

CENTER FOR AMERICAN POLITICAL STUDIES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



Made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Center for American Political Studies offers **Dissertation Fellowships (Research OR Completion) on the Study of the American Republic**. Eligible applications must contain dissertation topics with a direct engagement with the history, principles, and politics of the American Republic. These fellowships are inclusive to students inside the field of political science as well as History, English and American Literature, Philosophy, American Civilization, Sociology, Economics, Anthropology, and others - whose presence would enrich the collective discussion of enduring political, historical, and philosophical themes of the American Republic.

PROGRAM ON THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC DISSERTATION FELLOWS, 2016-17

Elizabeth Katz (History, G-4)

"Courting American Families: The Creation, Spread, and Evolution of Courts of Domestic Relations, 1910-1969"

My dissertation examines the creation, spread, and evolution of courts of domestic relations (sometimes called "family courts") beginning in the early twentieth century. Originally designed to address criminal desertion and nonsupport, domestic relations courts expanded over time to encompass divorce, child custody, child support, and sometimes domestic violence, adoption, and other family-related matters. Today these courts hear more than five million new cases per year, with nearly a third of American adults subject to a child support order at some point (totaling \$35 billion per year in payments). For many people, a family-related court proceeding is their most direct, intimate, and important contact with the state. Despite these courts' significance, historical treatment of their development and impact is sparse. My project seeks to understand how the personal and professional motives of lawyers, judges, probation officers, and other professionals influenced the jurisdictional and geographical growth of these courts, as well as how these individuals and their organizations shaped the procedures and laws enforced within the courts. My research also engages with the consequences these tribunals brought for litigants and society more broadly. I argue that these institutions—by intervening in families' conduct and especially their financial arrangements in new ways—contributed to a fundamental shift in the relationship between the household and the state.

Ekédi Mpondo-Dika (Sociology, G-7)

"Concentrated Poverty, Emotional Hardship, and the Welfare State"

My dissertation investigates the affective underside of urban poverty and its management by the welfare state. More specifically, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, I examine the interplay between economic and emotional hardship, as well as the interpersonal and institutional resources available to poor families to cope with repeated adversity. The first part of my dissertation studies the

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emotional economy of close relationships in a low-income network. Getting by amid chronic and concentrated poverty requires inordinate amounts of persistence, resilience, and solidarity among intimates. At the same time, I show that constant adversity depletes these emotional resources and frays close relationships, further reducing poor individuals' ability to cope with, let alone improve, their circumstances. I therefore argue that emotional hardship is an independent force in the perpetuation of poverty, to be considered alongside structural and cultural factors. The second part of my dissertation takes the view of the institution, and investigates how a rising concern with the mental and behavioral health of the poor is currently reshaping the welfare state and its nonprofit satellites. My preliminary findings suggest that mental health services for the poor reveal in exacerbated form the contradictions of contemporary poverty governance: on the one hand, they manifest a strong project of governmentality that reaches into the psyche of service recipients and seeks to alleviate the sorrows associated with life in poverty. On the other hand, this project is thwarted by the reality of fragmented counseling services funded by short-term grants, the persistence of punitive practices in poverty-processing institutions and a focus on individual problems at the expense of their social causes. The diffusion of psychiatric common sense through institutions of poverty governance removes some of the moral stigma of undeservingness attached to poverty, but also contributes to transforming social problems into individual illnesses and treating them as such.