constituencies, among others, because of it.

With rising popularity making a reform seem inevitable, both Republicans and Democrats pressed welfare as a key issue in their efforts to
attract voters. In the process, the politically centrist Democratic Leadership Council, led by Bill Clinton, sought to “inoculate” its party from Republican attacks by both pledging to “end welfare as we know it” and embarking on a gender- and color-blind approach to poverty.45

The color-blind approach that dominated public discourse hence was a product of political wrangling as much as anything else. Conservatives who claimed that “anything was better than the old system” of welfare “were really interested in . . . politically exploiting the issue and painting the Democrats as defenders of ‘amoral’ black women in ghettos.”46 In response, social liberals rationalized a color-blind welfare reform as necessary, since it provided “a way of banishing race, and racialized poverty from the political lexicon.”47 For both parties, welfare reform was as much about poverty as it was about navigating race politics to secure the vote of middle-class white (SHW AM) voters. Democrats had lost their support to Republicans following Great Society programs aimed at helping inner-city nonwhite poor.48 Corresponding with broader postmodern trends in thinking, the reform rhetoric assumed that “all human beings are the same under the skin.” This rhetoric claimed that “seeing racial differences is to be racist [just as] pointing out gender differences is to be sexist.”49

Contemporary domestic politics contributed immensely to the character of the 1996 welfare reform, but so did a legacy of imperial colonialism. Under the imperial paradigm, the extent of generosity offered by welfare states has historically varied by dynamics of race and class.50 In short, racial homogeneity at home has historically allowed for the fostering of national solidarity through generous welfare policies in nations such as Britain.51 In such cases, providing a strong, centralized, and deeply penetrating welfare state was politically feasible because it included only white residents of the homeland, excluding nonwhite members of the kingdom living abroad. Thus, it left colonialism’s racial hegemony unchallenged.52 This dynamic not only helps to explain Scandinavian nations that have not been hindered by racial cleavages in their construction of generous universal welfare states, but it also points out one possible cause of the comparatively un-generous policies of the United States.53

Unlike the British and French empires, both of which comprised considerable nonwhite majorities that lived abroad from the homeland, the particularities of the United States’ involvement in slave trade and southern agrarian economy led to a minority nonwhite population (approximately 10-12 percent) that lived domestically within the homeland at the time of welfare-state creation in the 1930s.54 In global comparison, Robert
Lieberman notes, “Where the boundaries of imperial and racial citizenship were more permeable, the possibilities for social policy were restricted by the possibility of racial inclusion.” In other words, the United States did not adopt a strong and generous centralized welfare system because it would have risked disrupting the nation’s established racial hierarchy.

In such countries, the problem of distinguishing between those who were and were not entitled to consideration as members of the solidaristic national community was a more complicated political and administrative enterprise, since one could not simply presume that social and national boundaries coincided. Rather, welfare states in these countries were more likely to take complex institutional forms, involving decentralized decision making and administration rather than constructing direct links between citizens and the state.

This framework for understanding the dynamics between race and the welfare state provides an explanation for the emergence of racially exclusive New Deal policies in the United States that systematically excluded certain predominantly black employment sectors (excluding over three-fifths of the black labor force from social insurance in the process) and took shape amidst a complexity of north-south racial politics. New Deal policies were thus “built on racial rather than class hierarchy” through a “cross-class coalition” that united disparate white constituencies of white northern urban workers, white southern workers, and the white southern planter-class elite.

As Lieberman documents, in both the United States and Britain, race became “one of the central axes around which the politics of welfare revolved” since the construction of cross-class coalitions was predicated upon racial animosities. Britons were united across class levels against “a racially defined threat from outside,” while in the United States, whites of various classes banded together against an internal racial threat to create the welfare state of the 1930s. The result in the United States was a welfare state that did not design inclusive and universal national approaches, opting instead for policies that were exclusionary and decentralized in nature. Contrary to contemporary associations of blackness with welfare, a large part of U.S. welfare history has thus involved overlooking the plight of poor blacks such that poverty was portrayed as a white problem. As such, the majority of efforts to alleviate poverty were directed at whites (see table 1.1). It was not until the 1960s that black migration to northern
<table>
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| Colonial Period to 1935 | Mother’s Pensions—state and locally created policies | • local implementers strictly interpreted eligibility to exclude black and/or unmarried women to protect their programs from public criticism  
  • programs often not established in areas with high black populations |
| 1935                | New Deal Programs—Federal Aid to Dependent Children | • agricultural and domestic workers who were disproportionately Black were left out of new deal provisions due to legislative compromise between northern and southern legislators  
  • states retained rights to determine eligibility and used standard of "suitable home" to exclude Black and unmarried women  
  • seasonal employment policies cut people, largely Black, off welfare rolls during harvest season  
  • higher standard budgets used for Whites then Blacks assumed that Blacks “could get by” with less |
| 1947                | ADC Rules Tightened—discrimination reduced due to more uniformed eligibility rules | • state administrators reframed image of clients from deserving White mothers to lazy Black mothers of questionable morality  
  • sexual behavior and childbearing of stereotypically Black recipients linked in public discourse to increasing costs to taxpayers  
  • "suitable home" was determined often on the basis of whether a child was illegitimate, Blacks had a higher rate of illegitimacy |
| 1960s               | Great Society and Civil Rights—push for equal rights in social policies | • county officials cut Blacks off welfare rolls or suspended benefits when they participated in voter registration  
  • “suitable home” regulations made more stringent in southern states  
  • states slow to comply with 1964 Civil Rights Act which prohibited discrimination in federally funded programs  
  • "man in the house rules" defined any man with whom a mother had sexual relations as a “substitute father” thus making children ineligible for aid - struck down by Supreme Court King V. Smith 1968  
  • welfare rights leaders’ homes were subject to gunfire in the south  
  • great society programs created in 1960's not implemented in states until 1970s |
| 1996                | TANF—created by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act | • neoliberal Personal Responsibility approach denies or minimizes contemporary significance of overt and institutional racism in welfare case management and the labor market  
  • greater discretion returned to states and local caseworkers to determine how the legislation applies to individuals, this allows for racial stereotypes and biases to be incorporated into implementation  
  • more punitive policies enacted in areas with higher Black concentration  
  • racial disparities in caseload declines, case management services, and employment outcomes |

cities, urban riots, and the civil rights movement forced black poverty into the public spotlight. However, simultaneous with the shift from focus on white to black poverty, news attention given to the poor became less sympathetic and African Americans became associated with the “undeserving poor.” This shift in media attention has increased in importance as the post-1996 return to local discretion elevates the role of public attitudes. Negative stereotypes are more consequential not only among frontline workers, their administrators, and state officials, but also among the wider public to whom they cater and who are less likely to be sympathetic to or support aid for poor families, especially those of color.

This association between race and laziness or unworthiness of aid is more than merely a suspicion or paranoia. Survey research reveals that believing that welfare recipients are black is correlated with a higher likelihood to blame “lack of effort on their part” and lack of desire to work rather than “circumstances beyond their control.” Such evidence suggests that the ability of black clients to manage their own image in the welfare office may be compromised by media portrayals that have predominantly associated the underclass of lazy welfare recipients with blackness. In one examination of news magazine stories between 1950 and 1992, for instance, researcher Martin Gilens found that people pictured in stories on the “underclass” were nearly universally “black,” as opposed to other more sympathetic stories on poverty, welfare, and hunger which, though having appreciably higher proportions of nonwhites, were more racially diverse.

This depiction of a large, nearly all black underclass prevailed despite estimates that only 5 percent of all Americans are thought to belong to an “underclass” and only 59 percent of these are African Americans. The result is a process of media representation in which the “undeserving poor” have been represented as mostly black, and racial stereotypes are perpetuated that lessen public support for anti-poverty programs in general, and assistance for blacks in poverty in particular.

Given these broad historical developments, America’s historical racism has changed but not dissipated. “Although America is much less segregated and much less outwardly racist than it was a half-century ago, race remains one of the deepest and most intractable dividing lines of contemporary American politics.” While the poverty rate overall has fallen in recent years to 10 percent for all families in 2003, it has remained disproportionately high among blacks as compared to whites (28.7 percent versus 8.9 percent among families with children under 18, and 42.8 percent versus 28.1 percent among female headed families with children
These statistics keep race in the public eye even if official welfare policy is color-blind. Race is a major factor as well in the common sense that has developed to address the problem of welfare in a global economy.

Politics of Globalization

Work-first common sense embraces a neoliberal vision of globalization in which the government focuses less on protecting its people than on encouraging them to “sink or swim” in the global labor market. This represents a monumental shift away from the common sense of earlier eras in which national welfare and solidarity were higher priorities than global commerce. This shift, however, was not an overnight process. The rise of neoliberalism as a strategy for globalization and the favoring of corporate-centered welfare are rooted in massive structural, political, and economic changes. These have brought about a new way of seeing government as less viable in its Keynesian role, that is, as a steward and protector of national economy and culture. Because of neoliberal globalization, and its attendant international competition and rising public debt, old models of state guardianship have come to be seen as antiquated. A consensus has grown around the necessity that governments become leaner and meaner to adapt to global market forces. These forces do not guarantee job stability and do not tolerate the inefficiencies of social protections for families and workers.

Globalization is implicated by the very nature of East County as depicted in its local newspapers and common locution. At its geographic center is a rust-belt city, built on the manufacturing eruption of the industrial revolution and modernity. As with the other major northeastern urban centers with declining populations, out-migrations have created a vacuum, drawing the youth to other areas of opportunity in the south and overseas. Those left behind are disproportionately the retiring baby boomers who have managed to keep their jobs or patch together employment until retirement, all the while pining for their distantly relocated children and grandchildren. The literature has much to say about the trajectory of well-paying industrial jobs—out of cities to suburbs, from the rust belt to the sun belt, and from expensive U.S. labor markets to overseas havens from taxes and organized labor.

Yet, the critical piece of this scholarship for the purpose of the present analysis is the ideology that has arisen to instruct people on how exactly
to deal with this tumultuous labor market. People can no longer expect to
spend a career with the same company, and no career training—not even
computers—is a surefire means to a lifelong livelihood. In this context,
work-first seems like a cost-effective stance for government to take, since
job-training investments run a high likelihood of proving futile. Further,
government is seen as having little choice in the matter, since its former
toolbox of economy boosters and job creators has proven ineffectual in
the new economy. Governments can no longer guarantee to stabilize com-
munities by luring business investments from elsewhere with promises of
tax breaks. This is clear from the stream of failed attempts by U.S. sena-
tors, representatives, and state assembly members to lure businesses to
East County only to be undercut by cheaper labor elsewhere, or by other
senators making better bids.

Community anchor businesses prove far too elusive and their capital
is far too mobile. They are eager to rush on to the next blighted commu-
nity offering to sacrifice just a little bit more for even a few less jobs than
were offered to the community before them. In this climate, downsized,
outsourced, and outmoded professional workers are taught in job-search
workshops to embrace the challenge, accept the risk inherent in the global
economy, and actively manage their careers so that they are always mak-
ing themselves marketable to the next potential employer. Unfortunately,
this will continue until their current job inevitably expires.\textsuperscript{69} In the case of
welfare in the post-reform era, a distant cousin to this discourse emerges
in the neoliberal work-first rhetoric that similarly individualizes the bur-
den of global dynamics.

But how did globalization come to mean the complex and volatile mix-
ture that is today both praised for the exchanges of culture and goods it
produces and blamed for unemployment, pollution, and destabilization
of daily life?\textsuperscript{70} As James Midgley points out, globalization is blamed for
these social ills “when they are not in fact the result of some objective
‘thing’ exerting its own, malevolent volition but the result of a complex
set of human activities with intended and unintended consequences.”\textsuperscript{71} If
indeed the problem is not international capitalism, but rather “interna-
tional predatory capitalism” as some have suggested, then understanding
the genesis and evolution of this approach is critical to gauging and ad-
dressing its influence at the welfare office.\textsuperscript{72}

In the era leading to the end of World War II, working classes had
flocked to the state for protection and business rallied around the market
to represent their interests.\textsuperscript{73} The rise in neoliberal popularity, however,
Selling Work-First

has enabled a welfare reform that merges capital interests with that of the state in the name of more efficient service. Simultaneously, the reform has provoked a condition in which those whom it affects most directly—clients, caseworkers, administrators, and taxpayers—are “unsure as to what their interests actually are, let alone how to realize them.” This condition, which Mark Blyth labels “Knightian uncertainty” following from the work of Frank Knight, is a by-product of both the complexity of contemporary society and the persuasive power of neoliberal ideas. Figuring out where our personal interests lie requires examining the origins of the neoliberal common-sense approach to globalization.

The words of Karl Polanyi regarding the 1800s are instructive for understanding the emergence of today’s neoliberalism: “While in imagination the nineteenth century was engaged in constructing the liberal utopia, in reality it was handing over things to a definite number of concrete institutions the mechanisms of which ruled the day.” This history can be seen to repeat itself, though with contemporary nuance. The present contours of the neoliberal approach to global economy similarly result from a series of twentieth-century decisions, events, and “handing[s] over” of reins that were initially intended to create a utopia. These began with the July 1944 United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference held in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. While this conference laid a foundation for facilitated global trade by establishing a system of rules, institutions, and procedures to regulate the international monetary system, its interests were more along the lines of ensuring stability of nations, economies, and working citizens in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II.

In the process, however, the imbalance of power accorded to the United States as an up-and-coming postwar economic and military superpower set the stage for “a hegemonic monetary regime centered on the dollar.” It also set a precedent for international leadership and normalized the existence of a global regime that would “act as a sort of governance mechanism between sovereign states.” A shift away from nation-centered economic growth and planning seemed a logical next step. Planning based on capital accumulation through international investment rather than national well-being became popular. This was part of a broader transnationalization of financial capital and weakening of national control over monetary policy similar to the “haute finance” identified by Polanyi in the early twentieth century.

There were numerous milestones for this late-twentieth-century shift. In 1971, the Nixon administration decided to abandon the gold standard to
facilitate the international flow of currency. Keynesian approaches to centralized economic planning within nations were replaced with neoliberal economic policies that were favored by the west, particularly in the 1980s. Prominent in this paradigm was the notion popularized by business writers (such as Kenichi Ohmae 1991, 1996) as the declining relevance of the nation-state in an era in which global markets are the last word. Things would work out for the best and most prosperous if everyone—regardless of race, gender, and caregiving responsibilities—pursued their own economic interests internationally and governments focused on helping them do so.

In this age of highly mobile global capital, and an expendable international labor force, within-nation solidarity and welfare supports were no longer needed to maintain profitability for policy-influencing elites. The tenor of the time in some ways embodies a version of the cosmopolitan perspective on globalization, in which national loyalties and prejudices are rejected in favor of recognizing commonality among the world’s peoples. In this version, however, global elites often have more in common, both in terms of material interests and lifestyle, with the elites in other countries than with the poor and working classes in their own nations. Seeking to augment their continued accumulation of capital, elites have enlisted the aid of the state through massive lobbying efforts. Accordingly, “rejecting the libertarianism and hard-line laissez-faire ideology of the right, neoliberalism embraces efficiency and ‘good government’ by shifting public resources away from the promotion of social equality and toward the promotion of targeted economic growth.” In the course of this transition Bretton Woods institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (and in 1995 the World Trade Organization), are increasingly used to promote the interests of powerful western commercial financial institutions across the globe. In addition, U.S. corporations have begun to restructure their employment strategies in accordance with neoliberal approaches to capital accumulation.

Since “the Great U-Turn” that Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone identified in 1988, elites seeking continued capital accumulation have adopted a “low road” approach to adapting to the global market. This entails a hyper-focus on cutting labor costs through “the breakup of internal labor markets and seniority systems, the increased use of ‘contingent labor’ through subcontracting and through the employment of temps, casuals, part-timers, and contract workers, the enforcement of pay freezes and two-tier pay systems, and increased hostility to organized labor.” In this new paradigm, “good business climate” equals “no social wage.”
Racialized minorities and overseas workers and corporations are no longer threatening competitors used to galvanize national solidarity. Offshoring often involves "increasingly yielding fundamental technology, manufacturing management experience, and design and engineering skills to what, in another era [of nation-centered common sense], would have been considered the competition." In the emergent restructuring, racial distinctions that had characterized early imperial colonialism have faded in importance and the lines of class are being re-emphasized. The new adversary of the U.S. capital elite includes those who would stand in the way of the economic agenda of restoring "growth" and renewing "corporate dynamism" through a strategy designed to, in the words of Nixon's assistant secretary of labor, "zap labor" in order to undermine labor union action.

Collectively, neoliberal views on globalization, racial politics, and suburban experiences form the backdrop for welfare reform's policy window and the everyday experience of common sense at the welfare office.

The Approach and Organization of the Book

Whether it is suburban opinions, racial politics, or globalizing logics, people are certainly influenced by the discourses they encounter. However, we also retain a considerable degree of personal autonomy in our lives. The prevailing common sense does not force us to behave in certain ways. Nevertheless, it is the standard by which we judge ourselves and our work and evaluate what we do. Though we may reject it, we remain accountable to common sense, and our resistance is in relation to its status quo. In this way, common sense influences the ways in which we organize our lives. Given the complexity of today's world and modern forms of communication by which we are exposed to discourse, it is seldom, if ever, possible to comprehensively understand the factors that influence our daily lives by looking only at local factors. Social reality is continually reproduced by what we say, do, and write, but the "we" involved is now much broader than in the past.

The approach I take to exploring the construction and politics of common sense is inspired by the work of Dorothy E. Smith. She incorporates this understanding of the interaction between local and extra-local within institutional ethnography. Like Smith, I am hopeful that this book provides an accessible means to understanding how what seems like naturally occurring logic in our daily lives, and in this case in the welfare office, is
“Selling Work-First”

more a product of how we decide to organize society. By “we” I mean the aggregate of local people like you or me who both live our lives locally and become sources of “extra-local” influence on others in other locations when we write, do, or say something that influences them (whether we ever meet them or not). By the same token, I am conscious of how others influence us from their extra-local standpoints.

Power is not necessarily a part of the relationship between our local life and its extra-local influences, though it often is. For instance, this is the case in work-first when federal officials mandate that state and local officials behave in certain ways, or when policymakers regulate the labor-market participation of local families. Smith’s aim is to improve our understanding of how our daily lives are involved in power dynamics by working to make clear how social organization links people’s everyday world with generalized social relations. Though some ways in which we organize society are blatant—such as military ranks, zoning laws, and organizational hierarchies—others are much more subtle. Institutional Ethnography is designed to attend to the subtle ways that society is organized through the flow of consciousness and ideas from person to person and across local and extra-local locations. These ideas and common-sense assumptions become the rules that we navigate in our daily lives, whether we choose to follow them or not. In aggregate, these rules are held in place by ruling relations—that is, by the interpersonal bonds that encourage us to play along. This may involve the relationships between a boss and employee or a wife and husband. It may also be seen in the fear of gossip that keeps new parents always in line with societal expectations of child rearing.

Smith asserts that it is possible to empirically investigate the connections between local people and the extra-local influences on their lives by paying close attention to the mediums by which people share ideas and adopt them. In practice, this often involves: interviewing people about what they are thinking when they do things; examining the texts, forms, letters, and books that people engage as they do things; and following up on the connections people make by then going to the extra-local sources they reveal to see what in turn has influenced them. In this case I begin with caseworkers and clients. I trace their work through texts and interviews to the work of caseworkers in other locations within the welfare bureaucracy, to administrators, and ultimately to thoughts and communications, or discourse, of people who are beyond East County. The result resembles a map that extends from people’s lives outward to the social
organization of work-first common sense. Though I begin from people’s daily lives and extend outward, I present my findings in reverse for the sake of clarity. The following chapters closely examine the details of the work-first institution of today by beginning with the extra-local creation of work-first common sense and then tracing it as it is sold to administrators, caseworkers, and eventually, to poor families. See table 1.2 for a summary of chapter findings.

I systematically demonstrate how the neoliberal restructuring of thinking about welfare in extra-local places is connected with the local day-to-day welfare office practices in East County’s TANF program. I begin by examining the work of local entrepreneurs who created work-first in East County. I demonstrate how the common sense that guided their local work was guided by national politics, including a well-organized lobbying effort. I then examine how this common sense was institutionalized through performance measures and technology. From there, I explore how work-first has transformed the common sense of case management and changed caseworker understandings of how best to deal with the needs of poor families. Finally, I address the process of buying into the ideology of work-first and the reasons for resistance among administrators, caseworkers, and clients.

Chapter 2 sets forth the concept of corporate-centered welfare as a lens through which the neoliberal restructuring of U.S. welfare can be understood. I explore how the values of corporate-centered welfare have entered into the thinking of local welfare leaders who have pioneered work-first.
In addition, I seek to frame this “common sense” in the context of the wider politics of neoliberal restructuring.

Chapter 3 broadens the field of analysis by turning to the federal, state, and county infrastructure behind welfare reform’s work-first approach. It explores how the logic of the welfare reform’s performance measures corresponds with the neoliberal paradigm of the new federalism. I explore how the reform has increased both worker accountability and worker vulnerability by creating contingent government workers, by imposing performance measures, and by retreating from client rights.

Chapter 4 allows for a closer scrutiny of how welfare technology has been restructured according to work-first priorities and how, given organizational restructuring, surveillance has become a case management strategy. This case management style fosters work-first “common sense,” as caseworkers sort and inspect clients. This surveillance serves to undermine client labor market bargaining power and divert clients from aid, because it establishes employers as gatekeepers to aid and also as central customers of work-first’s employee screening and conditioning functions. I argue that the restructuring of work-first technology further acts to prioritize the interests of employers and the state over those of clients. Thus, it simultaneously redefines the customers of welfare and acts to ensure a steady supply of labor for the increasingly unstable work of the new economy.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth analysis of how the daily function of human services casework has changed to accommodate neoliberal sensibilities. Work-first abandons a structural understanding of poverty for an individualistic approach. Chapter 5 offers an examination of the cognitive work involved in maintaining this neoliberal and individualistic approach to case management. National discourse and administrative efforts to coordinate discretion among caseworkers frame work-first as a form of moral work. They describe casework in terms of “tough love” and offer caseworkers a chance to take a stand against welfare abuses of fraud and dependency. Ideological buy-in to work-first serves to reinforce a neoliberal agenda in the minds of both clients and staff. Ideological buy-in on both of these accounts is perhaps most evident in instances where work-first clients become caseworkers themselves after participating in the program. The neoliberal framework views any type of work, regardless of how degrading and undercompensated, as good, thus fostering self-exploitation in the hopes of ultimately achieving prosperity. By encouraging poor adults to internalize a moral compass that steers them away from all
dependency as wrong, work-first also teaches clients who internalize its philosophy to blame themselves rather than the institution should they fail in the labor market, as most do.

Chapter 6 examines how the stages of work-first processing employed in East County demand that both motivated and unencumbered mothers enter the labor force. The work-first approach to welfare reform is used in such highly regarded programs as Wisconsin’s W-2 and California’s GAIN programs, and it involves a series of pre-aid work preparation requirements that must be completed successfully to gain entry to the welfare rolls. However, not all clients successfully enter the rolls. Many are diverted and still others must repeat the intake processing indefinitely. Diversion and struggles to gain admittance to welfare are aspects of work-first’s gauntlet approach to weeding out families and only selectively providing benefits. In the process, applicants learn that a disembodied and unencumbered worker becomes a pre-requisite for aid and that the economic roles of poor families are now valued over their caregiving and child-rearing potential.

Relationships between clients and staff become strained in the course of selling work-first at the welfare office. Caseworkers seek to change behavior of clients via punishments and rewards. They also engage in various forms of evasion, such as with respect to the relevance of gender and race within the labor market. The intent is to pacify clients whose first reaction is to resist work-first, sometimes violently. In Chapter 7, I approach these forms of everyday resistance as personal and political protests against what is problematic about work-first from the standpoint of everyday life. I use the disjuncture between work-first as anticipated and as experienced as a starting point from which to offer recommendations for future policy reform. To this end, I offer suggestions for future research, legal action, legislation, and grassroots strategy.

Chapter 8 holistically assesses the post-reform regime in an effort to ascertain which aspects of work-first common sense are most problematic and which are worth building upon. Though the problems that neoliberalism presents are considerable, retreating to pre-reform welfare is not an option. It would neither gain traction in the contemporary popularity of neoliberal political thinking nor empower poor families and their workers. There is, however, much to improve upon if welfare is to transition from pro-work to pro-worker in an honest, good faith attempt to live up to the rhetoric of the new welfare contract. We have much to learn from our own history and the experiences of other nations.