

## **Introduction/Thesis**

Through scholarly literature and the analysis of public opinion, four general theories have emerged that offer explanations of the mechanisms that perpetuate poverty in capitalist societies. In chapter two of *Interrogating Inequality* (the chapter is entitled “The Class Analysis of Poverty”), Erik Olin Wright explains the fundamental concepts behind these four theories, including, the genetic inferiority approach, the culture of poverty approach, the ravages of social change approach, and comprehensively, the class exploitation approach. Wright acknowledges that the genetic inferiority approach, one that attributes inherent individual attributes as the sources of poverty, is no longer widely accepted among academics, except in regard to variation in IQ between racial groups. Proponents of this approach argue that poverty exists because, “some people are simply not intelligent enough to compete in this modern world” (Wright 33). The culture of poverty approach states that the poor acquire certain values, attitudes, and cultural beliefs, which are not inherited, but are by-products of social systems that inevitably lead them into poverty. This approach suggests that the poor are poor because they lack motivation or are lazy, characteristics that some argue are more prevalent in certain cultures. Wright also highlights the theory of poverty that cites the ravages of social change as its primary cause, an explanation that occurs at the societal level, but exists as an unfortunate by-product that does not benefit specific groups. Proponents of this explanation blame the unequal distribution of opportunity among groups as the primary cause of poverty. One who argues that poverty exists as a by-product of social causes may cite the outsourcing of jobs and the welfare state as two policies that have created poverty. From this perspective, poverty can be eliminated by manipulating social policies that are currently in place.

Lastly, Wright thoroughly examines the existence of poverty as a result of inherent properties found in certain social systems, which in the context of his writing, is almost exclusive to capitalist systems. In his thesis, Wright argues that even if the sources of poverty cited in the three previous explanations were controlled for, poverty would still exist because it is inherent to capitalism, a social order that invokes systematic class exploitation. I argue that though this argument is convincing, the solutions that Wright proposes to mitigate the problem of poverty do not successfully support the fundamental basis of his thesis.

## **Argument**

In the “Class Analysis of Poverty,” Wright argues that poverty is inherent to the capitalist system, a system that is based on class and exploitation. Not only is poverty not an accident, but the material interests of certain individuals within a capitalist order actually depend on the deprivation and exploitation of others. “It is not just that poverty is an unfortunate consequence of their pursuit of material interests; it is an essential *condition* for the *realization* of their interests. To put it bluntly, capitalists and other exploiting classes benefit from poverty” (Wright 38). Therefore, as grounded in the Marxist tradition, Wright asserts that powerful people have an economic interest in preserving poverty through exploitation, which he illustrates with the nineteen-forties comic strip involving the Shmoo.

In this comic strip, a manager working for a wealthy capitalist does research to find the poorest area in the United States in hopes of identifying this place, building a factory there, and exploiting the people by offering only low wages to maximize surplus profits. Through his research, the manager identifies Dogpatch as the poorest community in America, therefore he and the wealthy capitalist travel there to set-up a canning factory, only to find out that shmooos have also been discovered there. Shmooos are creatures in Dogpatch that function solely to please humans by transforming themselves into the basic necessities of life essential for human survival (i.e. milk, butter, eggs, meat, and bread), and can reproduce in infinite numbers. Therefore, shmooos are not much use for the rich, but are of great value to the poor, as they provide the basic materials needed for human survival. Upon arrival to Dogpatch, the manager and wealthy capitalist expect to find starved individuals willing to work long hours in a factory for incredibly low wages. But, because of the shmoo, people in Dogpatch are no longer willing to do this. This creates quite a dilemma for the wealthy capitalist who in frustration states, “Do you realize what the shmoo means? Nobody’ll have to work hard any more! The shmoo must Go!! It’s either it – or us! Thank Heavens its sinister influence hasn’t spread yet” (Wright 6)!!

This comic strip illustrates that poverty is not simply a by-product of social policies, but is critical for the preservation of capitalist material wealth. If the poor are deprived of basic necessities, they *must* work for any wages offered to them to ensure even the possibility of survival. Without the deprivation of basic necessities (as seen with the provision of the shmoo), the poor have more power as they no longer depend on the capitalist owners as a means of survival. Because of this, capitalists first prefer that only capitalists get shmooos, secondly, that all shmooos are destroyed, thirdly, that everyone gets shmoo, and lastly, that only workers get shmoo. In contrast, the working class first prefers that everyone gets shmooos, secondly, that only workers get shmoo, thirdly, only capitalists get shmoo, and lastly, that shmooos are destroyed. The working class first prefer that everyone gets shmooos, because in this case not only would they have the basic necessities of life provided for them, but so too would the capitalists, increasing the chances that wages would be increased and/or more workers would be hired. Though the situation that maximizes the well-being of the working class also benefits the capitalists, this does not mean that working class is in some way more altruistic than others. Both groups are acting rationally to preserve self-interests, which in the case of the working class, results in what Marx and others refer to as “universal human interests.”

Wright goes on to distinguish between the concepts of exploitation and nonexploitative economic oppression, in addition to what constitutes the working poor and underclass. He argues that class exploitation is defined by three primary principles which are that the material interests of the wealthy causally depend on the material deprivation of the working class/poor (inverse interdependent welfare principle), workers are excluded from the ownership of property and productive resources (exclusion principle), and that there is an unequal distribution of “surplus product” between exploiters and the exploited (appropriation principle). Nonexploitative oppression in contrast exists when only the first two principles above are satisfied. In the case of nonexploitative oppression, individuals do not even have the opportunity to be exploited because they are simply excluded from economic processes. The distinction then is that,

“in an exploitative relation, the exploiter *needs* the exploited since the exploiter depends upon the *effort* of the exploited. In the case of nonexploitative oppression, the oppressors would be happy if the oppressed simply disappeared” (Wright 11). Therefore, because oppressors depend on the oppressed, the oppressed do have certain power, particularly in the form of mobilizing large groups, that if successful, can improve working conditions. Wright associates the working class with those that are exploited and the underclass with those that are excluded from productive processes through nonexploitative oppression.

Wright argues that the working class and underclass are two “subproblems” that contribute to poverty. “The concepts we have been exploring suggest that the general problem of poverty needs to be broken down into two sub-problems: poverty generated inside exploitative relations, and poverty generated by nonexploitative oppression” (Wright 46). This statement implies that in order to eliminate poverty, one must address the constraints placing both the working class and the underclass in impoverished conditions. To solve the problem of poverty, Wright asserts that people in the capitalist system who have power must relinquish some of it, even though it is to their detriment. This is in contrast to the solution that arises out of the Marxist tradition that suggests that the capitalist system must be abolished completely. Overall, Wright argues that the solution to eliminating poverty is not coming up with savvy policies (as in the liberal reformist perspective), but that poverty is an issue of power and conflicting interests that should be solved by redistributing power among groups more equally (cites the Swedish labor movement and Social Democratic Party as successful examples of this).

### **Evaluation**

Though Wright is convincing in his explanation of poverty as an inherent aspect of the exploitative capitalist system, I suggest that the solutions that he proposes to eliminate poverty, to a certain extent, undermine the assumptions and premises described in his argument. The idea that poverty is inherent to the capitalist system rather than an unfortunate by-product is a fundamental premise on which Wright’s argument is based. If one assumes that this is true, it seems somewhat contradictory to suggest that poverty can be eliminated through any mechanism other than the destruction of the capitalist system itself. But, as a solution to poverty, this is not what Wright suggests. In contrast, Wright argues that one should combat poverty through a more equal distribution of power, which according to his own assumption will not eliminate poverty, because the capitalist system will still be in place, even though it has been significantly altered. Through this logic, one can assume that at best, redistributing power between capitalists and workers can only function to *reduce* poverty, rather than eliminate it. This is somewhat problematic to Wright’s assertion that the “class analysis of poverty” perspective is any better than the liberal reformist perspective, which argues that poverty is an unfortunate by-product of certain social systems. The solutions offered by both perspectives only have the potential to reduce poverty, rather than eliminate it. If one controlled for poverty that exists because of class exclusion and exploitation (the causes that Wright describes in the “Class Analysis of Poverty”), poverty would still exist, because the capitalist system would still be intact, and poverty is inherent to this system.

Secondly, the solution that Wright offers to reduce poverty does not address issues regarding the condition of the underclass. Wright suggests that poverty exists

because of the deprivation of two distinct groups, the working poor, and the underclass. By simply distributing power more equally between wealthy capitalists and those working for them, nothing is done to improve the condition of the underclass, who by definition are excluded from the economic processes of the capitalist system entirely. To improve the conditions of the underclass, I argue that a more comprehensive system to reducing poverty must be in place. One must not only require that those with power relinquish some of it, but that *policy* efforts are made to assist the underclass in acquiring skills and knowledge that will give them labor capacity that has economic value in the capitalist system. Therefore, I argue that the most successful way to reduce poverty while maintaining the capitalist system is by utilizing solutions from a variety of approaches (primarily the class analysis of poverty approach and the liberal reformist approach), as opposed to simply one.

### **Reflection**

Overall, though Wright is convincing in his argument that poverty is inherent to the capitalist system, the solution that he proposes undermines this exact argument, and is not comprehensive enough to address those impoverished within the underclass. From this assignment I learned to distinguish between various explanations of poverty that have arisen in academia and through popular consensus. Rather than arguing in support of or against a particular explanation, this assignment allowed me to critique flaws in the logic of these arguments, in particular, the logic found in the class analysis of poverty approach. What I learned most from this assignment is that to solve institutionally imbedded and complicated problems such as poverty, creativity of ideas and collaboration between individuals and approaches is essential.