



The Forum

Chuck and Pierre at the Welfare Office¹

Javier Auyero²

After an ethnographic vignette that encapsulates the typical trajectory of an applicant to welfare benefits observed during a year of collaborative fieldwork, this brief essay will put to work Tilly's notion of "invisible elbow" and Bourdieu's understanding of waiting as a strategy of power in order to clarify the cultural dynamics of a welfare waiting room in the age of neoliberalism.

KEY WORDS: poverty; power; social interaction; temporal routine; the state; welfare.

INTRODUCTION

In an insightful and provocative essay published in the pages of this journal, Charles Tilly (1996) proposed the notion of "invisible elbows" to put forth his understanding of how social life works. "Coming home from the grocery store," he writes:

arms overflowing with food-filled bags, you wedge yourself against the doorjamb, somehow free a hand to open the kitchen door, enter the house, then nudge the door closed with your elbow. Because elbows are not prehensile and, in this situation, not visible either, you sometimes slam the door smartly, sometimes swing the door halfway closed, sometimes missed completely on the first pass, and sometimes—responding to one of these earlier calamities—spill groceries all over the kitchen floor. (1996:593)

The systematic properties of actors and things involved in this familiar vignette (door, elbow, groceries, and, not least, shoppers) constrain the outcomes of the "attempted nudge." Tilly adds, "[o]ver many trips to the grocery store, which of these outcomes occurs forms a frequency distribution with stable probabilities modified by learning. With practice, you may get your door-closing average up to .900" (1996:593). And therein lies Tilly's key insight: erroneous interactions and unanticipated consequences pervade social interactions, but so do "error correction and responses, sometimes almost

¹ *Editor's Note:* The Forum Mailbox will return in the next issue. In the meantime, if you wish to respond to this essay or any piece appearing in *Sociological Forum*, please write to me at cerulo@rci.rutgers.edu. We regularly publish responses of approximately 500 words or less.

² Sociology Department, University of Texas at Austin, 2501 University, Burdine Hall, Room 564, Austin, Texas 78712; e-mail: auyero@austin.utexas.edu.

1 instantaneous, to unexpected outcomes” (1996:593). Collectively, mistakes and
 2 rectifications, learning and practice, produce “systematic, durable social struc-
 3 ture” (1996:592), even in the absence of a unified, conscious intention.

4 In one of his last books, Pierre Bourdieu (2000:228) wrote that we should
 5 think about waiting as one of the privileged ways of experiencing the effects
 6 of power. “Making people wait ... delaying without destroying hope ...
 7 adjourning without totally disappointing” are, according to Bourdieu, integral
 8 parts of the workings of domination.

9 Although the links between power and time have been thoroughly exam-
 10 ined in the social sciences, waiting (as both temporal region and as an activity
 11 with intricate relationships with the constitution and reproduction of submis-
 12 sion) remains, with few exceptions, “hardly mapped and badly documented”
 13 (Schweizer, 2008:1). Understandably so: attention to waiting and its (apparent)
 14 related inaction goes against the social science’s preferred focus on individual
 15 and collective action, on the event as that “historical fact that leaves a unique
 16 and singular trace, one that marks history by its particular and inimitable con-
 17 sequences” (Dumoulin, quoted in Tarrow, 1996:587). Writing precisely about
 18 this absence, Pierre Bourdieu (2000:228) asserts that we need to “catalogue,
 19 and analyze, all the behaviors associated with the exercise of power over other
 20 people’s time both on the side of the powerful (adjourning, deferring, delaying,
 21 raising false hopes, or conversely, rushing, taking by surprise) and on the side
 22 of the ‘patient’ as they say in the medical universe, one of the sites par excel-
 23 lence of anxious, powerless waiting.”

24 Tilly’s “invisible elbow” and Bourdieu’s understanding of waiting as a
 25 strategy of power are fruitful analytical tools to make sense of the endless
 26 delays experienced by poor people at the welfare office of the city of Buenos
 27 Aires. After an ethnographic vignette that encapsulates the typical trajectory
 28 of an applicant to welfare benefits observed during a year of collaborative
 29 fieldwork,³ this brief essay will put both notions to work in order to clarify
 30 the cultural dynamics of a welfare waiting room in the age of neoliberalism. I
 31 will argue, by way of demonstration, that invisible elbows are at work in usu-
 32 ally underfunded welfare agencies where minor “street-level bureaucrats” (Lip-
 33 sky, 1980) interact with the poor on a daily basis. There, prolonged, arbitrary,
 34 and uncertain waiting manufacture, without anybody’s explicit intention, the
 35 routine (though always partial) compliance of the dispossessed.

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38 **OBSERVATIONS**

39

40 Jessica is 19 years old, born and raised in Argentina. We met her at the
 41 welfare office in the City of Buenos Aires. She came to renew her housing sub-
 42 sidy. She has been waiting for four hours and, like most of the people we
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45 ³ “The Forum” has been active in publishing essays based on such accounts. See, for example,
 Larson (2009).

1 talked to, she does not know if and when she will receive the benefit. “You
2 come here and you don’t know at what time you’ll leave.” As we are speaking
3 with her, a state agent tells her, from the counter and in a very teacher-like
4 manner, “stay seated.” She turns to us and says: “If they are in a good mood,
5 they treat you well.”

6 Like many other recipients of the housing subsidy, Jessica first heard
7 about the state benefit from a social worker who was present when state offi-
8 cials and policemen were evicting her and 15 other families with children (“we
9 were all women, with children in tow”) from her room of “wood and metal
10 shingles” in a squatter settlement. She still remembers the day of the eviction
11 as a highly traumatic experience.

12 Jessica thinks the welfare benefit is an “aid because with the scavenging, I
13 can’t pay for a room. These days, it costs at least \$450 a month (roughly
14 US\$110) and with the scavenging I collect for the day to day, I can’t pay the
15 rent with it.” If she is lucky, the subsidy will cover six months of rent in a
16 run-down hotel in the city. After those six months, she will be homeless; the
17 subsidy cannot be renewed.

18 Echoing what we heard countless times, Jessica says that obtaining the
19 benefit takes “a long time ... you never know when they will pay you.” Like
20 many others, she conceives of the waiting time as an indicator of the clients’
21 perseverance and thus of their “real need.” If you “really need,” she and oth-
22 ers believe, “you will wait for a long time,” you will “keep coming,” and you
23 will show state agents you are worthy of aid. This is how she puts it: “you
24 have to wait, wait, and wait They will not give it to you until you come
25 here three, four, five, ten times, to check, to talk, to ask, with this official and
26 then with the other official”

27 Like many people we talked to, Jessica compares this long and uncertain
28 wait to that of the public hospital. In a statement that captures one prominent
29 way in which poor people relate to the state, she adds: “*Here and in the hospi-
30 tal, they tell you the same thing, ‘sit down and wait’ ... and (what do you do?),
31 you sit down and wait. And if you have some money, you buy a soda and a
32 sandwich*” (my emphasis).

33 In the city of Buenos Aires, state-mandated evictions from illegally occu-
34 pied residences and from public spaces have skyrocketed since the beginning
35 of the decade due to the rapid increase in real estate prices since 2001, increas-
36 ing gentrification in selected areas of the city, and changes in the judiciary sys-
37 tem that shorten the civil judicial process. When the current mayor of Buenos
38 Aires took office, there were squatters and/or homeless individuals living in
39 approximately 160 public spaces, mostly in parks and plazas. In less than a
40 year, the government “cleaned” (a word used by officials) almost 100 of them
41 (*Perfil*, November 16, 2008). Evictions from private and state-owned buildings
42 also increased at a fast rate. In 2006, 34 persons per day were evicted; a year
43 later, this figure more than doubled: 76 persons a day were removed from the
44 places they were living (*Clarín*, June 2004, 2007). By the end of 2007, 6,700
45 families had been evicted in the City of Buenos Aires (*Clarín*, September 7,

1 2007). According to the city government, there has been a 300% increase in
2 evictions during 2007 (CELS, 2009:322). During 2008, evictions proceeded at
3 an even faster pace of one judiciary-ordered eviction per day. Denying their
4 speed but acknowledging their occurrence, the city government chief of staff
5 put it this way: “*Slowly, and silently*, evictions are being carried out” (*Pági-*
6 *nal*2, May 4, 2009, my emphasis). Not surprisingly, the number of people liv-
7 ing in the streets doubled in less than a year, from roughly 1,000 to 2,000
8 persons sleeping in the streets on any given night (*Página*2, May 4, 2009). As
9 the city government rolls out its punitive arm with rapidly increasing evictions,
10 it simultaneously rolls in its welfare hand: the budget of the Instituto de Vivi-
11 enda de la Ciudad (the agency in charge of state-funded housing) decreased
12 four-fold, from 500 million pesos to 120 million pesos in one year (2009).

13 For illustrative purposes, let us move to a typical eviction scene. Along-
14 side police personnel and judicial officials who constitute the repressive right
15 hand of the state, there are other agents that make up the state’s left hand
16 (Bourdieu, 1999), that is, officials from the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social
17 (Welfare Agency). Drawing on informal interviews with state officials, field-
18 work at the welfare agency in the City of Buenos Aires, and on newspaper
19 coverage, I uncovered a basic logic in the welfare cases I reviewed. In essence,
20 welfare agents, who are usually less noticeable than repressive forces, make
21 themselves present during most evictions in order to encourage the recently
22 expelled to apply for a “housing subsidy” available from the state welfare
23 agency. The cash amount of this subsidy varies according to the number of
24 members in the household, but it usually covers no more than six months of
25 rent in one of the rundown hotels in the city. On occasion, the subsidy is uti-
26 lized as a bribe to entice intruders to leave the illegally occupied property. The
27 reader should note the irony: in a way that reminds us of the operation of a
28 racketeer, the state produces a danger (in evicting, it creates a homeless popu-
29 lation) and then, at a price, offers a (precarious and limited) shield against it
30 (Tilly, 1985). The price to be paid is often the silent submission of the poor to
31 the mandates of the state (“sit and wait”).

32 In the immediate aftermath of an eviction, a new ordeal begins for the
33 now homeless population—one that is shared by others who, for a variety of
34 reasons, end up in the welfare office, and by those at the lower rungs of the
35 social and cultural space who have to interact with many a state agency. In a
36 manner that closely resembles the trials and tribulations experienced by Josef
37 K in Kafka’s *The Trial*, every time the dispossessed seeks a solution from the
38 welfare office to his or her pressing problems (from housing to food and medi-
39 cine), he or she is likely to become progressively entangled in the state’s web
40 of power—one composed of uncomfortable waiting rooms and corridors,
41 always changing paperwork, and long and unpredictable delays. During this
42 ordeal, elbows poor people do not quite see (impossible requests, grueling run-
43 abouts, sudden and unexplained cancellations, etc.) produce outcomes nobody
44 explicitly intends. In the opening vignette of this essay, Jessica captures well
45 the manufacturing of what I would call “patients of the state”: she and others

1 like her just “sit and wait” and “keep coming, and wait, wait, wait” while
 2 experiencing endless postponements produced by bureaucratic mistakes and
 3 inattentions (and random rectifications) and by the perennial underfunding of
 4 the presumably benign arm of the state.

5 Let’s listen to Mónica. We met her at the waiting room of the welfare
 6 office with her two-year-old in tow. She was waiting for a resolution on her
 7 housing subsidy. This was her third time in the office. A national from Para-
 8 guay, Mónica is a legal resident of Argentina. She had been evicted the previ-
 9 ous month from a squatter house and had been receiving the subsidy for a
 10 month but “one day they didn’t give me any more. They told me that I had
 11 incomplete documents. They wanted a certified letter of eviction on part of the
 12 owner.” Her story portrays the kind of precarious itinerant life lived by many
 13 of the people we met at the office. It also captures, in elementary (and absurd)
 14 detail, the workings of the state’s invisible elbows.

15
 16 M: I lived in a squatter house (casa tomada). I rented a room, because they didn’t want
 17 to rent to me with him (referring to her two-year-old son who is running around us)
 18 anywhere, they don’t like to rent with babies ... When they evicted us I had a friend
 19 who told me that I could move to her place, share the room with her until I found
 something else.

20 I: That’s how you arrived here?

21 M: Yes, because a man in the eviction told me to come here, that here they would help
 22 me rent something ...

23 I: And? That’s how you entered the housing program (Plan Habitacional)?

24 M: But they only gave it to me for the first month. Every time I came back they told
 25 me to come on another date, that the payment still wasn’t resolved.

26 I: What explanations did they give you?

27 M: At the beginning they told me that the day of payment for foreigners still wasn’t
 28 scheduled. But later they told me that they didn’t give it to me because I lacked
 29 documentation.

30 I: What documentation?

31 M: A letter. A certificate of eviction signed by the owner of the place where they evicted me
 32 from, which I never could obtain (emphasis that Mónica signaled with her hand).

33 I: Because ...?

34 M: Because I never met the owner.

35 I: In other words: first they evicted you, they recommended that you come here, they
 36 gave you a month of subsidy, and then they didn’t just stop paying you but they
 37 told you to bring a certificate of eviction after having evicted you?

38 M: Uh huh.

39
 40 In the limited space of this essay, I cannot provide a full description of
 41 the many interactions between the urban poor and the state we witnessed
 42 during the course of a year of team fieldwork (interactions that include
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1 injunctions—"sit down and wait," "stay seated"; friendly and not-so-friendly
2 advice—"come back in a month and we'll see"; but also human mistakes,
3 delays caused by computer crashes, errors in understanding state language,
4 etc.). Let me simply present one more story of an "exemplary waiter," a sort
5 of Odyssey's Penelope of the welfare office that typifies the many facets of the
6 shared experiences of waiting and that further exemplifies the invisible elbow's
7 cultural work.

8 In the back of the welfare office waiting room, 27-year-old Milagros plays
9 with two little children; one of them is her two-year-old son Joaquín. Milagros
10 is Peruvian (she arrived in Argentina more than five years ago) and she has
11 been "in this thing" (the way she refers to the paperwork at the welfare office)
12 for a year and a half. She is a beneficiary of two programs, a cash transfer
13 program known as Nuestras Familias and the housing subsidy. The housing
14 subsidy is "late," she tells us, "because there's no payday scheduled for for-
15 eigners."

16 She often walks to the welfare office—it is a mile and a half walk but it
17 saves her much needed cash. Since giving birth she cannot carry much weight
18 on her, so the days Joaquín's grandmother cannot babysit, Milagros has to
19 take the bus with him. The expensive bus fare is not the only reason she avoids
20 coming with him. Waiting, she says, is "boring and tiring" for her and her son.
21 Waiting, she adds, is "costly"—referring to the expenses she incurs every time
22 her son demands "something to drink or to eat" from the little stand located
23 in the back of the welfare area. In her nickel-and-dime life, a 30-cent bus ride
24 and a one-dollar treat are luxuries that she cannot afford. In this way, and in
25 many other respects, Milagros's story is not anecdotal. During one of our first
26 observations, a mother scolded her little daughter saying: "You are making me
27 spend a fortune. That's it. I'll buy you a chocolate milk in the after-
28 noon"—and dozens of interviewees told us stories along similar lines.

29 Milagros learned about the welfare benefits from a social worker at the
30 hospital where she gave birth. When she first attempted to apply, she came to
31 the welfare office at dawn. "At 4 AM, they were giving 30 slots, and I was
32 number 32. I thought they were going to attend [to] me, but they didn't." The
33 next day, she came "earlier ... at 11 PM (the night before). I waited outside
34 all night long but there was some sort of problem and they didn't open the
35 office that day. That was a long wait." She then waited three more months.
36 One day, she came back at noon and was told to come earlier in the morning.
37 She did the paperwork and received the housing subsidy for one month. Since
38 the owner of the apartment from whom she was renting "did not have every-
39 thing in order," her subsidy was terminated abruptly. She had to start the
40 paperwork all over again in order to receive two more installments—after
41 which she ceased to be eligible.

42 Milagros makes US\$9 per day taking care of an elderly couple and she
43 cannot afford to miss a day at work. When she comes to the welfare office,
44 she meets with friends, and they talk about how agents give them the "run-
45 around." "You feel despondent here (te desanimás)," she tells us, "because

1 they [welfare agents] tell you to come on day X. You ask for permission at
2 work and then you find out that they have not deposited the money. I lose
3 one day at work ... I think the aid is a good thing but ... well, I don't think
4 it's fair that they make you wait so long and that sometimes they make you
5 come here for nothing (te hacen venir al pedo) ... They tell you to come on
6 Monday, and then Wednesday, and then Friday ... and those are working
7 days."

8 Milagros does not know whether or not she will receive the subsidy
9 today. The last time she came to this office she "left with nothing" She felt
10 "impotent" and cried a lot at home, she tells us, but "*here I didn't say any-*
11 *thing*" (my emphasis). She desperately needs the aid the city government offers
12 to pay the rent and to feed her son.

13 Waiting, Milagros's story teaches us, is a process, not a one-shot event.
14 The overwhelming majority of the 89 people we interviewed at the welfare
15 agency's waiting room had gone through some version of what, to invoke
16 Joseph K again, one could call "the trial" of welfare. As Milagros's story of
17 endless hassles illustrates, this process is pervaded by uncertainty, arbitrariness,
18 and resulting frustration, much like Kafka's. The uncertainty and arbitrariness
19 engenders one particular subjective effect among those who need the
20 state to survive: they silently comply with the authorities' often capricious
21 commands. Milagros's one-line statement regarding what she did (or, better,
22 did not do) when forced to wait while suspended in uncertainty ("here I didn't
23 say anything"), and her feelings at the time ("despondent," "impotent"), summarize
24 the relationship between waiting and submission unearthed during our
25 fieldwork. Or as Jessica, cited at the beginning of this essay, puts it: "They tell
26 you to sit down and wait ... and you sit down and wait." Thus, far from
27 being simply a negative practice, a combination of words and deeds that
28 merely tell poor people that it is not yet their time, making people wait has
29 some "possible positive effects, even if these seem marginal at first sight"
30 (Foucault, 1979:23). Chief among these positive effects is the everyday manufacturing
31 of subjects who know that when dealing with state bureaucracies
32 they have to patiently comply with the seemingly arbitrary, ambiguous, and
33 always changing, state requirements, and act accordingly.

34 This is the appropriate place to recall that the Latin root of the word
35 patience, "the quality of being patient in suffering" according to the *Oxford*
36 *English Dictionary*, is pati—"to suffer, to endure." In the recursive interactions
37 with the state, poor people learn that they have to remain temporarily
38 neglected, unattended to, or postponed. True, patients comply because they do
39 not have an alternative; but they comply silently because they also learned that
40 there is no use in protesting publicly. If they are to obtain the much needed
41 "aid" (ayuda) (over the many months of fieldwork we never heard the word
42 "right"), they know they have to show they are worthy of aid, they know they
43 have to avoid making trouble, and they know they have to "keep coming and
44 wait, wait, wait." This implicit knowledge demonstrates that acts of cognition
45 are, simultaneously, acts of recognition of the established political order.

1 Over time, trips to the store and nudge attempts make us all better at
 2 closing the door with our elbows, Tilly says. Trips to state offices and interac-
 3 tions with state officials teach poor people that if they are to obtain some
 4 resource crucial to their survival, they will have to comply by waiting. On a
 5 daily basis, this form of domination recreates the existent dis-symmetry
 6 between urban denizens and state agents, and subordinates the former by rou-
 7 tinely “inducing anxieties, uncertainties, expectations, frustrations, wounds
 8 and humiliations” (Bourdieu, 2001:110).

9 Writing about the nineteenth-century English proletariat, Friedrich Engels
 10 describes a class that “knows no security in life,” a class that is a “play-ball to
 11 a thousand chances” (1973:139). Those waiting in the welfare office fit this
 12 description well. Their lives are constantly “on the edge” of disaster or in the
 13 midst of it—they have recently been evicted or they are about to be, they have
 14 just lost their jobs, they are seriously sick, their spouses recently left them with
 15 three or more small children to be cared for with no source of household
 16 income, and/or some combination of the above. Once they come into the wel-
 17 fare waiting room, the insecurity does not abate. Many of the individuals we
 18 met during the course of fieldwork describe their waiting in ways that echo
 19 Engels’s depiction of lives far away in time and place: “They kick us around
 20 like balls (Nos pelotean).” This simple statement encapsulates the pervasive
 21 uncertainty and arbitrariness of the lived experience of waiting. The over-
 22 whelming majority know when to come to the office (“the earlier the better”);
 23 most of them, however, do not know when they will leave: “I told my
 24 husband—I’m going to the welfare office ... don’t know when I’m coming
 25 back.” Indeed, uncertainty pervades both the amount of time they will spend
 26 there, as well as the outcome of the visit (More than half [64%] of our 89
 27 interviewees do not know if and/or when they will receive the benefit they
 28 came to ask for.) One is thus reminded of Barry Schwartz’s statement in his
 29 classic study of queuing: “Punitive sanctioning through the imposition of
 30 waiting is met in its most extreme forms when a person is not only kept
 31 waiting but is also kept ignorant as to how long he must wait” (1975:38; see
 32 also Comfort, 2008). In other words, in the indeterminate waiting that defines
 33 the interactions between poor people and the welfare bureaucracy, we witness
 34 the daily reproduction of a mode of domination founded “on the creation of
 35 a generalized and permanent state of insecurity” (Bourdieu, 1999:85). This
 36 insecurity forces the destitute into compliance with the state’s invisible elbows.

37

38

39 DISCUSSION

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41 The state agencies and agents we observed in the City of Buenos Aires do
 42 not place much emphasis on the “customs, habits, ways of acting and think-
 43 ing” (Foucault, 1991:209) of those in need. During the many hours of obser-
 44 vation and in formal interviews and informal conversations, I did not notice
 45 the attention to—nor the attempt to control—the most minute aspects of poor

1 people's behaviors; on governing their bodies and souls; on molding the "hab-
 2 its, behavior, or dispositions" on which the "rehabilitative function" of wel-
 3 fare in the United States has historically placed much emphasis (Goldberg,
 4 2007:3; also see Gilliom, 2001; Hays, 2003). Rather, the interactions with the
 5 state described here produce "economy and order" (i.e., government, in Fou-
 6 cault's sense) through innumerable acts of waiting. In the recurring encounters
 7 with the state, poor people learn through endless delays and arbitrary changes
 8 that they have to comply with the requirements of unpredictable agents.
 9 Subordinated to the operation of invisible elbows, they learn to be patients of
 10 the state.

11 The complex relationship between subordinated groups and the state has
 12 been the subject of much scrutiny in historical and ethnographic research (see,
 13 e.g., Bayat, 1997; Chatterjee, 2006; Goldberg, 2007; Roy, 1994; Wedeen, 1999).
 14 For the most part, it has drawn the attention of empirical investigation when it
 15 has broken down—that is, when it has erupted in episodes of mass contention
 16 or explosive insurgency (for a classic statement on the subject, see Joseph and
 17 Nugent, 1994) and/or when it has called for the deployment of the state's
 18 visible iron fist. Tilly's elbow-based understanding of social interaction and
 19 Bourdieu's approach to waiting as an experience of domination allow us to
 20 see other, less obvious, forms of engagement of the state with subaltern group-
 21 s—such as those routine, ordinary ones that are at work in the welfare office.

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Change to bold italic	~ under matter to be changed	<i>bf+ital</i>
Change to lower case	Ɔ	<i>lc</i>
Insert superscript	√	√ under character e.g. √
Insert subscript	^	^ over character e.g. ^
Insert full stop	⊙	⊙
Insert comma	↵	↵
Insert single quotation marks	↙ ↘	↙ ↘
Insert double quotation marks	↵ ↶	↵ ↶
Insert hyphen	=	=
Start new paragraph	¶	¶
Transpose	┌┐	┌┐
Close up	linking  characters	
Insert or substitute space between characters or words	#	#
Reduce space between characters or words	˘	˘