

# POVERTY RESEARCH AND POLICY FOR THE POST-WELFARE ERA

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■ **Abstract** The “end of welfare as we know it” constitutes an important challenge for poverty research, shifting the focus away from once-dominant themes of dependency and toward the reality of widespread “working poverty.” The literature reviewed in this chapter points in the direction of a reformulated research agenda, built around issues of inequality, political economy, and stratification by gender, race, class, and place. It also calls into question the traditional distinction between welfare and working poor, as well as the notion of an isolated underclass existing apart from the social and economic mainstream. Finally, it points to the need to broaden a policy discourse that has been narrowly fixated on welfare and on changing the behavior of the poor. A real anti-poverty agenda would focus instead on the elements of mainstream political economy and culture that continue to produce widespread economic inequality.

## INTRODUCTION

Three years after President Clinton signed the legislation bringing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to an end, poverty research remains fixated on welfare, the characteristics of people “on” (and soon to be “off”) it as well as what it takes to rid welfare mothers of their “dependency.” Having watched in all-too-predictable frustration as conservative politicians hijacked their own best-laid plans to replace “welfare as we know it” with temporary assistance, training, and work (Ellwood 1996), the country’s leading poverty experts are now absorbed in a wide array of efforts to assess the aftermath of welfare repeal.<sup>1</sup> While politicians

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<sup>1</sup> Among the many research and policy institutions engaged in formal evaluation of AFDC’s replacement, the state-operated Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF, program, are the Urban Institute, the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin, the Northwestern/University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, and a consortium of prominent scholars from Johns Hopkins, Harvard University, University of Chicago, and Pennsylvania State University.

celebrate the vast reductions in the welfare rolls, these social scientific assessments offer a sobering and much-needed reminder that the zeal to reform welfare had little to do with reducing poverty. As recently reported in a study by the Washington-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (1999), welfare's end has left large numbers of poor families with children substantially worse off than before. This is despite the fact that these very families had earlier benefited from the overall economic recovery. The reality so far, much as predicted, is that the end of welfare has pushed many a dependent family into the already-swelled ranks of the working poor (Solow 1998, Parrott 1998).

The end of welfare also provides the occasion for reassessing what poverty research and policy have been—and should be—about. For despite widespread social scientific opposition to the legislation President Clinton signed, poverty research did little to undermine its central underlying premise: that dependency was the crux of the poverty problem and that the answer was to change poor people's behavior, whether by threatening to eliminate welfare entirely (Murray 1984), by enforcing a wide array of authoritarian and paternalistic sanctions against childbearing, school drop-out, and the like (Mead 1986, 1992), or, most of all, by putting welfare recipients to work (Kaus 1992, Gingrich et al 1994). Indeed, since the early 1980s no issues have loomed larger in poverty research than those clustered around welfare dependency—its extent and consequences, whether it is intergenerational, and its place in the culture of the underclass (summarized in Corcoran 1995). During the same two decades, a great deal of research and social experimentation was also devoted to moving people from welfare into the paid labor force (Gueron & Pauly 1991), in sharp contrast to the guaranteed income experiments of the 1970s (Watts & Rees 1977).<sup>2</sup> More generally, the vast store of social scientific knowledge built up since the War on Poverty has focused far more heavily on the behavior, culture, and demographic characteristics of poor people than on the characteristics of the broader social structure, political culture, and economy that foster such high rates of poverty (Katz 1993: Introduction; O'Connor 2000). The challenge for social scientists of poverty, then, is to break the hold of a still-prevalent welfare discourse—what Hecló (1994) calls the Welfare Fixation—that social science has helped to create (Katz 1989, Lynn 1993, Schram 1995).

There are practical reasons, too, why the end of welfare calls for shifting the prevailing focus of poverty research, and none more immediate than the sudden transformation of all those former welfare recipients into the working poor. Indeed, this alone has given added weight to an older critique of the official poverty line: not, as conservative analysts charge, that it fails to count social welfare benefits

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<sup>2</sup>A more recent experiment, known as the New Hope Program and conducted in Milwaukee from 1994 to 1998, attempted to combine elements of both. The program required participants to work at least 30 hours per week (providing community service jobs for those who could not find private-sector work) and offered assistance with health insurance, child care, and a guaranteed above-poverty income (Bos et al 1999).

as income, but that it fails to take account of child care, transportation, and other work-related expenditures (Citro & Michael 1995). Equally important, the by-*no-means-recent* rise of working poverty calls into question two additional premises of the current post-welfare regime: one, that work in the paid labor force is *always* the better way to support non-disabled, non-elderly adults and their families; the other, that the private market will provide adequately, consistently, and beneficently for social needs. Now, the immediate problem for poverty research is not so much to explain dependency as it is to explain why so many working-class Americans do not earn enough to sustain even a minimalist standard of living in this extraordinarily prosperous economy.

Fortunately, social scientists will not be approaching this question in a vacuum. In focusing on the changing economy as well as on patterns of class, gender, and racial stratification, the work reviewed in this chapter points to an alternative framework for poverty research, beginning with the problem of rising inequality. The backdrop to much of this literature rests in the structural changes that have affected far more than those with incomes below the poverty line, and in particular the much-debated forces that brought the post-World War II era of growth, prosperity, and rising incomes to an end (Levy 1987, Bernstein & Adler 1994).

## ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING AND THE RISE OF INEQUALITY

While welfare reformers concentrated their energies on eliminating dependency, by far the more dramatic and consequential development of the past quarter century has been the combination of stagnating middle- and lower-class incomes and the sharp and sustained rise of economic inequality (Levy & Murnane 1992, Danziger & Gottschalk 1993, Mishel et al 1999). At first greeted with some skepticism in a field accustomed to distinguishing between poverty and inequality<sup>3</sup> (Sawhill 1988), by the early 1990s the growing disparity in wages and income had emerged as a leading explanation for the persistence, even during economic growth periods, of high rates of poverty (Blank 1993). Indeed, while often dated from the economic decline and wage stagnation of the 1970s, the fastest and most sustained rise in measured inequality took place during the post-1983 Reagan recovery, when those at the bottom actually lost income, while both wealth and income became far more concentrated among the top 5%, and especially the top 1% of the distribution (Krugman 1992, Wolff 1995). Wages for less educated, non-unionized and otherwise uncredentialed workers dropped precipitously, while college-educated

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<sup>3</sup>Economists in particular maintain a conceptual distinction between poverty and inequality, distinguishing the former as a measure of absolute deprivation as opposed to the more relativistic measure of inequality. The distinction is also a political one, however, and as such was built into the official definition of poverty endorsed by the economists who took the lead in conceptualizing the War on Poverty (Ruggles 1990, O'Connor 1998).

(with the important, recent exception of young college graduates) and technologically highly-skilled workers earned more (Juhn et al 1993, Levy 1998). Clearly, most researchers agreed, something had changed in the economy to make faster growth—the sure-fire weapon in the War on Poverty—no guarantee of better times for the poor (Blank 1997).

The question of why remains subject to a great deal of debate among the economists who have tracked trends in inequality. While much of the literature points to a mismatch between the skills of less educated workers and the demands of better-paying, technology-driven jobs (Blank 1997, Levy 1998), others point to more structural, institutional, and political factors, including deindustrialization, globalization, the decline of unionization, and the deliberately low-wage, upwardly redistributive bias of economic policy (Bluestone & Harrison 1982, Harrison & Bluestone 1988, Howells 1994, Galbraith 1998). The larger point, from the perspective of poverty research and policy, is that the combination of rising inequality and declining prospects for workers reframes the poverty problem in at least three significant ways.

First, it has drawn attention to what economists refer to as the demand side of the problem: the quality and distribution of jobs (Burtless 1990, Kasarda 1995a), the practices and perspectives of employers (Holzer 1996, Moss & Tilly 1995, Henly 1999), and the persistence of discriminatory barriers for whole categories of workers, and in particular for minorities (Kirschenman & Neckerman 1991, Fix & Struck 1993). Along with this has come renewed social scientific interest in the possibility of direct labor market interventions to improve the job and income prospects for disadvantaged workers (Freeman & Gottschalk 1998)—albeit an interest not currently discernible in public policy debates.

Second, research on inequality and economic restructuring has helped to flesh out, refine, and in some instances to challenge the structural dimensions of William Julius Wilson's concept of the underclass, which linked the post-1970 growth of concentrated inner city poverty to a combination of urban deindustrialization, job dispersal to the suburbs, and the flight of black middle-class residents from ghetto neighborhoods (Wilson 1987, 1996). While still overshadowed by the heavily behavioral emphasis of popular (Auletta 1982) as well as scholarly (Ricketts & Sawhill 1988) writing on the underclass, a substantial body of empirical literature has confirmed the devastating impact of manufacturing losses on the economic prospects for low-skilled minority workers in general and for inner city residents in particular (Kasarda 1990, 1995b, Johnson & Oliver 1992, Bound & Holzer 1993). A related and especially prominent theme in the literature concentrates on the geographic restructuring of industrial space and job opportunities within the broader metropolitan area, much of it supporting at least some version of the long controversial notion that a spatial mismatch separates inner-city neighborhoods from suburban jobs (summarized in Holzer 1991, Kain 1992, Jargowsky 1997). And while much of it remains focused on Wilson's controversial emphasis on black middle-class out-migration (Massey & Denton 1993, Jargowsky 1997), research on urban demographic restructuring has begun to explore the significance of the new, post-1965 immigration on changing patterns of urban disadvantage and

opportunity (Foner 1987, Kasinitz 1992, Moore & Pinderhughes 1993, Lamphere et al 1994, Waldinger & Bozorgmehr 1996). Particularly when viewed in historical perspective, these processes of industrial, geographic, and demographic restructuring challenge the tendency, exaggerated in the notion of an isolated underclass, to treat poverty as itself an isolated phenomenon existing apart from the day-to-day functioning of the social and economic mainstream. Historical research also challenges the tendency to treat structural change as a self-generating, inexorable force. The structural roots of contemporary poverty are very much the reflection of past and ongoing political choice (Katz 1993).

Third, research on inequality and economic restructuring has drawn attention to a growing, but as far as policy and public attention goes, virtually forgotten segment of people in poverty: the so-called working poor (Schwarz & Volgy 1992, Swartz & Weigart 1995). The terminology itself is problematic for several reasons, not in the least because it plays into an artificial and now largely outdated distinction between the employed ("deserving") and the welfare ("undeserving") poor. The reality, as a great deal of quantitative and qualitative research has shown, is that welfare recipients have always worked, whether or not as part of the officially recognized labor force. For most, welfare is a temporary stopgap, part of a broader income strategy that takes them between paid, low-wage, low-benefit employment and the welfare rolls, where at least they can gain access to insured medical care (Bane & Ellwood 1994, Harris 1993, Rank 1994). Very few recipients, however, can possibly survive on welfare benefits alone; instead they often turn to part-time, seasonal work or work in the underground economy to, as in the title of one study, "make ends meet" (Edin & Lein 1997). And in households or extended kin networks where employment opportunities are irregular, unstable, and poorly compensated, the welfare mother (or grandmother) often provides the essential work of child care that allows a sibling, cousin, son or daughter to hold down a paying job (Anderson 1995, Newman 1999). In these and other ways, the working/welfare poor distinction devalues work inside the home, a form of unpaid labor-force participation that falls heavily to women, whether they are formally employed or not (Mink 1998).

Nevertheless, the relatively small but now (by definition) growing literature on the working poor brings several familiar (to scholars) but largely unrecognized facts about poverty into full view. One is that the struggle to make ends meet on below-poverty or otherwise inadequate income is quite widespread. Certainly it is not confined to the isolated pockets famously described by John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) as backwaters of the Affluent Society and recently memorialized by President Clinton in his "poverty tour." A second is that economic growth and full employment, under current wage and labor market conditions, are not creating jobs that will move people out of poverty: Getting a job, even when combined with the Earned Income Tax Credit, is not enough (Burtless 1995, Blank 1997, Handler & Hasenfeld 1997). A third, evident in quantitative but especially in more detailed qualitative research, is that the kinds of entry-level, low-wage jobs that proliferate in the new economy do not carry much promise of upward mobility. They are concentrated at the bottom end of the domestic service, child care, food service,

agricultural, textile, health and retail sectors, paying poverty wages to a heavily female labor force (Kasarda 1995a). They are economically as well as socially stigmatized, rarely attached to benefit plans let alone to unions, and often unstable as a source of regular hours or steady employment (Tilly 1996, Mishel et al 1999, Newman 1999). Nor, for people with low skills and few outside resources such as child care, transportation, and family support networks, are these “lousy jobs” necessarily easy to get and maintain (Burtless 1995, Holzer 1999, Newman 1999). Finally, these studies highlight the gaping and dangerous disjuncture between reality and policy rhetoric. The problem, ignored in the ongoing push to minimize public assistance and to get poor people into “work first,” is not with the propensity of welfare to coddle dependency and bad behavior. It is with a political economy that has tolerated such high concentrations of wealth (to reverse the usual formulation) amidst steadily declining standards of living for the working class and much of the middle class (Mishel et al 1999).

## GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS

While important as a starting point, the literature linking poverty, inequality, and economic restructuring has thus far been dominated by a limited range of principally economic theories, telling a story of skill and other human capital deficits while paying scant attention to the broader processes of gender, race, and class stratification that regulate access to education and skill training. Other research, some of it in direct response to the limitations of the prevailing framework, reveals the inadequacy of this explanation and begins to provide a fuller picture of the dimensions of inequality.

Up until recently, the inequality story was based almost entirely on the labor market experience of men, typically downplaying the consequences of deindustrialization and wage inequality among women as less severe (Levy & Murnane 1992). As recent research indicates, however, the reality is more complicated than that. While on the whole women have increased both employment and earnings since the 1970s (Blau 1998), not all women have shared equally—and some not at all—in the gains (Corcoran 1998, Bound & Dresser 1998). Thus, buried within the measured progress, which includes a reduction in the gender gap, are wide variations among women across race and ethnicity (Browne 1998). Moreover, for low-skilled women in general, closing the gender gap did not come from better wages and job opportunities, but from the deteriorating labor market position of men (Waldfogel & Mayer 1999). Nor do conventional measures adequately capture the impact of economic restructuring and wage decline—and now, the end of welfare—on the organization of child care, household labor, and related family arrangements, where women continue to assume primary responsibility (MacDonald 1995, Spain & Bianchi 1996). Indeed, when the issue of family structure has entered the poverty literature, it has been more often to draw attention to the absence of a male breadwinner and psychological role model than to the structural

barriers between women and the family wage (Spalter-Roth et al 1994a). In contrast, research that focuses attention on the experience of women as mothers and wage earners emphasizes how unequal gender relations have been and continue to be structured into the economy, social norms, and social welfare policy (Gordon 1990, Gordon 1994, Spalter-Roth et al 1994b, Handler & White 1999).

Similarly, much of the research linking poverty to economic inequality and restructuring has been cast in a racially neutral tone, taking note of persistent racial gaps in earnings but often explaining these differences as part of such presumably color-blind processes as skill mismatch, or as a product of changing family structure (O'Neill 1990, Smith 1988). A growing body of literature since the early 1990s has challenged and complicated this view, however, arguing not only that race matters in limiting opportunity for low-income families, but that racial inequality is built in, reinforced, and perpetuated in the restructured economy in several ways.

One is through the mechanism of continued racial residential segregation, which concentrates the minority poor in economically declining, neglected neighborhoods that are often remote from job opportunities. Equally important, segregationist practices have limited access for minorities across the income spectrum to the mortgages and housing markets that represent a principal source of wealth, upward mobility, and, for the working class in particular, a modicum of economic stability amidst large-scale economic change (Massey & Denton 1993, Bobo & Zubrinsky 1996, Oliver & Shapiro 1995). A second is through employer attitudes and practices that shape labor market opportunities, including outright discrimination in hiring and wages (Kirshenman & Neckerman 1991, Fix & Struck 1993, Holzer 1996, Wilson 1996), a heavy reliance on network hiring (Newman 1999), decisions about plant location and relocation (Tilly & Moss 2000), and race and gender hierarchies in hiring, internal promotion, and supervisory practices (Browne et al 2000). Third is through a racially segmented structure of public support for social policies directed at poverty and racial inequality (Gilens 1996, Bobo & Smith 1994), a pattern that has long been both exploited and exacerbated by politicians seeking to demonize welfare and anti-poverty policy more generally (Edsall & Edsall 1992).

Finally, there is the historical and ongoing legacy of social policies designed to establish or maintain a hierarchical and racially segregated status quo. Perhaps best-documented among these are the post-World War II housing, land use, urban renewal, highway-building, and related development policies that literally paved the way for white middle and working-class suburbanization while simultaneously containing minorities in inner city ghettos and barrios (Jackson 1985, Hirsch 1998). Other studies have looked further, to show how locally constructed education, social services, transportation, and employment policies maintained the color line in major cities (Bayer 1996, Sugrue 1996), and how racial inequality has been built into and sustained by the structure of the national welfare state (Quadagno 1994, Lieberman 1998). For all that has changed in US race relations over the course of the twentieth century, what comes through most notably in these studies is the persistence of historic patterns of racial stratification. More

than a century after the publication of W.E.B. DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and five decades after Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) and Drake & Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945), these classic works of sociology offer a still-trenchant and comprehensive analysis of the structural factors—residential segregation, labor market discrimination, racial attitudes, and social policy—that explain the disproportionately high rates of poverty among nonwhite minorities.

For all the emphasis on its rising significance, class analysis has been largely missing from recent poverty research, where class is more often conceptualized in terms of individualized family background, education, or skill variables than as a structured pattern of economic, social, and political relations. The underclass literature, despite the terminology, is premised on concepts of detachment, cultural and social isolation, and self-generating cycles of self-destructive behavior. Recent studies by Newman (1999), Fine & Weis (1998), and Duncan (1999) offer a more fluid, variegated rendering, in research that uses qualitative and ethnographic methods to explore the consequences of working-class destabilization and class polarization in communities with high rates of poverty.

Following a group of young adult fast-food workers in Harlem, Newman (1999) shows them negotiating the complicated, often conflicted class (and ethnic) relationships that structure their family, work, education, and neighborhood lives. Looking beyond the underclass label and beneath the statistics in Census reports, she finds family and personal networks that stretch across class lines—and that, particularly when viewed from an intergenerational perspective, tell a story—not of uninterrupted joblessness and welfare dependency—but of downward mobility brought about by the loss of job opportunities for the inner city working class. Similarly concentrating on the experiences of young adults in declining urban economies, Fine & Weis (1998) portray a generation struggling to establish a foothold in the no longer stable post-industrial working class. Like their counterparts in Harlem, they are very much aware that the unionized manufacturing, public sector, and civil service jobs that sustained an earlier generation have largely disappeared from view. These two studies bring texture and a sense of lived experience to what has been reported in statistical trends. On the one hand, they relate poverty to the declining fortunes of the middle- and working-class post baby-boom generations. On the other, they recognize that poverty is not a fixed status, but a constant threat to already disadvantaged workers trying to make a living in a precarious economy.

Situating her research in three different rural communities, Duncan (1999) takes a different angle on class and poverty, in a detailed analysis of the polarized class and caste relations that sustain poverty in the coal counties of Appalachia and in the primarily agricultural Mississippi Delta. A central theme of her study is the devastating social cost of maintaining a social structure in which a rich, white elite holds such enormous political and economic power, leaving the poor powerless, dependent, and with severely limited access to economic and educational opportunities, or even to the social welfare services that are firmly controlled by the upper class oligarchy. Isolated though they may be from one another, the haves and

have-nots in Duncan's study are bound together by a kind of mutual dependence. The haves rely on a pool of cheap, subordinate, contingent labor; the have-nots on such opportunities to make a living that their rich neighbors are willing to dole out. What they lack is any sense of the shared civic culture that Duncan finds in a far less polarized, principally blue collar New England mill town which, despite its own experience of job loss and economic hard times, sees far less of the entrenched poverty that Duncan describes in Appalachia and the Delta.

In drawing explicit links between poverty, politics, and power, Duncan is raising themes that, with some notable exceptions (Piven & Cloward 1993, Gans 1995), have been neglected or remain in the backdrop of social scientific poverty research. Related to this is a larger absence of political analysis in the poverty and inequality literature, of how, for example, the decline of wages and opportunity is related to what analyst Kevin Phillips (1990) called the "politics of rich and poor" as well as to the frayed infrastructure of political representation for low-income groups (Imig 1996). Here again, the "working poor" designation is telling as a categorization that avoids reference to social class and, as such, to real or potential membership in a more broadly based political coalition based on common economic interest.

And yet, these studies in poverty and stratification also reveal the complications of categorization. If they point to any single conclusion, it is that the disadvantages of class, race, and gender do not operate as easily separable variables, let alone as alternative explanations for poverty or strategies for change. Indeed, this same complicated array of structural divisions is often reflected in the way poor and working class people analyze their own situations in ethnographic interviews, and particularly in their tendency to blame presumably competing racial and ethnic "others" for the loss of opportunity (Rubin 1994, Fine & Weis 1998, Newman 1999). This is hardly a new theme in social research. Progressive-era social investigators, revealing their own cultural biases, lamented the absence of working-class consciousness among immigrant newcomers willing to work for less than a living wage. But it does speak to the need for further investigation into how poor people do engage, politically and socially, in ways that are often overlooked in poverty research (Kelley 1993, Weir 1999).

## POVERTY AND PLACE

Having been eclipsed by the turn to national-level statistical data in the 1970s and 1980s, the study of community and neighborhood has once again emerged as a central theme in poverty research. To some degree this renewed interest might be linked to broader cultural and ideological trends. Concerns about the decline of community and civic culture, after all, are not confined to or even primarily associated with the poor (Putnam 1995). And although prominently associated with arguments for welfare state retrenchment and privatization (Olasky 1992), a communitarian ethos has also been invoked in the name of a strengthened public sector as a countervailing force to market inequities (Kaus 1992, Kuttner 1997).

But the revival of social scientific interest in community and neighborhoods has also been stimulated by developments more specific to poverty research, in particular by Wilson's theory of the underclass, and by the related research finding that the extent of geographically concentrated poverty has grown enormously since 1970 (Wilson 1987, Jargowsky 1997). As a result, a great deal of this research has focused on investigating the existence and mechanisms of so-called neighborhood effects: the impact, that is, of levels of neighborhood poverty and other environmental factors on various aspects of individual development, especially among children and adolescents (Jencks & Mayer 1990, Brooks-Gunn et al 1997). Anchored in a combination of Chicago-school ecology, social capital, and psychological development theory, this inquiry has produced a substantial, if inconclusive, body of interdisciplinary research on the impact of growing up in neighborhoods that lack the economic, institutional, and, presumably, the social resources that make middle-class neighborhoods work.

In fact, the very notion of neighborhood effects remains controversial and contested. Despite efforts to integrate ethnographic with statistical analysis, the recent literature has not resolved the basic tension that has long characterized research on poor communities: Beneath indicators of what the Chicago school called social disorganization are what a host of ethnographers since the 1940s have characterized as coherent and resourceful forms of social organization replete with social capital (Whyte 1943, Liebow 1967, Stack 1974; 1996a). Nor does the neighborhood effects literature capture the powerful sources of elite resistance to neighborhood organizing, exercised in local politics as well as in social welfare institutions (Stack 1996b, Weir et al 1998). In the meantime, poverty researchers have paid far less attention to what is arguably the more important question of what determines the spatial distribution of wealth, poverty, and resources, particularly in this era of globalized economic restructuring. For that, research needs to look beyond the characteristics of poor people and places to the metropolitan (Jargowsky 1997), regional (Lyson & Falk 1993), and national levers of political and economic decision making.

## POVERTY AND POLICY

Ever since the publication of Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984), investigating the relationship between policy and poverty has never been quite the same. Having invested considerable energy in assessing the effectiveness—and documenting the flaws—of anti-poverty and especially welfare programs, liberal analysts found themselves having to justify the existence of any safety net at all. Nevertheless, over the past several years a number of sociologists and historians have built up a persuasive critique of the American welfare state, showing how its two-tiered, public/private, federal/local and what Patterson (1994: p. 56) calls “jerry-built” structure was grounded in a politics that relegated poor people to second-class citizenship, and left women and non-whites particularly vulnerable to poverty (Weir et al 1988, Gordon 1994, Katz 1996). More recently, scholars working in

the “new institutionalist” tradition have developed the argument further, focusing on how the courts (Bussiere 1997), federal administrative agencies (Lieberman 1998), and political regimes at the subnational level (Amenta 1998) played a powerful role in shaping social relations and limiting the scope of anti-poverty policy.

An equally important project taken up in research on poverty and policy has been to imagine the alternatives, and in the process to expand the constricted boundaries, of a debate that has been driven by the politics of welfare backlash, deficit reduction, and anti-statism. While hardly constituting a social scientific consensus, recurrent themes in much of the literature point in precisely the opposite direction from what has actually come about in the United States: a preference for universalistic rather than narrowly targeted (and stigmatized) programs; a call for cross-class, cross-racial coalitions in social politics; and an expanded role for the federal government in battling social and economic inequality (Skocpol 1991, Wilson 1996).

## CONCLUSION: Social Science and the Poor

Ultimately, the task of imagining a different future does not rest with social science alone. But it does require a different kind of knowledge than that we have known as poverty research. A starting point, as suggested by the ongoing trend toward greater inequality, is to shift the focus of research, away from the characteristics and failings of poor people, and toward those of a mainstream political economy and culture that relegates so many people to economic insecurity and social marginality. It is also to break the still-powerful hold of the Welfare Fixation by turning attention to the decline and changing nature of work opportunities in the post-industrial economy. And it is to rethink the categorizations that, however inadvertently, reinforce what close scrutiny reveals to be artificial distinctions among and between poor people and the rest of society.

The literature reviewed above points in the direction of a reformulated poverty research agenda; the realities of post-welfare poverty make it that much more of an imperative.

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