

Desperation in New York: rumors bring thousands of poor in search of cash

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At about 10 a.m. on November 21 in New York City, a crowd began to gather slowly in lower Manhattan outside the Worth Street office of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The government body is empowered to distribute federal grants and assistance to those who suffered economic losses as a result of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center.

Within several hours, the numbers had swelled to the thousands. At times the line that formed snaked twice around the entire block, just a few minutes' walk from the City Hall office of Mayor Michael Bloomberg. FEMA officials said that up to 5,000 people had come to the office. The number was probably considerably higher.

What brought these thousands of men, women and children from all five boroughs of New York, and from neighboring New Jersey as well? According to those who showed up, they had heard reports that a wealthy individual had died and left his inheritance to the poor, and the money was being handed out at the FEMA office.

Some said they had seen the report on a public-access cable television station. Others said there had been an announcement on a Spanish-language radio program. Friends and neighbors had spread the word rapidly. So the poor and unemployed got onto buses and subways and spent much of the day trying to track down the money.

Government officials told those who continued to arrive that the story was false. One official, James McIntyre, told the press that "people got a little hyper when they learned they weren't getting money." Police barricades were quickly put up, and motorcycle cops were called in to deal with the crowd.

The source of the rumor may have been an ongoing

offer, in the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center, of reimbursements for air-filtering equipment used to clean indoor air. Faced with the crowd, FEMA officials gave out registration numbers and scheduled appointments for possible reimbursement, but that move was mostly an attempt to defuse an explosive situation. Even this modest reimbursement will not apply to most of those who turned up looking for cash on November 21.

At first glance, the long lines on Worth Street were reminiscent of the thousands of people who regularly lined up, even during the boom of the 1990s, for the handful of jobs that were offered with the opening of a new hotel or Wal-Mart store. On closer examination, however, this incident has more in common, in some respects, with the occasions when thousands turn out because of a report of a religious miracle.

It was definitely a miracle that thousands were looking for last week. What made them believe such an improbable rumor? Clearly, this response was produced by conditions of poverty and desperation, and also—even if not consciously expressed—growing anger over the widening gulf between rich and poor.

The official story is that New York City has made an amazing recovery from its near-bankruptcy in the 1970s. Crime is down, the streets have been cleared of the homeless, and the welfare rolls have been cut by more than half. True, the current budget crisis looms like a big black cloud on the horizon, but still, things have never been better. Everyone, or nearly everyone, has shared in the boom, and opportunity knocks for all who seek to better themselves.

Millions of people know that this is a grotesque lie, even if they have no idea what to do about it. Meanwhile, in the absence of any other avenue to improve their conditions, and bombarded with media

hype of a quick and easy fortune for the lucky lottery winner or the determined jobseeker, ordinary people become susceptible to rumors and impossible promises. Such are the conditions produced by the chasm that exists between wealth and poverty in the financial capital of world capitalism.



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