

This book challenges the notion that excesses in government generosity destroyed the work ethic in poor minority communities and therefore are responsible for the growth in poverty. This gross distortion is driven more by an underlying anti-government political agenda than by any historical accuracy. All rhetoric about equal opportunity aside, the United States has, at best, a partial commitment to equality. The social and economic policies initiated in the 1960s were carefully crafted to minimize their impact on the racial status quo, with the Democratic Party engaged in a delicate balancing act between responding to racial injustice and preserving the often conflicting interests of its other traditional constituencies. Affirmative action policies have been so controversial in large part because they challenge traditional racial boundaries, thereby jeopardizing white male expectations of obtaining the most coveted jobs.

In 1996, after years of minimal funding for urban anti-poverty efforts, both political parties agreed to withdraw the federal government's sixty-year-old commitment to providing financial support for poor women with children. Remarkably, these changes occurred without either party publicly acknowledging the difficult reality that thirty years after the enactment of basic civil rights reforms, economic opportunities remain as limited as ever for poor minorities living in our nation's cities. As of 1990, 43 percent of the nation's poor were concentrated in America's central cities. Living in neighborhoods that are highly segregated by both race and class, poor African-Americans and Latinos are largely cut off from the society's basic structures of opportunity. Decades of racial segregation have left "the economic base of urban black communities uniquely vulnerable to any downturn in the group's economic fortunes."¹ As manufacturing

companies left behind their old inner-city facilities during the 1970s and 1980s, segregation quickly triggered a process of neighborhood disinvestment and abandonment. Today, "poor blacks live in communities that typically contain only the rudiments of retail trade."² Without an economic base, these communities offer few employment opportunities to the thousands of welfare recipients who will be required to work within the next two years.

Attacking the Poor, Not Poverty

The highly visible growth of urban poverty spawned a virtual cottage industry of academics and policymakers seeking to shed new light on the phenomenon. Conservative writers, who have been the most vocal in their attacks on what they label as liberal welfare policies, have stigmatized poor minorities by arguing that they somehow have "a hidden investment in victimization and poverty."³ Although these writers correctly identify common attitudes of the poor, their "blame the victim" approach never connects apparent deviant social behavior to the alienation of the poor from the broader society. The conservatives fail to comprehend the link between poverty and powerlessness that leaves poor people constantly having to respond to the actions of others. Life on public aid is the highest expression of such powerlessness because it robs people of the hope of self-advancement through legitimate means. Finding themselves caught between the American myth of equal opportunity and their own inability to achieve their personal dreams, poor people often "internalize their powerlessness as their own fault, rather than as a response to system-wide discrimination."⁴ Much of the deviant behavior displayed by members of the underclass has its roots in their sense of powerlessness. Feeling themselves to be outcasts from mainstream society, they do not see themselves as bound by its norms. Indeed, powerlessness leads to a sense of victimization that can become immobilizing. "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom."⁵ They become reluctant to believe in the possibility of change, or that they possess the creative capacity to affect their surroundings.

Martin Luther King, Jr., and others involved in the southern civil rights movement understood that their battle for freedom would be won only if

large numbers of black people underwent a personal transformation and became conscious of themselves as purposeful actors infused with a sense of dignity and self-worth. Long years of oppression had beaten them down so badly that they doubted their own capacity to improve their conditions. In the South the strategy of nonviolent direct action became the means by which thousands of ordinary blacks divested themselves of their traditional passivity, breaking forever the image of the “shuffling Negro.”⁶ Only then could institutional change occur.

Conservatives are oblivious to the continued existence of deep structural barriers that prevent poor minorities from gaining access to the advantages of the dominant society. In *The New Politics of Poverty*, Lawrence Mead simply dismisses poor-quality education, the disappearance of industrial jobs, and the continued presence of racial discrimination, arguing that the existence of powerful social barriers no longer explains why the poor do not work. As he sees it, “motivation is inevitably more at issue than opportunity.”⁷ Since the social policies of the left and the right have not worked, the fault must lie with the poor themselves. According to Mead, the solutions to poverty lie in the poor becoming “less deviant but more assertive in their own self-interest, especially by working.”⁸ The often unstated assumption underlying these types of explanations is that all Americans possess equal opportunities for advancement, so that if whole groups of people are falling behind it must be due to their own cultural inadequacies. For example, Nathan Glazer contends that African-Americans have not fared as well because they lack an entrepreneurial spirit and suffer from higher levels of unemployment and social disorganization.⁹ Thomas Sowell believes that blacks do not possess the Protestant work ethic required for success.¹⁰ He sees no connection between poor blacks’ lack of motivation and their powerlessness, asserting that it is an “arbitrary premise” that the “‘disparities’ and ‘gaps’ in incomes and occupations [between whites and blacks] are evidence . . . of discrimination or exploitation.”¹¹

Closely tied to these cultural arguments are those that place the onus on government social policies, especially those implemented by the Democrats during the 1960s. Supposedly, these anti-poverty efforts were so massive that they made a life of dependency on government aid more attractive than hard work and self-reliance. Charles Murray and George Gilder

have both argued that the expanded education, jobs, and welfare programs of the Great Society encouraged laziness and promiscuity and decreased incentive among the urban poor by providing payments to those who chose not to work. According to Murray, "in the late 1960's—at the very moment when the jobs programs began their massive expansion . . . the black youth unemployment rate began to rise again, steeply, and continued to do so throughout the 1970's."¹² The same trends are said to hold for black male labor force participation. Murray blames the liberalization of public aid eligibility for the rise in juvenile delinquency and children born to unwed mothers that occurred in the late 1960s. By making virtually all low-income people welfare recipients, the means-tested programs supposedly robbed them of the social status of working. According to Murray, youths were most affected by this change in the status of work: "In the day to day experience of a youth growing up in a black ghetto there was no evidence whatsoever that working within the system paid off. The way to get something from the system was to be sufficiently a failure to qualify for help, or to con the system."¹³

These authors would have us believe that somehow black inequality was gradually vanishing on its own, rendering any type of government intervention unnecessary. In *Affirmative Discrimination* Glazer presents income and occupational data for the 1950s that show a convergence of black and white incomes, indicating "a virtual collapse in traditional discriminatory patterns in the labor market."¹⁴ Murray goes to considerable lengths in his book *Losing Ground* to prove that during the 1950s and early 1960s black poverty was declining, unemployment was holding steady, and labor force participation rates for blacks were on a par with those of whites from similar backgrounds.¹⁵

Much of the increase in black income in the 1950s and early 1960s came as the direct result of massive migration out of southern agriculture into industrial employment in the North. Between 1950 and 1970 more than 3 million blacks left the South to replace whites in the industrial labor force, just as new technologies were being introduced that would soon eliminate many of the unskilled jobs on the assembly line.¹⁶ In fact, 1953 was the last year of relatively low black unemployment, 4.4 percent for males and 3.7 percent for females.¹⁷ By 1962, the rates were 10 percent and

9.8 percent, respectively, more than twice the unemployment level among whites, while for black teenagers it was already a shocking 23.6 percent.¹⁸ Those occupations in which unemployment was the highest—for example, laborers, operatives, and “other service workers”—were precisely the occupations in which blacks were most concentrated.¹⁹ Conversely, the occupations with the lowest unemployment rates, such as managers, officials, and proprietors, were those in which blacks were least concentrated. The move from agriculture to industrial labor did not bring the majority of blacks any closer to the center of American economic life. By the end of 1963, at least 750,000 black youth were roaming the streets, out of school and out of work.²⁰

It does not take a great deal of complex social science research to conclude that today there are few jobs left in poor minority communities. A drive through streets lined with boarded-up factories, warehouses, and stores will suffice. It has been estimated that between 30 and 50 percent of the employment gap between white and black youth can be explained by differences in job accessibility.²¹ A recent labor market study in Illinois found that there are four potential entry-level job seekers for every entry-level job available in the state. In Chicago the ratio was even higher—six job seekers for every available entry-level job.²² The loss of manufacturing jobs and the high concentration of poorly trained African-Americans and Hispanics has placed the demographics and economics of America's cities on a collision course. Although the overall educational attainment of urban minorities improved during the 1970s and 1980s, these gains were not sufficient to keep pace with even faster rises in the education required to work in the new urban information-based economy.²³ Yet, conservatives would have us think that jobs are plentiful. For example, Mead contends that “since the 1960s, opportunities have grown for the low-skilled. Their education levels as well as the number of jobs have risen. Racial discrimination has fallen, as have welfare disincentives, with the failure of AFDC benefits, since the early 1970's, to keep pace with inflation.”²⁴ The decline in factory jobs was supposedly offset by “an explosion of employment in service trades.” Thus, Mead concludes, “Most inner-city poor appear able to find jobs, albeit not of the quality they would like.”²⁵

Creating Economic Opportunity

A true pledge to alleviate poverty would require a commitment to building structures of economic opportunity. Every economy has such structures, both formal and informal, designed to move each successive generation to a new level of economic security. In poor minority communities, these structures are often nonexistent or in acute disrepair, leaving the majority of residents without any real possibility of economic advancement. Given America's legacy of racial oppression, establishing structures of economic opportunity for people of color would entail more than just competent schools, career training, available employment, childcare, and job referrals. It would require opening up the entire metropolitan labor market, which is now so geographically and occupationally stratified by race and class that poor minorities are confined to only a tiny fraction of the total job opportunities. It would include a commitment to eliminating all remaining forms of racial exclusion, even though they are not legally sanctioned. The lack of access to the mainstream labor market lies at the heart of the urban crisis of poverty. The departure of low-skill manufacturing jobs, continued employment discrimination, and the poor quality of urban education work together to condemn large segments of black and Latino communities to a marginal economic status.

Without special incentives, private capital flows to where the potential for a return on investment is the greatest. Having engaged in a prolonged process of disinvestment from inner-city communities, private businesses are unlikely to be the engine of economic opportunity for the people who live there. It is only through government intervention that such new structures of economic opportunity will emerge. Historically, the majority of public policies have not successfully accomplished this goal. There are several reasons for their shortcomings:

1. The close association between urban poverty and race creates powerful barriers to building broad-based support for strengthening social mobility programs.
2. The development of effective anti-poverty measures requires a redistribution of resources, which has been blocked successfully by more powerful political constituencies.
3. Black leaders, representing the interests of their middle-class sup-