THE UNDESERVING POOR

AMERICA'S ENDURING CONFRONTATION WITH POVERTY

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I

The Undeserving Poor: Morals, Culture, and Biology

THE UNDESERVING POOR HAVE a very old history. They represent the enduring attempt to classify poor people by merit. This impulse to classify has persisted for centuries, partly for reasons of policy. Resources are finite. Neither the state nor private charity can distribute them in unlimited quantities to all who might claim need. On what principles, then, should assistance be based? Who should—and, the more difficult question, who should not—receive help? Answering the questions means drawing lines separating individuals into categories and defending arbitrary distinctions that discriminate among people, none of whom can survive by themselves with comfort and dignity. In practice, honest and perceptive officials have recognized the impurity of all distinctions: No classification can be applied easily or satisfactorily to real people. For reasons of convenience, policy has collapsed into artificial categories the continuum on which poor people have been arrayed.

How to draw the boundaries between who does and who does not merit help is one of the three great questions that run through debates about poverty since the late eighteenth century. The second is, how can we provide help without increasing dependence or creating what economists call moral hazard? The third is, what are the limits of social responsibility? What do we owe to the poor and to each other? This chapter focuses on the first question; later chapters take up the second and third.

The identity of the undeserving poor, as this book shows, has varied throughout American history. At times, men—allegedly drunk and lazy—have dominated; at other points, women—unmarried mothers,

especially women of color—have been the focus; frequently, immigrants—for instance, Mexicans in the 1930s and the undocumented in the early twenty-first century—have been part of the group; and African Americans often have found themselves included as well. In studying the undeserving poor, one methodological point is very important. Who fits within the category at any point in time is evident not only by discovering what has been said and written about them, but, at least as important, by identifying how groups of poor people have been treated—in practice, who has been excluded from private and public charity.

The terms used to describe the undeserving poor—whether based on morality, culture, or biology—serve to isolate and stigmatize them. The undeserving poor, the culture of poverty, and the underclass are moral statuses identified by the source of dependence, the behavior with which it is associated, its transmission to children, and its crystallization into cultural patterns. Empirical evidence almost always challenges the assumptions underlying the classifications of poor people. Even in the late nineteenth century, countervailing data, not to mention decades of administrative frustration, showed their inadequacy. Since the 1960s, poverty research has provided an arsenal of ammunition for critics of conventional classifications. Still, as even a casual reading of the popular press, occasional attention to political rhetoric, or informal conversations about poverty reveal, empirical evidence has remarkably little effect on what people think. Part of the reason is that conventional classifications of poor people serve such useful purposes. They offer a familiar and easy target for displacing rage, frustration, and fear. They demonstrate the link between virtue and success that legitimates capitalist political economy. And by dividing poor people, they prevent their coalescing into a unified political force. Stigmatized conditions and punitive treatment, moreover, provide powerful incentives to work, whatever the wages and conditions.

The belief that poverty results from personal inadequacy assumes that poverty is a problem of persons. There are, in fact, as the rest of this book will illustrate, a number of other answers to the question, what kind of a problem is poverty? Before the twentieth century, the idea that poverty is a problem of persons—whether deserving or undeserving—remained intertwined with the biblical idea that poverty is

always with us. With production limited and population pressing on resources, poverty appeared ingrained within the human condition.[1] When this fatalistic idea of poverty as a result of universal scarcity began to crumble in the early twentieth century under Progressive-era economists' "discovery of abundance," a wholly new dilemma emerged. If poverty was unnecessary, then what accounted for its stubborn persistence? Why were so many people poor? The most straightforward answer unbundled the two strands: scarcity and individual deficiency. With scarcity off the table, individual failings marked persons as all the more undeserving in a world of possibility where poverty no longer was inescapable. This idea—we might call it the *irony of optimism*—carved a hard edge of inferiority into ideas about poor people. That is one reason why the idea that poverty as a problem of persons persists with such tenacity, despite whatever evidence social scientists produce.

The idea of poverty as a problem of persons comes in both hard and soft versions. The soft version portrays poverty as the result of laziness, immoral behavior, inadequate skills, and dysfunctional families. The hard version views poverty as the result of inherited deficiencies that limit intellectual potential, trigger harmful and immoral behavior, and circumscribe economic achievement. The soft view, which is the older of the two, holds out the possibility of individual escape from poverty. The hard side, also rooted in the nineteenth century, is deeply pessimistic. Neither the soft nor hard side have resulted in much sympathy for poor persons throughout American history other than children, widows, and a few others whose lack of responsibility for their condition could not be denied. These were the deserving poor. Today they are most often referred to as the working poor, and in recent years they have elicited sympathy and support from public programs. The others have been thought to have brought their poverty on themselves; they are the undeserving poor.

The Origins of the Undeserving Poor

Before the twentieth century, it would have seemed preposterous to imagine the abolition of poverty. Resources were finite; life was harsh. Most people, as the bible predicted, would be born, live, and die in poverty. The questions, then, were who among the needy should be

helped? What should they be given? How should relief or charity be administered? The answers by and large were not moral, because poverty entailed no disgrace. Rather, from the time of the Elizabethan poor law, policies in England and America reflected two other ways of classifying poor people. The first of these represented an attempt to answer the enduring question, what are the limits of our social obligations? Of primary importance was the division between neighbors and strangers. Responsibility extended to family and community; there it ended. This was the point of the settlement provisions in both English and American poor laws, which required communities (defined variously as parishes, towns, or counties) to assist their permanent members. Others who might fall into need within their borders should be shipped to their places of origin. Settlement laws reflected a state of limited mobility in which most people belonged to some identifiable community. They reflected, too, the permeable and blurred boundaries between family and community in agricultural villages where markets and wage labor had not hardened distinctions and redefined relations.[2]

No aspect of the poor laws caused as great confusion and litigation as the settlement provisions. The restriction of public and private charity to neighbors resonated with deep cultural preferences, but in practice it proved almost impossible to do. As migration and mobility increased, as people wandered from town to town in search of work, who could say with authority to what community someone belonged? The complex attempts at definition all failed, and the result was cruelty and expense. In winter, local authorities shunted sick or old people from one town or county to another, and the expense of transporting them, or of defending against their claims in court, consumed a large share of the tax money raised for relief. Indeed, the modification of the settlement laws became a primary goal of poor law reform in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Still, despite the modification, settlement continued as both a legal and emotional issue, as in the resistance to national welfare standards, the resentment of dependent outsiders allegedly drawn to states with relatively generous welfare benefits, and the reluctance to provide benefits to immigrants.[3]

Another distinction originally attempted to separate the genuinely needy from rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars. It translated over time into the restriction of aid to the impotent and the exclusion of

the able-bodied. This principle, so transparently reasonable on the surface, also proved administratively impossible to implement. In both England and America, rising costs for poor relief in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries convinced critics that in fact the able-bodied had penetrated relief rolls, and a great object of poor law in both countries became to remove them. This task remained far more difficult than imagined.

In his report on the poor laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1821, Josiah Quincy, future mayor of Boston and president of Harvard University, pointed out that the principle on which the laws rested divided the poor into "two classes": first, "the impotent poor; in which denomination are included all, who are wholly incapable of work, through old age, infancy, sickness or corporeal debility." Second were the "able poor . . . all, who are capable of work, of some nature, or other; but differing in the degree of their capacity, and in the kind of work, of which they are capable." No one disagreed about helping the impotent, but the able poor were another matter: "From the difficulty of discriminating between this class and the former, and of apportioning the degree of public provision to the degree of actual impotency, arise all the objections to the principle of the existing pauper system." The problem could not be solved by legislation, because

> There must be, in the nature of things, numerous and minute shades of difference between the pauper, who through impotency, can do absolutely nothing, and the pauper who is able to do something, but that, very little. Nor does the difficulty of discrimination, proportionally, diminish as the ability, in any particular pauper, to do something, increases. There always must exist, so many circumstances of age, sex, previous habits, muscular, or mental, strength, to be taken into the account, that society is absolutely incapable to fix any standards, or to prescribe any rule, by which the claim of right to the benefit of the public provision shall absolutely be determined.[4]

Quincy's language points to another enduring classification: the distinction between the poor and paupers. Paupers originated as an administrative category. They were recipients of public relief. Although by itself poverty carried no stigma, pauperism did. During the early nineteenth

century, the distinction between poverty and pauperism hardened, and commentators increasingly attributed the latter to moral sources. A few years after Quincy had written his report, a Philadelphia committee of the Guardians of the Poor, reporting on poor relief in other cities, asserted: "The poor in consequence of vice, constitute here and everywhere, by far the greatest part of the poor.... From three-fourths to nine-tenth of the paupers in all parts of our country, may attribute their degradation to the vice of intemperance."[5] In 1834 the Reverend Charles Burroughs, preaching at the opening of a new chapel in the poorhouse in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, admonished his audience:

> In speaking of poverty, let us never forget that there is a distinction between this and pauperism. The former is an unavoidable evil, to which many are brought through necessity, and in the wise and gracious providence of God. It is the result, not of our faults, but of our misfortunes.... Pauperism is the consequence of willful error, of shameful indolence, of vicious habits. It is a misery of human creation, the pernicious work of man, the lamentable consequence of bad principles and morals.[6]

The transmutation of pauperism into a moral category tarnished all the poor. Despite the effort to maintain fine distinctions, increasingly poverty itself became not the natural result of misfortune, but the willful result of indolence and vice. As Walter Channing pointed out in 1843, to the "popular mind" poverty "is looked to solely as the product of him or of her who has entered its dreadful, because dishonored, uncared for, or unwisely cared for, service. Let me repeat it, the causes of poverty are looked for, and found in him or her who suffers it."[7]

The redefinition of poverty as a moral condition accompanied the transition to capitalism and democracy in early nineteenth-century America. It served to justify the mean-spirited treatment of the poor, which in turn checked expenses for poor relief and provided a powerful incentive to work. In this way the moral definition of poverty helped ensure the supply of cheap labor in a market economy increasingly based on unbound wage labor. The moral redefinition of poverty followed also from the identification of market success with divine favor and personal worth. Especially in America, where opportunity awaited anyone with energy and talent,

poverty signaled personal failure. The ubiquity of decently paid work and opportunity, of course, were myths, even in the early Republic. The transformation in economic relations, the growth of cities, immigration, the seasonality of labor, fluctuations in consumer demand, periodic depressions, low wages, restricted opportunities for women, industrial accidents, high mortality, and the absence of any social insurance: together these chiseled chronic poverty and dependence into American social life.[8]

Persistent and increasing misery did not soften the moral definition of poverty. Neither did the evidence available through early surveys or the records of institutions and administrative agencies, which showed poverty and dependence as complex products of social and economic circumstances usually beyond individual control.[9] Instead, the definition hardened until nearly the end of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, public policy and private charity remained mean, punitive, and inadequate. Predispositions toward moral definitions of poverty found support in the latest intellectual fashions: in the antebellum period, in Protestant theology; after the Civil War in the work of Charles Darwin and early hereditarian theory; and in the twentieth century in eugenics. So deeply embedded in Western culture had the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor become that even writers on the Left invoked it automatically or translated it into their own vocabulary. Marxists wrote about the "lumpenproletariat" and even the Progressive reformers who, starting in the 1890s, rejected individual explanations of poverty, unreflectively used the old distinctions. Robert Hunter, a socialist whose widely read book *Poverty* (published in 1904) traced dependence to its structural sources, used the hoary distinction between poor people and paupers ("Paupers are not, as a rule, unhappy. They are not ashamed. . . . They have passed over the line which separates poverty from pauperism"). He asserted that "the poverty which punishes the vicious and the sinful is good and necessary. . . . There is unquestionably a poverty which men deserve."[10] (Not all Progressive-era writers on poverty agreed with Hunter. In 1908, in one of the first articles on poverty in a scholarly journal, poverty expert Lilian Brandt wrote that most poverty resulted from "some form of exploitation or . . . some defect in governmental efficiency." To be sure, some "natural depravity" and "moral defects" resulted in dependence, but they "may not be large enough to constitute a serious problem."[11])

The moral classification of the poor survived even the Great Depression. Poverty lost much of its moral censure as unemployment reached catastrophic levels, but the idea of relief remained pejorative and degrading. The unemployed turned to the state for help usually only as a last resort, after they had exhausted all other possibilities. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt could hardly wait to move the federal government out of the business of relief, which it had reluctantly and temporarily entered in 1933. The foundation of the social welfare edifice erected by his administration became a distinction between public assistance and social insurance (relief based solely on need versus universal programs such as Social Security) that assured public policy would continue to discriminate invidiously among categories of poor people.[12] At the same time, social workers and public officials in the Southwest deliberately constructed needy Mexican immigrants as the undeserving poor, thereby justifying encouragement of their "voluntary" repatriation and, when that failed, deportation.[13]

During World War II and the 1950s, poverty received little explicit attention from social scientists. However, controversies about Aid to Dependent Children—federal matching grants to states popularly known as "welfare"—and other aspects of public assistance showed that the moral classification of poor people had persisted.[14] In the nineteenth century, asking for relief became a sign of individual failure; no label carried a greater stigma than pauper. By the second half of the twentieth century, some groups in need of help had been moved out of the pauper class. Most elderly people, workers disabled in accidents, and the unemployed (not to mention veterans, always a special category) could claim help as a right through social insurance. Others, notably single mothers, remained dependent on public assistance—morally tarred, as always, by their association with relief as well as by their allegedly promiscuous sexuality and, increasingly, their race.[15]

Assaults on the character of unmarried, welfare-dependent mothers escalated throughout the last half of the twentieth century, culminating, as Chapter 4 explains, in the 1996 "welfare reform" legislation. Seen as lazy, immoral "welfare queens" happily soaking up public money while transmitting a culture of dependence to their children, they stood out in public rhetoric as the quintessential undeserving poor. (For a time, with the decline in the "welfare" rolls after the passage of the

1996 legislation, criticism of poor single mothers softened as many were forced into low-wage jobs, but by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, fueled by the research of social scientists, criticism had come roaring back.) If, however, the lens is shifted from rhetoric to action, two other groups come into focus in the picture of the undeserving poor. The first is a subset of immigrants. The construction of Mexicans as the undeserving poor during the 1930s persisted, augmented by the huge influx of immigrants from Latin America and Asia triggered by the repeal of nationality-based quotas in 1965 and subsequent legislation. Disproportionately poor, immigrants'—and not just from Mexico—place among the undeserving poor also became clear with legislation in 1996 denying them public benefits for which they had previously been eligible. The other undeserving poor were young black men. In fact, men in need always had elicited less sympathy than women. It is true, as historians have shown, that since its inception, social insurance has favored men. But nineteenth and early twentieth century responses to men in need for the most part represented them as lazy alcoholics who had brought their misery on themselves. Variously labeled tramps, hoboes, and vagabonds, they elicited harsh local ordinances criminalizing their behavior. Early in the twentieth century, to take one example, Buffalo, New York, contained several homes for needy women and not one for men. Children, in fact, more readily took in their needy mothers than fathers, which is why men were found more often in poorhouses than women. There was no federal or state assistance for men comparable to the mothers' pensions of the early twentieth century. In the late twentieth century, chronically jobless black men had few places to turn for assistance and, instead of support, training, or work, found themselves incarcerated in astounding numbers, pushing America to the top of the list of nations in rates of imprisonment. Incarceration had become the welfare state for black males, signifying more than any rhetoric their place among the undeserving poor.[16]

The Culture of Poverty

In the early 1960s intellectuals and politicians rediscovered poverty. Sustained economic growth and myths of affluence had hidden the

stubborn persistence of deprivation and dependence; Americans appeared shocked to discover that between 40 and 50 million among them were, by any objective measure, poor.[17] To interpret the meaning of these no longer avoidable and disheartening facts, social scientists drew on a new concept: the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty did not have the classification of poor people as its primary purpose. Still, it served the same end. For most writers observed that the culture of poverty did not capture all poor people. Rather, it placed in a class by themselves those whose behaviors and values converted their poverty into an enclosed and self-perpetuating world of dependence. Although some of its exponents located the sources of poverty in objective factors such as unemployment, the new concept resonated with traditional moral definitions. The culture of poverty could not quite sanitize the poor; their ancient odor seeped through the antiseptic layer of social science. They remained different and inferior because, whatever their origins, the actions and attitudes of poor people themselves assured their continued poverty and that of their children.

Not surprisingly, by the 1970s the culture of poverty had become a conservative concept, thought of as a justification for mean and punitive policies, harshly and sometimes unfairly attacked from the Left. But its political history is much more complex, for the culture of poverty originated among liberals who advocated more active, generous, and interventionist policies on behalf of the poor. As such, the concept reflected a larger strand in the liberalism of the time: the assumption that dependent people were mainly helpless and passive, unable without the leadership of liberal intellectuals to break the cycles of deprivation and degradation that characterized their lives.

In *Poverty Knowledge*, her magisterial history of poverty and social science in the twentieth century, Alice O'Connor interprets the culture of poverty as the result of two strains within postwar social science: the behaviorist revolution and the Cold War-induced concepts of development and modernization. The behaviorist revolution grew out of "the quest for an interdisciplinary, methodologically rigorous science of human behavior, with the ability to predict as well as describe." With funding by the federal government and major foundations, behaviorism "assumed the dimensions of an organized movement . . . leading to a vast expansion of the resources and institutional

infrastructure for behavioral research." Behaviorism was revolutionary because it broke with the "Progressive Era tradition of industrial and social survey research" and "reflected a broader change in the political economy of affluence" that "set the stage for individualizing poverty as a social problem, locating its origins in individual behavior rather than in economic and social arrangements, and tracing its 'pathology' to individual personality." Behaviorists, including sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset and anthropologist Margaret Mead, identified a core American national character oriented toward achievement, "acquisitive, individualistic, and fixed on the future" as the source of "prosperity and democratic practice." In this context, the "lower class" emerged as un-American. "Lower-class deviance, deprivations, and even political ideology . . . were looking more and more like personality deficiencies inculcated by lower-class mothers in the young."[18] With the most advanced scientific tools, behaviorists rediscovered the undeserving poor and placed most of the blame for its reproduction on poor mothers.

"If World War II had opened the door to a behaviorist 'revolution' in social science," claims O'Connor, "it was the Cold War that truly paved the way for direct investigation of the culture and psychology of 'the poor' as a distinguishable social group. For it was the Cold War that generated the need and the justification for opening up a whole new world—the 'third world'—for technical assistance and applied behavioral research in the name of international aid to the poor." "Modernization," the crucial concept guiding programs of international development, broke with anthropologists' stress on the exotic, primitive folkways of peasant cultures. Instead, modernization theory identified their poverty as the principal barrier to "a more modern, democratic way of life." What held third world cultures back, the Harvard psychologist David McClelland argued, was the absence of "a single personality trait" he labeled the achievement motive or "n Achievement," which formed "the engine behind *all* the great civilizations in Western history." In McClelland's theory, behaviorism combined with the imperatives of Cold War foreign policy goals to promote a "vision in which the individual personality, manufactured by the family, was the central driving force, and in which the family, reduced to its psychological function, was sharply divided into

maternal and paternal breadwinning roles." This was, remarkably, a vision for development that disregarded "the facts of political economy and . . . the economic agency of women and the family in the developing world." Other social scientists extended the blend of behaviorism and Cold War modernization theory from the third world to the "rural coal towns and mill towns of the United States" where they located "a superstitious, often fundamentalist 'pre-modern' worldview that left villagers passive, submissive, hostile to outsiders, and unable to share in the national wealth." Liberals found in this "dead hand of tradition" not only the source of deep and persistent poverty but of reactionary politics as well. In the early 1960s, according to O'Connor, "the elements of rural traditionalism and lower-class urban culture became conflated into a single, undifferentiated concept of a culture of poverty that deviated from the American middle-class norms."[19]

The anthropologist Oscar Lewis introduced the idea of the culture of poverty in his ethnographic portraits of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.[20] "In the idea of the culture of poverty," claims O'Connor, Lewis "extended" the "logic" of behaviorally based modernization theory "across national, racial, and ethnic lines."[21] The culture of poverty, he stressed, differed from "economic deprivation . . . or the absence of something." Rather, it was a "way of life . . . passed down from generation to generation along family lines." It could be found in both urban and rural settings and in different regions and nations because it represented a series of "common adaptations to common problems."[22]

Those problems flourish in cash economies where wages are low, unemployment high, social and political organization of the poor undeveloped, kinship bilateral, and dominant class values stress "the accumulation of wealth and property, the possibility of upward mobility and thrift, and . . . personal inadequacy or inferiority" as the source of low economic status. In these settings, the lower strata of rapidly changing societies became likely candidates for the culture of poverty because of their alienation and marginality.[23] Lewis stressed the adaptive role of the culture of poverty: It serves to "cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the impossibility of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society." Nonetheless, its perpetuation "from generation to generation" crippled children because it leaves them psychologically

unprepared "to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime."[24]

For Lewis, the culture of poverty had several key features. Among the most important was "the lack of effective participation and integration of the poor in the major institutions of the larger society" and their consequent apathy, hostility, and suspicion. Nor do the members of the culture of poverty form very many organizations of their own. Indeed, he wrote, "the low level of organization . . . gives the culture of poverty its marginal and anachronistic quality in our highly complex, specialized, organized society. Most primitive people have achieved a higher level of socio-cultural organization than our modern urban slum dwellers."[25]

A distinctive family life also characterized the culture of poverty: "the absence of childhood as a specially prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle, early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriage, a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of wives and children," and maternal dominance. Dominating individual psychology were a "strong feeling of marginality or helplessness, of dependence, and of inferiority" coupled with a battery of other traits:

> a high incidence of maternal deprivation, of orality, of weak ego structure, confusion of sexual identification, a lack of impulse control, a strong present-time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism, a widespread belief in male superiority, and a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts.[26]

Lewis stressed the distinction between poverty and the culture of poverty. In this, he echoed the old distinction between poverty and pauperism, which as we have seen was a staple of social thought from the late eighteenth century onward. In the United States, he argued, only 20 percent of the poor remained trapped within the culture of poverty. Both anthropological and historical evidence gave many examples of impoverished people untouched by the latter. For the most part, they escaped for one of a variety of reasons: the lack of stratification within their societies (as with hunting and gathering tribes); their integration into the larger society through formal organizations (as with castes in India); an emphasis on

literacy and voluntary associations (as with the Jews of Eastern Europe); or, Lewis speculated, political leaders who inspired confidence and hope. "On the basis of my limited experience in one socialist country—Cuba—and on the basis of my reading, I am inclined to believe that the culture of poverty does not exist in socialist countries." When poor people became class-conscious or joined trade unions, when their outlook became "internationalist," they left behind the culture of poverty because any "movement . . . which organizes and gives hope to the poor and effectively promotes solidarity and a sense of identification with larger groups, destroys the psychological and social core of the culture of poverty."[27]

Lewis understood the culture of poverty's "positive adaptive function," but did not romanticize it. He found it "a relatively thin culture. There is a great deal of pathos, suffering and emptiness among those who live in the culture of poverty."[28] Lewis understood how his portrait of the culture of poverty among Puerto Ricans could offend those who have dedicated themselves to eliminating poverty and who are trying to build a positive public image of an often maligned minority group. He knew the "danger that my findings might be misinterpreted or used to justify prejudices and negative stereotypes . . . which, unfortunately, are still held by some Americans." Clearly, his intent was otherwise. To improve the conditions of people trapped within the culture of poverty, "the first step is to know about them," he asserted, quoting a popular Puerto Rican saying: " 'You can't cover up the sky with your hand.' Indeed, you can't cover up slums, poverty, and ugliness."[29]

Despite his intentions, Lewis's definition of the culture of poverty lent itself easily to appropriation by conservatives in search of a modern academic label for the undeserving poor. At the same time, it also pointed in a radical direction. For the quickest and surest way to eliminate the culture of poverty was through the organization of its members. Lewis's stress on the pivotal role of organized militancy links the culture of poverty to the stress on the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor that characterized the War on Poverty in the early 1960s. For him pride, organization, and class (or racial) consciousness led swiftly away from the culture of poverty. In other words, Lewis understood that poverty resulted in part from a lack of power. In the United States, the great example for Lewis was the civil rights movement. In the third world, it was revolution.[30]

Michael Harrington was the first major author to apply the culture of poverty concept to the United States, although, wrote Lewis, "he used it in a somewhat broader and less technical sense than I had intended."[31] In *The Other America*, published in 1962, a pivotal book in the rediscovery of poverty in the 1960s, Harrington defined the contemporary poor in the United States as "those who, for reasons beyond their control, cannot help themselves." "Poverty in the United States," he wrote, "is a culture, an institution, a way of life.... The family structure of the poor... is different from that of the rest of the society.... There is... a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a world view of the poor."[32] Harrington's call to action against poverty lacked Lewis's appreciation of the potential of organized militance and assumed the passivity of the poor. Only the intervention of sympathetic elites could begin to lift poor people out of their degraded and helpless condition. The first step was to arouse the conscience of the nation, and this was the purpose of his book. Indeed, the great service of Harrington's *Other America* was to render poverty visible. Harrington, points out Harold Meyerson, saw "what almost everyone else had missed: that 40 million Americans in a nation of 176 million were poor."

> The new middle-class majority that had moved to suburbia bypassed the decaying inner cities on the recently built interstates, kept their distance from the African American ghettos, never encountered the migrant farmworkers, and failed to see (at least in aggregate) the millions of impoverished elderly. None of these groups had political power or a visible collective presence: they had not found a way to announce their existence. So Harrington did.[33]

As the culture of poverty entered the lexicon of American social science, it framed interpretations of public policy issues. Most notable was educational discourse in which the culture of poverty concept, redefined as cultural deprivation, explained the learning disabilities of economically disadvantaged youngsters.[34] To educators, cultural deprivation necessitated major changes in schooling, which ranged from "readers and materials more attuned to the experiences and problems of lower socioeconomic groups" to methods of instilling "school know-how" in which culturally deprived children were especially deficient, pedagogy

that drew on their "physical approach," techniques for combatting their anti-intellectualism, and balancing the "female school" with masculine influences.[35] Cultural deprivation underpinned the War on Poverty's Operation Head Start, which sought to counteract the familial and environmental disadvantages of poor children through intensive preschool education.

Other liberal social scientists shared key assumptions of the culture of poverty. Most important was the image of poor people both past and present as dependent—passive, lacking the will and organizational capacity to attack the sources of their exploitation and degradation. Historian Oscar Handlin wrote of the Irish immigrants to mid-nineteenth century Boston: "No other contemporaneous migration partook so fully of this poverty-stricken helplessness." Indeed, "degradation by poverty was almost inevitable under the circumstances of Irish life in Boston." Want "insinuated itself into personal habits, perverting human relations and warping conceptions of right and wrong." Boston's Irish, moreover, reflected the impact of Ireland's harsh agrarian economy and Catholic religion: "Their utter helplessness before the most elemental forces fostered an immense sadness, a deep rooted pessimism about the world and man's role in it."[36]

Stanley Elkins compared slaves to the inmates of concentration camps. The force of oppression disintegrated their personalities and transformed them into "Sambos," passive grinning subhumans who tried to please their masters. The "Elkins interpretation of slavery," writes John Cell, "was part of the American liberalism of the postwar era.... Under segregation, though obviously not so rigidly as during slavery, a closed-behavior system has supposedly continued. And, especially in the South, black people on the whole had continued to submit to it."[37] Psychologist David McClelland's theory of development, as we have seen, pointed in the same direction—characterizing poor people's lack of n Achievement motivation as the source of the passivity that retarded their economic progress.

The culture of poverty solved two intellectual problems. First, it provided a justification for America's Cold War intervention into third world societies. Without the aggressive intervention of the West, third world societies locked into backwardness by the culture of poverty could not put themselves on the road to economic development

and political democracy. In this way, the culture of poverty played a role similar to the idea of Manifest Destiny in the mid-nineteenth century and the racial arguments used to justify America's imperial activities a half century later.[38] Second, the culture of poverty helped explain why poor people failed to rise up in protest on the streets or through the electoral system. The false consciousness offered by Marxism appeared increasingly facile and patronizing. The culture of poverty, by contrast, offered a complex and subtle interpretation of the process that connected the objective sources of exploitation with the psychology and behavior of everyday life. Its emphasis on the development and transmission of adaptive coping strategies preserved some dignity and rationality for the poor even as it deplored the culture that resulted and stressed the importance of intervention by sympathetic elites.[39]

From the Culture of Poverty to the Black Family

In the early 1960s the resurgent interest in poverty did not focus initially on cities or on race. Michael Harrington's *Other America*, for instance, paid most attention to rural poverty, and the Kennedy Administration's early concern with poverty concentrated on Appalachia. However, as Chapter 3 shows, after 1964 the civil rights movement and urban civil violence refocused the lens on poverty. Poverty increasingly appeared an urban problem most seriously afflicting blacks, even though most poor people were white.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's commencement speech at Howard University on June 4, 1965, signaled the shifting focus of anti-poverty efforts. The "great majority of Negro Americans—the poor, the unemployed, and the dispossessed," said Johnson, "are another nation. Despite the court orders and the laws, despite the legislative victories and the speeches, for them the walls are rising and the gulf is widening. . . . The isolation of Negro from white communities is increasing rather than decreasing, as Negroes crowd into the central cities and become a city within a city . . . . Negro poverty is not white poverty. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences—deep, corrosive, obstinate differences—radiating painful roots into the community, the family, and the nature of the individual."[40]

Johnson based his remarks on a hitherto confidential report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which had been submitted to him in March 1965. Its principal author was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor in the Office of Policy Planning and Research of the Department of Labor.[41] Moynihan's report, finally published in the fall, became one of the most controversial documents in the history of American social science.[42] Moynihan drew on the work of early black sociologists, especially E. Franklin Frazier, and the recently completed *Dark Ghetto* by black social psychologist Kenneth Clark.[43] His explanation for worsening poverty among urban blacks did not name the culture of poverty; nor did he mention Oscar Lewis or Michael Harrington. Nonetheless, informed readers could not miss the striking parallels between Lewis's culture of poverty and Moynihan's cycle of poverty—the "subculture . . . of the Negro American" and "tangle of pathology" (a phrase borrowed from Clark).[44] Moynihan's report outraged black leaders and a great many of their white supporters. Because most critics distorted the report, the debate generated more passion than insight. One result was to accelerate the burial of the culture of poverty as an acceptable idea in liberal reform and research for close to a half century.[45]

Moynihan, points out James T. Patterson, "was a reformer who believed that poor people had to receive substantial government help." But this did not lead him to dismiss "the power of cultural forces. . . . He worried that racist and economic pressures had driven many poor Americans, especially blacks, so far into the depths that they were in great danger of passing on a host of dysfunctional behaviors to future generations." At the same time, "he also believed that unemployment was the major source of instability within poor families, and that government could and should act to improve their chances in life."[46]

Moynihan argued that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had fulfilled "the demand of Negro Americans for full recognition of their civil rights." Now, Negro Americans would press "beyond civil rights." They would want their equal opportunities to produce "equal results, as compared with other groups." This would not happen without special effort because two forces undermined blacks' legitimate aspirations for equal results. One was "the racist virus in the American bloodstream that still afflicts us"; the other was the toll of "three centuries

of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment." The most difficult fact for white Americans to understand, emphasizes the report, is that conditions within "the Negro American community in recent years" had not been improving. On the contrary, they were worsening. The fundamental problem with black communities was "family structure." The evidence, still a bit tentative admitted the report, was "that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling." A middle class had managed to save itself, but "for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated... So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself." Only a massive federal effort could reverse the pathology afflicting the lives of black Americans. Its goal should be "the establishment of a stable Negro family structure."[47]

Moynihan used several indexes to demonstrate the disintegration of the black family: "Nearly a quarter of urban negro marriages are dissolved"; "Nearly one-quarter of negro births are now illegitimate"; "Almost one-fourth of negro families are headed by females"; "The breakdown of the Negro family has led to a startling increase in welfare dependence."[48] As Lee Rainwater and William Yancey point out, Moynihan's dismay at trends in black family structure reflect the influence of Catholic social welfare philosophy emphasis on "family interests" as the "central objective of social welfare and of social policy in general."[49] The influence of the family in "shaping character and ability," wrote Moynihan, "is so pervasive as to be easily overlooked. The family is the basic social unit of American life; it is the socializing unit. By and large, adult conduct in society is learned as a child."[50] By definition, children raised in female-headed families could not learn conduct appropriate to American life. "Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in public and private affairs," asserted Moynihan. "The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, as that of the Negro American in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage."[51]

The current condition of black Americans resulted from a variety of forces. The unique brutality of American slavery, Moynihan argued, had destroyed family life among blacks and crippled black males, and trends after the Civil War had reinforced the assault on

black masculinity. "The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male. The 'sassy nigger' was lynched."[52] The rapid transformation of American blacks from a rural to an urban population had accentuated the deterioration of black family life. When urbanization occurs "suddenly, drastically, in one or two generations," as it did among blacks, observed Moynihan, "the effect is immensely disruptive of traditional social patterns."[53]

Black male unemployment heightened the disorganizing impact of slavery's legacy and rapid urbanization. "The fundamental overwhelming fact is that negro unemployment, with the exception of a few years during World War II and the Korean War, has continued at disaster levels for 35 years." Employment affected family patterns profoundly. During the periods when jobs for black men had been relatively plentiful, "the Negro family became stronger and more stable. As jobs became more and more difficult to find, the stability of the family became more and more difficult to maintain."[54] The American wage system added to the other factors eroding black family stability. Although it offers relatively high incomes for individuals, it rarely ensures "that family, as well as individual needs are met." Alone among industrial democracies, America failed to supplement workers' incomes with family allowances. Because black families have the largest number of children and the lowest incomes, "many Negro fathers literally cannot support their families. Because the father is either not present, is unemployed, or makes such a low wage, the Negro woman goes to work." This "dependence of the mother's income" further undermined the position of the father and deprived the children "of the kind of attention, particularly in school matters, which is now a standard feature of middle-class upbringing."[55] For Moynihan, therefore, male unemployment and underemployment remained key issues.

The result of these trends, as Moynihan saw it, was a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, which he described provocatively as a "tangle of pathology."[56]

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American

> society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

Moynihan naturalized patriarchal gender roles as the standard from which black families had departed. "A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife." He cited with alarm a research study that purposed to show that in "44 percent of the Negro families studied, the wife was dominant, as against 29 percent of white wives." This matriarchal family pattern that inverted natural sex roles proved insidious because "it reinforces itself over time." Moynihan found problematic the education gap between black female and male students. "There is much evidence that Negro females are better students than their male counterparts." These educational "disparities . . . carried over to the area of employment and income." In one quarter of black families "where the husband is present, is an earner, and someone else in the family works, the husband is not the principal earner." In comparable white families, the proportion was 18 percent. "More important, it is clear that the Negro females have established a strong position for themselves in white collar and professional employment, precisely the areas of the economy which are growing most rapidly and to which the highest prestige is attached." Moynihan turned black women's strengths and accomplishments into evidence that they had subverted the natural order of gender relations. Rather than cause for admiration, black women's achievements emerged as reasons for deep concern because by reproducing matriarchy, they weakened black men and perpetuated the tangle of pathology in the nation's urban ghettos.[57]

Housing segregation worsened the situation because it prevented stable middle-class black families from escaping the "cultural influences of the unstable ones."[58] Besides matriarchy, the "tangle of pathology" revealed itself in "the failure of youth" (defined by poor school performance and low scores on standardized tests); delinquency and crime; the failure rate on the Armed Forces Qualification Test; and the alienation of black youths, reflected in staggering unemployment rates, "narcotic addition," and isolation from white society. "The present generation of Negro youth," observed Moynihan, "growing up in the

urban ghettos has probably less personal contact with the white world than any generation in the history of the Negro American."[59]

Only a program of national action could begin to undo the "tangle of pathology." Its object should be "to strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support its members as do other families."[60] Moynihan purposefully omitted specific policy recommendations. His audience was the administration; he wanted to persuade the president and his advisors to mount a coordinated attack on the forces retarding the economic progress of black Americans. Clearly, this goal influenced his choice of language, his provocative metaphors, and the lack of balanced argument. As Rainwater and Yancey observe, an alternative approach to poor urban black families would concentrate on how "particular family patterns" help individuals adapt to deprivation and survive "in the one world in which they must live." (This has been, precisely, the approach of urban ethnographers.) From this point of view, some of the very behaviors that appear "pathological" assist families "to make as gratifying a life as possible in the ghetto milieu." Had he emphasized the positive aspects of black family patterns, Moynihan might have avoided some of the criticism his report provoked.[61] But this was not possible. The problem with Moynihan's presentation extended deeper than rhetoric. It lay, as we shall see, in his incorrect beliefs about the legacy of slavery, patriarchal view of the family, and emasculating impact of strong women. It is not surprising that the report initiated a major debate on the black family in which Moynihan became the villain.

Major newspaper accounts omitted Moynihan's emphasis on unemployment as the major source of family disorganization. Scholarly commentators relied on newspaper accounts rather than on the original report, distorted Moynihan's arguments, and offered as their own alternatives views Moynihan either explicitly or implicitly shared.[62] Moynihan's report aroused passionate hostility because it intersected with the second phase of the civil rights movement, which emphasized black pride and power. In this context, his thesis "deeply embarrassed" advocates of increased black political power because his stress on social pathology contradicted claims of black achievement.[63] Criticism of Moynihan did not result solely from misreading his report. It reacted as well to his misreading of history and patriarchal assumptions, which,

as Chapter 2 explains, violated the racial and gender premises of the politics of liberation nearing their zenith at the time Moynihan wrote and, indeed, remain deeply offensive to African American women to this day.

The attacks on Moynihan highlight the swelling reaction against cultural explanations of poverty and other ideas that assumed passivity and disorganization among the poor.[64] Although Moynihan rarely used the word "culture," clear parallels exist between his report and early descriptions of the culture of poverty. Critics associated his argument with theories of cultural deprivation. Both Moynihan and culture of poverty theorists located the perpetuation of poverty in attitudes and behaviors transmitted from one generation to the next. Both stressed the origins of those behaviors in the legitimate frustration and alienation bred by blocked opportunities; and both used similar indicators to identify the "culture of poverty" or "tangle of pathology": a high proportion of female-headed families, unrestrained sexuality, an inability to defer gratification, and an apathetic withdrawal from social involvement.

Moynihan did not share Oscar Lewis's emphasis on the adaptive, strategic role of poverty culture. Nonetheless, a casual reading could easily lump both views together as attempts to use cultural explanations to reinforce sophisticated versions of the old idea that poverty resulted from individual behavior. To their critics, Lewis's families caught in the culture of poverty, educators' culturally deprived children, and Moynihan's black families all seemed mid-twentieth-century euphemisms for the undeserving poor. The ironic outcome of Moynihan's report, therefore, was to sweep the black family off the agenda of policy research and to hasten the culture of poverty's amputation from its liberal origins. The idea of such a culture, however, did not disappear. Instead, it became a conservative rationalization for cutting welfare until, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, "culture" staged a stunning reentry into mainstream poverty research.

Culture as a Conservative Idea

Even in the late 1950s and 1960s, liberal social scientists did not have a monopoly on cultural approaches to poverty. Among the more

conservative writers who also developed cultural interpretations of poverty, the political scientist Edward Banfield became the most prominent. At the same time that Oscar Lewis first described Mexican villagers as trapped in a culture of poverty, Banfield used culture to explain the failure of economic development and modernization. Banfield did not share Lewis's belief that political mobilization could destroy the culture of poverty, and when he extended the fatalistic implications of his interpretation of a "backward society" to American cities, Banfield stressed the futility of liberal reform. Published shortly after the Moynihan report, Banfield's book helped cement the association of culture with conservatism. It foreshadowed the major themes in conservative writing about poverty and welfare during the next two decades.

In 1958 Banfield published an account of the Southern Italian village Montegrano under the title, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*.[65] In Montegrano he found a cultural pattern, which he labeled "amoral familism," that inhibited corporate action and perpetuated the miserable lives of its peasants. Banfield identified "amoral familism" as behavior consistent with a simple rule: "Maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise."[66] Montegranesi never joined together to sponsor projects such as the improvement of roads; the village had no voluntary charities; most residents said that no one was "particularly public-spirited"; there was no "stable and effective [political] party organization; villagers remained reluctant to help one another; and friends were "luxuries" they felt they could not afford. The example of Montegrano showed that "technical conditions and natural resources" did not inevitably result in the formation of economic and political associations that sponsored development. Instead, the intervening force of culture caused people to live and think in "ways . . . radically inconsistent with the requirements of formal organization."[67]

Because their family-centered ethos prevented them from acting "concertedly or in the common good," better incomes, argued Banfield, would do little to "make the atmosphere of the village less heavy with melancholy." Indeed, it would probably worsen the situation, because without "accompanying changes in social structure and culture, increasing incomes would probably bring with them

increasing frustration."[68] By 1970 Banfield had extended his pessimistic forecast for social and cultural change to American cities.[69] Like the Montegranesi, the American urban lower class remained trapped by a culture that inhibited advancement and perpetuated pathology. Without transgressing against democratic and constitutional rights, government could do little to alter the situation. In fact, most of its well-meaning interventions had been ineffective or harmful.

Banfield belittled the then-fashionable despair about American cities and argued that no urban crisis in fact existed. On most measures, conditions within cities had improved. Even the number and "relative disadvantage" of "the poor, the Negro, and others who stand outside the charmed circle" had decreased. As a result, "a great many so-called urban problems" were really conditions that we either "cannot eliminate or do not want to incur the disadvantage of eliminating."[70] One reason those conditions remained intractable was, as in Montegrano, their anchor in lower-class culture.

To Banfield, class exerted a major influence on "the city's form and the nature of its problems." To whatever source they traced class, he argued, all definitions stressed its expression in a "characteristic patterning that extends to all aspects of life: manners, consumption, child-rearing, sex, politics, or whatever." No agreement existed on the core principle that unified each cluster of traits. For his purposes, and from a policy standpoint, "the most promising principle seems to be that of psychological orientation toward the future."[71] Banfield located four classes in America: upper, middle, working, and lower. The distinction between the working and lower class played a pivotal role in his analysis, because he wanted to separate the poor into groups defined by their psychology and behavior. "The reader is asked to keep in mind," he advised, "that members of a 'class' as the word is used here are people who share a 'distinct patterning of attitudes, values, and modes of behavior,' *not* people of like income, occupation, schooling, or status. A lower class individual is likely to be unskilled and poor; but it does not follow from this that persons who are unskilled and poor are likely to be lower class."[72]

Banfield defined the lower class person by his "time-horizon." (Note the use of the male pronoun. Banfield describes class behavior almost exclusively in male terms.)

> The lower-class person lives from moment to moment, he is either unable or unwilling to take account of the future or to control his impulses. Improvidence and irresponsibility are direct consequences of this failure to take the future into account . . . and these consequences have further consequences: being improvident and irresponsible, he is likely also to be unskilled, to move frequently from one dead-end job to another, to be a poor husband and father.[73]

The lower-class person was also impulsive. "Bodily needs (especially for sex) and his taste for 'action' take precedence over anything else—and certainly over any work routine." With a "feeble attenuated sense of self," suffering from "feelings of self-contempt and inadequacy," he remained "suspicious and hostile, aggressive yet dependent," lacking the ability to maintain a stable relationship with a mate, without attachment to community, neighbors, or friends, and with no interest in voluntary organizations or politics. Because the women in the characteristically female-headed lower-class households were usually impulsive and incompetent, boys drifted into gangs where they learned the "extraordinarily violent" style of lower-class life. Lower-class life, in fact, was not normal, and lower-class people emerged from Banfield's account as less than fully human. "In the chapters that follow, the term *normal* will be used to refer to class culture that is not lower class."

In his interpretation of the origins of the lower class, Banfield repeated a common but incorrect version of urban and ethnic history usually labeled "the last of the immigrants thesis." "The *main* [emphasis in original] disadvantage" of the contemporary Negro, wrote Banfield, was "the same as the Puerto Rican's and Mexican's: namely, that he is the most recent unskilled, and hence relatively low-income, migrant to reach the city from a backward rural area." As with other immigrants, blacks had been attracted to cities by a "job, housing, school, and other opportunities." As poor as facilities in cities were, they were "better by far than any he had known before." Cities were "not the end of his journey but the start of it." Indeed, "Like other immigrants, the Negro has reason to expect that his children will have increases of opportunity even greater than his."[74]

Banfield did not deny the force of race prejudice. Instead, he argued that its intensity and institutional embodiment had lessened. As a

consequence, the problems facing contemporary blacks had more to do with class than race. (Chapter 5 takes up the issue of the history of black social structure and the question of black "progress.") Indeed, he expected that "under favorable conditions Negroes can be expected to close the gap between their levels of welfare and those of whites much faster than most people would probably imagine." He predicted that "the movement of the Negro up the class scale appears as inexorable as that of all of other groups."[75]

Casting blacks as the last of the immigrants results in important consequences for policy. It links their advancement to patience, not government intervention or special policies that favor them over others. Cities, Banfield argued, develop according to their own internal logic—determined by the three "imperatives" of rate of population growth, transportation technology, and distribution of income—which place "stringent limits on policy." Government interference might speed up or slow down the process of growth, but it cannot change it.[76] In fact, it often has made problems worse.

One of those problems, Banfield wanted to clarify, was poverty. He argued that urban poverty seldom originated in cities. Cities attracted poor people, and migrants imported poverty. As a term, however, poverty covered a condition with "four degrees": destitution, want, hardship, and relative deprivation. No one within cities was destitute any longer. That is, no one lacked "income sufficient to assure physical survival and to prevent suffering from hunger, exposure, or remediable or preventable illness." Even want had nearly disappeared, and in only a few decades there would "almost certainly" be none.[77] The modern problem of poverty, therefore, had more to do with relative deprivation, with "income *level* [rather] than . . . income *distribution*" [emphasis in original].[78] Even though the contemporary poor remained no more relatively deprived than their counterparts a decade before, they thought "the gap to be wider." This accentuation of discontent resulted largely from the well-meaning, though misguided, liberalism of the War on Poverty, which, by focusing on income differences, "probably engendered and strengthened feelings of relative deprivation."[79]

Banfield realized that absolute poverty still existed among the people once called "undeserving." Now, as he observed, new terms like "troubled," "culturally deprived," "hard to reach," "chronically," or

"multiproblem," carried the same connotation. This poverty reflected both lack of money and the "extreme-presentist orientation" of the lower class. Beyond the boundary of the lower class, "poverty in the sense of hardship, want, or destitution" now generally resulted from "external circumstance—involuntary unemployment, prolonged illness, the death of the breadwinner, or some other misfortune." Among the lower class, however, its proximate cause was "ways of thinking and behaving that are, in the adult, if not elements built into personality, at least more or less deeply ingrained habits."[80]

All the problems of the lower class melded in fact into one problem: "the existence of an outlook and style of life which is radically present-oriented and which therefore attaches no value to work, sacrifice, self-improvement, or the service to family, friends, or community."[81] The Italian peasants of Montegrano at least owed a fierce loyalty to their immediate family. The American urban lower class lacked even this small, redeeming virtue.

Not surprisingly, therefore, none of the programs directed toward lower-class reformation in recent years succeeded; only policies unacceptable in a constitutional democracy (such as semi-institutional care, separation of children from parents, or preventive detention based on statistical probability of criminal behavior) could even begin to eradicate it. In their absence, the lower class would replenish itself and continue to generate serious urban problems at a rate far exceeding its size.[82] Government, Banfield feared, would only exacerbate the problem, because its "growing multitude of programs" created an unstoppable "bureaucratic juggernaut" that had no effect on the core of the problem. If the government needed a symbol for its policies, what was preferable "in every way" to a Freedom Budget or Marshall Plan was a "useless dome."[83]

Banfield's work revealed the conservative potential within cultural theories of poverty. Without Lewis's faith in the transformative power of political mobilization, the culture of poverty led neither to socialism nor to a liberal war on poverty. Instead, its logical outcome was the "benign neglect" advocated as a response to urban problems by Daniel Patrick Moynihan when he served in the Nixon administration and the translation of "lower class" into a new synonym for undeserving poor.[84] In fact, Banfield's argument contained all the

essential themes of the conservative attack launched on poverty and welfare in the 1980s (and described in Chapter 4): the "last of the immigrants" thesis as a description of American history; the gradual disappearance of physical want; the damage done to the poor by liberal government policy; and the preeminent role of culture and behavior in the perpetuation of misery. In the 1960s and early 1970s, these ideas conflicted with proud and militant independence movements (discussed in Chapter 2) that fought for civil rights and national liberation. They resonated, however, with the idea that poverty was in part a problem of biology and that the undeserving poor were the product of faulty genes as much as, or more so than, toxic environments.

The Biological Inferiority of the Undeserving Poor

In 1866 the Massachusetts Board of State Charities, which had oversight of the state's public institutions, wrote, "The causes of the evil ['the existence of such a large proportion of dependent and destructive members of our community'] are manifold, but among the immediate ones, the chief cause is inherited organic imperfection,—vitiated constitution or *poor stock*."[85] This was the hard version of poverty as a problem of persons. It arose as a response to institutional failure. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, reformers sponsored an array of new institutions designed to reform delinquents, rehabilitate criminals, cure the mentally ill, and educate children. Crime, poverty, and ignorance, in their view, were not distinct problems. The "criminal," "pauper," and "depraved" represented potentialities inherent in all people and triggered by faulty environments. Poverty and crime, for instance, appeared to cause each other and to occur primarily in cities, most often among immigrants. This stress on the environmental causes of deviance and dependence, prominent in the 1840s, underpinned the first reform schools, penitentiaries, mental hospitals, and, even, public schools. Residential institutions, where possible, were to be located outside of cities and governed by "moral therapy," a mild regime that avoided corporal punishment and other harsh sanctions. Public schools, advocated Horace Mann and his allies, should substitute a pedagogy based on appeal to the interests of children, identification

with the teacher, and soft sanctions for the prevailing regime of corporal punishment, drill, and extrinsic motivations.[86]

By the mid-1860s it had become clear that none of the new institutions built with such optimism had reached their goals. They manifestly failed to rehabilitate criminals, cure the mentally ill, reeducate delinquents, or reduce poverty and other forms of dependence. The question was, why? Answers did not look hard at the failures in institutional design and implementation or at the contexts of inmates', prisoners', and patients' lives. Rather, they settled on individual-based explanations: inherited deficiencies. The emphasis on heredity in the 1866 Massachusetts State Board of Charities reflected the views of one of its most influential members, Samuel Gridley Howe, founder of the Perkins Institute for the Blind, whose discouragement with the results of the Institute had led him to believe that the blind were mentally inferior and to stress the influence of heredity on mental and physical capacity.[87] Howe's pessimism and emphasis on heredity reflected a parallel move away from environmental causation in theories of insanity, evident, even, in popular novels that touched on the genesis of crime. The Board of State Charities explained that "vitiation or imperfection of stock" originated from two sources: "First, lack of vital force; second, inherited tendencies to vice. The first comes from poor nutrition, use of stimulants, or abuse of functions on the part of progenitors [in other words, the inheritance of acquired characteristics later known as Lamarckianism]. The second comes from their vicious habits of thought and action. The first, or lack of vital force, affects mainly the dependent class, and lessens their ability for self-guidance." The Board supported its belief that the inheritance of acquired characteristics reproduced the undeserving poor as well as criminals, the mentally ill, and other depraved and dependent individuals with scientific evidence from physiologists that emphasized the toxic impact of large amounts of alcohol, which stimulated "those organs or those functions" evident in the "animal passions, and represses those which manifest themselves in the higher or human sentiments which result in *will*." This submission to "animal passions" resulted in the terrible outcomes for posterity evident in the state's dependent, delinquent, and defective population.[88]

The State Board's gloomy emphasis on heredity did not lead it to pessimistic conclusions, however. It believed, rather, in the body's recuperative power over time. Vice had a standard deviation that, if not exceeded, could be eradicated by the body's natural capacity for healing. "The intemperate and vicious classes," argued the Board, "do tend to point in the wrong direction, but the tendency is not yet so established that they point simultaneously. They are still susceptible to the influences of education, and or moral and religious training, and these should be brought to bear on them." In place of despair, the Board promised "we may, by taking thought, during two or three generations, correct the constitutional tendencies to disease and early decay." In fact, the Board, surprisingly, still believed that the persistence of crime and poverty was "phenomenal—not essential in society . . . their numbers depend upon social conditions within human control." The "important truth" to be "presented in every aspect on and on every proper occasion" was this: "the numerical proportion of the dependent and criminal classes to the whole population is subject to conditions within human control, and may be rapidly increased or lessened by the action of society." The Board had revealed the source of social pathologies through the scientific study of heredity; through the scientific study of society it would excavate the laws governing its prevention. The scientific vehicle, which its secretary Frank Sanborn helped found in 1865, was the American Association for the Promotion of Social Science. The practical vehicle was advocacy of public programs that would remove the inheritable sources of deviance and dependence. The Board advocated: "improvement of dwellings; encouragement to ownership of homesteads; increased facility for buying clothing and wholesome food; decreased facility for buying rum and unwholesome food; restriction of exhausting labor; cleanliness in every street, lane, and yard which the public arm can reach . . . and many like measures." The Board had started out with an ideology prefiguring eugenics and ended with one anticipating Progressivism. Its early bridge between heredity and environmentalism, or biology and reform, remained one crossed by reformers for only a relatively short time until it was broken by social Darwinism. It was rebuilt in the early twentieth century until demolished once more by eugenicists and their successors and then

reconstructed yet again in the early twenty-first century by the proponents of epigenetics.

By the 1920s, two initially separate streams converged in the hard-core eugenic theory that justified racism and social conservatism. "Eugenics," initially coined in 1883 by the English scientist Francis Galton, denoted "the 'science' of improving human stock by giving 'the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable.'" The word itself derived from a "Greek root meaning 'good in birth' or 'noble heredity.'" Galton pioneered the mathematical study of heredity, basing his theories on studies of probability, first developed with sweet pea data in 1876.[89] Social Darwinism composed the other stream. Social Darwinists attempted to apply the theory of Darwinian evolution to human behavior and society. Many "insisted that biology was destiny, at least for the unfit, and that a broad spectrum of socially deleterious traits, ranging from 'pauperism' to mental illness, resulted from heredity."[90]

In the United States, eugenic "science" owed more to the genetic discoveries of Gregor Mendel, first published in 1866 but unrecognized until the end of the century, than to mathematical genetics as practiced by Galton and his leading successor Karl Pearson. In 1904 Charles Davenport, the leading US eugenics promoter, used funds from the newly established Carnegie Corporation to set up a laboratory at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island. Cold Springs, according to historian Daniel Bender, "revitalized the marriage between biology and the social sciences," which "had gone sour with the advent of Weismanism and the rediscovery of Mendel's laws of inheritance." Anticipating Mendel, August Weismann, the German biologist, had advanced the theory that "essential traits were inherited through . . . 'germ plasm,' an internal substance unaffected by the environment." Davenport looked forward to the "new era" of cooperation between the sociologist, legislator, and biologist who together would "purify our body politics of the feeble-minded, and the criminalistic and the wayward by using the knowledge of heredity."[91]

In the United States, the application of evolutionary and genetic ideas to social issues gained traction in the late nineteenth century as a tool for explaining and dealing with the vast changes accompanying industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. "Herbert Spencer's

triumphant 1882 tour of the United States," observes Bender—Spencer was the leading spokesman for social Darwinism—"marked the growing importance of evolutionary thought within and beyond the academy. Hailed as a hero, Spencer was feted with banquets, including a feast on the last night of his tour at Delmonico's in New York, the city's toniest restaurant."[92] "In 1908," reports Daniel Kevles, "the American geneticist Raymond Pearl noted that eugenics was 'catching on to an extraordinary degree with radical and conservative alike, as something for which the time is quite right.'"[93] In 1913 a writer in the *Yale Review* tried to explain the "new 'cult' of eugenics" by pointing to both the "rediscovery of Mendel's laws" and "the growing demands on the taxpayers" caused by "a rapid and steady increase in the ratio of pauperism, insanity, and crime to the whole population."[94]

Darwinists viewed the "unfit" not only as unworthy losers but as savage throwbacks to a primitive life. "A host of poverty experts, settlement workers, reformers, socialists, and eugenicists," observes Bender, "cast paupers, tramps, and prostitutions as 'savage survivals.' Immigrant children in street gangs as well as working women found themselves compared to men of the lower races. Ominously, like the lowest animals, racially inferior humans seemed to be breeding faster than their moral and economic betters."[95] Hereditarian beliefs thus fed widespread fears of "race suicide," giving an urgency to the problem of population control. The "ignorant, the improvident, the feeble-minded, are contributing far more than their quota to the next generation," warned Frank Fetter of Cornell University.[96]

Eugenics drew support from both conservatives and progressives. Conservatives found in eugenics justification for opposing public and private charities that would contribute to the reproduction of the unfit. Davenport, for instance, pointed to a strong role for heredity in a number of diseases and in conditions such as alcoholism and "feeblemindiness"—"a catchall term of the day, used indiscriminately for what was actually a wide range of mental deficiencies." He "similarly reduced pauperism to 'relative inefficiency [which] in turn usually means mental inferiority.'" "Reformers and eugenicists shared, above all, a faith in the explanatory power of evolution and individuals, most notably birth control activist Margaret Sanger, crossed fluidly from one campaign to the other."[97] Settlement workers, argues Bender, saw "the

immigrant working class" standing "on a precipice with degeneracy looming in the abyss on the other side." Like their predecessors on the Massachusetts State Board of Charities decades earlier, they reconciled their belief in the biological foundation of physical and moral degeneration with their commitment to the power of environment in shaping character and behavior through "a kind of neo-Lamarckianism that posited that acquired characteristics were passed on to future generations." Their role combined weeding out the irredeemable with providing a social environment in which adults would build character and acquire habits that they would transmit to their children. Social worker James Reynolds emphasized, "we are helping to prevent the continuance of evils whose triumph would mean the pauperizing or degradation of another generation."[98]

Immigration restriction was one campaign that drew support from progressive reformers as well as from conservatives. Davenport, for instance, reserved his heaviest fire for the new immigrants pouring into America, all of whom he believed came from biologically different races. They would, he expected, "rapidly make the American population 'darker in pigmentation, smaller in stature, more mercurial... more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sex-immorality.'" One possible solution was state-enforced sterilization; another was immigration restriction. Davenport's colleague, Harry Laughlin, who directed the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring, established with money from Mrs. E. Harriman in 1911, became the principal advisor to the congressional committee that recommended the nationality-based immigration quotas in the 1920s.[99]

Nonetheless, by the 1920s, cracks appeared in the bridge that linked hereditarians and environmentalists. Hereditarians took an increasingly hard line, manifest especially in the use and interpretation of intelligence tests and the advocacy of sterilization. The French psychologist Alfred Binet, "an acoloyte of Galton's quantifying aims," developed the first intelligence tests in France in the early twentieth century at the request of the French government, which sought a means for identifying mentally deficient children. In 1880 American psychologist Henry H. Goddard brought intelligence tests to the United States, where he first applied them at the Vineland, New Jersey, Training School for Feeble-Minded Boys and Girls—he was the director of its new laboratory

for the study of mental deficiency. Goddard extended his studies, introducing the classifications "idiot," "imbeciles," and "morons," and eventually published *The Kallikak Family: A Study in Feeble-Mindedness* in 1912, which he followed in two years with *Feeble-Mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences*. The feeble-minded lacked "an understanding of right and wrong and the power of control." Some of them became paupers "because they found the burden of making a living too heavy." Feeble-mindness, he was certain, constituted "a condition of mind or brain which is transmitted as regularly and surely as color of hair or eyes."[100] "After Goddard instituted IQ tests for immigrants upon their arrival at Ellis Island," reported Stephen Jay Gould, the great critic of hereditarian-based theories of intelligence, "he proclaimed more than 80 percent of them feeble-minded and urged their return to Europe."[101]

Other psychologists picked up Goddard's work on intelligence testing, extended it to other populations, and experimented with different methods. Lewis Terman at Stanford, one of the most prominent and a proponent of the hereditarian view of intelligence, introduced the term "IQ," which stood for "intelligence quotient," a concept developed in 1912 by William Stern, a German psychologist. Intelligence testing, which at first aroused skepticism and hostility, received a tremendous boost during World War I, when a trial of the tests on more than 1.7 million people during the war dramatically brought them to public attention. "The army tests," according to historian Paula Fass, "demonstrated the feasibility of mass testing, and as one textbook on testing noted, 'The possibility of measuring an individual's intelligence by a short and simple test has captured the imagination of school people and of the general public'... the army tests were a significant administrative breakthrough, but the headline-grabber and contemporary interest involved the results."[102] The tests purported to show that nearly one-fourth of the draft army could not read a newspaper or write a letter home and that "the average white draftee—and, by implication, the average white American—had the mental age of a thirteen-year-old." Blacks, the tests claimed to show, had the average mental age of a ten-year-old.

Davenport, Goddard, and others blamed the results for whites on the immigration of inferior races and used them as ammunition in their advocacy of immigration restriction. One significance of these tests

lay in their alleged demonstration that intelligence as well as "mental deficiency" was "genetically determined." The implications for policy were stark. "Terman and other psychologists were quick to point out that opening up avenues of opportunity to the children of the lower socioeconomic groups probably made no sense; they did not have the I.Q. points to compete."[103] These ideas worked their way into public education in the 1920s, underpinning the educational psychology taught in teacher preparation courses and the massive upsurge in testing used to classify students, predict their futures, and justify unequal educational outcomes. After the war, "the same group of psychologists who constructed the army Alphas [the name of the Army intelligence tests] developed the National Intelligence Test." Sales were astonishing: more than 575,000 copies in the first year and more than 800,000 the next year, 1922–23. "By 1922," reports Fass, "it was competing with other tests of a similar kind. In 1922–23, over 2,500,000 intelligence tests were sold by just one firm which specialized in their development and distribution."[104] In the minds of its prominent advocates, intelligence testing was linked with beliefs that science had demonstrated the primacy of heredity over environment and that the immigration of inferior races was driving America toward a dysgenic future. In 1923 Terman told the National Education Association in Oakland that one of the "most significant batteries of tests" measured "certain traits of moral character likely to be associated with delinquency and incorrigibility. . . . in the traits measured by these tests our gifted children ranked high. . . . The conclusion is that here as elsewhere gifted children are superior to the common run. . . . Children of so many superiorities could hardly have acquired them all through environmental influences. Nor have they, for their heredity, too, is demonstrably superior." But "two facts of serious portent should be mentioned. (1) The racial stocks most prolific of gifted children are those from northern and western Europe and the Jewish. The least prolific are the Mediterranean races, the Mexicans and the Negroes. (2) The fecundity of the family stocks from which our gifted children come appears to be definitely on the wane."[105]

Eugenics entered public policy through its influence on immigration restriction, public education, and, as well, state sterilization laws. Indiana passed the first of these in 1907. By the end of the 1920s,

twenty-four states had passed laws permitting the sterilization of the mentally unfit. First in the Virginia Supreme Court in 1925 and then in the US Supreme Court in 1920, the case eventually known as *Buck v. Bell* tested the constitutionality of state sterilization. The case originated with a sterilization order issued against Carrie Buck, born out of wedlock to a mother certified as feebleminded and herself committed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and the Feebleminded. Buck's court-appointed legal guardian challenged the sterilization order. In preparing its defense, Virginia officials "consulted Harry Laughlin at the Eugenics Records Office" who, without ever having seen Buck or her mother in person, "provided an expert deposition that Carrie's alleged feeblemindedness was hereditary." Another staff member at the Eugenics Records Office, Arthur Estabrook, also provided evidence for the state. The Supreme Court, by a vote of 8-1, upheld the Virginia Statute, declaring "sterilization on eugenic grounds was within the police power of the state, that it provided due process of law, and that it did not constitute cruel or unusual punishment." Writing for the Court, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes issued his famous (or infamous) dictum: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."[106]

Even before the 1920s, strains between eugenicists and reformers had opened fissures in the consensus around the heritability of mental and character defect. Eugenicists' commitment to "germ plasm" pulled them away from the environmental neo-Lamarckianism on which reformers depended. Criticisms surfaced at conferences held at the Race Betterment Foundation, started by cereal millionaire J. H. Kellogg in Battle Creek Michigan in 1914, 1915, and 1928. "Advocates for reform found themselves face-to-face with eugenicists and both presented competing visions of race betterment. It became clear that the emerging science of the 'germ' favored eugenics." Attempts to chart a middle ground between the two failed, signaling the victory—albeit temporary—of the eugenicists and the need for the reformers to find other grounds to support their emphasis on the environmental sources of social pathologies.[107]

Biochemistry and the rise of the Nazis combined to drive eugenics into eclipse and disrepute after the 1920s. The more research revealed about the complexity of human genetics, "the less did eugenics—even much of the reform variety—appear defensible in principle, or

even within scientific reach." The American Eugenics Society told several newspaper editors that Hitler's 1933 sterilization law "showed great courage and statesmanship." German eugenicists flattered their American counterparts by pointing to the debt that they owed them. In 1936 the University of Heidelberg awarded an honorary doctorate to Harry Laughlin. The American writer, eugenicist, and virulent anti-communist, Lothrop Stoddard, traveled to Germany in 1939, "where he was—to the distaste of many American readers—heartily received by the Nazi leadership, including Adolf Hitler himself."[108]

The fall of eugenics left the field open to environmentalist explanations. Nurture rather than nature became the preferred explanation for crime, poverty, delinquency, and low educational achievement. The emphasis on environment fit with the emergent civil rights movement, which rejected racial, or biological, explanations for differences between blacks and whites—explanations that had been used to justify slavery, lynching, segregation, and every other form of violent and discriminatory activity. Hereditarian explanations fit badly, too, with the optimism underlying the War on Poverty and Great Society that, as Chapter 3 shows, assumed the capacity of intelligent government action to ameliorate poverty, ill health, unemployment, and crime.

Nonetheless, by the late 1960s a new eugenics began to challenge the environmental consensus. Its appearance coincided with the white backlash against government-sponsored programs favoring African Americans and the disenchantment following on what appeared to be the failure of programs of compensatory education designed to make up for the culturally deficient home life of poor, especially poor black, children. "No single publication did more to precipitate the revival," claims Kevles, "than Arthur R. Jensen's 1969 article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, 'How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement.'"[109] Once again, institutional and programmatic failure became the grounds for invoking science-based theories of the limits imposed by genetic inheritance. Jensen began with the unequivocal assertion, "Compensatory education has been tried and it apparently has failed." He continued:

> Compensatory education has been practiced on a massive sale for several years in many cities across the nation. It began with auspicious

> enthusiasm and high hopes of educators. It had unprecedented support from Federal funds. It had theoretical sanction from social scientists espousing the major underpinning of its rationale: the 'deprivation hypothesis,' according to which academic lag is mainly the result of social, economic, and educational deprivation and discrimination—an hypothesis that has met with wide, uncritical acceptance in the atmosphere of society's growing concern about the plight of minority groups and the economically disadvantaged.[110]

Despite this massive investment of resources, "the chief goal of compensatory education—to remedy the educational lag of disadvantaged children and thereby narrow the achievement gap between 'minority' and 'majority' pupils—has been utterly unrealized in any of the large compensatory education programs that have been evaluated so far." His question, thus, was, "Why has there been such uniform failure of compensatory education programs wherever they have been tried?" The short answer—and Jensen's article consisted of 123 pages bristling with statistics and summaries of scientific literature—was that they ran up against a genetic wall. Poor, minority children lacked the intelligence to profit from them. The diagnosis of the problem, he argued, needed to begin "*with the concept of the IQ: how it came to be what it 'really is'; what makes it vary from one individual to another; what can change it, and by what amount*" [emphasis in original]. For Jensen, intelligence had a "specific meaning . . . namely, the general factor common to standard tests of intelligence . . . . probably best thought of as a capacity for abstract reasoning and problem solving." As such, it was largely inherited. Jensen quoted with approval the 1905 pronouncement of Edward L. Thorndike, perhaps the most prominent educational psychologist of the early twentieth century: "In the actual race of life, which is not to get ahead, but to get ahead of somebody, the chief determining factor is heredity." The "preponderance of evidence" gathered since Thorndike's time had "proved him right, certainly as concerns those aspects of life in which intelligence plays an important part." After a review of the available data, Jensen concluded that "the composite value" for the heritability of intelligence "is .77, which becomes .81 after correction for unreliability. . . . This represents probably the best single overall estimate of the heritability of measured

intelligence that we can make." (Unfortunately for his case, Jensen had relied for his most important evidence on twin-studies by Cyril Burt, a prominent British educational psychologist, which, in the early 1970s, were revealed as fraudulent by Princeton psychologist Leon Kamin.) From this data about the heritability of intelligence, Jensen drew the unavoidable conclusion that class and race variation in intelligence reflected primarily genetic rather than environmental differences. This is why the IQ changes produced by compensatory education programs, he argued, were so small.[111]

"The reaction to Jensen's article," reported Harvard psychologist Richard Herrnstein and conservative writer Charles Murray, "was immediate and violent. From 1969 through the mid-1970s, dozens of books and hundreds of articles appeared denouncing the use of IQ tests and arguing that mental abilities are determined by environment, with the genes playing a minor role and race none at all. Jensen's name became synonymous with a constellation of hateful ways of thinking."[112] Nonetheless, the controversy over Jensen breathed new life into research and writing on the influence of heredity on intelligence and seeped into the rationales for failure offered by educators. (I recall sitting in a meeting in the early 1970s with a high-level Toronto school administrator who, in a discussion of the low achievement of poor students, said, in effect, "well, Jensen has told us why.") In 1971 Nobel laureate physicist William Shockley told the National Academy of Sciences, "Diagnosis will, I believe, confirm that our nobly intended welfare programs are promoting dysgenics—retrogressive evolution through the disproportionate reproduction of the genetically disadvantaged." Herrnstein wrote in *The Atlantic* that "the tendency to be unemployed may run in the genes of a family about as certainly as bad teeth do now."[113] Harvard zoologist E. O. Wilson, a leading authority on insect societies, helped found the new field of sociobiology, which, he wrote, focused on "the study of the biological basis of social behavior in every kind of organism, including man."[114] This new emphasis on heritability, however, met strong scientific as well as political criticism and failed to clear away the taint that still clung to eugenics and genetically-based theories of race, intelligence, and behavior. The idea that the undeserving poor were genetically inferior had not been wiped

from the map by any means, but it remained muted, unacceptable in most academic circles.

In 1994, in their widely publicized and discussed *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray—whose notorious *Losing Ground* (discussed in Chapter 4) had served as the bible for anti-welfare state politicians—challenged the reigning environmentalist view of intelligence. Their 800-page plus book reported and elaborated on "six conclusions regarding tests of cognitive ability . . . that are now beyond significant technical dispute."

1. There is such a thing as a general factor of cognitive ability on which human beings differ.
2. All standardized tests of academic aptitude or achievement measure this general factor to some degree, but IQ tests expressly designed for that purpose measure it most accurately.
3. IQ scores match, to a first degree, whatever it is that people mean when they use the word *intelligent* or *smart* in ordinary language.
4. IQ scores are stable, although not perfectly so, over much of a person's life.
5. Properly administered IQ tests are not demonstrably biased against social, economic, ethnic, or racial groups.
6. Cognitive ability is substantially heritable, apparently no less than 40 percent and no more than 80 percent.[115]

Success in American society, they argued, was increasingly a matter of the genes people inherit. Intelligence, in fact, had a lot to do with the nation's "most pressing social problems" such as poverty, crime, out-of-wedlock births, and low educational achievement. It was true, they admitted, that whites growing up in the worst socioeconomic circumstances are far more likely to fall into poverty than those growing up in the most advantaged family. "*But low intelligence is a stronger precursor of poverty than low socioeconomic background*." Poverty, they argued, "is concentrated among those with low cognitive ability," which, itself, was largely inherited. It also was racially tinged because blacks, they found, revealed lower cognitive ability at every socioeconomic level. Evidence "pointing toward a genetic factor in cognitive

ethnic differences is that blacks and whites differ most on the tests that are the best measures of g, or general intelligence."[116]

With the cognitive elite producing fewer children and the nation overrun by immigrants with low IQs, Herrnstein and Murray saw only a dysgenic future for America divided into a wealthy cognitive elite and a growing, menacing cognitive underclass. The newly consolidated coalition of the cognitive elite and the wealthy "is already afraid of the underclass. In the next few decades, it is going to have a lot more to be afraid of." Public policy directed toward promoting an unattainable and undesirable equality through measures like affirmative action, welfare, and disproportionate education spending on the poor at the expense of the gifted only pushed the nation faster along the road to disaster. Herrnstein and Murray deployed advanced statistical techniques and drew on contemporary research to give their case scientific grounding. But stripped of its scientific veneer it revealed the persistence of some of the oldest themes in American writing on social issues: the combination of crime, poverty, ignorance, and other social pathologies into single condition with different manifestations but a common origin in inherited inferiority; the use of "science" to make its case about the heritability of human weakness; the ineffectual and perverse outcomes of well-meaning public policy; and the threatened collapse of American society under the weight of its dysgenic future.[117]

Herrnstein and Murray based *The Bell Curve* on both philosophy and science. As philosophy, they situated their argument in a long tradition of writing sympathetic to inequality as inevitable, justifiable, and, even, important to the promotion of the general welfare and happiness—"the social tradition of an Edmund Burke . . . the economic tradition of an Adam Smith." As science, they based almost all their conclusions on the NLYS—the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience of Youth that started in 1979 with a national sample of participants aged fourteen to twenty-two—and the AFQT—the Armed Forces Qualification Test administered to the sample to measure cognitive ability. In *Inequality by Design*, a detailed and powerful demolition of *The Bell Curve,* Claude Fischer and his colleagues show how Murray and Herrnstein misused both the AFQT and NLYS, leaving their empirical conclusions utterly unreliable and their larger argument in shambles. *The Bell Curve*, they point out, "was attacked even as

it was publicized." Despite assaults in the public media and by scholars, "the book withstood the attacks and sold hundreds of thousands of hardcover copies (perhaps a record for a book with dozens of pages of statistical tables)." For this reason, they felt compelled to reanalyze the data on which the book rested and expose its misunderstanding of inequality. Fischer and his colleagues show that Murray and Herrnstein "made major errors that exaggerated the role of the AFQT relative to social factors. For example, the AFQT is largely a measure of *instruction*, not native intelligence. . . . Moreover, a correct analysis of the NLSY survey reveals that the AFQT score is only one factor among several that predict how well people do; of these factors, the social ones are more important than the test scores" [emphasis in original]. "Even more importantly, *The Bell Curve* also provides an inadequate understanding of systems of inequality."[118]

Fischer and his colleagues provide many examples that undermine *The Bell Curve*'s credibility. For instance, they show that the real distribution of test scores from the AFQT did not simulate a bell curve, or normal distribution. In order to produce the bell curve they wanted, Herrnstein and Murray resorted to "a good deal of statistical mashing and stretching. Because they presumed . . . that intelligence must be distributed in a bell curve, they justified transforming the number of questions each test taker correctly answered until they produced the bell curve" they needed. In their analysis of the NLSY, Herrnstein and Murray had to deal with the problem that "key information was missing for many of the respondents." In the case of income, their solution was to assign to respondents "the *average* parental income reported by the other respondents. But these respondents with missing information were not average respondents." In their reanalysis of the data, Fischer and his colleagues corrected for this error, using "a more appropriate procedure." Their reanalysis showed that *"social environment during childhood matters more* as a risk factor for poverty than Herrnstein and Murray report and that it matters *statistically at least as much as do the test scores* that purportedly measure intelligence" [emphasis in original]. The "most surprising omission of all in *The Bell Curve*'s discussion of poverty is any recognition that women are far likelier to be poor than are men" with similar advantages and test scores. Inequality, they show, does not reflect the intersection of cognitive ability with

the natural working of markets, as Herrnstein and Murray contend. Rather, "America's level of inequality is by design. It is not given by nature, nor by the distribution of people's talents, nor by the demands of a 'natural' market. Other Western nations face the same global competition that we do and are about as affluent as we are and yet have managed to develop patterns of inequality less divisive than ours."[119]

The Bell Curve is understood best not as a popularization of science but as an episode in the sociology of knowledge. It is hard to gauge the impact of a book on policy, but *The Bell Curve* probably had much less influence than Murray's earlier *Losing Ground*. *Losing Ground* fit within the boundaries of acceptable debate. It updated historic conservative positions on poverty and welfare (see Chapter 4) and reinforced the widespread hostility toward welfare expressed in the media and politics, as reflected in the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan as president. *The Bell Curve*, in contrast, hovered outside the boundaries of respectability. The weight of scholarly and political argument still tipped the scales toward environment, and hereditarian theories of causation could not escape a reflexive association with racism. Yet, the book, as Fischer and his colleagues pointed out, did sell an extraordinary number of copies for a thick, quantitatively based academic tome. (Despite the book's reliance on quantification, it is so clearly written that its argument may be followed easily by readers without statistical training.) Clearly, even if it often did not dare speak its name, the suspicion remained alive that heredity underlay the growth and persistence of the "underclass" and the black-white gap in educational achievement, which seemed to many impervious to increased public spending or reform. This suspicion was nurtured by a small set of academic researchers and some foundations, like the Pioneer Fund, which claims that it "has changed the face of the social and behavioral sciences by restoring the Darwinian-Galtonian perspective to the mainstream in traditional fields such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology, as well as fostering the newer disciplines of behavioral genetics, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and sociobiology."[120]

From the 1990s onward, a profusion of new scientific technologies has provided the tools with which to explore mechanisms underlying the linkages between biology and society. With astonishing acceleration, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, genomics, and epigenetics

emerged as important scientific fields—in practice, often combined in the same programs. Of the 134 graduate programs in neuroscience in place in 2009, only 40 percent existed in 1986 and 60 percent in 1991, compared to 90 percent 1998. Between 1998 and 2009 the mean number of faculty per program increased from thirty-four to fifty. Neuroscience and other biological advances promised new ways of explaining medical issues, such as the black-white gap in cardiovascular diseases, the increase in diabetes, the rise of obesity, and the origins and treatment of cancer-related disease.[121] They promised, as well, the possibility of understanding how the brain ages and how Alzheimer's disease and dementia might be mitigated or delayed.[122] Research focused, too, on how the environmental stresses associated with poverty in childhood could damage aspects of mental functioning and learning capacity with lasting impact throughout individuals' lives and, some scientists believed, beyond through the inheritance of acquired deficiencies.[123]

In its January 18, 2010, cover story, *Time* announced, "The new field of epigenetics is showing how your environment and your choices can influence your genetic code—and that of your kids." Epigenetics, the article explained, "is the study of changes in gene activity that do not involve alterations to the genetic code but still get passed down to at least one generation. These patterns of gene expression are governed by the cellular material—the epigenome—that sits on top of the genome, just outside it. . . . It is these 'epigenetic' marks that tell your genes to switch on or off, to speak loudly or whisper. It is through eugenic marks that environmental factors like diet, stress and prenatal nutrition," which "can make an imprint on genes," are transmitted "from one generation to the next." More soberly, the eminent child psychiatrist Sir Michael Rutter offered this definition: "The term 'epigenetics' is applied to mechanisms that change genetic effects (through influences on gene expression) without altering gene sequence."[124] The flood of scholarly research and popular writing on epigenetics justified science writer Nessa Carey's giving her book the title, *The Epigenetics Revolution*. The revolution, according to Carey, "that has happened very recently in biology is that for the first time we are actually starting to understand how amazing epigenetic phenomena are caused."[125]

Epigenetics found such a receptive audience, in part, because once again scientific advance coincided with a major social issue—this time,

the "achievement gap." The stubborn persistence of a gap between the educational achievement of African American and white students bedeviled educators and appeared to elude the efforts of educational reformers. The allegedly tightening link between school success—notably higher education—and good jobs combined with the pressure on schools to improve their performance on standardized test results placed increasing urgency on the question of what it would take to reduce the gap. The meteoric increase in articles on the achievement gap during the first decade of the twenty-first century testifies to the problem's prominence in the pantheon of educational dilemmas. A search of scholarly articles turned up six references to achievement gap in 2000, twenty-nine in 2005, and sixty-eight in 2011.[126] A large literature suggested a variety of answers, most of which focused in one way or another on the handicaps associated with growing up in poverty while the proponents of hereditary explanations lurked in the background. What the environmentalists lacked was a mechanism that explained exactly how the environment of poverty was translated into low school achievement. This is what epigenetics offered.[127]

Time's breathless account ran ahead of the evidence about the heritability of acquired characteristics and limits of existing epigenetic knowledge. Even Carey, an epigenetics enthusiast, warned, writing specifically about neuro-epigenetics, "this whole area, sometimes called neuro-epigenetics, is probably the most scientifically contentious field in the whole of epigenetic research."[128] In fact, the links between childhood, poverty, and biology are exceedingly complicated and only partly understood, as serious scientists working in the area readily admit. Much of the existing evidence on the "biology of social adversity" was summed up in the October 2012 publication of the papers of a December 2011 symposium cosponsored by the National Academy of the Sciences and the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. The papers addressed a number of key questions: "What . . . are the developmental and biological consequences of early exposures to penury, strife, and hardship? How do experiences of childhood adversity get 'under the skin' and affect physiological and cellular pathways leading to disease susceptibility? How are the adverse circumstances of children 'biologically embedded' into the molecular, genomic systems that determine expressions of vulnerability and resilience? Why do some

children flourish, whereas most others founder in the face of severe childhood conditions?"[129] Collectively, the papers provided evidence bearing on each question, and, at the end, a number of key themes emerged reinforcing the impact of early "social adversity" on health and well-being. But many issues remained unresolved or subject to further research. As Rutter wrote:

> First, there needs to be much better conceptualization, categorization, and measurement of the several rather different forms of environmental adversity. Second, much greater use must be made of research strategies that can test environmentally mediated causal hypotheses. Third, there is a need to determine just what epigenetic changes do and do not account for.... Fourth, what do the findings on brain plasticity tell us about the neural responses to brain injury and environmental remediation? Fifth, what are the implications of [gene-environment interaction] for an understanding of the effects of environmental influences and their biological embedding? Sixth, how can preventive interventions be better informed by the biological evidence?[130]

The significance of epigenetic research on how environment alters gene expression—which has made *The Bell Curve* obsolete—according to Nobel laureate economist James Heckman, is that the "modern literature on epigenetic expression and gene-environment interactions teaches us that the sharp distinction between acquired skills and ability featured in the early human capital literature is not tenable.... Genes and environment cannot be meaningfully parsed by traditional linear models that assign unique variances to each component. Abilities are produced, and gene expression is governed by environmental conditions. Behaviors and abilities have both a genetic and an acquired character. Measured abilities are the outcome of environmental influence, including *in utero* experiences, and also have genetic components."[131] The upshot, nonetheless, is the power of early childhood experience. For Heckman, most of the gaps at age eighteen that explain adult outcomes are present by age five. "Converging evidence from neuroscience, molecular biology, genomics, and epigenetics," points out Jack P. Shonkoff of Harvard's Center on the Developing Child, "indicates

that the influence of the early years can extend over a lifetime, as it affects the foundations of learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health."[132] By the time disadvantaged children reach school, the clear implication is that it is too late to remedy their cognitive deficiencies or to put them on a road to escape poverty.

Other neuroscientists, it should be pointed out, are not so sure. They view brain development as more plastic, with changes possible through adolescence and, possibly, even in old age, although they find direct evidence of early childhood disadvantage on the size of key areas of the brain, especially those that control memory and executive functions. Rutter points out, "it is now clear that the brain is intrinsically plastic right into adult life, although plasticity reduces with increasing age. The sensitive periods are not as fixed and immutable as was once thought, and they can be extended pharmacologically. . . . In addition, plasticity can be increased by vigorous extended exercise."[133] "The pathways by which socioeconomic deprivation and stress in childhood and adult development negatively influence cognitive health at later ages," report Michelle C. Carlson, Christoher L. Seplaki, and Teresa E. Seeman, "remain plastic and responsive to environment in late-life development."[134] Here, at least, are some grounds for optimism.

Epigenetics has facilitated the reconciliation of hereditarianism and reform that flourished before social Darwinism in the late 1860s and then again in the Progressive Era, before splitting apart in the 1920s. This time, however, the question of the biological ranking of "races" has remained off the table—a reflection of the impact of profound political and social change on science. Epigenetics promises to move beyond the long-standing war between explanations for the achievement gap, persistent poverty, crime, and other social problems based on inheritance and those that stress environment. It gives scientific sanction for early childhood education and other interventions in the lives of poor children. As with earlier invocations of science, popular understanding fed by media accounts threatens to run ahead of the qualifications offered by scientists and the limits of evidence. Herein lies the danger. In the past, the link between hereditarianism and reform proved unstable, and when it broke apart the consequences were ugly. Even when in place the link supported racially-tinged immigration reform and compulsory sterilization—all in the name of the best "science." Indeed, every regime

of racial, gender, and nationality-based discrimination and violence has been based on the best "science" of its day. "It is when scientists and doctors insist that their use of race is purely biological," cautions legal scholar and sociologist Dorothy Roberts, "that we should be most wary."[135] In *Beyond Human Nature: How Culture and Experience Shape the Human Mind*, philosopher Jesse J. Prinz warns that "naturism"—theories that stress the biological causes of behavior—"is not just misleading; it is potentially dangerous." Naturism

> has been used to keep various groups down, and it vastly underestimates human potential. When we assume that human nature is biologically fixed, we tend to regard people with different attitudes and capacities as inalterably different. We also tend to treat differences as pathologies. We regard people who think differently than we do as defective. We marginalize groups within our borders and we regard the behavior of foreigners as unnatural or even subhuman.[136]

It is not a stretch to imagine epigenetics and other biologically based theories of human behavior used by conservative popularizers to underwrite a harsh new view of the undeserving poor and the futility of policies intended to help them. This is not the aim, or underlying agenda, of scientists in the field, or a reason to try to limit research. It is, rather, a cautionary note from history about the uses of science and a warning to be vigilant and prepared.