The Culture of Poverty Revisited: Bringing Back the Working Class

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Abstract: This article looks at the "unhappy marriage" between the anthropology of poverty in the United States and Marxist social science. It examines the theoretical and methodological assumptions of poverty studies that have excluded a Marxist analysis and identifies the analytic weaknesses of these assumptions through ethnographic field data on homelessness in New York City during the Reagan/ Bush years. Finally, an attempt is made to situate the development of poverty studies within the larger political history of the American working class in the 20th century and suggestions are presented for the directions that a Marxist anthropology of poverty might take.

Keywords: Marxism, poverty, homelessness, working class, anthropology of the United States, race

Résumé : Cet article s'intéresse au mariage raté de l'anthropologie de la pauvreté, telle qu'elle est pratiquée aux États-Unis, et des sciences sociales marxistes. Il examinera les suppositions théoriques et méthodologiques des études sur la pauvreté qui font abstraction des analyses marxistes et relèvera les faiblesses analytiques de ces suppositions. Cette critique s'appuie sur des données ethnographiques de la situation des sans-abri à New York sous le règne de Reagan et Bush. Nous tenterons ensuite de situer le développement des études sur la pauvreté au sein de l'histoire politique générale de la classe ouvrière américaine du 20ième siècle et de proposer de nouvelles orientations pour une anthropologie marxiste de la pauvreté.

Mots-clés : Marxisme, pauvreté, sans-abri, classe ouvrière, anthropologie Américaine, race

The Waxing and Waning of Poverty Studies

For Marxists there is no greater bugaboo than the issue of poverty in America. On the surface it would seem that dire poverty amidst the over-capacity, over-production and economic plenty of the United States would be the ideal empirical indictment of the irrational brutality of the capitalist mode of production. Yet there is probably no academic or policy literature that has been more impervious to Marxist analysis than that on poverty in America. This has been particularly true in urban anthropology, where the overwhelming majority of treatments of poverty have been functionalist, a-historical and anti-political. The Weberian typologies upon which this literature relies "disappear" the working class by positing a set of imagined categories, based largely on consumption (or lack of it) and composed of society's most exotically grotty and underprivileged. In disappearing the Marxist category of the proletariat, they also negate working-class political solutions to the continuing problems of capitalist reproduction, U.S. style; thus participating in the ideological suppression of such solutions, while attempting to ameliorate the suffering of those most afflicted.

From the 1962 publication of Michael Harrington's book *The Other America* to the homeless crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s, social scientists have presented many catchy names for this poorest section of the American working class. The most popular and persistent has been simply "the poor," but terms such as "culture of poverty," "other America," "homeless," "underclass," "inner city" and the Marxian "working poor" have come and gone. Since President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" in the mid 1960s the United States government has poured billions of dollars into poverty relief programs directed at this group, despite the endless speculation on how to give it demographic parameters and the difficulty of finding people who actually self-identify by these vague, politically charged and stigmatizing categories.

Over the past 40 years, such programs have not eliminated the poverty they claimed to target, often failing to accomplish such seemingly modest goals as eliminating public sleeping and preventable diseases. Despite these failures anthropologists and other social scientists have continued to use the same research categories to produce literature that is often little more than a tuning mechanism for the government poverty bureaucracy.

Since the 1993 inauguration of Bill Clinton the anthropology of poverty has become far less important (Susser 2001). The post-cold war *pax Americana* that drove almost a decade of continuous economic growth had Democrats and Republicans alike competing to dismantle the New Deal/Great Society poverty relief programs, leaving poverty studies a less attractive area of research. Since the election of George W. Bush the orgy of economic self-congratulation at the end of the cold war has given way to the post-September 11 "war without end," further reducing the importance of domestic social policy and the public face of urban policy research.

The still recent collapse of communism combined with the contemporary retrenchments in poverty studies may seem like a bad period in which to discuss Marxism, poverty, and the failures of our meagre, but sorely missed welfare state. However, this interstitial moment may actually be the perfect time for Marxists to enter the discussion of poverty in the United States and put the working class back into the centre of the analysis.

In the following paper I will discuss how the discourses on poverty have excluded and silenced a Marxist perspective, often reducing social science in general and anthropology in particular to little more than an adjunct of government policy. Then, using ethnographic data from my own research on "homeless" men in New York City in the 1990s, I will demonstrate some of the ways that this instrumentalizing of research categories and excision of Marxist understandings of social class not only removes the liberating potential of social science by colluding in the management of inequality, but also greatly limits the explanatory power of our work. It will be my argument that the difficulty of situating and contextualizing working-class problems such as housing, employment, and health care within vague, impressionistic and often arbitrary categories such as "underclass" and "homeless" forces us to either project imaginary categories onto the data or remain agnostic about exactly who we are studying and why. Finally, I will suggest some possible explanations for the lack of a working-class perspective in poverty studies by challenging the historiography that posits a "Fordist compromise" and imagines the United States working class as an ideologically, politically and economically bounded cultural isolate, removed from the larger history of the world.

Two Nations or Two Classes?

Much of the modern social science of poverty, its definitions, methodologies and relationship to public policy owes its origins to Michael Harrington and his 1962 book, *The Other America*. It is said that John F. Kennedy was moved to tears when he read Harrington's book and many people credit the book with instigating many of the anti-poverty programs of the 1960s. At the centre of his methodology was the category "poor," which was inscribed in the title of his book, by the use of the word "other," to describe a section of the American working class that numbers in the tens of millions. Though often identified with the left and Marxism, Harrington's work was a key part of the discourse that silenced Marxism and systematically excluded a working-class focus from discussions of poverty.

In the final chapter of *The Other America*, Harrington asserts, "...the United States contains an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty...They are beyond history, beyond progress, sunk in a paralyzing, maiming routine" (Harrington 1962: 158). He concludes his book by saying that "until these facts shame us, until they stir us to action, the other America will continue to exist, a monstrous example of needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world" (ibid: 191). In this last chapter, Harrington makes two assumptions that were crucial to nearly all subsequent literature on poverty: the poor are different and separate from the rest of the United States, and social shame is the means for ending suffering in America.

The first of these assumptions is the one that most directly excludes a Marxist analysis and confuses attempts to understand the nature of poverty. Harrington's functionalist typology divides society into two groups, or as he calls it, "two nations" (ibid: 158). The first nation is a cross-class group in which the system functions. The second nation, which he calls "the other America," is a place where nothing functions.

Although by the very title of his book Harrington assumes two different Americas, he never clearly defines or justifies his division between the "other America" and an implied "same America." In this sleight of hand Harrington obscures the two most fundamental categories of a Marxist analysis: the capitalist class who own the means of production and derive benefit from channelling a higher percentage of the social product into profit and the employed working class who share with "the poor" an

interest in channelling a higher percentage of the social product into use values and a lower percentage into profit. Harrington's fusion of these two categories, which in a Marxist analysis are separate and structurally opposed, into an implied and unproblematized category, "the same America," nearly guarantees that the working class will disappear from the analysis which focusses on the stated and problematized category of "other."

Though Harrington never denies that "the other America" is populated by people who are spit out of the "same America," his dismissal of the Marxist idea that a minimum wage store clerk, a welfare mother, a $75 000 a year truck driver, and a doctor working on salary for a major health insurer have an economic and political commonality of interest directs the focus of research to a cultural model of difference expressed perfectly by the objectifying adjective "other." By establishing a cultural rather than class model Harrington predetermines that the capitalist competitive labour market is naturalized. It is also assumed that the conflict over working-class demands to expand the social wage, thereby increasing the percentage of the social product that goes to use values (rather than profits), will be absent from the debate over social inequality. Instead we are left with the American working class played by its understudy, the "other America": a group cast for its economic impotence and exotic grottiness.

Harrington's primary category for analysis, "the other America" became the basis for subsequent research in the anthropology of poverty and inequality. Over the nearly four decades since the publication of *The Other America*, debates on poverty in America have focussed on a variety of versions of this imagined category, cobbled together with often arbitrary empirical criteria. With no subjective consciousness, self-identity, or organic social organization defining "the other America" and no two researchers able to agree on a theoretical or scientifically replicable objective definition, research on poverty in America has typically used a unit of analysis defined by the poor people who are most easily seen (Katz 1986; Marcus 2003; Mitchell 1997). This has given anthropologists, who have a strong tradition of empiricism, direct engagement with research subjects, and a tendency to imagine coherence, community and identity, where it may not fully exist, comparative advantage over other social scientists in studying multiple "other Americas." However, it has left much of the theoretical debate on poverty in America focussed on arguments over who the poor actually are and where they came from (Harrington 1984; Katz 1993; Maxwell 1993, Ricketts and Sawhill 1988; Wilson, 1987), rather than the politics of social inequality in America.

The Problem of Praxis

The disappearance of the Marxist category "the proletariat," supports Harrington's second assumption: that social shame will lead America to fight poverty. In a Marxist world view the proletariat, defined by its relationship to the means of production and its dependence on the use values section of the social product, has an overall interest in contesting the division of society's product: at the individual production site; at the national level and globally. In actual fact, these conflicts over the product of labour tend to remain sporadic, unreliable, and conjunctural in the absence of conscious working-class political organization. However, the basis of the Marxist approach to social analysis depends on the conscious recognition and ideological articulation of inherent and irresolvable contradictions in the social relations of production that drive class struggles and other social motion. Within this view, the proletariat is the privileged agent of social change, with a more conscious, combative and unified proletariat more open to anti-capitalist political leadership that challenges the logic of the profit system and protects each of its members from political or economic injury. The end product in this Marxist view of society is communism, which eliminates the class divisions that create and reinforce those injuries.

In *The Other America*, Harrington posits a model of society in which it is the academics and policymakers that study poverty who are the privileged agents of social change. In the tradition of progressive liberal theories that assume the possibility of social equilibrium, harmony, consensus, or rational administration, Harrington presents enlightened experts as the privileged crafters of rationalist discourses that can shame the not-poor into action to help the poor, making the dysfunctional function and turning "other Americans" into "same Americans."

With a social harmony model of life under capitalism and a society that he describes as "advanced," Harrington must find some person or group of people to blame for having deviated from the liberal social imperative of order. In his case it is a combination of unenlightened social policymakers who fail to incorporate the poor into the modern and ever changing capitalist division of labour, and the excesses of the shameless. Though he never precisely defines who is shameless, he mentions "Southern Democrats," "Northern Republicans," and, in a nod to the "American exceptionalism" discussion, the "American party system" (p. 173). However, in his pluralist model of the state we may take him to mean all those who don't share his feelings for the suffering of the poor: anybody who is smug, self-satisfied, opportunistic, wealthy or greedy.

It remained for subsequent literature on poverty to debate what combination of poor and not-poor shamelessness was prolonging the incomplete American consensus. Whether it is the poor themselves who are blamed (Auletta 1982; Matza 1966; McCord 1969; Moynihan 1969), some vague and ill defined "macrostructural" force like deindustrialization, changing work processes under capitalism, lag time in economic regulation, or runaway corporate greed that was not properly addressed by state social policy (Gordon, Edwards and Reich 1982; Hopper, Susser and Conover 1987; Nash 1985; Piven 1997; Susser 1996; Wilson 1978; Wilson 1987), or some caste defined form of isolation (Anderson 1999; Hannerz 1969; Sharff 1987; Stack 1974; Suttles 1968) someone had to be blamed and then shamed back into the social fold. The continuation of pockets of shameless people has generally been attributed to the failure to put enough light and exposure on their transgressions. The prescription for intransigent shamelessness has usually been more social science, educational campaigns around poverty amelioration, new economic structures for regulating and balancing the economy, and increased social work.

Despite this lack of clear parameters for inquiry, poverty researchers have been able to unite into two hostile camps based on their explanation of why people are poor and what should be done about it. The first of these camps, which comprises advocates of the "culture of poverty" theory uses a Weberian/Parsonian concern for values and culture that critics have argued blames the poor for their poverty. They view capitalist economies as natural, the behaviour of elites as normative, and political economic history as having almost no importance in creating "the other America." This leads them to argue for educational programs designed to teach "mainstream" values and re-socialize the "shameless" poor. Despite some prominent advocates attached to the Democratic Party, this camp has traditionally been identified with Republican Party social policy (Moynihan 1969; Parsons and Clark 1966; Poussaint 2003; Rainwater and Yancey 1967; Tyson 1997).

The other camp, which has traditionally been identified with Democratic Party social programs, takes a Durkheimian focus on brute economics and what is sometimes referred to as "macrostructures," or the division of labour in society. For this group of scholars the behaviour of the poor is generally adaptive and acceptable in light of their difficult circumstances. They typically seek solutions in political economic remedies such as expanding the scope of welfare, food stamps and other poverty relief programs, and sometimes use such Marxian terms as "working poor." Like Harrington, they sometimes claim

a Marxian method, connecting the "needless suffering" to "American exceptionalism," or the lack of an explicitly working class based party in the United States. However, when applied to poverty studies, even this working-class flavoured perspective, typically views "grassroots" political action as an additional weight on the equal arm balance of public policymaking (Blau 1992; Lyon-Callo 2001; Piven 2001; Susser 1996) and ultimately views poverty as a problem of social imbalance, bad or penurious policy and the shameless behaviour of certain unenlightened elites, rather than an expected outcome of a competitive economy (Gans 1967; Stack 1974; Susser 1996; Valentine 1968).

Though the debate between these two currents has often been bitter, they share a fundamental unity in their social vision and scholarly theory. Like their sociological parents, Weber and Durkheim, both reject Marxist class analysis for a liberal, functionalist model of capitalism that begins with the category "poor" and rejects the Marxist understanding that the working class and the capitalist class have intrinsically counterpoised and unbalanceable interests. Where poverty studies represent American society as an incomplete consensus, a Marxist analysis would necessarily involve looking at the exercise of power by historically contingent groups pursuing political and economic interests that grow out of the inherently contradictory and directional relationship between social labour and the control of social surplus. It is these interested groups and classes, including academics in the poverty industry, that give names to things and people, creating the cognitive map by which we all live.

In the United States, where the working class has very limited consciousness of its own existence and has organized no independent political party to pose its own names, definitions and perspectives, the political and economic fight over the social product is more often disorganized and hidden than open. Identifying the working-class perspective often becomes an exercise, first in clearing away the noise of such anti-working class discourses as poverty studies and then listening for historical silences (Sider and Smith 1997). It is in these silences that we might find the disappeared working-class component to the study of poverty in America. In the following section I will discuss some of the practical problems that I encountered in my own fieldwork among "the homeless," trying to find the words and names for these interests and missing categories that, from a Marxist perspective create, define, and could once and for all resolve the problem of poverty, but from the perspective of poverty studies do not exist.

Who Are the Homeless, Really?

In the summer of 1993, as I neared the end of my contract as staff ethnographer on a large three-year federally funded demonstration project on homelessness, I faced the difficult task of turning thousands of pages of research data into a doctoral thesis. Throughout my three years on the job, friends, neighbours, in-laws, and just about everybody I met at any social gathering had asked me the same question, "who are the homeless, really?" When I came to write up my work, I discovered I still was not any closer to answering this simple question, despite having passed three years with hundreds of "homeless" and learning many of the most intimate details of their lives.

When I approached my colleagues on the project with this question they were unhelpful. "It's a stupid question. It's someone without a home," one said. Another more thoughtful colleague told me that he had worried about this at first, but eventually decided it was more important to try to figure out what would help them the most. He pointed me towards Peter Rossi's book that describes the homeless as one part of the "extremely poor" (Rossi 1989) and some public health literature on the question. One of my professors at the University told me not to worry so much about definitions, "just pick one you are comfortable with and write about the people you met," she said, and "stay close to the ethnography."

As my concern turned to despair, I returned to the literature on homelessness and poverty and looked for others who had worked on this same problem. There were numerous books about the homeless, each with a different definition. Some authors had no concern for the problem of definitions (DeHavenon 1995; Dinkins and Cuomo 1992), others used the first pages of their work to qualify their subject and explain that the term "homeless" wasn't fully adequate to describe this subgroup of the "extremely poor," "working poor," or "underclass" (Blau 1992; Hopper and Hamburg 1986; Jencks 1994; Rossi 1989), other more ethnographically focussed accounts looked for community and cultural coherence (Desjarlais 1997; Gounis 1993; Grunberg and Eagle 1990). Since it was as difficult to find someone who self-identified as homeless as it was to find a self-identifying yuppie, all the studies relied on objective rather than subjective categories. However, nobody could agree on an objective definition, making comparative discussion and substantive conclusions difficult.

Nobody could agree on how many nights sleeping publicly were necessary to make someone homeless. Nobody believed that two nights or even ten nights in a year were enough to define someone as homeless, but some researchers believed that living situations in which someone regularly spent a night or two a week in a semi-public place constituted homelessness. Then there were people who never slept publicly but had no place of their own. Kim Hopper (1991; 1995) called these "the pre-homeless," another subgroup to study, discuss and possibly provide service to.

Nobody was even sure what constituted sleeping publicly. Was a top landing of an apartment building public? Was a basement laundry room after closing time public? What if there was a locked closet in the laundry room where bedding and personal belongings were stored and a key was supplied by the superintendent in exchange for unpaid maintenance and cleaning duties? I had informants who lived in shacks in a garden. Did their homeless status change when electricity was run into the shack and they were given keys to a toilet and shower room in the community center next to the garden? Then there were squatters in abandoned buildings and people who lived in shacks under the highway. Furthermore, nobody was sure how to count three families living in a three-bedroom apartment. Did their status change if sisters headed all three families? What if there was a brother who lived in the living room and was registered at the shelter as an escape for occasions when a sister's boyfriend became violent with him.

For many of my colleagues, being registered at a shelter was what counted. However, we all knew people who registered with the shelter to obtain free meals and keep their personal belongings there, but never slept there, preferring a girlfriend's house. Similarly we all knew people for whom the shelter was an extra bedroom. They kept their belongings at parents' houses, ate meals with family, and took showers at home, but went down the block to the shelter to sleep at night because there was a lack of space or because a same-sex lover lived at the shelter. Many housing situations depended on being registered at the shelter in the event of occasional problems or uncertainties.

Finally, as is usually the case with studies of poverty in America, the race question was never very far below the surface. I had found whole networks of white, ethnic blue-collar types living in the interstices of the suburbs and edge cities around New York. Generally well versed in using the system and sometimes registered at a shelter, many of these people exhibited the homeless life in every way down to the ratty clothes and street corner begging, but they were rarely included in the category. I also discovered networks of young, often college educated, white Americans who had spent nights sleeping in train stations, on roofs, in parks, and on friend's floors because of

economic problems and housing conflicts. However for most people at the time, a black 23-year-old casual cocaine user trying to become a writer and bouncing from bad housing situation to bad housing situation was "homeless," but the same person in white skin was merely struggling with the New York City housing market.

Since none of the work of experts had helped answer my questions and most amelioration projects were failing, partially, I sensed, due to confusion over who was to be helped, I turned to non-experts for help. A 1990 New York Times poll had shown that 82% of New Yorkers saw homeless people daily (Fantasia and Isserman 1994). I decided to test exactly what it was that they were seeing. I had been collecting data on many of the underhoused people, the beggars, street salesmen and mentally ill in my neighborhood (the Upper West Side of Manhattan) and in the one where I was doing much of my fieldwork (Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan). Over the course of a few months I took people I knew from these neighbourhoods around in my car, or walked them through the streets and tried to discover who they thought was homeless.

They pointed to the bizarre looking, middle-aged black men asking for change from passersby. Though I knew that they were long time residents of the single room occupancy hotel (also known as a welfare hotel or SRO) on my block, they presented an image of homelessness. The Vietnam veteran, with military disability benefits that were higher than my salary, who sold second hand books for extra money and in order to pass the time was seen as homeless. Though he had never spent a night on the streets, he was black, passed his days on the street, and dressed in shabby clothes. There was an unbathed black woman dragging children behind her who also got the designation homeless, but she lived two blocks down in a large crowded studio apartment with her sister and her niece. No one pointed to the well-dressed Barbadan man with sharp-creased, brown pants and a stylish dress shirt, sitting on a bench reading a paper on his favourite traffic island in the middle of Broadway: he was a shelter resident. The white man on crutches hawking videos, who slept in Riverside Park, the good looking young black man arguing in a shop, who slept in a basement uptown, and the Latina City University of New York (CUNY) student who worked in the supermarket and alternated nights at an aunt's home in Jersey City, the student government office at City College, and her best friend's bedroom (when there was no boyfriend present) in a shared apartment, all received no notice.

My colleagues had been unable to provide an objective definition of homeless that went beyond "we know em'

when we see 'em" and my friends and neighbours were equally perplexed about what a homeless person was, despite seeing them every day. They tended to use a folk category that described people with some combination of dark skin, poor grooming, inappropriate behaviour, and little to do with the day except hang out on the streets. Still operating within the poverty studies model I went in search of help from my informants. I knew that they did not think of themselves as homeless, but I thought they might have special insights into what I was studying.

My informants were the only group that could agree on a definition of the homeless. "Why don't you ask the Spanish guy (director of the Community Support Services office at the shelter). He's the one who decides who stays in the shelter and who gets a place," snapped one informant, summing up the general sense about the category. Throughout field work informants had expressed doubt or disgust towards my research category, but my location within the poverty studies paradigm had usually led me to disregard what they said, often putting it down to race resentment or even mental illness. I went back to my field notes and began to revise my views of what they had told me.

Henry, an African-American jazz trumpeter with a bad crack habit, had teased me mercilessly throughout my field work about being an anthropologist looking for culture among the homeless. "You the guy who studies culture," he'd say. "How come you can't teach me any of the traditional homeless songs so I can do my improvisations. You holdin out on me?"

I brought my doubts to an articulate older informant named Delaney who had been in the merchant marines for many years, but had lost housing after a mental breakdown. He later found a place in the sunny second story front bedroom of a boarding house in a beautiful historic brownstone in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, owned by the daughter-in-law of an African-American World War One veteran and his French war bride. There were a few other older black "homeless" men renting rooms there, some of whom had briefly passed through the shelter system. We sat in the sunlight on tall antique wooden chairs and he explained to me that I was studying black culture in its most degraded form. "You want to know about the homeless, study the social workers," he suggested, "they're the ones always talking about it." He compared my study to looking for Jewish culture in a concentration camp, "you want to understand the camp, study the damn Nazis."

I even had an informant who responded to an interview question about where he imagined being in five years by claiming that what social workers call homelessness is

sometimes the last phase of youth for late teenage, early twenties black men. "It's kind of like you white folks and your frat parties," he said, "everybody goes around sleeping in big houses with a bunch of different people and they drink beer all the time instead of use drugs. I seen all that in the movies. We just ain't got the fancy cars and the wealthy daddies." He would cite cases of people who had passed through periods without housing and a job, eventually settling down to the lower ranks of the steadily employed and disappearing from the view of social workers and researchers. At the time I merely noted it and moved on. How many of the men I had met might fit such a category of unestablished young black working-class men, I later wondered?

As I saw the category of homeless "melting into air" many of these comments began to make sense. One of my informants, an African-American in his late twenties who was too emotionally unstable for me to bring my doubts to, had once told me that he believed that the shelter was a giant intelligence experiment "to see how many niggers is stupid enough to enter. The guards, the big gorillas that sleep down at the other end, the crazy ones like me, hell even the shelter director, don't know they fuckin' with him. They can call us homeless or whatever the fuck they want, but it's just a bunch of poor niggers." As I looked back, I realized that in a strange and unconscious way he was voicing the same thought that virtually all my informants had: the concept of homeless was a weak abstraction imposed from above on people who may or may not have had housing. None of my informants were sure where and why they fit into my study, but they were all sure that "homeless" was the wrong category.

I approached the social workers, as Delaney and several other informants had suggested. They were busy preparing for the next project and suggested that I was taking the ravings of the mentally ill too seriously. However, there was one who encouraged me to pursue my line of questioning. As he put it, "words are important because they appear on budgets. The word 'homeless' is like triage at the hospital. When you have somebody who is about to freeze to death on the streets, after a knife fight with a family member or being burnt out of his apartment or just out of Attica (a state prison), you gotta find the guy a place to sleep and damn quick. But after a good night's sleep, a shower and a cup of coffee, how ya gonna convince him that his problem is homelessness. Sure he needs to find an apartment, but maybe he has a bigger problem, like no job or nobody to take care of him until he gets on his feet. Maybe he just needs a new prescription for his meds. The guys are not stupid. Only an idiot could convince himself that being homeless is anybody's number one problem."

He claimed that he had doubted the value of the concept of "homeless" for a long time, and as he became more frustrated with the project his work life became more untenable. He eventually resigned his position.

As with my struggle to make sense of exactly what it was that I was studying, this social worker was identifying the irrationality of trying to maintain a dichotomy between the "same America" of which he was a part and the special subdivision of the "other America," known as "homeless," that his clients inhabited. Though Harrington's work can be appreciated by Marxists for its dramatic focus on a problem that many Americans did not even know about, its dichotomy between two nations, a functional and non-functional one, helped track subsequent debates over poverty towards discussions of fine tuning programs for individuals and groups of individuals who were thought to be "other," rather than discussions of systemic political economic conflict.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when so called social programs were expanding, the categories of poverty studies such as "the other America," "the culture of poverty," and "the inner cities" did not clarify either cause and effect or solution and motive actor, but they were broad enough that significant numbers of working-class people were able to find some fit between the programs and their lives. However, by the time I started my fieldwork in 1990, the "reluctant welfare state" had given way to a shadow welfare state, yielding the category, "homeless." As my social worker informant had observed, this was a social service relief category that was so narrow and divorced from working-class lives, goals, and perspectives that only the most exotically immiserated could fit its narrow parameters, and only on particularly bad nights.

In my journey through homeless studies and the homeless bureaucracy, I had found many silences: the absence of homeless people chanting at homeless rights rallies that had been organized by social workers and poverty researchers, people who had left their cot, taken their cup of coffee and moved on to pursue a job or repair broken family ties, and more than a few people who had spent a night in a shelter, at a social worker's recommendation, simply to qualify for social support that had been limited only to "the homeless." Though I had found the silences, I needed to find the acts of silencing to explain what was happening at the bottom reaches of the New York City working class.

American Individualism, Fordism and Cultural Economy

Individuals alone cannot create social consciousness; social groups pursuing their interests and fighting for institu-

tional space create consciousness. In order to find the big silences and the big silencers that created an environment where Michael Harrington swayed millions with his fuzzy, class-blind functionalism it is necessary to look for the origins of poverty studies and the homeless crisis in the political and ideological history of the American working class.

The tradition of American individualism has been discussed and celebrated by writers from de Crevecoeur and de Tocqueville to F.J. Turner, but there is also a collective current in American political culture that is less frequently discussed. This is the tradition of counter-hegemonic and working-class politics that during the three decades before World War I started the international general strike day on May 1, fought battles with the armed forces during major strikes at Pullman, Homestead, and Ludlow, and produced one of the only major socialist parties in the world that opposed World War I.

In the two decades after World War I the American working class faced tremendous state repression in the form of detentions, deportations, and assassination, yet organized at least three general strikes that briefly captured major cities (Seattle 1919, Minneapolis 1934, San Francisco 1934) and generated a mass proletarian class consciousness in the 1930s that yielded sit-down strikes, unemployed councils, and nationally significant workers' party initiatives. This combative American working class of the 1930s won national victories such as the right to union representation, social security, unemployment insurance, public housing, low cost credit, public infrastructure, community healthcare, public education and other use value entitlements that few other national working classes had at the time.

However, by the 1950s the very idea of an American working class was disappearing. In 1957, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) ended production of its newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, leaving the United States with no independent, specifically working-class daily. It was not until 10 years later in 1967 that the CPUSA resumed publication of a daily party press, opting for the class neutral name, *The Daily World*. During this same period many self-described socialists, "revolutionaries," and "neo-Marxists" came to radical politics amidst third world rebellions and the upheavals of 1968. Often embracing Maoist or Guevaraist political programs and organizations that identified "new vanguards" (Trotskyism), "student/peasant alliances" (Maoism), "revolutionary foci" (Guevaraism), and "Third World liberation" (Castroism), many of the most radical voices of this generation of activists and scholars made little reference to the working class or social relations of production. Instead

they often used such concepts as internal colonialism, dependency, de-linking, revolutionary foci, revolutionary nationalism (Amin 1990; Breitman 2004; Cruse 2002; Guevara 1992; Limqueco and McFarlane 1983) or vague class neutral terms such as "the people" and "international revolution."[1]

The journey from Roosevelt, who enacted emergency legislation to placate an angry, combative and class conscious U.S. working class and halt the growth of a labour party, to the class blind anti-poverty programs of the Great Society is one that has usually been explained by postulating a "culture" of individualism as the natural state of the American working class and assuming a "complacency born of post-war affluence."

Some scholars who have chronicled the decline of working-class consciousness in the post war period have looked to a functionalist capital/labour social contract, generally referred to as "the Fordist compromise" (Aglietta 1979; Lipietz 1992; Masters and Robertson 1988; Nash 1985; Nash 1989; Piven 1997; Piven and Cloward 1982). This contract has been described as an exchange by the working class of political and work process power for a rising standard of living and superficial consumerism. Underpinning this notion of a "Fordist compromise" is the economic theory known as "regulationism" that holds that social relations and social solidarities derive from the division of labour in society or the forces of production. In this view, systems of political economic regulation must be identified and enacted by enlightened policy makers, in order to create balanced "regimes of accumulation." Each change in the division of labour requires the creation of a new set of institutions for balancing the socio-economic contradictions of capital accumulation. In the case of the post-World War II period the name given to the regime of accumulation is "Fordist," within which a variety of "Keynesian" economic policies and "Great Society" anti-poverty programs are viewed as part of the regulation that allowed for industrial and social equilibrium (Aglietta 1979; Lipietz 1986).

This period of compromise and equilibrium, which has often been referred to as "the golden age" (Hobsbawm 1995), is seen as a time when a "Fordist" industrial division of labour produced a working class and an industrial class whose interests could be balanced through state regulation overseeing a capital/labour compromise that was administered by a cradle to grave welfare state and large, powerful pro-capitalist and social patriotic trade unions that incorporated workers into an affluent consensus. Ultimately declining class consciousness in the postwar period is explained by peace, prosperity, and good management. Like the poverty studies model, this

approach also posits a vision of society as an equilibrium-seeking entity, driven by the ministrations of enlightened experts and progressive academics, rather than a socio-political battle over the social wage.

Critics have argued that this model identifies a direct and unconscious relationship between economic cause and cultural effect that is empirically unprovable due to the lack of either documentary evidence of a compromise or convincing specific correlations between Fordist regulation and declining class consciousness at the level of nations, regions, or even individual production sites. They have also pointed to the problem that cultural economy behaviourism of the regulation model reduces politico-ideological history to epiphenomena of the division of labour, raising the question of why there was no swing back to class conflict and consciousness with the withdrawal of the Fordist compromise (Clark 1991; Cohen 1987).[2] Finally, some critics have suggested that, in fact, there was never a balance, but rather a steady rise in rates of exploitation, driven by a long term employers' offensive (Brenner and Glick 1989).

A Marxist explanation for the lack of working-class consciousness in the postwar period must address the concrete histories of conscious actors, political parties, and other institutions of working-class self-organization that operate at the political and ideological level of, what Eric Wolf has referred to as, "structural power" (Wolf 1999). In the following pages I will provide a brief discussion of the history of the politico-ideological organization of the American working class since the end of World War II, as well as some speculations about impacts this history has had on the study of poverty.

Class and Culture in the Postwar Period

It has become generally accepted in anthropology that "old style" holistic studies of cultures and their "master patterns" are inadequate to explain a world where exogenous determinants can create or destroy a culture and its traits almost overnight. However, this understanding has rarely been applied to the anthropology of the United States. In most anthropological studies of the United States, the issues of world culture, world capitalism, or determinants that lie outside the boundaries of the United States are rarely mentioned, much less given explanatory weight. The assumption that generally underwrites the study of the United States is that U.S. culture is something like Felix the Cat's magic bag: objects and ideas emerge from inside the bag and fill the world, but little besides immigrant labour enters. In examining the history of the American working-class movement this discussion will attempt to break with the American intellectual isolation and situate the politico-ideological life of the American working class within an international context.

In most of the countries of the advanced industrial world in the 20th century the working class has had two major political institutions: an indigenous social democratic or "workers" party and a Moscow aligned communist party. One of the key points of American exceptionalism is the failure of the American working class to develop an indigenous workers' party. This has meant that the Communist Party (CPUSA), despite its small size and lack of electoral success, in comparison to communist parties in Japan, France and Italy,[3] has had a particularly strong influence on the consciousness of its country's proletariat, through organized labour, left academe, social movements, and the arts (Aronowitz 1974; Klehr 1984; Murphy 1991; Wald 2002).

The CPUSA began as the U.S. party of the Third International in 1919 and attracted many class conscious militants in the 1920s. Like all the communist parties that developed in this period, the CPUSA was deeply disoriented by the isolation of the October Revolution after the failure of the post-World War I Central European revolutions. Increasing despair regarding the possibility of world revolution made the Soviet leadership defensive and inward looking, yielding the victory of evolutionary objectivist leader Joseph Stalin, who put nearly total faith in technological development carrying the world through stages of government and society until the point of communism. Lacking faith in the conscious and militant activity of the international working class, Stalin's Soviet bureaucracy turned to a national communism in which the protection of the Soviet experiment was prioritized over the world class struggle. They used the prestige of the October Revolution and its powerful workers' state to reduce communist parties throughout the world into transmission belts for Soviet geo-politics and bargaining chips in great power politics, giving Stalin a particularly large influence on the U.S. working class, which lacked its own political party (Draper 1960; Klehr 1984; Mandel 1995).

In 1928 Stalin initiated what he called the third period. Based on the desire to make peace with European ruling classes that faced an upswing in power by social democratic parties, Stalin declared the German social democratic party (SPD) to be social-fascist and set Germany's powerful communist party (KPD) against capitalist Europe's most powerful workers' party. During this period German workers fought each other in the streets while the Nazis seized state power. Newly reinvigorated German imperialism posed an immediate threat to Moscow, which

in 1934 inaugurated its most defensive policy to date: the popular front.

The popular front held that for the foreseeable future communism was not possible, therefore all organizations of the working class, including the communist parties of the world, should ally with what Stalin called progressive bourgeoisie. Systematically liquidating Bolsheviks in the USSR and removing them from party leadership around the world, Stalin used the influence of the Soviet Union to replace Marxism with functionalist theories that promoted co-existence between the USSR and the capitalist world, and posited evolutionary stages that held that workers in the former colonial world should put aside their struggle for communism to join nationalists in the fight for "bourgeois democracy" (Mandel 1995).

Though the CPUSA was never a large mass party and there was no social democratic workers' party in the United States to act as a conduit to the "progressive bourgeoisie," the popular front would have dramatic implications for the development of class-blind American social science discourses. CPUSA militants continued to play an important role in union organizing and social movements like civil rights. However, in its political life the CPUSA was rapidly changing its class goals. Throughout the United States attempts within the labour movement to build a labour party were opposed and sometimes sabotaged by the CPUSA, who ultimately supported the pro-capitalist Democratic Party. CPUSA militants who had earlier preached revolution found themselves either arguing against revolution and independent self-organization by the working class, or expelled from the party (Cannon 1944).

In 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor CPUSA militants and sympathizers were as unprepared to draw an international class line on the battlefields of Europe, Asia and Africa as they were at home. Engaging in the ultimate popular front, the Communist Party mobilized all its forces to weld the American working class to the interests of its bosses and no longer even paid lip service to principles of international class solidarity. It abandoned class struggle at the point of production by accepting no strike pledges, refused to support and sometimes sabotaged the wildcat strikes common during World War II, and jettisoned its commitment to struggles for black civil rights (Kelley 1996; Robinson 2000). These alliances had the effect of forcing most of the vanguard of the American working class to choose between its class interests and its one political party. Militants disappeared into wildcat strikes, rogue civil rights actions, the social patriotism of the armed forces, or merely political inactivity (Mandel 1986).

When the war ended the U.S. ruling class turned its scorched earth policy homeward. The ideological void left by 12 years of popular front class-blind agitation and propaganda in the face of the 20th century's most intense period of ruling class economic, political, and social violence had created a deeper ideological silence in the American working class. Through harsh anti-labour laws, domestic political repression against communists, former communists, and sympathizers, war against communists and organized labour in the third world, and the aggressive conformism of the 1950s, the American ruling class actively and consciously attempted to root out all class politics. Anti-communism became the state religion as the United States government publicly executed Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, while encouraging the widespread introduction of school curricula like the "Americanism versus Communism" class that was required for many high school students until the late 1980s.

Though the labour explosions of 1946 won back a small percentage of wages lost during World War II, the vanguard of the U.S. working class had been ideologically disarmed, expelled from unions, physically liquidated, and denied the tools of self-organization. By the mid 1950s, the U.S. working class had no political party to provide intellectual, ideological or political leadership and little in the way of party affiliated socialists or communists to fight for an anti-capitalist perspective in the trade unions. The CPUSA was haemorrhaging members and became separated from its working-class base, due to anti-Communist purges of the trade unions, its slavish commitment to the increasingly discredited Moscow bureaucracy, and loyalty to the Democratic Party, which came to be the only political party that counted a significant base among the organized working class.

As Weberian theories of the managerial class and cross-class caste categories promoted by scholars like W. Lloyd Warner flooded American social sciences, the category of working class, as defined by social relations of production, rarely entered social theory (Sutton 1993; Wolf 2001). It was out of this ideological climate of defeat that the liberal functionalism of poverty studies emerged in the late 1950s.

Within the politically somnolent postwar environment there were still large pockets of economic deprivation, misery, and public dissent. Among the most visible were geographically, culturally, and racially defined zones such as Puerto Rico, the underdeveloped Appalachian region and black ghettoes. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who had long standing connections to the Communist Party (Price 1999), combined the Marxist tradition of looking for the underside of capitalist rule with the class blind traditions

of the popular front in his studies of poverty (Lewis 1959; 1968).

He defined the parameters of his study as an exotically poor group seen as distinct from the rest of society and defined by their visible lack of resources rather than class location. However, he did assert that there was something systematic and inevitable about the processes by which industrial capitalism impoverishes the most disorganized sectors of society. The Marxist solution implied in his work was social organization, by which we may imagine some combination of organizing from within these "communities" and external politico-ideological struggles waged by the industrial working classes that Lewis suggests are created by the same processes that spawn the culture of poverty. However, it was the consensus implied by culture, rather than the conflict implied by class in Lewis' work, that fired the imagination of a generation of social scientists influenced by Parsonian functionalism and Harringtonian volunteerism.

Throughout the 1950s African Americans had fought for civil rights and Puerto Ricans for de-colonization, with some success. The Chinese revolution had taken a quarter of the world's population out of the circuits of the capitalist system, Koreans had fought the US/UN forces to a stalemate, and the situation in Vietnam was unstable. However, in the early 1960s the growing anti-colonial revolt across the world and the spectacular USSR victory in the space race shook US hegemony. The rise of a charismatic anti-colonial, anti-racist, liberation government only 90 miles offshore in Cuba, along with the growth of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam helped touch off explosions of anger and protest around the world. Throughout the Americas young people of every background quit university, joined guerilla fronts, political organizations, and "freedom summers," and the questions of national liberation, anti-racism and "revolution" were on the agenda.

This infectious optimism was not lost on blacks, Latinos, the indigenous, and other specially oppressed peoples in the United States. For African Americans the failure of the civil rights movement in the South to yield substantive economic gains in the cities of the North and the continuing political weakness of black capitalism created an explosive situation, where there was little bourgeois leadership to calm smouldering ghettoes. The CPUSA's retreat from civil rights during World War II and its defence of Roosevelt's systematic exclusion of blacks from the New Deal in order to placate segregationist "Dixiecrats" had alienated and disoriented the powerful beginnings of a black communist wing of the American working class. The African American section of the working class, sometimes posited as having a special role in building a vanguard (Breitman 2005), had suffered a particularly great denial of voice by the popular front.

By the mid-1960s urban blacks who confronted desperate poverty amidst the boom had, like whites, few traditions of explicitly working-class political representation. Between 1964 and 1970 there were ghetto riots across the U.S. In the midst of this tumult various attempts at black-centred Marxism emerged, but either remained marginal (Georgakas 1998; Geschwender 1977; Kelley 2002) or embraced class blind anti-colonial liberation theories such as the theory of "internal colonialism" (Cruse 2002). Though many of the frustrations of rioting ghetto masses were class specific and yielded a new militancy, the black working class, like the white one, had little explicit class consciousness, class organization, or experience acting as a "class for itself."

When Oscar Lewis wrote about the "culture of poverty" in the 1950s he had retained some residual notion that poverty was a working-class problem, with a working-class solution: self-organization. However, by the 1960s, when Michael Harrington sat on Lyndon Johnson's anti-poverty task force and helped create programs to address the problems that had created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and sparked ghetto riots across the nation, it was the class-blind side of Lewis's work that was used. Other scholars in the Harvard Parsonian tradition, like Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, who lacked Harrington's Christian populism, turned the concept of culture of poverty into a stifling class-blind functionalism directed towards psycho-cultural resocialization projects.

As the government pursued austerity in the late 1970s, working-class welfare state entitlements increasingly gave way to the lowest level safety net designed to address the problems of "the poor." Public education was eroded in many urban areas, social security and unemployment insurance declined, public healthcare nearly disappeared and public housing deteriorated. The use value support programs that the American working class had won through class struggles in the 1930s became less a part of a working-class life and more a special provenance of "the poor," which often meant urban African Americans. Unlike many other advanced industrial nations where public support programs were used occasionally as part of a working-class life, these U.S. programs came to be specially adapted to the imagined, class-blind categories of poverty studies.

Specific class-blind crises, such as "homelessness" or the growth of the "underclass," yielded specific class-blind remedies. The "homeless" crisis produced a remark-

able range of finely tuned combinations of psycho-cultural and economic support programs for the already fallen "homeless," but no overall housing policy designed to ensure that decent housing was available and affordable. The crisis of the "underclass" produced countless educational and mentoring programs and NGOs designed to "end the cycle of poverty," in the absence of employment and unemployment policy and with no expansion of public education.

With little political motion by the U.S. working class, class-specific explanations a distant memory, and class-specific solutions to the concerns of everyday life completely absent, the problem of poverty became increasingly bleak. Poverty studies had naturalized the competitive economy and the lack of full employment and there was little vision of a viable road to the elimination of poverty, both within social science and in the broader society. Nearly all scholars had accepted that, for the foreseeable future, a certain percentage of people would live in poverty (Katz 1983; Katz 1986).

The Poverty Industry in the Neo-Liberal Age

In 1981 Thatcherite[4] neo-liberal Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as President and almost immediately broke the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike. This was the beginning of a newly intensified employers' offensive, fuelled by the world economic contraction of 1982-83. The social wage continued to shrink and the United States' division of wealth became more unequal. The lack of a class-specific discourse and class-specific organizations made it increasingly unclear what the immiserated lower sections of the working class had in common with defensive middle and upper sections.

The 1984 election was particularly revealing in this regard, as one of the key debates between Republican, Ronald Reagan and Democrat, Walter Mondale was how to implement austerity and apportion the declining social wage. Mondale argued that austerity should take the form of increased taxes on the steadily employed middle and upper sections of the working class, and Reagan argued against increased taxes and for cuts to social programs, targeting "the poor." Finding themselves pitted against "the other America" many of the steadily employed, not surprisingly, voted for Reagan. After re-election Reagan moved against the New Deal/Great Society bureaucracy.

Though the majority of people living below the poverty line were white, anti-poverty policy and the social problems of the welfare state had for a long time been specifically identified with African Americans and the problems of the inner city. The issue of race became particularly important in Reagan's attack on the welfare state bureaucracy, not so much due to the high percentage of African Americans who relied on the public social programs, but because of their historic ties to the public sector for employment.

Threatened by the "Reagan revolution," welfare bureaucrats, caseworkers, researchers, public sector unionists, anti-poverty professionals and others with a stake in the New Deal/Great Society state sector raised a number of class-blind battle standards. One of the important ones was "the homeless." In cities with powerful public sector unions and large percentages of the working class dependent on receiving or distributing public resources, homelessness became a "symbol of shame" that resonated with still entrenched popular front politics.

In New York City, where a vast public sector bureaucracy had provided European style social democratic amenities such as free higher education, community healthcare, rent control, and an extensive public transportation system, there was strong support for the homeless battle standard (Freeman 2000). David Dinkins, an explicitly "pro-homeless" mayor with longstanding ties to Michael Harrington, who had made his own contribution to the social science debate on poverty and homelessness (Dinkins and Wackstein 1986), was elected as New York's first African American mayor. However, in most of the United States this battle standard had little more than voluntary emotional appeal for workers who were asked to balance their standard of living against paying for "social programs" that did not help them. This New Deal/Great Society alliance eventually ran out of steam even in New York City where David Dinkins was replaced by law and order Republican Rudolph Guiliani after only one term.[5]

The trope offered by the Republican Party of ghetto super-predator Willie Horton, who emerged as a factor in the 1988 presidential election, and the Democratic Party homeless derelict trope helped obscure the society-wide changes in the price of labour (the ratio of use values to profits). As the American working class was pushed to work longer hours, monographs, articles and political speeches revolved around obscure and sophistic debates on the nature of the underclass and other newly imagined socio-economic groups. Who were they? Why were they poor? What did they have in common with each other and everybody else? The Democrats who talked about the homeless never proposed a housing policy, or even mentioned housing, and Republicans who promoted the image of drug-dealing scrape-out-your-mama's-gold-fillings-for-a-crack-pipe, ghetto super-predators, avoided mention of the employment market.

Conclusion

It is said that a scratch can turn into gangrene if not treated properly. The more of the wrong care that is applied, the worse the infection becomes. Similarly with social analysis, the more the wrong methodology is used, the deeper the mistakes. During the homeless crisis vast sums of money and millions of hours of labour often yielded little but deteriorating lives for my informants. The deeper my informants journeyed into the system the more useless they felt and the less they felt their real needs were being met. At base, these tragic consequences were the result of a deeply flawed method for understanding and responding to the problems that my informants confronted in their daily lives.

This flawed method is an ethnicized model for analyzing capitalist reproduction, that takes groups of people with real or imagined differences from "the mainstream" and reifies those differences into a social identity. A key trait or set of traits that the group is thought to share is identified and these traits typically become embodied in their physical selves, making them publicly recognizable as instantiations of a social problem and classifiable in a vast Linnaean social taxonomy. Each group in the taxonomy is imbued with its own history, its own culture, its own strengths and weaknesses, its own successes and failures, and its own distance from a mythic functional mainstream. This hierarchical human zoology is the measure of all of our sins and shortcomings, defines who is fully human and who is of a slightly lower order, and provides the basis for pitting one section of the working class against another, as presidential election campaigns, with their debates over "social programs," often dramatically demonstrate.

It is this American social taxonomy that provided the foundation for Michael Harrington's mechanical functionalist readings of poverty in America and created the nomenclature to describe and classify it. It is the same method that created "the homeless" and the "homeless crisis" out of the attacks on the social wage and changing patterns of accumulation during the Reagan Revolution that affected both white and blue collar working-class America. The misery was more publicly visible (and perhaps more severe) for African Americans who, as a group, often came to be bound up in the public imagination with many of the categories of poverty studies, such as underclass, inner-city, welfare mother and ghetto super-predator. However, the notion of the United States as divisible into poor and not-poor, which is the starting point for even the strongly Durkheimian scholars who look to economics rather than "faulty values" for their explanations of poverty, is part of the same ethnicized, particularist methodology that allowed for the imagination of other equally ill-defined categories of socio-economic difference within the American working class, such as the yuppie, whose antonymous counterpoint to urban problem populations provided the political metonym for the entire period.

Harrington and many subsequent poverty studies scholars, particularly those in the Durkheimian tradition, were often passionately concerned with changing the distribution of resources in society. However, their focus on "the other America," rather than the overall political-economy of American capitalism and the challenges of the American working class represents, at best, the use of "the poor" as loss leaders for progressive welfare state social policy. In its more common form, it was simply a positivist particularism that missed any social whole and blamed the pinky finger for being small, rather than identifying it as part of the morphology of the hand. Regardless of the form taken, this methodology has proven a distraction from discussions of how American capitalism uses, abuses, and divides its poorly organized working class.

My informants' contacts with social services and researchers like myself, as well as their classification by the dominant political discourse of the time, defined them as homeless. However, this description based on an albeit very important aspect of their poverty, tended to obscure the fact that their situation was the result of the same declining public health and education systems, rising housing costs, caustically "flexible" "new" labour market, and other symptoms of the rising rate of exploitation that the rest of the American working class was confronting. In a strange way, this was recognized by nearly everybody who I took on the rhetorical journey to spot the "homeless" on the streets of New York City. The failure to identify people who were actually sleeping in public was, as I have argued, a problem of policy definitions and semantics, not a failure to understand that there was a higher bar that had to be jumped over in order to survive in Reagan's America. Understanding this fact, they inevitably looked to the historically weakest section of the American working class to find "the homeless": African Americans.

In many urban areas during the 1980s homelessness became the most visible representation of the difficulty of working-class social reproduction in Reagan's America. My informants typically viewed the designation "homeless" as a race-specific ritual humiliation that was the price of social support, in much the way they saw living in physically separated public housing or presenting "other America" currency at the grocery store, in the form of food stamps. However, none of these ritual humiliations,

abuses, or instantiations of "otherness" could entirely hide the fact that they were part of an objectively definable working class that was everywhere facing the same loss of security in nearly every aspect of economic life. What hid their connection to the vastly larger section of the American working class that was facing similar concerns was the ideology of the American ruling class— promoted by the pro-capitalist Democratic Party desperate to regain the White House, the centrist trade union leadership always happy to find class blind popular front causes to keep its rank and file under control, and a revanchist anti-labour Republican White House torn between imprisonment and social work for controlling the vast urban tinderbox that would eventually explode in Los Angeles in April of 1992 and spread to cities across the United States.

The failure of the American working class to pose its own class-specific definitions, descriptions and explanations for American Thatcherism in the 1980s may have been the product of the "American exceptionalism" that has been celebrated and lamented in academic and popular literature, though many "non-exceptional" European countries seem to have had similar problems during the 1980s (Brenner 1998; Schaffner-Goldberg and Rosenthal 2002). It may have been the result of a change in the division of labour in society, as suggested by regulationists and a variety of postmodernist writers, or the harvest of a global crisis of proletarian political vision and organization, as I have suggested in the preceding pages. Regardless of the cause, such big challenges can only be addressed by broad historic changes driven by powerful social actors such as new national ideologies, new regimes of socio-political management or new political parties and a reconstitution of the world working-class movement.

Such developments are difficult to see over the historical horizon that separates the present from the future and even more difficult to influence, even when seen. However, in war and in peace and in economic sickness and health, the U.S. poverty studies industry, often composed of academics like myself, who think of themselves as Marxists and advocates for their social class, have actively participated in maintaining and nurturing a set of influential intellectual discourses and categories of difference that disappear the U.S. working class and any potential working-class resolutions. These discourses and categories are often shot through with corrosive caste/colour prejudices, illusory notions of social harmony under capitalism, and faith in the moral and ethical behaviour of enlightened elites and their capitalist employers.

However, such discourses are actually quite fragile, due to their deep contradictions, procrustean unwieldiness

and declining support from government funding agencies.[6] It is difficult to know exactly what conscious Marxist anthropologies of poverty would look like. There is no roadmap or blueprint that can substitute for conscious and cumulative discussion, debate and practice. However, as a start it is worth reiterating that providing fine tuning for even the broadest program directed at an "other America" represents a "retreat from class" and a barrier to providing a clear Marxist analysis. Following this, the use of Weberian consumption categories such as "poor" and "middle class" or "practical" categories based on emergency considerations such as housing, food, healthcare, or employment as the unit of analysis may be useful or important in a variety of scholarly, professional and policy contexts, but it tends to obscure larger conflicts involving the entire working class and the social product that it produces. These conflicts must be highlighted and examined in order to develop a thoroughly dialectical materialist history of who is doing what to whom. Finally, even in the best of times for class struggles, social movements, and other forms of "agency" and "resistance" the acceptance of the inevitability of a competitive capitalist market ultimately tends to pose social questions and provide "progressive" policy answers that serve bourgeois interests, rather than working-class ones.

None of this is to insist that even the most brutal and divisive program to expand the American capitalist welfare state should be opposed on grounds of "maximalist purity," but rather to suggest that scholars inclined towards a Marxian analysis have far more impact on Marxism and the formulation of a working-class politics than they do on the social policies of the American capitalist class. It is not so much participation in the poverty studies industry that is problematic, but rather the failure, by "those who should know better," to help pose and discuss Marxist alternatives to the competitive capitalist economy that our work so often naturalizes, even when focussed on the most grinding poverty.

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Acknowledgments

Notes

1 Robert Brenner (1977) has provided a definitive critique of the theoretical problems of the international revolution without social class approach and Ellen Meiksins Wood (1998) has provided a social movement oriented critique of such perspectives.

2 The primary response to this query has been to posit the existence of a new and ill defined period such as post-Fordism, postmodernism, postindustrialism, etc.

3 Estimating the number of members of the CPUSA remains a difficult task, due to definitions, political agendas, the tendency of the party to inflate numbers, problems with counting the youth section, and the high turnover during the turbulent 1930s. However, Fraser Ottanelli (1991) reports that in 1938 there were 75 000 members of the CPUSA, 20 000 members of the youth section, The Young Communist League, and a yearly recruitment of 30 000 members.

4 The term Thatcherite is used in recognition that Reagan's anti-working-class austerity was never systematized into a coherent and articulate ideology in the way Margaret Thatcher's version was in Great Britain.

5 One can see the seeds of the change in Dinkins's hiring of 7 000 new police and his cuts to city social services that earned him the nickname David (they'll take it from me) Dinkins.

6 An encouraging development along these lines is the recent anthology, *The New Poverty Studies* (Goode & Maskovsky, 2001). The ethnographic focus is working-class issues such as debt, migration and job loss and it prioritises "agency," "resistance," and scholarly independence. However, Goode and Maskovsky's strong grounding in Marxist theories of crisis belie the theoretical commitment that they share with their co-authors to (1) Weberian consumption categories, "poor" (p. 3) and "middle class" (p. 7); (2) an equilibrium model of capitalism built on a regulationist "Fordist compromise" (p. 4); (3) a belief that the state was not oriented "explicitly to service big capital at the expense of the workforce and the larger citizenry" before the Reagan era (p. 5); and (4) a positive assessment of Durkheimian poverty studies (p. 11). It is indicative of the residual power of poverty studies and the silence of conscious Marxist alternatives to capitalism that despite the possibilities suggested by the title the first words in the book regret "that the poor, the homeless, and the hungry have dropped off the political agenda" (Susser, 2001: vii); thus setting the intellectual focus entirely on what has been lost, rather than what may be gained.

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