

Cycles of Deprivation and the Underclass Debate

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Social Service Review, vol. 59 n°4, 1985

In the mid-1960s, liberal scholars forcefully and candidly discussed the rise of social dislocations in the inner city and effectively challenged conservative arguments regarding the culture and behavior of the ghetto underclass. This article attempts to explain why the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has now receded into the background and why the conservative perspective enjoys wide and increasing currency. A suggestion is made as to how the liberal perspective might be refocused to regain its influence and thereby provide a more balanced intellectual discussion of why the problems in the inner city sharply increased when they did and in the way that they did.

In the mid-1960s, urban analysts began to speak of a new dimension to the urban crisis in the form of a large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasted sharply with the behavior of the general population.¹ Despite a high rate of poverty in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970s.

These increasing rates of social dislocation signified changes in the social organization of inner-city communities. Blacks in Harlem and in other ghetto neighborhoods did not hesitate to sleep in parks, on fire escapes, and on rooftops during hot summer nights in the 1930s and 1940s, and whites frequently visited inner-city taverns and night-clubs.² There was crime, to be sure, but it had not reached the point

where people were fearful of walking the streets at night, despite the overwhelming poverty. There was joblessness, but it was nowhere near the proportions of unemployment and labor-force nonparticipation that have gripped ghetto communities since 1970. There were single-parent families, but they were a small minority of all black families and tended to be incorporated within extended family networks and to be headed not by unwed teenagers and young adult women but by middle-aged women who usually were widowed, separated, or divorced. There were welfare recipients, but only a very small percentage of the families could be said to be welfare dependent. In short, unlike the present period, inner-city communities prior to 1950 exhibited the features of social organization—including a sense of community, positive neighborhood identification, and explicit norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior.³

Although liberal urban analysts in the mid-1960s hardly provided an adequate explanation of changes in the social organization of inner-city communities, they forcefully and candidly discussed the rise of social dislocations among the ghetto underclass. "The symptoms of lower-class society affect the dark ghettos of America—low aspirations, poor education, family instability, illegitimacy, unemployment, crime, drug addiction, and alcoholism, frequent illness and early death," stated Kenneth B. Clark, liberal author of a 1965 study of the black ghetto. "But because Negroes begin with the primary affliction of inferior racial status, the burdens of despair and hatred are more pervasive."⁴ In raising important issues about the experiences of inequality, liberal scholars in the 1960s sensitively examined the cumulative effects of racial isolation and chronic subordination on life and behavior in the inner city. Whether the focus was on the social or the psychological dimensions of the ghetto, facts of inner-city life "that are usually forgotten or ignored in polite discussions" were vividly described and systematically analyzed.⁵

Indeed, what was both unique and important about these earlier studies was that discussions of the experiences of inequality were closely tied to discussions of the structure of inequality in an attempt to explain how the economic and social situations into which so many disadvantaged blacks are born produce modes of adaptation and create norms and patterns of behavior that take the form of a "self-perpetuating pathology."⁶ Nonetheless, much of the evidence from which their conclusions were drawn was impressionistic—based mainly on data collected in ethnographic or urban field research that did not capture long-term trends.⁷ Indeed, the only study that provided at least an abstract sense of how the problem had changed down through the years was the Moynihan report on the Negro family, which presented decennial census statistics on changing family structure by race.⁸

However, the controversy surrounding the Moynihan report had the effect of curtailing serious research on minority problems in the inner city for over a decade, as liberal scholars shied away from researching behavior construed as unflattering or stigmatizing to particular racial minorities. Thus, when liberal scholars returned to study these problems in the early 1980s, they were dumbfounded by the magnitude of the changes that had taken place and expressed little optimism about finding an adequate explanation. Indeed, it had become quite clear that there was little consensus on the description of the problem, the explanations advanced, or the policy recommendations proposed. There was even little agreement on a definition of the term "underclass." From the perspective of liberal social scientists, policymakers, and others, the picture seemed more confused than ever.

However, if liberals lack a clear view of the recent social changes in the inner city, the perspective among informed conservatives has crystallized around a set of arguments that have received increasing public attention. Indeed, the debate over the problems of the ghetto underclass is now being dominated by conservative spokespersons as the views of liberals have gradually become more diffused and ambiguous. Liberals have traditionally emphasized how the plight of disadvantaged groups can be related to the problems of the broader society, including problems of discrimination and social class subordination. They have also emphasized the need for progressive social change, particularly through governmental programs, to open the opportunity structure. Conservatives, in contrast, have traditionally stressed the importance of different group values and competitive resources in accounting for the experiences of the disadvantaged; if reference is made to the larger society, it is in terms of the adverse effects of various government programs on individual or group behavior and initiative.

In emphasizing this distinction, I do not want to convey the idea that serious research or discussion of the ghetto underclass is subordinated to ideological concerns. However, despite pious claims about objectivity in social research, it is true that values influence not only our selection of problems for investigation but also our interpretation of empirical data. In addition, although there are no logical rules of discovery that would invalidate an explanation simply because it was influenced by a particular value premise or ideology, it is true that attempts to arrive at a satisfactory explanation may be impeded by ideological blinders or views restricted by value premises. The solution to this problem is not to try to divest social investigators of their values but to encourage a free and open discussion of the issues among people with different value premises in order that new questions can be raised, existing interpretations challenged, and new research stimulated.

I believe that the demise of the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has made the intellectual discourse on this topic too one-sided. It has made it more difficult to achieve the above objective and has ultimately made it less likely that our understanding of inner-city social dislocations will be enhanced. With this in mind I would like, in the ensuing discussion, to explain why the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has receded into the background and why the conservative perspective enjoys wide and increasing currency. I would then like to suggest how the liberal perspective might be refocused to challenge the now dominant conservative views on the ghetto underclass and, more important, to provide a more balanced intellectual discussion of why the problems in the inner city sharply increased when they did and in the way that they did.

The Declining Influence of the Liberal Perspective on the Ghetto Underclass

The liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has become less persuasive and convincing in public discourse principally because many of those who represent traditional liberal views on social issues have been reluctant to discuss openly or, in some instances, even acknowledge the sharp increase in social pathologies in ghetto communities. This is seen in the four principal ways in which liberals have recently addressed the subject. In describing these four approaches I want it to be clear that some liberals may not be associated with any one of them, some with only one, and others with more than one. But I believe that these approaches represent the typical, recent liberal reactions to the ghetto underclass phenomenon and that they collectively provide a striking contrast to the crystallized, candid, and forceful liberal perspective of the mid-1960s. Let me elaborate.

One approach is to avoid describing any behavior that might be construed as unflattering or stigmatizing to ghetto residents either because of a fear of providing fuel for racist arguments or because of a concern of being charged with "racism" or with "blaming the victim." Indeed, one of the consequences of the heated controversy over the Moynihan report on the Negro family is that liberal social scientists, social workers, journalists, policymakers, and civil rights leaders have been, until very recently, reluctant to make any reference to race at all when discussing issues such as the increase of violent crime, teenage pregnancy, and out-of-wedlock births. The more liberals have avoided writing about or researching these problems, the more conservatives

have rushed headlong to fill the void with popular explanations of inner-city social dislocations that much of the public finds exceedingly compelling.

A second liberal approach to the subject of underclass and urban social problems is to refuse even to use terms such as "underclass." As one spokesman put it: " 'Underclass' is a destructive and misleading label that lumps together different people who have different problems. And that it is the latest of a series of popular labels (such as the 'lumpenproletariat,' 'undeserving poor,' and the 'culture of poverty') that focuses on individual characteristics and thereby stigmatizes the poor for their poverty."⁹ However, the real problem is not the term "underclass" or some similar designation but the fact that the term has received more systematic treatment from conservatives who tend to focus almost exclusively on individual characteristics than from liberals who would more likely relate these characteristics to the broader problems of society. While some liberals debate whether terms such as "underclass" should even be used, conservatives have made great use of such terms in developing popular arguments about life and behavior in the inner city.¹⁰

Regardless of which term is used, one cannot deny that there is a heterogeneous grouping of inner-city families and individuals whose behavior contrasts sharply with that of mainstream America. The real challenge is not only to explain why this is so but also to explain why the behavior patterns in the inner city today differ so markedly from those of only three or four decades ago. To obscure these differences by eschewing the term "underclass" or some other term that could be helpful in describing changes in ghetto behavior, norms, and aspirations in favor of more neutral designations such as "lower class" or "working class" is to fail to address one of the most important social transformations in recent U.S. history.

Indeed, the liberal argument to reject the term "underclass" reflects the lack of a historical perspective on urban social problems. We often are not aware of or lose sight of the fact that the sharp increase in inner-city dislocations has occurred in only the last several years. Although a term such as "lumpenproletariat" or "underclass" might have been quite appropriate in Karl Marx's description of life and behavior in the slums of nineteenth-century England, it is not very appropriate in descriptions of life and behavior in America's large urban ghettos prior to the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s such communities featured a vertical integration of different segments of the urban black population. Lower-class, working-class, and middle-class black families all lived more or less in the same communities (albeit in different neighborhoods), sent their children to the same schools, availed themselves of the same recreational facilities, and shopped at the same stores. Whereas today's black middle-class

professionals no longer tend to live in ghetto communities and have moved increasingly into mainstream occupations outside the black community, the black middle-class professionals of the 1940s and 1950s (doctors, teachers, lawyers, social workers, ministers) lived in higher-income neighborhoods of the ghetto and serviced the black community. Accompanying the black middle-class exodus has been a growing movement of stable working-class blacks from ghetto neighborhoods to higher-income neighborhoods in other parts of the city and to the suburbs. In the earlier years, the black middle and working classes were confined by restrictive covenants to communities also inhabited by the lower class, and their very presence provided stability to inner-city neighborhoods and reinforced and perpetuated mainstream patterns of norms and behavior.¹¹

This is not the situation in the 1980s. Today's ghetto neighborhoods are populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged segments of the black urban community, that heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system. Included in this group are individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not part of the labor force, individuals who are engaged in street criminal activity and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families who experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency. These are the populations to which I refer when I speak of the "underclass." Moreover, the use of this term is meant to depict a reality not captured in the more standard designation of "lower class."

In my conception, the term "underclass" suggests that changes have taken place in ghetto communities, and the groups that have been left behind are collectively different from those that lived in these communities in the 1940s. It is true that long-term welfare families and street criminals are distinct groups, but they live and interact in the same depressed community and they are part of that population that has, with the exodus of the more stable working- and middle-class segments, become increasingly isolated socially from mainstream patterns and norms of behavior. It is also true that certain groups are stigmatized by the label "underclass," just as some people who live in depressed central city communities are stigmatized by the term "ghetto" or "inner city"; but it would be far worse to obscure the profound changes in the class structure and social behavior of ghetto communities by avoiding the use of the term "underclass." Indeed, the real challenge is to describe and explain these developments accurately so that liberal policymakers can appropriately address them. It is difficult for me to see how this can be accomplished by rejecting a term that aids in the description of ghetto social transformations.

A third liberal approach to the subject of problems in the inner city and the ghetto underclass is to emphasize or embrace selective evidence

that denies the very existence of an urban underclass. We have seen this in two principal ways. First, in the aftermath of the controversy over Daniel Patrick Moynihan's unflattering depiction of the black family, a number of liberals, particularly black liberals, began in the late 1960s and early 1970s to emphasize the positive aspects of the black experience.¹² Thus earlier arguments, which asserted that some aspects of ghetto life were pathological,¹³ were rejected and replaced with those that accented the strengths of the black community. Arguments extolling the "strengths" and "virtues" of black families replaced those that described the breakup of black families. In fact, aspects of ghetto behavior described as pathological in the studies of the mid-1960s were reinterpreted or redefined as functional because, it was argued, blacks were demonstrating their ability to survive and even flourish in an economically depressed and racist environment. Ghetto families were portrayed as resilient and capable of adapting creatively to an oppressive society. These revisionist arguments purporting to "liberate" the social sciences from the influence of "racism" helped to shift the focus of social scientists away from discussions of the consequences of racial isolation and economic class subordination to discussions of black achievement. Since the focus was solely on black achievement, little attention was paid to the internal differences within the black community. Moreover, since the problems were defined in racial terms, very little discussion was devoted either to problems created by economic shifts and their impact on the poor black community or to the need for economic reform. In short, such arguments effectively diverted attention from the appropriate solutions to the dreadful economic condition of poor blacks and made it difficult for blacks to see, in the words of one perceptive observer, "how their fate is inextricably tied up with the structure of the American economy."¹⁴

More recently, in response to arguments by conservatives that a growing number of inner-city residents get locked into a culture of poverty and a culture of welfare, some liberals have been quick to cite research that indicates that only a small proportion of Americans in poverty and on welfare are persistently poor and persistently on welfare. The problems of long-term poverty and welfare dependency began to receive detailed and systematic empirical attention when it became possible to track the actual experiences of the poor and those who receive welfare with adequate longitudinal data provided by the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). A series of initial studies based on the PSID revealed that only a very small percentage of those in poverty and on welfare were long-term cases. For example, one study found that only 3 percent of the population was poor throughout a ten-year time span, and another study reported that only 2.2 percent of the population was poor eight of the ten years (1968–78) covered in their research.¹⁵ These studies have been widely cited and were said

to provide powerful evidence against the notion of a permanent underclass.

However, more recent studies based on the PSID data seriously challenge these findings.¹⁶ Specifically, these studies revealed that the previous PSID research on spells of poverty and welfare dependency observed over a fixed time frame—say, eight or ten years—underestimated the length of spells because some individuals who appear to have short spells of poverty or welfare receipt are actually beginning or ending long spells. To correct for this problem, the more recent studies first identified spells of poverty and welfare receipt, then calculated exit probabilities by year to estimate the duration of spells. With this revised methodology it was found that, although most people who become poor during some point in their lives experience poverty for only one or two years, a substantial subpopulation remains in poverty for a very long time. Indeed, these long-term poor constitute about 60 percent of those in poverty at any given point in time and are in a poverty spell that will last eight or more years. Furthermore, families headed by women are likely to have longer spells of poverty—at a given point in time, the average child who became poor when the family changed from married couple to female headed is in the midst of a poverty spell lasting almost twelve years. It was reported that “some 20 percent of poverty spells of children begin with birth. When they do, they tend to last ten years. The average poor black child today appears to be in the midst of a poverty spell which will last for almost two decades.”¹⁷ Similar findings were reported on spells of welfare receipt. Long-term welfare mothers tend to be racial minorities, never married, and high school dropouts.

Thus, despite the findings and interpretations of the earlier PSID reports on long-term poverty and welfare dependency, there is still a firm basis for accepting the argument that a ghetto underclass has emerged and exhibits the problems of long-term poverty and welfare dependency. Accordingly, liberal attempts to deny the existence of an underclass on the basis of the earlier optimistic Michigan panel studies now seem especially questionable.

Finally, a fourth liberal approach to the subject of the ghetto underclass and urban social problems is to acknowledge the rise in inner-city social dislocations while emphasizing racism as the explanation of these changes. There are two basic themes associated with this thesis. The more popular theme is that the cycle of pathology that characterizes the ghetto can only be comprehended in terms of racial oppression, and “the racial dehumanization Americans permit is a symptom of the deepseated, systematic and most dangerous social disease of racism.”¹⁸ In response to this argument, I should like to emphasize that no serious student of American race relations can deny the relationship between the disproportionate concentration of blacks in impoverished

urban ghettos and historic racial subjugation in American society. But to suggest that the recent rise of social dislocations among the ghetto underclass is due to contemporary racism, which in this context refers to the "conscious refusal of whites to accept blacks as equal human beings and their willful, systematic effort to deny blacks equal opportunity," is to ignore a set of complex issues that are difficult to explain with a race-specific thesis.¹⁹ More specifically, it is not readily apparent how the deepening economic class divisions between the haves and have-nots in the black community can be accounted for when this thesis is invoked, especially when it is argued that this same racism is directed with equal force across class boundaries in the black community.²⁰ Nor is it apparent how racism can result in a more rapid social and economic deterioration in the inner city in the post-civil rights period than in the period that immediately preceded the notable civil rights victories. To put the question more pointedly, even if racism continues to be a factor in the social and economic progress of some blacks, can it be used to explain the sharp increase in inner-city social dislocations since 1970? Unfortunately, no one who supports the contemporary racism thesis has provided adequate or convincing answers to this question.

The problem is that the proponents of the contemporary racism thesis fail to distinguish between the past and the present effects of racism on the lives of different segments of the black population. This is unfortunate because once the effects of historic racism are recognized it becomes easier to assess the importance of current racism in relation to nonracial factors such as economic class position and modern economic trends. Moreover, once this distinction is made it clears the way for appropriate policy recommendations. Policy programs based on the premise that the recent rise of social dislocations, such as joblessness, in the inner city is due to current racism will be significantly different from policy programs based on the premise that the growth of these problems is due more to nonracial factors.

However, some liberals know that "racism is too easy an explanation" because, in the words of Michael Harrington, it implies "that the social and economic disorganization faced by black Americans was the result of the psychological state of mind of white America, a kind of deliberate—and racist—ill will."²¹ He goes on to acknowledge that such racism exists and has to be vigorously fought, but he emphasizes that "it is a relatively simple part of the problem. For there is an economic structure of racism that will persist even if every white who hates blacks goes through a total conversion."²² In this more complex version, racism is seen not as a state of mind but as "an occupational hierarchy rooted in history and institutionalized in the labor market."²³ Also, it is argued that this economic structure of racism will become even more oppressive in the future because massive economic trends in the

economy—the technological revolution, the internalization of capital, and the world division of labor—will have an adverse effect in areas where blacks have made the most significant gains.

The problem with this argument is not the association between economic shifts and the deteriorating economic position of some blacks, which I feel is true and should be emphasized, but that all of this is discussed in terms of an “economic structure of racism.” In other words, complex problems in the American and worldwide economies that ostensibly have little or nothing to do with race, problems that fall heavily on much of the black population but require solutions that confront the broader issues of economic organization, are not made more understandable by associating them directly or indirectly with “racism.” Indeed, because this term has been used so indiscriminately, has so many different definitions, and is often relied on to cover up lack of information or knowledge of complex issues, it frequently weakens rather than enhances arguments concerning race. Indiscriminate use of this term in any analysis of contemporary racial problems immediately signals that the arguments typify worn-out themes and make conservative writers more interesting in comparison because they seem, on the surface at least, to have some fresh ideas.

Thus, instead of talking vaguely about an economic structure of racism, it would be less ambiguous and more effective to state simply that a racial division of labor has been created due to decades, even centuries, of discrimination and prejudice; and that because those in the low-wage sector of the economy are more adversely affected by impersonal economic shifts in advanced industrial society, the racial division of labor is reinforced. One does not have to “trot out” the concept of “racism” to demonstrate, for example, that blacks have been severely hurt by deindustrialization because of their heavy concentration in the automobile, rubber, steel, and other smokestack industries.²⁴

In sum, the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass and inner-city social dislocations is less persuasive and influential in public discourse today because many of those who represent the traditional liberal views on social issues have failed to address straightforwardly the rise of social pathologies in the ghetto. As I have attempted to show, some liberals completely avoid any discussion of these problems, some eschew terms such as the “underclass,” and others embrace selective evidence that denies the very existence of an underclass and behavior associated with the underclass or rely on the convenient term “racism” to account for the sharp rise in the rates of social dislocation in the inner city. The combined effect of these tendencies is to render liberal arguments ineffective and to enhance conservative arguments on the underclass, even though the conservative thesis is plagued with serious problems of interpretation and analysis. It is to the conservative perspective that I now turn.

The Increasing Influence of the Conservative Perspective on the Underclass

If the most forceful and influential arguments on the ghetto underclass in the 1960s were put forth by liberals, conservative arguments have moved to the forefront in the 1980s, even though they have undergone only slight modification since the 1960s. Indeed, many students of social behavior recognize that the conservative thesis represents little more than the application of the late Oscar Lewis's culture-of-poverty arguments to the ghetto underclass.²⁵ Relying on participant observation and life history data to analyze Latin American poverty, Lewis described the culture of poverty as "both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society."²⁶ However, he also noted that once the culture of poverty comes into existence, "it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven," argued Lewis, "they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their life-time."²⁷

Although Lewis was careful to point out that basic structural changes in society may alter some of the cultural characteristics of the poor, conservative students of inner-city poverty who have built on his thesis have focused almost exclusively on the interconnection between cultural traditions, family history, and individual character. For example, they have argued that a ghetto family that has had a history of welfare dependency will tend to bear offspring who lack ambition, a work ethic, and a sense of self-reliance.²⁸ Some even suggest that ghetto underclass individuals have to be rehabilitated culturally before they can advance in society.²⁹

In the 1960s, before the civil rights revolution ran its course and before the Great Society programs began to wind down, such arguments were successfully beaten back by forceful liberal critics who blamed society for the plight of the ghetto underclass and who called for progressive social reforms to improve their economic and social chances in life. There was considerable optimism and confidence among liberals in the latter half of the 1960s because they felt that they not only understood the problems of the inner city, they also believed that they had the potential solution in the form of Great Society and civil rights programs. Conservative students of urban poverty worked in an intimidating atmosphere, and those who dared to write or speak out on the subject received the full brunt of the liberal onslaught.³⁰

Arguments that associated ghetto-specific behavior (i.e., behavior that departs from mainstream patterns) with ingrained cultural char-

acteristics (that whole array of norms, values, orientations, and aspirations) received the most attention from liberal critics in the 1960s. These critics contended that ghetto-specific behavior is largely due to segregation, limited opportunities, and external obstacles against advancement—which were determined by different historical circumstances. They further argued that even if one were able to demonstrate a direct relationship between ghetto-specific behavior and values or other cultural traits, this would be only the first step in a proper social analysis. Analysis of the historical and social roots of these cultural differences represents the succeeding and, indeed, more fundamental step.³¹

In short, liberal scholars in the 1960s argued that cultural values do not ultimately determine behavior or success. Rather, cultural values emerge from specific social circumstances and life chances and reflect one's class and racial position. Thus, if underclass blacks have limited aspirations or fail to plan for the future, it is not ultimately the product of different cultural norms but the consequence of restricted opportunities, a bleak future, and feelings of resignation resulting from bitter personal experiences. Accordingly, behavior described as socially pathological and associated with the ghetto underclass should be analyzed not as a cultural aberration but as a symptom of class and racial inequality.³² As economic and social opportunities change, new behavioral solutions originate and develop into patterns, later to be complemented and upheld by norms. If new situations appear, both the patterns of behavior and the norms eventually undergo change. "Some behavioral norms are more persistent than others," wrote Herbert Gans in 1968, "but over the long run, all of the norms and aspirations by which people live are nonpersistent: they rise and fall with changes in situations."³³

These are forceful arguments but they do not give sufficient attention to the role that culture itself plays in influencing behavior. Although culture is a response to social structural constraints and opportunities, after it has been created it does not quickly disappear; it may, for a period of time, become a constraining or liberating factor in the experiences of individuals and groups, regardless of the kinds of opportunities created by changes in the broader society.³⁴ However, this point is not inconsistent with the liberal thesis because it acknowledges the possible relationship between culture and behavior, even though far more emphasis is placed on the social structural origins of group cultural characteristics.

What is important to emphasize, however, is that in the 1960s liberals effectively used this thesis not only to challenge the conservative arguments about culture and underclass behavior but also to explain why ghetto communities were so different from mainstream communities. The assertions about the relationship between culture and

social structure were rendered plausible by evidence reported and interpreted in a series of urban field studies in the latter 1960s.³⁵ On the other hand, conservative assertions about underclass life and behavior were weakened because of a lack of direct evidence and because they seemed to be circular in the sense that cultural values were inferred from the behavior of the underclass to be explained, and then these values were used as the explanation of the behavior.³⁶

Thus, by the end of the 1960s, the most forceful and persuasive arguments on the ghetto underclass had been provided by liberals, not conservatives. A few years later, just the opposite would be true, even though the conservative thesis of the interplay between cultural tradition, family biography, and individual character remains largely unchanged. To understand this development, it is important to note the unsettling effect of the heated controversy over the Moynihan report on those who represent traditional liberal views.

As I mentioned previously, liberals became increasingly reluctant to research, write about, or publicly discuss inner-city social dislocations following the virulent attacks against Moynihan. Indeed, by 1970 it was clear to any sensitive observer that if there was to be research on the ghetto underclass that would not be subjected to ideological criticism, it would be research conducted by minority scholars on the strengths, not the weaknesses, of inner-city families and communities.³⁷ Studies of ghetto social pathologies, even those organized in terms of traditional liberal theories, were no longer welcomed in some circles. Thus, after 1970, for a period of several years, the deteriorating social and economic conditions of the ghetto underclass were not addressed by the liberal community as scholars backed away from research on the topic, policymakers were silent, and civil rights leaders were preoccupied with the affirmative action agenda of the black middle class.

By 1980, however, the problems of inner-city social dislocations had reached such catastrophic proportions that liberals were forced to readdress the question of the ghetto underclass, but this time their reactions were confused and defensive. The extraordinary rise in inner-city social dislocations following the passage of the most sweeping antidiscrimination and antipoverty legislation in the nation's history could not be explained by the 1960 explanations of ghetto-specific behavior. Moreover, since liberals had ignored these problems throughout most of the 1970s, they had no alternative explanations to advance and were therefore sadly ill prepared to confront a new and forceful challenge from conservative thinkers. The result was a diffused and confused reaction typified by the four responses to the subject that I discussed above.

The new conservative challenge does not represent a change in the basic premise of the interplay among cultural tradition, family biography, and individual character; rather, it builds on this premise with the

argument that the growth of liberal social policies has exacerbated, not alleviated, ghetto-specific cultural tendencies and problems of inner-city social dislocations. Widely read neoconservative books such as *Thinking about Crime, Wealth and Poverty*, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality*, and *Losing Ground* present a range of arguments on the negative effects of liberal social policy on the behavior and values of the ghetto underclass.³⁸ Thus liberal changes in the criminal justice system are said to have decreased the sanctions against aberrant behavior and thereby contributed to the rise of serious inner-city crime since 1965; affirmative action pressures are linked with the deteriorating plight of the underclass because, while they increase the demand for highly qualified minority members, they decrease the demand for the less qualified due to the cost, particularly at times of discharge and promotion; and the Great Society and other social welfare programs have been self-defeating because they have made people less self-reliant, promoted joblessness, and contributed to the rise of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed families. Thus, unlike their liberal counterparts, conservatives have attempted to explain the sharp rise in the rates of social dislocation among the ghetto underclass, and their arguments, which strike many as new and refreshing, have dominated public discourse on this subject for the last several years. But there are signs that this is beginning to change. There are signs of a liberal revival. The spark for this revival, I believe, is Charles Murray's provocative new book, *Losing Ground*.

Probably no other work has done more to promote the view that federal programs are harmful to the poor. As reported in a recent *New York Times* editorial, "This year's budget-cutter bible seems to be 'Losing Ground,' Charles Murray's book appraising social policy in the last 30 years. The Reagan budget . . . is likely to propose deep reductions in education, child nutrition and housing assistance, and elimination of programs like the Job Corps, revenue sharing and urban development grants. In agency after agency, officials cite the Murray book as a philosophical base for these proposals, for it concludes that social-welfare programs, far from relieving poverty, increase it and should be stopped."³⁹ Indeed, *Losing Ground* not only attributes increasing poverty to programs such as those of the Great Society, it also explains increasing rates of joblessness, crime, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, and welfare dependency, especially among the ghetto underclass, in terms of such programs as well. Murray argues that recent changes in social policy have effectively changed the rewards and penalties that govern human behavior.

Losing Ground initially drew rave reviews in a variety of newspapers and periodicals, partly because Murray seemed to have marshaled an impressive array of statistics to support his arguments. But in the last

several months, critics from liberal quarters have awakened and have responded with powerful criticisms that have devastated the central core of Murray's thesis.⁴⁰ For example, whereas Murray maintains that the availability of food stamps and increases in Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments have had a negative effect on poor black family formation and work incentives, liberal critics have appropriately pointed out that the real value of these two combined programs increased only from 1960 to 1972; after that time, their real value declined sharply because states neglected to adjust AFDC benefit levels to inflation, yet "there were no reversals in the trends of either family composition or work effort."⁴¹ Moreover, in 1975, Congress enacted the "Earned Income Tax Credit," which further expanded the advantages of working for the poor. Thus, if welfare incentives lead to black joblessness and family dissolution, as Murray argues, "these trends should have reversed themselves in the 1970s, when the relative advantage of work over welfare increased sharply."⁴² They did not, of course; black joblessness, female-headed families, and illegitimacy soared during the 1970s.

Whereas Murray also contends that despite substantial increases in spending on social programs, the poverty rate failed to drop from 1968 to 1980—thus indicating that these programs were not successful—liberal critics argue that Murray "neglects the key facts that contradict his message," namely, that the unemployment rate in 1980 was twice that of 1968.⁴³ When unemployment increases, poverty also rises. What Murray fails to consider, they argue, is that many people slipped into poverty because of the economic downturn and were lifted out by the broadening of benefits. According to Robert Greenstein, director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., "The two trends roughly balanced each other and the poverty rate remained about the same" from 1968 to 1980.⁴⁴

Murray, on the other hand, maintains that the slowing of the economy had nothing at all to do with the failure of the poverty rate to decline in the 1970s. He argues that the economy, according to the GNP, grew more in the 1970s than in the 1950s, when the poverty rate dropped. Liberal critics have responded with the argument that, although growth in the GNP does create jobs, in the 1970s the growth was insufficient to handle the "unusually large numbers of women and young people (from the baby boom generation) who were entering the job market," resulting in an increase in unemployment. Moreover, real wages, which had risen steadily in the the 1950s and 1960s, stopped growing in the 1970s.⁴⁵ Greenstein states that "when unemployment rises and real wages fall, poverty increases—and low income groups (especially black males) are affected the most."⁴⁶ Thus, liberal critics maintain that far from being unimportant, the economy was the major cause of the

failure of poverty to decline in the 1970s. If it had not been for the benefit programs that Murray attacks, the poverty rate would have risen further still.⁴⁷

The Murray book has indeed "lit a fire" under liberals; if these and other responses are any indication, we could be seeing the beginnings of a major revival in the liberal approach to the ghetto underclass phenomenon. But the responses are still largely in reaction to what conservative thinkers are saying. In conclusion I would like to suggest how the liberal perspective might be refocused to provide the kind of intellectual and social policy leadership needed to balance the public discourse on the ghetto underclass.

Conclusion: Toward a Refocused Liberal Perspective

If the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass is to regain the influence it has lost since the 1960s, it will be necessary to do more than simply react to what conservative scholars and policymakers are saying. Liberals will also have to propose thoughtful explanations of the rise in inner-city social dislocations. Such explanations should emphasize the dynamic interplay between ghetto-specific cultural characteristics and social and economic opportunities. This would necessitate taking into account the effects not only of changes in American economic organization but also of demographic changes and changes in the laws and policies of the government as well. In this connection, the relationships between joblessness and family structure, joblessness and other social dislocations (crime, teenage pregnancy, welfare dependency, etc.), and joblessness and social orientation among different age groups would receive special attention.

However, thoughtful explanations of the recent rise in the problems of the underclass depend on careful empirical research. It is not sufficient to rely solely on census data and other secondary sources. Liberals will have to augment such information with empirical data on the ghetto underclass experience and on conditions in the broader society that have shaped and continue to shape that experience. This calls for a number of different research strategies ranging from survey to ethnographic to historical.

But first, liberals will have to change the way that they have tended to approach this subject in recent years. They can no longer afford to be timid in addressing these problems, to debate whether or not concepts such as the "underclass" should even be used, to look for

data to deny the very existence of an underclass, or, finally, to rely heavily on the easy explanation of racism.

These are my suggestions for refocusing the liberal perspective. It will not be easy and there is a lot of work to be done. But such an effort is needed if we are to provide a more balanced public discourse on the problems of the ghetto underclass.

Notes

This is the ninth *Social Service Review* lecture, delivered at the School of Social Service Administration, May 21, 1985. William Julius Wilson is Lucy Flower Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology and Public Policy and chairman of the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago.

1. Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Lee Rainwater, "Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower Class Family," *Daedalus* 95 (Winter 1966): 176–216; Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965), and "Employment, Income and the Ordeal of the Negro Family," in *The Negro American*, ed. Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

2. David L. Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981); Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1984).

3. See St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1945), vol. 2.

4. Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, p. 27.

5. Rainwater, "Crucible of Identity," p. 173.

6. Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, p. 81.

7. See, e.g., Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1964); Clark, *Dark Ghetto*; Rainwater, "Crucible of Identity"; and Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1967).

8. Moynihan, *The Negro Family*.

9. Richard McGahey, "Poverty's Vogueish Stigma," *New York Times* (March 12, 1982).

10. For a discussion of recent conservative analyses of the underclass, see Ken Auletta, *The Underclass* (New York: Random House, 1982).

11. Drake and Cayton.

12. Moynihan, *The Negro Family*; see e.g., Joyce Ladner, ed., *The Death of White Sociology* (New York: Random House, 1973); Robert B. Hill, *The Strength of Black Families* (New York: Emerson Hall Publishers, 1972); Nathan Hare, "The Challenge of a Black Scholar," *Black Scholar* 1 (December 1969): 58–63; Abdul Hakim Ibn Alkalimat (Gerald McWorter), "The Ideology of Black Social Science," *Black Scholar* 1 (December 1969): 28–35; and Robert Staples, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy," *Black Scholar* 2 (January/February 1970): 9–16.

13. Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (n. 1 above); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); Moynihan, *The Negro Family* (n. 1 above); Rainwater, "Crucible of Identity" (n. 1 above).

14. Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York: Stein & Day, 1977), p. 155; see also Martin Kilson, "Black Social Classes and Intergenerational Poverty," *Public Interest* 64 (Summer 1981): 58–78.

15. Martha S. Hill, "Some Dynamic Aspects of Poverty," in *Five Thousand American Families: Patterns of Economic Progress*, ed. Martha S. Hill et al. (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan Press, 1981), vol. 9; Mary Corcoran and Greg J. Duncan, "Demographic Aspects of the Underclass" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Pittsburgh, 1983).

16. Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood, *Slipping Into and Out of Poverty: The Dynamics of Spells*, Working Paper no. 1199 (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1983), and *The Dynamics of Dependence: The Routes to Self-Sufficiency* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Health and Human Services, 1983).

17. Bane and Ellwood, *Slipping Into and Out of Poverty*.

18. Kenneth B. Clark, "The Role of Race," *New York Times Magazine* (October 5, 1980), pp. 25–23.

19. Carl Gershman, "A Matter of Class," *New York Times Magazine* (October 5, 1980), pp. 92–105.

20. See William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Regarding the second theme, that of racism directed with equal force, see e.g., Clark, "The Role of Race"; Alphonso Pinckney, *The Myth of Black Progress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and Charles V. Willie, "The Inclining Significance of Race," *Society* 15 (July/August 1978): 10, 12–15.

21. Michael Harrington, *The New American Poverty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), p. 140.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

25. Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Scientific American* 215 (October 1966): 19–25.

26. Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), *The Children of Sanchez* (New York: Random House, 1961), and *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966).

27. Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty."

28. For a good discussion of these points, see Auletta (n. 10 above), esp. chap. 2.

29. See, e.g., Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City Revisited*, 2d ed. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1974).

30. For examples of the tone of the more popular and ideological liberal critiques, see Charles A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); and William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Random House, 1971).

31. See Herbert J. Gans, "Culture and Class in the Study of Poverty: An Approach to Anti-Poverty Research," in *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Lee Rainwater, "The Problem of Lower-Class Culture and Poverty-War Strategy," in Moynihan, ed.; Hylan Lewis, "Culture, Class and the Behavior of Low Income Families" (paper prepared for the Conference on Views of Lower Class Culture, New York, June 1963); Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1981). Steinberg's analysis is a succinct restatement of points made by liberal critics in the 1960s.

32. Gans; Rainwater, "The Problem of Lower Class Culture"; Lewis, "Culture, Class and the Behavior of Low Income Families"; Steinberg.

33. Gans, p. 211.

34. I am indebted to Alan Sica of the University of Kansas for raising these points in private communication.

35. See, e.g., Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (n. 1 above); Liebow (n. 7 above); Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); and Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* (New York: Atherton Press, 1970).

36. For a discussion of this point, see Stanley Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie: Black and White Immigrants since 1880* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), chap. 1.

37. For a discussion of this point, see William Julius Wilson, "Reflections on the Insiders and Outsiders Controversy," in *Black Sociologists*, ed. James E. Blackwell and Morris Janowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

38. James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Sowell (n. 2 above); Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

39. "Losing More Ground," *New York Times* (February 3, 1985).

40. See, e.g., Robert Greenstein, "Losing Faith in 'Losing Ground,'" *New Republic* 192 (March 25, 1985): 12–17; Robert Kuttner, "A Flawed Case for Scrapping What's Left of the Great Society," *Book World* (December 17, 1984), pp. 4, 11; David Ellwood and Lawrence Summers, "Poverty in America: Is Welfare the Answer or the Problem?" (paper presented at a conference on "Poverty and Policy: Retrospect and Prospects," Williamsburg, Va., December 6, 1984); Christopher Jencks, "How Poor Are the Poor?" *New York Review of Books* 32, no. 8 (May 9, 1985): 41–49; Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, "Social Programs—a Partial Solution to, but Not a Cause of Poverty: An Alternative to Charles Murray's View," *Challenge Magazine* (May/June 1985), pp. 32–38.

41. Danziger and Gottschalk.

42. Greenstein, p. 14.

43. *Ibid.*; Danziger and Gottschalk; Jencks.

44. Greenstein, p. 14.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*; Danziger and Gottschalk; Kuttner; Jencks; Ellwood and Summers.