

1 Introduction

Ordinary Poverty

The ideas which are here expressed so laboriously are extremely simple and should be obvious. The difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones.

—J. M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN, 38 years old. She has lost her benefits and explains what she now does to get housing:

My friend helps me. I live some of the time with him. I eat here [at St. John's Bread and Life soup kitchen] whenever I can.

[Is it getting harder to make ends meet?] Yes it is. I can't survive; I need medical assistance and I'll do anything. I have to ask people to stay at their house. I have to do favors. I provide sexual favors [she points at her friend]. He only lets me stay with him for sex.

White man, 40 years old, a warehouse manager with 20 years of experience. He hasn't worked in a year:

You should see the people I have to compete with. I am waiting for a job interview with a moving company. Beautiful operation. They liked me but they said they didn't want to train me. It's not because I'm obese. At least not this time. It's a computerized operation, and I would have to be trained on the computer. But I'm sitting waiting for the interview, the other guy sitting to be interviewed is an MBA, also my age. Knows how to use computer. Laid off from Wall Street, \$80,000-a-year job. He's competing with me. I told him I just applied for a warehouse job at Busch Terminal. He asks me for the information and if I mind that he'll apply for the job. I give him the address. He's

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more desperate than I am. How am I going to get a job? I have all on-the-job experience and only a two-year college degree. How can I compete for warehouse jobs with MBAs? And it happens all the time.

African American man, 49 years old. He doesn't have any benefits:

I live between a rock and a hard place. I'm homeless, but I have a basement that they let me sleep in for taking care of it. I don't have my own home. . . . It's truly a shame that I can't get a job. . . . I have an associate's degree in accounting. I was working in a beverage place that reclaims bottles and cans. It took me less than a minute to fill the boxes. I pride myself at my speed at work. They're paying me three dollars an hour. Working 10 hours a day, how can I live? Then they laid me off because they weren't busy. Its pitiful out there.

White man, January 20, 1989. President George H. W. Bush's inaugural address:

It is to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world. My friends, we have work to do. There are homeless, lost and roaming. There are children who have nothing, no love, no normalcy. There are those who cannot free themselves of enslavement to whatever addiction—drugs, welfare, the demoralization that rules the slums. There is crime to be conquered, the rough crime of the streets. There are young women to be helped who are to become mothers of children they can't care for and might not love. They need our care and guidance, though we bless them for choosing life. . . . I have spoken of a Thousand Points of Light, of all the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the nation, doing good. We will work hand in hand, encouraging, sometimes leading, sometimes led, rewarding. We will work on this in the White House, in the Cabinet agencies. I will go to the people and the programs that are the brighter points of light, and I'll ask every member of my government to become involved. The old ideas are new again because they are not old, they are timeless: duty,

sacrifice, commitment and a patriotism that finds its expression in taking part and pitching in.¹

White man, February 17, 1993. President Bill Clinton's economic address to a joint session of Congress:

Later this year we will offer a plan to end welfare as we know it. I have worked on this issue for the better part of a decade and I know from personal conversations with many people, that no one—no one wants to change the welfare system as badly as those who are trapped in it. I want to offer the people on welfare the education, training, the child care, the health care they need to get back on their feet, but say after two years they must get back to work, in private business if possible, in public service if necessary. We have to end welfare as a way of life and make it a path of independence and dignity.²

Latino man from the Bronx. He is in the Work Experience Program (WEP):

I don't understand, I work 35 hours per week and I get \$68.50 every two weeks. I'm a single man so I get less for working the same jobs as someone who has kids. That's not fair; I'm doing the same work. I sweep the park at my site on Arthur Avenue. It's not enough to live on. With my food stamps I get four dollars a day for food, so I use the three dollars a day that I get to go to work every day for my food too. My rent is \$270 but welfare only gives me \$215, so I have to get the other \$55 from my grants. So I walk everywhere. I walk an hour back and forth to work. I walk all over the Bronx and Manhattan, more than two hours each way. I'm in good shape. I like orange juice, but a container costs three dollars, so if you buy a container, I have almost nothing left for food for the day. I don't know what to do. Still I don't understand why I get so little for working, sweeping leaves in the park.

African American man, begging on the G train in Queens:

You look at me and you say I should get a job. That I'm a bum. Why am I bothering you? But I just want some change so I can

get something to eat, a room for the night. You know that there's people doing drugs, killing each other, raping children, doing all kinds of terrible things. I'm just asking you for some money. And you say I should get a job. Well, let me tell you, there aren't any jobs out there. If there were jobs in Brooklyn and Queens, there wouldn't be people on this train going to Manhattan to work. And every time they advertise a job, there wouldn't be 150 people waiting for that job. There aren't any jobs out there. It's a lie that there are jobs for everyone. And that's why people are robbing, stealing, doing drugs, murdering. There aren't any jobs out there. So please give me some change. God bless you.

These are dramatic accounts but poverty is not dramatic—it is ordinary. Two of the accounts are by presidents of the United States who do not necessarily understand the daily lives of the poor but who have the power to change their lives. They will, in fact, change the lives of poor people dramatically. When President Clinton signs the welfare reform bill in 1996, he cuts their benefits on the premise that welfare recipients will get jobs. But most of the jobs pay poverty-level wages, and he succeeds only in increasing their misery. The man on the G train, who understands too well the lives of the poor, also wants some change. Sure, he wants a little money to purchase what he needs, but if his misery is going to end, he needs some social change as well.

Social change for the poor was rare in the 1990s and is still rare at the start of the twenty-first century. Welfare rolls are down, but poverty has not been reduced. In our free market system there are always a few winners, but most lose, and poverty just increases. Unemployment is low, under 5 percent, but jobs that pay well are declining, wages have not increased, and the poor face a choice between workfare and reduced benefits. Public funding for the poor has been cut (27.9% in aid for single mothers with children from 1979 to 1989).³ The poor keep losing ground, and neither President Bush's "Thousand Points of Light" nor President Clinton's "welfare reform"

has reduced their daily misery. Democrats and Republicans have agreed that workfare is the full-employment program for the United States: “Jobs for All,” but at a rate that means indentured servitude for the poor. The politicians all speak the same language—jobs will reduce poverty—but there aren’t enough jobs. New technologies are destroying the older job sectors without producing enough good new jobs, and most of the new jobs that have been created pay low, even poverty-level wages. To end poverty, jobs would have to pay above poverty level wages. They don’t; instead, we have the end of welfare replaced by workfare, as the poor are forced to work for limited public assistance that just guarantees their continued poverty.⁴ Poverty grows throughout the United States. It seems unchangeable. As a young homeless man in a soup kitchen says about his life, it’s “a little food and cold storage.” The hopelessness of the poor has become ordinary.

A VOCABULARY SHIFT

The vocabulary of social policy has shifted over the decades, and the metaphors of the conservatives have become dominant.⁵ In the mid-1970s, with the continuous increase in poverty, the recession, the oil crisis, and the fiscal crisis, the language of “community control” and “black power” and activism to “end poverty” gave way to the language of “benign neglect,” “culture of poverty,” and the “failure of social programs.” The poor became “pathetic victims,” “junkies,” “the homeless.” Such changes reflect the political shifts of the 1970s and 1980s. First, the language of social change mutated into the liberal language of advocacy. The poor could no longer speak for themselves; they were no longer part of dynamic social movements, and experts would speak for them. By the eighties, liberal social policy had been reduced to a holding action, and the only question was how much of the safety net could be saved. Next, as the practical, liberal language of advocacy gave way to the new conservative hegemony, the goal was to “end welfare.” The language of possibility faded, and the conservative language of “individual achievement” and

“personal responsibility” came to center stage. This shift excluded the poor.

Though the Reagan administration guaranteed that the “truly needy” would be provided for by the “social safety net,” social welfare programs were slashed in the 1980s and 1990s. Poverty, hunger, and homelessness reached a level unknown in the United States since the Great Depression. The first President Bush reacted to this new poverty, not by redirecting federal money to the poor, but by promising that the private sector would make up the difference through the mobilization of volunteers, the “Thousand Points of Light.”

William Jefferson Clinton started his presidency in 1992 with a pledge to “end welfare as we know it.” Some hoped that this was merely a campaign promise, and that his administration would turn around the Reagan-Bush assault on welfare. Ultimately, however, Clinton spoke the same conservative language, even if he seemed to have more compassion for children. In 1996 the Democrats, originally reluctant, joined the Republicans in passing welfare reform, ending Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replacing it with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).⁶ On January 25, 1999, during his impeachment, Clinton boasted that because of his welfare reform program, there were fewer than 8 million Americans on welfare, down 44 percent from 14.3 million in 1994.⁷ He left out some significant data. First, there were still 35.5 million people living below the poverty level in 1997, down only 0.5 percent since 1995.⁸ Second, typical welfare recipients who found jobs through welfare-to-work programs across the United States earn between 65 and 70 percent of the federal poverty level.⁹

The language of possibility has become a one-dimensional language of the free market—a “final vocabulary,” to use Richard Rorty’s term: “It is final in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no non-circular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language: beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force.”¹⁰ In this sense the final vocabulary of conservative social policy ends debate. Its key terms are “work,” “productivity,” “moral,” “duty,” “responsibility,” “achievement,” “free market,” “competition,” and “patriotism.”

Both conservative and liberal politicians and social scientists have been affected by the conservative vocabulary shift. The victory of conservative policy makers means not just that their views have become dominant but that liberal social scientists and policy makers now speak the language of limitations of the free market. Plans for economic redistribution through a higher minimum wage, taxation, and government intervention against homelessness and hunger have been severely restricted by the forced austerity of budget cuts. Thus, the “economic boom” of the Clinton years did not mean a new era of possibility in the fight to end poverty but a continuation of the conservative vocabulary, with some new words added: “workfare,” “time limits,” “block grants,” “sanctioning,” and the “ending of entitlements.”

With the policy shift to the right, the programs for the poor are determined not by their needs but by market forces. The new poverty advocates speak the language of accommodation, survival, and maintenance. Two government policies concerning poor children in the early 1990s demonstrate the conservative hegemony over poverty policy. First, the America 2000 Excellence in Education Act proposed to reform education in the United States by creating “New American School Communities” in which federal money would be allocated to public schools based on standards of excellence.¹¹ Schools in poor districts, already underfunded, would have to compete with well-funded schools in middle-class and wealthy districts. “The Bush administration argued that the competition would make the poor schools shape up or shut down.”¹²

Second, a study entitled *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*, by the National Commission on Children, reported on the condition of poor, battered, unhealthy, homeless, and hungry children in the United States. “The National Commission on Children calls on all Americans to work together to change the conditions that jeopardize the health and well being of so many of our youngest citizens and threaten our future as an economic power, a democratic nation and a caring society. Our failure to act today will only defer to the next generation the rising social, moral and financial costs of our neglect. Investment in children is no longer a luxury, but a national imperative.”¹³

The commission proposed “52 billion to 56 billion in new federal funds in the first year.”¹⁴ This expenditure is not feasible in the current austere fiscal condition. It is not cost-effective. It will increase taxes. It will hinder American competitiveness in the global market. The language of possibility is quickly muted. Liberals must accommodate or become silent. The poor do not have a voice; without a social movement, they are spoken for. Advocates, though well meaning, are isolated and impotent. They cannot speak the vocabulary of social change. They “settle for”; they “do the best they can.” Without power, they engage in piecemeal struggles. They do not struggle for new housing but for the right of the homeless to have a shantytown in Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Instead of struggling for a guaranteed middle-class income for all, they put all their energy into saving an inadequate safety net. These struggles yield some victories, but over the 13 years that this book deals with, failure was more common and the conditions of poor people have gotten worse. The vocabulary of advocacy is never a transformative vocabulary. In the name of practicality, advocates rule out social movement, change, and possibility. Ultimately, they support the status quo, and for the poor this means that their poverty is permanent.

POLICY AND DAILY LIFE IN BEDFORD-STUYVESANT

September 13, 1991. I am walking down Stuyvesant Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, surrounded by crumbling buildings and crumbling people. A man is collecting bottles, pushing a shopping cart draped with a green lawn-and-leaf bag. The bag is full of bottles and cans, which he can redeem at the supermarket for a nickel apiece. This is another example of the Protestant work ethic and free enterprise in Bedford-Stuyvesant. In my own Brooklyn neighborhood, Greenpoint, the bottle redemption center is next to a Key Food supermarket. Men and women line up daily with trash bags full of bottles and cans. Nickels for bottles: the fair exchange for their hard work. Many of the men in line at the Greenpoint Men’s Shelter earn their living in this way. They keep the streets clean. They are underpaid.

The director of Catholic Charities says to me, "It's very depressing—the age of these people. They're young. They're not old and disabled—these are physically able people. It's very depressing."

Today at St. John's Bread and Life soup kitchen in Bedford-Stuyvesant, I am serving cookies. I take a handful, wrap them in a napkin, and give them out. I talk to Jerry, who works in the kitchen. He's living at the Glenwood Hotel on Broadway and Havermeyer Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, down the hall from John, who also works in the kitchen. John was forced to leave the Greenpoint shelter because of budget cuts about a year ago. "The hotel is a fleabag," he says. "It's shit, but it's better than the shelter. It's \$6.50 a night, and welfare pays."

"The hotel is hell," Jerry says, "but I couldn't live on the streets. I've been worried about living on the street since my sister-in-law don't want me staying in the basement at their house. She says she wants to rent it and she can get more than I pay. I'm too old to be in the streets. It would kill me."

John interrupts, "We did it. We spent a whole winter in the streets, and then a long time at the shelter."

Jerry: "It would really kill me now. I could never do it again." He laughs: "Do you remember, you spent the whole winter without a coat? That was our project, to get you a warm coat."

John: "I don't know how I survived that whole winter without a coat."

Jerry: "We finally got him a coat, but it was February."

John: "It's great having Jerry down the hall."

All of these poor people are trying to cope with an unbearable situation. Politicians and policy makers make decisions about them, mostly without much knowledge of their daily lives. Here conservatives and liberals are the same, congratulating themselves even though their policies decrease funding and make the lives of poor people harder. It is important to analyze these policies and try to understand how they have failed to help poor people who are "living the experience" of poverty, increasing immiseration amidst prosperity.

On this same day, Professor E tells me that they are always “between a rock and a hard place.” Professor E is a West Indian who took it upon himself to educate me on the realities of “Bed-Stuy.” I remember what Professor E said to me about the shortcomings of the first President Bush’s solution to poverty: “If President Bush was serious, he would know that a thousand points of light ain’t enough. At least a million is necessary.”

TWO EXEMPLARS OF FREE MARKET SOCIAL POLICY

The Conservatives

Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* is the basic statement of the conservative position on poverty and social welfare.¹⁵ Murray’s study was the bible of the Reagan and Bush administrations’ poverty policy¹⁶ and an influential text even during the Clinton era. His discourse on poverty, framed in the language of the free market, launched the essential vocabulary shift and the new dogma that government social welfare programs are the problem. (Later, in the nineties, Michael Tanner, would echo Murray’s account of the poor being enticed into welfare by a failed liberal welfare state.)¹⁷ According to this narrative, the behavior of the disadvantaged is independent of social and psychological factors and determined by economically motivated rational choices. Social welfare programs create a context in which the rational choices of the disadvantaged are “not to enter the labor force,” “not to get an education,” and “not to get married.” In short, the social welfare programs of the 1960s and 1970s failed because “we made it profitable to be poor.”¹⁸

Murray claimed that poverty increased in spite of the federally funded social programs of the 1960s and 1970s because those programs decreased incentives for disadvantaged young blacks to enter the labor force, take available jobs (even at low wages), and continue working. Thus, these programs increased black unemployment. They also increased the proportion of black female-headed families because benefits provided disincentives for marriage. Though his data was unconvincing, and he had many critics, his argument became

dominant.¹⁹ That was because his argument was based not on his data but on thought experiments, the most important of which was the case of Harold and Phyllis.

Harold and Phyllis have low-income parents, are not well educated, and have no special vocational skills. Phyllis is pregnant.²⁰ Harold and Phyllis are the children of AFDC, the most extensive public assistance package in the United States until it was ended in 1996. In Murray's view, it destroyed the motivation of Harold and Phyllis to form a family and to struggle at low-wage jobs. AFDC made it more advantageous for Phyllis to live off her welfare package and for Harold to work only enough to collect unemployment benefits. They cohabit out of wedlock because they would lose benefits if they got married. For Murray, social welfare programs have made this strategy the norm of economic advantage. It is not economically rational to work hard at a low-paid job and get married. Social welfare programs have made the personal dignity of both partners an economic disadvantage.

When economic incentives are buttressed by social norms, the effects on behavior are multiplied. But the main point is that social factors are not necessary to explain behavior. There is no "breakdown of the work ethic" in this account of rational choices among alternatives. There is no shiftless irresponsibility. It makes no difference whether Harold is white or black. There is no need to invoke the spectres of cultural pathologies or inferior upbringing. The choices may be seen more simply, much more naturally, as the behavior of people responding to the reality of the world around them and making the decisions—legal, approved, and even encouraged decisions—that maximize the quality of life.²¹

Murray assumes that both Harold and Phyllis could work at low-wage jobs if they wanted to, that they could get married if they wanted to, but that social welfare programs have made it easier for them to live off the tolerable misery of public assistance. This is especially true because from 1965 through the early 1970s subsidies increased, altering the structure of incentives for the poor:

It was easier to get along without a job. It was easier for a man to have a baby without being responsible for it, for a woman to have a baby

without having a husband. It was easier to get away with crime, it was easier to obtain drugs. Because it was easier to get away with crime, it was easier to support a drug habit. Because it was easier to get along without a job, it was easier to ignore education. Because it was easier to get along without a job, it was easier to walk away from a job and thereby accumulate a record as an unreliable employee.²²

All of this was, for Murray, the result of increasingly generous social welfare programs: AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid, housing subsidies. These programs degrade the poor. If it were not for these programs, Harold and Phyllis would have chosen an alternative path. They would have married. Harold would have worked at a low-wage job, which, after years of hard work, would have provided them with a decent life. Independent of welfare, they would have personal dignity. "Work hard, stick to the job no matter how bad it is, and you will probably climb out of poverty, but not very far out."²³

Murray's underlying assumption is that low-wage jobs are available if you are willing to work. Cut social programs severely, and the poor will become motivated to take these jobs. It is the logic not only of Newt Gingrich and Dick Arme's *Contract With America*,²⁴ but of President Clinton's policies as well. Murray's work was powerfully influential because he successfully combined the concept of the "culture of poverty," with its emphasis on the family structure of the black underclass, with free market capitalism. The Clinton economic boom of the nineties merely reinforced Murray's position. Capitalism is no longer the problem, nor are the inequities of class, because the problem is the behavior of poor people who refuse to work because they can successfully live off welfare.

The liberal Mickey Kaus exemplifies the range of Murray's influence. In *The End of Equality*, Kaus argues that an underclass—built on the dependency programs of "money liberalism"—has undermined the public sphere that makes civil society possible in the United States. The two key money liberal programs, AFDC and food stamps, "throw money" at poverty and have had the unintended consequence of supporting welfare over work. This must be corrected if a more egalitarian society is to be built. Kaus's answer is civic liberalism and the expansion of the public sphere as a means of creating

more equality in American capitalist society. For Kaus, money liberalism fails to recognize the practical limitations of the redistribution of wealth through tinkering with capitalism. “Civic liberalism,” on the other hand, “pursues social equality directly through government action, rather than by manipulating the unequal distribution of income generated in the capitalist marketplace.”²⁵

If the civic liberal program is followed, we can have the peaceful, civil society of the 1950s—“a society in which the various classes use the same subways and drop off their kids at the same daycare centers and run into each other at the post office. We don’t have to repeal capitalism or abandon meritocracy to do these things. We don’t have to equalize incomes or make incomes more equal or even stop incomes from getting more unequal to do these things. We just have to do them.”²⁶ A more powerful public sphere will increase the possibility of egalitarianism by creating a society in which money counts for less and in which class mixing can occur.

Ultimately, Kaus’s solution is the same as Murray’s in that he puts the emphasis on the values of work and family. Here, political and economic change isn’t necessary, only cultural change. The solution to the problem of poverty isn’t eliminating structural inequality in American society but abolishing the culture of poverty and the behavior of the nonworking poor.

The extremely poor—the poorest 2.5 million of the 32 to 39 million who were estimated to be officially poor by the Bureau of the Census in the 1990s—are, for these thinkers, the ghetto underclass that has sabotaged the civility of the public sphere in the United States. They have degraded the country because they do not share the universal American values of work and family. Everyone should share these values even if they are stuck in low-wage, subsistence-wage, poverty-maintaining-wage jobs. The urban underclass isn’t like Marx’s proletariat; it “is the villain rather than the hero. It is a class whose values are so inimical to America’s universal culture that its negation, and transformation, will allow those universal values to flower.”²⁷

This underclass stays poor for a long time. It consists of women who have out-of-wedlock births and receive AFDC, of men who won’t work and are prone to criminal behavior and drug abuse. They

are mostly black. Kaus tells us, "I am saying what every urban resident knows to be true, and what statistics know to be true, which is that underclass areas are awful environments that produce a large subculture of criminality, often violent criminality."²⁸ Kaus, like Murray, bases his arguments on very selective evidence and, for the most part, on what everyone "knows to be true." Thus he can state that a black underclass who won't work and who are part of a large criminal subculture are the villains who are destroying American cities. This is ridiculous or worse, and yet his work is taken seriously.

Consider criminality. In actuality the costs of corporate crime are much greater than that of the urban underclass. In 1992 white-collar crime was estimated at \$250 billion, whereas "the monetary costs to all victims of personal crimes (e.g., robbery, assault, larceny) and household crimes (e.g., burglary, motor vehicle theft) totaled \$17.6 billion in that year."²⁹ The Savings and Loan scandal cost taxpayers \$500 billion, compared with the \$35 million stolen in all the bank robberies in 1992. Clearly the outrage over street crime is out of proportion to its costs.³⁰

The claim that teenage AFDC mothers have more out-of-wedlock births is crucial because, if true, it attests to the degradation of the black underclass family. Kristin Luker in *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancies* finds that teens are less likely than older women to have unwed births and abortions.³¹ Mark Robert Rank has shown that birth rates in the general population are higher than those for welfare mothers.³² But data isn't crucial to either Murray or Kaus because their argument isn't scientific but ethical. It is an ethics based on the shared charge that the underclass lacks the values of work and family. Work is so important that Kaus has no difficulty in calling for only "work-tested" programs and a new Works Progress Administration (WPA) offering subminimum-wage jobs to the extremely poor.³³ This WPA-style workfare would only maintain poverty, but these would be a more moral poor. Work and family values will reduce the evils of welfare dependency. The success of this argument is based neither on facts nor on results but on its broad acceptance throughout the political realm. It is not a contradiction that the conservative Murray and the liberal Kaus share the same closed

discourse, or that workfare has become commonsense policy for people of all political persuasions, translated directly into state and local politics throughout the United States. In New York City, Mayor Giuliani made it difficult for the poor to apply for food stamps, forcing them to spend two days being screened before applications are even given to them. (This is in violation of federal law, and the Department of Agriculture filed a suit against New York City, stating that "city officials routinely violate the law by denying poor people the right to apply promptly for food stamps.") But for Mayor Giuliani, making food stamps harder to get is good for poor people, whereas under the Department of Agriculture's "user friendly" program, "foodstamps have sometimes been used to buy drugs."³⁴

In the same vein, New York City's Human Resources Administration (HRA) Commissioner Jason Turner bemoaned the fact that people who have been sanctioned off welfare can still find shelter from providers and still receive food from soup kitchens and food pantries. He said, "We need to create, if you will, a personal crisis in individual lives."³⁵ This is consistent with the final vocabulary of conservatives. Both Giuliani and Turner believe, as does Charles Murray, that harsh policies against public assistance will make the poor self-reliant, and that a "personal crisis" will force the poor to change their lives and become willing to work at low-wage jobs. The proof that conservatives are right about ending entitlements is "the 43 percent drop in welfare rolls" since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed.³⁶ The success and power of the conservative vocabulary shift in poverty policy has been operationalized in welfare reform and has become the common sense behind the continued discourse on how to deal with the poor. For if a black underclass is subversive to the central American values of work and family, it is in the interest of national survival to end entitlements and incarcerate the large underclass criminal element.³⁷ Ending welfare is ultimately in the interest of the poor: "hard love." Abolishing AFDC, cutting food stamps, and imposing work requirements motivate the nonworking poor to take low-wage jobs. The conservative solution is a job solution.

The Liberals

William Julius Wilson embodies the liberal response to Murray, asking “why the behavior patterns in the inner city today differ so markedly from those of three decades ago.”³⁸

For Wilson, the social welfare programs of the 1960s and the race-specific programs of the 1970s succeeded in enlarging the black middle class. As this class became more affluent, it moved out of the inner-city ghetto, increasing the concentration of underclass blacks there: “150,000 blacks departed these communities during this ten year period (1970–1980) leaving behind a much more concentrated poverty population.”³⁹

Wilson is concerned about the increasing proportion of underclass blacks in the inner city. For many, his use of *underclass* is problematic and controversial: Bob Blauner proposes that social scientists stop using the term because “it suggests a group of people who are permanently outside of the class structure” and “calls up images of black people who whites find both frightening and morally irredeemable.”⁴⁰ Wilson understands the problems with the term but uses it because he wants to move away from “race” as the dominant concept for explaining the continuation and overrepresentation of blacks among the poor. He doesn’t deny that blacks are a highly stigmatized group, but he believes that *underclass* is a better term for describing the profound economic and social dislocations of the inner-city ghetto.⁴¹

Crucial for understanding these dislocations is the deindustrialization of the American economy and the loss of union jobs. Blacks have been disproportionately hurt by these changes. It is with an analysis framed by these economic transformations that Wilson confronts Murray’s major contentions that black unemployment and the breakup of poor people’s families (as indicated by an increase in female-headed households) are the result of social welfare programs. For Wilson, the problem is joblessness.

Responding first to Murray’s contention that the increase in welfare benefits has led Harold and Phyllis to choose welfare over full employment, Wilson argues:

Real benefits in fact have fallen dramatically since the early 1970's. . . . [B]y 1980 the real value of the AFDC plus food stamps has been reduced by 16 percent from their 1972 levels. By 1984 the combined payments were only 4 percent higher than their 1960 levels and 22 percent less than 1972. In the words of Greenstein, no other group in American society experienced such a sharp decline in real income since 1970 as did AFDC mothers and their children.⁴²

Second, black joblessness is not a result of young black men making a rational choice not to work. Rather, deindustrialization had a greater impact on black workers because they were concentrated in inner-city areas.

Between 1947 and 1972, the central cities of the thirty three most populous metropolitan areas . . . lost 880,000 manufacturing jobs, while manufacturing employment in their suburbs grew by 2.5 million. The same cities lost 867,000 jobs in retail and wholesale trade at the same time that their suburbs gained millions of such positions, while the black population of these central cities lost more than 9 million whites and added 5 million blacks.⁴³

Third, the geographic deindustrialization of urban and suburban areas became national from the mid-1970s through the 1980s. These employment changes had a major impact on family life that Wilson conceptualizes in terms of what he calls the "male marriageable pool index": the men who are available to marry and support a family. Because of increased black joblessness caused by urban deindustrialization, "combined with high black mortality and incarceration rates, . . . there has been a decrease in black men who are able to support families. This has resulted in the increase in black female-headed families." Again, it is not welfare that has caused this situation.⁴⁴

His solution to these problems is to remedy black joblessness. His "hidden agenda" is that race-specific programs increase the stigmatization of the target group. He prefers universal programs for increasing employment, operating on the key assumption that "improving the job prospects of men will strengthen low-income black families."⁴⁵

Central to Wilson's solution is a mixture of public and private programs to increase economic opportunity. The truly disadvantaged

“would also benefit disproportionately from a program of balanced economic growth and tight labor market policies because of their great vulnerability to swings in the business cycle and changes in economic organization, including the relocation of plants and use of labor-saving technology.”⁴⁶

Though Wilson disagrees with Murray’s contention that work is available to all who are morally willing to work, though he contends that deindustrialization has greatly reduced the number of jobs available to inner-city blacks, he shares with the conservative Murray a job solution to the problems of American poverty.

This job solution is further developed in *When Work Disappears*. “The jobless ghetto”⁴⁷ is the result of the social and economic dislocations caused by the global economy. All the problems of deindustrialization have been exacerbated by the new global competition. Globalization has increased the educational and training requirements for workers; along with new technological labor processes that eliminate jobs and displace workers and the tendency of new companies to locate in the suburbs, it has taken an immense toll on the inner city. “As the disappearance of work has become characteristic of the inner-city ghetto,” Wilson continues, “so has the disappearance of the traditional married-couple family. Only one-quarter of the black families whose children live with them in inner-city neighborhoods in Chicago are husband-wife families, today.”⁴⁸

For Wilson, the impact of deindustrialization on the opportunity structure and changing societal norms on marriage must be viewed together: both “negative outlooks towards marriage” and “an environment plagued by persistent joblessness. This combination of factors has increased out-of-wedlock births, weakened the family structure, expanded the welfare rolls and as a result caused poor inner-city blacks to be even more disconnected from the job market and discouraged about their role in the labor force.”⁴⁹

Wilson is aware that myths about welfare are widespread: he knows that blacks were not the majority of AFDC recipients, nor were most recipients long-term. He also disparages the belief that government intervention and welfare itself are the greatest problems for the poor. Yet he seems to have reversed the causal nexus, and now

the behavior of the black male in relation to marriage and the family has become crucial. The social and economic structure, still important, is no longer central, and Wilson has come closer to Murray's position. This is not surprising, since Murray's position on poverty has become common sense for American society. Thus, Wilson increasingly stresses the socialization process of the black inner-city family, warning that "weak families do not prepare youngsters for the labor market."⁵⁰ Though he understands the limits of Murray's arguments, he still emphasizes the same points: first, the need to rear black children to "avoid street culture,"⁵¹ and, second, the need to get inner-city black men jobs at all costs. The belief that the extremely poor have a degraded culture of poverty is complicitous with Murray, as is the idea that hard work will automatically remedy the culture of the underclass. Wilson's analysis of the second point deserves closer examination.

The global economy has increased wage and skill inequality and strained the welfare state.⁵² The diminished welfare state has taken a toll on the inner city, and homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and abandoned buildings attest to this decline. Wilson's solution—jobs at all costs—is an attempt to remedy the increasing immiseration of the poor. He first tries to develop a policy to meet the skill demands of the new global economy. In a society that has decreased its commitment to the inner-city public school, Wilson backs a conservative education policy. Instead of advocating better modes of curriculum, he comes out in favor of national performance standards, better teachers, and vouchers (public monies for private schools).⁵³ The problem of the jobless ghetto can be solved through the panacea of education and training. He provides scant evidence for this position, which, put simply, states that if you train the inner-city poor, the jobs will come. But education and training isn't Wilson's real solution; in fact, his solution is antithetical to the call for education and training. His real remedy is "WPA-style jobs of the kind created during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration."⁵⁴

These jobs would be provided by the government at minimum and subminimum wages, with the addition of wage supplements through an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). "By 1996,

the expanded EITC will increase the earnings from a minimum wage job to \$7 an hour."⁵⁵ But \$280 per week only sustains misery and poverty. Wilson is influenced here by the work of Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk,⁵⁶ whose "proposal offers a subminimum-wage public service job to any applicant. They would set compensation at 10 to 15 percent below the minimum wage to encourage movement into private sector jobs as they become available. . . . These wages would be supplemented with the earned income tax credit and other wage supplements."⁵⁷

Wilson prefers Mickey Kaus's WPA-like plan, however. Kaus's program would be universal, not just for those on welfare. (Older workers would be excluded because retraining would be too costly.) These jobs would also be at minimum and subminimum wages. As Wilson states, "None of my immediate solutions offers a remedy for the growing inequality in the United States. . . . The jobs created would not be high wage jobs, but with universal health insurance, a child care program, and earned income tax credits attached, they would enable workers and their families to live at least decently and avoid joblessness and the problems associated with it."⁵⁸

Would these poor families live "decently"? Wilson's scenario addresses education and health care but leaves out food, clothing, and housing. In America in the 1990s and 2000s, a family cannot afford a decent life at minimum or subminimum wages. Wilson's uncritical embrace of Kaus's WPA proposals is a key link to the conservative analysis that Kaus himself has embraced. Murray, Kaus, and Wilson all agree that the solution to poverty is hard work and low wages. None of them interrogate the nature of the available jobs or the likelihood that the global economy will create the jobs needed to end the problem of the jobless ghetto.

To put it simply, only above-poverty-wage jobs can end poverty. There isn't any evidence that those jobs are being produced. Low unemployment and a tight labor market have not resolved the problems of the inner city. The current boom has barely raised middle-class wages and has completely missed the urban poor. The job solutions of the conservatives and liberals have failed. The misery of the poor endures.