

Paradigms of Poverty: A Critical Assessment of Contemporary Perspectives

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I. INTRODUCTION

For the last three decades America has struggled with the problem of poverty. The end result has been what Harrison and Bluestone (1988) have called the "great U-turn." In 1965, when Molly Orshansky first developed a poverty index for the Social Security Administration, roughly seventeen percent of Americans were living at or below the poverty line (Sawhill, 1988). Twenty years later fifteen percent were living in poverty. That drop of two percent, however, masked an even more telling statistic, for between 1960 and 1972 the number of people living in poverty actually fell from roughly twenty two percent to eleven percent. In the next twelve years that figure rose, then fell slightly, and finally stabilized at between thirteen and fifteen percent. Phillips (1990) and Greenstein and Barancick (1990) have recently documented that this recent rise and stabilization in poverty rates is in main due to a rapid, upward shift of wealth in the class structure.

What these trends mean will be hotly debated for some time to come. Neo-conservatives have thus far adopted Charles Murray's (1984) position, charging that the welfare system by destroying individual incentive is responsible for poverty's persistence. In a break with such neo-conservative dogma, Kevin Phillips in *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (1990) has tried to revive Nixonian "cloth coat populism" and thereby wrest control of Republican Party politics from Reaganite "parvenus." Much to the horror of neo-conservatives, he has introduced the specter of class conflict and class-based politics into the poverty debate. Finally, a renewed welfare agenda is beginning to take shape, as liberal social scientists increasingly focus on ways to reform welfare and extend basic social entitlements for the poor. Wilson's (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the*

Underclass, and Public Policy, David Ellwood's (1988) *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family*, Harrison and Bluestone's (1988) *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarization of America*, and Katz's (1989) *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*, exemplify this latter trend.

Given this resurgence of interest among social scientists, and the political struggle now taking shape, a critical examination of poverty theory seems in order. In an effort to contribute to this new dialogue, we have constructed a formal typology of poverty paradigms whose main purpose is to clarify the conceptual infrastructure and ideological assumptions which ground modern poverty theories. This paper reports the final results of our theoretical efforts.

Our goal is to construct a "theoretical space" that maps the meta-theoretical contours which structure current poverty debates. Given the purely formal nature of our efforts, it is not our intention to assemble an exhaustive review of the literature, nor to recount the social history of the idea of poverty as such. Our aim, instead, is to provide some insight into the formal properties of poverty theory and show how these properties themselves carry within them an implicit ideological content.

Reflecting these goals and interests, this paper is divided into three sections. In the first we present the assumptions of the formal model which was used to generate the typology of poverty paradigms. The second section outlines the typology itself. Nine separate paradigms are identified and a representative theory of each family is chosen which exemplifies a particular approach. These formal consideration then give way to more practical issues. Having delineated the theoretical space in which poverty theory ostensibly occurs, we demonstrate how such a typology could be used to critically examine and evaluate a current work in the sociology of poverty. In a section entitled "Eclectic Approaches to Poverty," we briefly analyze the theoretical infrastructure of William Julius Wilson's (1989) *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

II.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE MODEL

Three approaches to the study of poverty are current in the social sciences. First, there are those works which focus primarily on welfare reform. They deal only tangentially with the structural roots of poverty. Ellwood's (1988) *Poor Support* and, to a lesser extent, Feagin's (1975) *Subordinating the Poor* typify this approach. The second studies the perceptions which the non-poor have of the poor and their poverty. Typical of this preoccupation is Gertrude Himmelfarb's (1984) jeremiad against the

new social history, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. Written as an intellectual history of nineteenth century perspectives on poverty among England's political, intellectual, and literary elites, it traces the ostensible development of the *idea* of poverty. As a work on the idea of poverty, Himmelfarb's nominalist excursion seldom addresses the actual structural dynamics that produced early industrial poverty. The third approach consists of scientific studies that use either naturalistic or cultural-hermeneutic methods to identify the *structural causes* of poverty. In constructing this typology of poverty paradigms, this paper will focus on this third group of writings.¹

The typology itself is based on two axioms. The first concerns factors of political economy and the role they play in generating poverty. The second considers the role that class subcultures play in creating or reproducing poverty. Both axioms take the form of questions. Beginning with the first axiom, we ask whether or not a given approach locates poverty's roots in the economic domain. If the answer is "Yes," then a second question is asked: Is poverty's economic moment located in: (i) the contradictions of society's productive relations, (and, hence, the class structure which emerges from that nexus), or (ii) does it originate in the sphere of commodity circulation? Alternatively, if the answer to the first question is in the negative — that is, if a theory holds that poverty originates in a domain other than the economic, then that source is duly noted. The three alternatives are schematically represented in Fig. 1.

The same sequence of questions orders the construction of the second axiom. First, it is ascertained if a theory attributes to poverty a unique subcultural content. If the answer is "yes," a second question establishes whether or not the subculture of poverty is seen as having a "negative" or a "positive" content. In the former case, poverty's subculture would be seen as being maladaptive and "pathological," and, hence, a contributing *cause* of poverty itself. A corollary of this perspective often claims that the culture of poverty is itself a materially inferior approximation of the dominant culture. The positive response argues that poverty's subculture possesses a social logic and legitimacy that is relatively independent of the larger community for much of its content. Neither inferior or pathological, it has a validity and inner logic that can only be understood and evaluated against the demands of poverty's niche. Finally, the third response denies the existence of a relevant culture of poverty by appealing to either political economic forces, or naturalistic, reductionist accounts. The three alternatives are summarized in Fig. 2.

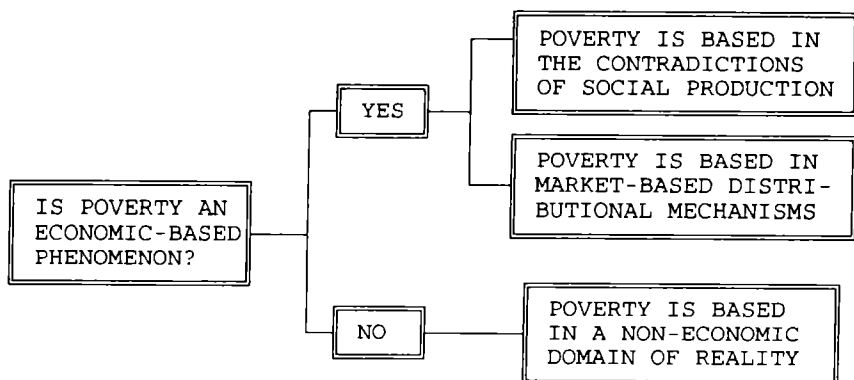


Fig. 1. The economic parameters of poverty.

III. PARADIGMS OF POVERTY

Combining the above question sets, we are able to generate a typology of nine possible families of paradigms. That typology is schematized in Fig. 3. Using this schematic to organize our discussion, we will examine each family of paradigms in the order indicated in Fig. 3.

A. The Classical Malthusian Paradigm

Cell A represents the perspective which holds (1) that poverty is grounded in the productive structures of society, and (2) that the poor are committed to a set of negative subcultural practices and beliefs. This family of perspectives, as well as those in Cells D and G, is well-suited to those accounts of poverty that blame the victim, while exonerating society or "the system."² Such an approach is epitomized by the works of Thomas Robert Malthus. His account of poverty can best be understood if we interpret his three major works as being elements of a single ideological project. They are: *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it affects The Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers* ([1798] 1960), sometimes referred to as "The First Essay"; *An Essay on the Principle of Population, or, A View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness; with an Inquiry into Our Prospects Respecting the Future Removal or Mitigation of the Evils Which it Occasions* ([1872] 1960), referred to as "The Second Essay"; and, finally

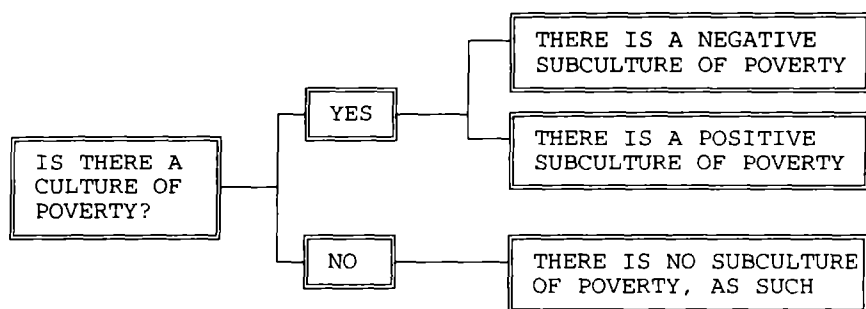


Fig. 2. The subcultural parameters of poverty.

Principles of Political Economy: Considered with A View to Their Practical Application ([1836] 1986). The primary goal of Malthus's ideological project was not only to grasp scientifically the nature of poverty, but to shape the course of public policy as well. Recognized in sociology as a demographer, Malthus is known primarily for the *First Essay*.³ He was, however, one of the great political economists of his day, and we believe that the *First Essay* can best be interpreted as a moral and theological propaedeutic to his economic thought.⁴

Like other classical economists of his day, Malthus was interested in how an increased material wealth could be secured for the greatest common good. Unlike Adam Smith, who argued that material progress and happiness was assured for all future generations, Malthus believed that progress was neither "natural" nor automatically guaranteed. Indeed, an entire generation's cultural pessimism was given full expression in Malthus's *First Essay*, and is summed up in his famous dictum that populations grow geometrically while the means of subsistence increases arithmetically. The empirical precision of this ratio has long been discounted, but the powerful moral brief which supported it still remains an inspiration to modern conservatives. Winch (1987, 32-35) has recently noted that the *First Essay's* enduring intellectual power is due largely to a masterful synthesis of Newtonian scientific canons and "theological utilitarianism." Its moral force springs from its ability to pronounce a *natural* limit on man's perfectibility, arguing that the positive checks of war, famine, plague, and misery, constantly curb nature's tendency to over-reproduce. The fact that we so seldom witness demographic catastrophes is, for Malthus, evidence of the effective role these checks play in a larger providential plan. Vice and misery are positive elements

	THERE IS A NEGATIVE SUBCULTURE OF POVERTY	THERE IS NO SUBCULTURE OF POVERTY	THERE IS A POSITIVE SUBCULTURE OF POVERTY
POVERTY IS A PRODUCTION- BASED PHENOMENON	A. MALTHUSIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY: THE PARADIGM OF PREVENTIVE CHECKS ON POPULATION	B. CLASSICAL MARXISM: INDUSTRIAL RESERVE ARMY PARADIGM OF THE CAPITALIST MODE PRODUCTION	C. CRITICAL MARXIST PARADIGM: POVERTY & ITS CULTURE AS INTEGRAL ELEMENTS OF CAPITAL'S REPRODUCTIVE APPARATUS
POVERTY IS A MARKET-BASED PHENOMENON	D. NEO-CLASSICAL ECONOMICS: MARGINAL PRODUCTIVITY OF UNSKILLED LABOR PARADIGM	E. SECULAR MALTHUSIAN PARADIGM: HISTORICIST PARADIGM OF MARGINAL PRODUCTIVITY OF LAND, LABOR AND CAPITAL	F. SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARADIGM: DISTRIBUTION OF LABOR'S TOTAL PRODUCT AS SOURCE OF POVERTY
POVERTY IS A NON-ECONOMIC PHENOMENON	G. SOCIAL DARWINIST PARADIGM: CULTURAL ETHOS & BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION PARADIGMS OF POVERTY	H. REDUCTIONIST PARADIGMS OF POVERTY: BIOLOGICAL, GEOGRAPHICAL OR PURELY DEMOGRAPHIC MODELS	I. PROGRAMMATIC OR VOLUNTARISTIC POVERTY PARADIGM

Fig. 3. Typology of poverty paradigms.

of a Divine order in that they test the mettle and virtue of men and women as they struggle against temptation and adversity.

The *First Essay*, then, is neither a treatise on population nor a mature work in political economy, but a work which combines moral philosophy and science into a powerful conservative critique of Enlightenment and utopian pretense. The *Second Essay*, by contrast, while a substantial expansion of the first, is more single-mindedly a work of political economy. Its major focus is Malthus's proposal for a new program of Poor Law reform. Malthus's program is a simple one; it assumes that poverty is either a function of ignorance or of moral perversity. Poverty is caused by men and women having larger families than they can support. Therefore, poverty's cure, in part, rests in providing a "moral" education for the ignorant poor and their children, one which teaches them the virtues of prudence and foresight.

In time, such education would eliminate in large measure the upward pressure of population on resources. Accidental circumstances, of course, could still plunge even the "rational poor" into poverty, thus creating a need for charity. But Malthus, concerned as he is about this contingency, never wants this charity coming from the state and, above all, does not want its recipients to see it as a natural right. In the future, charity would

have to come only from persons motivated by Christian concern, for only then would it contribute to the maintenance of social order. Under such a giving arrangement, the poor would be grateful to those giving aid, while the well-off would be allowed to cultivate Christian virtue.

The perverse poor would be another matter. Since an education grounded in rational argument had failed to convince them to limit their numbers, they would have no claim on society's largess. Malthus thus proposes a program directed to them which would require the state to announce that any child born after a certain date would not receive state-sponsored welfare. In order to be fair and to reward the prudence and virtue of the moral poor, this date would be set far enough in the future that the latter could anticipate and plan for the cessation of public support.

Malthus saw his proposals as being morally just and scientifically sound, for in the time between the publication of the two essays, he had come upon two ideas. The first was the law of diminishing returns. This newly-discovered law underscored the thesis of *The First Essay* that placed natural limits on technology's ability to improve man's material prospects. It thus gave new backbone to the *First Essay's* critique of those who argued that technical progress might be an effective substitute for a regimen of moral restraint.

The second idea, present, but undeveloped in the *First Essay*, pertained to man's capacity to anticipate and take steps to avert disaster. The *Second Essay* now referred to the exercise of this rational capacity as "negative checks." By exercising discretion and sexual restraint, delaying marriage, practicing abstinence prior to marriage, and rationally limiting their numbers, a people could prevent the onset of nature's positive checks. Furthermore, the poor would benefit most from these preventive measures, for in reducing their numbers, the supply of labor would fall and labor's wage would rise.

Malthus's plan immediately drew fire. The reason for the public outcry is easy to see, for it remains with us today. The central tenet of the Malthusian legacy proclaims that the poor and their immorality — not nature, and certainly not a well-managed capitalist system — are ultimately, the cause of poverty. This paradigmatic act of "blaming the victim" still evokes anger on the left, just as it has become an ideological linchpin of neo-conservative thought.

In fairness to Malthus, though, we cannot equate his approach with that to which most neo-conservatives today adhere, for the recommendations of the *Second Essay* represent only an intermediate step in his overall analysis. His final position is set forth in the *Principles of Political Economy* ([1836] 1986). In the *Principles* he details what a capitalist society might look

like once it had solved its population problem. Malthus had a well-developed sense of the contradictions and self-destructive nature of capitalist production. Yet he felt that the capitalist economy of his day contained the seeds of a reasonable order. He argued that capitalist manufacturing created periodic "gluts" whose amelioration required a manipulation of "effectual demand." He argued, moreover, that the consumption habits of the landed gentry and their nonproductive retainers were clearly a potential benefit to society. Their consumption could be used to sustain effectual demand, eliminate surplus stocks, and, hence, unemployment among the manufacturing classes.

Thus Malthus offered a future vision of social and economic justice predicated upon society solving its population problems. Having challenged the myth of progress in *The First Essay*, and having offered society a way out in *The Second Essay*, in the *Principles* he showed how, once moral and demographic equilibrium had been achieved, a commonwealth of free and reverential citizens could prosper.

B.

The Classical Marxist Paradigm

In contrast to the Malthusian paradigm which locates poverty's origins in the fixed propensities and ratios of nature, Marxian political economy gives a social and historical accounting of poverty in capitalist society. According to the classical Marxist paradigm, modern poverty is the product of an historically specific mode of production. This framework stands in sharp contrast to the Malthusian paradigm by insisting that each historical mode of production has its own unique dynamic for creating poverty. In *Capital* ([1887], 1970), Marx locates the structural sources of modern poverty in the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production and in so doing gives us his clearest vision as to the causal relations that link class, poverty, and the productive contradictions of capital.⁵ By this analysis, modern poverty is created by capital's tendency to continuously revolutionize the productivity of labor. Its logic of production not only manufactures ever greater masses of commodity wealth, but *of necessity* creates an ever-renewed pool of superfluous workers — "an industrial reserve army."

There are two components of this reserve army. The first consists of those *absolute surplus populations* that appear when traditional modes of production are displaced by more efficient, machine-based technologies and economies. Three paths of accommodation are usually open to members of an absolute surplus population: (1) they can remain in their homes and become rural paupers; (2) move to an urban area and become unskilled

or semi-skilled proletarians, or (3) risk failure and social isolation as members of a distaff *lumpenproletariat*. The second component of the reserve army is the *relative surplus population*. This group is usually produced in mature capitalist formations, as machines increasingly replicate the activity and, eventually, the cooperative organization of labor itself. The organizational logic of capital now turns workers and their machines into adversaries, as every invention that might otherwise ease labor's lot becomes a potential threat to its livelihood. Thus, while capitalist social relations enable fewer workers to produce greater commodity wealth, it also renders a segment of the work force superfluous and threatens it with poverty.

Marx is careful to state that poverty is not caused by machines and technology, though under capital's regime, both contribute to the creation of relative surplus populations. Modern poverty, instead, is a necessary by-product of the social relations of production that capital employs in allocating persons, materials, and machines in the process of commodity production and distribution. Since Marx's analysis historicizes poverty and insists on a purely sociological analysis of poverty's origins, it stands in bold contrast to Malthusian-based accounts of poverty. This difference is spelled out by Marx in *Capital*:

The labouring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus-population; and it does this to an always increasing extent. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits alone. An abstract law of population exists for plants and animals only, and only in so far as man has not interfered with them. ([1887], 1970; Vol. I, 631-632)

From the Marxist perspective, then, there is no universal law linking population increase and poverty as there is in Malthus. Instead, poverty is a structural prerequisite grounded in the sociological contradictions of an historically specific mode of production. As Harrison and Bluestone (1987) have recently documented, despite capital's evolution over the century or so since Marx wrote, its modern forms are still driven by the need for ever-cheaper labor and a dynamic that of necessity generates impoverished reserve armies of the unemployed and sub-employed.

C.

The Critical Marxist Paradigm

The third paradigm is rooted in classical Marxist political economy. It assumes that modern poverty is the product of the historically specific contradictions of capital. Taking Marxist political economy as its base line,

this critical variant of Marxist thought concentrates on the way in which the poor construct their own culture of poverty. Sensitive to the dialectical nature of such constructions, this paradigm emphasizes the survival enhancing immediacies which the culture of poverty has for everyday life, while, at the same time, acknowledging the role which such a culture plays in reproducing the overall structure of capitalist social relations. Like all cultures, the subculture of poverty has simultaneously creative, oppositional elements, as well as constraints which in the larger picture reinforce existing class relations.

Thus, Critical Marxism approaches modern poverty as if it were an organic union of an economic superfluity that is imposed from above and a set of subcultural conventions that reproduce it from below. This *reproductive paradigm of poverty* emphasizes the process of poverty's social reproduction and distinguishes between the objective, economic origins of *poverty*, and the role which the poor play in culturally reproducing poverty's everyday contours. It explores the dialectical interaction between poverty's economic base and its cultural superstructure. Moreover, it sees the reproductive actions of the poor as a *necessary* element of capital's over-all reproduction of the social status quo. Finally, critical Marxism holds that the existence of poor people and the cultural reproduction of poverty are as necessary to capital's continued health as are well regulated capital markets, a disciplined labor force, and superfluous workers.

What we are calling the reproductive paradigm was given its classic formulation by Oscar Lewis (1964, 1968). He attributed to the subculture of poverty the following traits:

1. It is historically specific to the capitalist mode of production and usually occurs wherever capitalism has destroyed a traditional community, or used imperialist mechanisms to make inroads into the self-sufficiency of traditional cultures.
2. It is not the immediate cause of poverty, but a response to poverty. The culture of poverty's various traits are the result of a creative coping on the part of the poor as they manufacture their survival in hostile circumstances.
3. It reproduces itself in each generation as families pass on their accumulated class-specific wisdom to their children.
4. It is not synonymous with economic impoverishment. One can be poor without living in a culture of poverty. Thus culturally intact, preliterate societies, though "materially disadvantaged," would not necessarily have a culture of poverty, nor would ethnically or religiously marginal peoples who, though poverty stricken, sustain a coherent cultural orientation.

5. It often gains a relatively autonomy from the economic processes which call it into existence. For this reason, economic reforms may not immediately eliminate certain cultural commitment which caretakers and reformers find so objectionable.
6. Finally, because of its relative autonomy, the culture of poverty can be modified without having the objective basis of poverty removed. In societies taken over by revolutionary or nationalistic movements, for example, many of the key traits of the culture of poverty can be altered ideologically, if not eliminated altogether.

Lewis' culture of poverty thesis obviously cannot be classed with approaches that blame the victim. Instead, the reproductive paradigm firmly fixes poverty's origins in a flawed productive mode, one which is an inveterate destroyer of communities.

D.

Neo-Classical Economics

The three paradigms thus far discussed are grounded, one way or another, in the productivist ontologies of classical political economy. As such, the sociological dimensions of poverty are readily at hand. The neo-classical approach to poverty, by contrast, is grounded in a radical paradigm shift, one which emerged during the late nineteenth century. In a radical break with classical economics, the neo-classical paradigm defines economic activity in terms of individuals and their subjective utilities, rather than classes and their interaction. Ontologically, economics is grounded in the psychological structures of subjective preference and market exchange rather than the presumed objectivity and realism of value-added, labor-based production processes.

The nascent science of sociology experienced a similar shift during this period, one which is at the very heart of what is called the classical sociological tradition. That shift was manifested in Weberian action theory (Weber, 1968, 3-75; Lukacs, 1972) and in the neo-Kantian analysis of social forms that culminated in the works of Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1978; Etzkorn, 1968). In both sociology and economics, neoclassical analysis reduces economic life, even commodity production, to market-mediated activities of buying and selling commodities.

According to this viewpoint, poverty's economic roots lie in the marginal productivity of the laborer and the social dependency that such marginality produces in everyday life (Simmel, 1978). Since labor, like any other commodity, has its value set by mechanisms of supply and demand,

those possessing skills which can enhance their productivity, *ceteris paribus*, have a competitive edge over the unskilled and uneducated. Those without education or a skill-based edge are thus more likely to fail in the competitive job search and, hence, more likely to descend into the ranks of the impoverished.

A parallel utilitarian logic is involved in evaluating the culture of the poor. Much of the problem the poor have in selling their labor, aside from its marginal productivity, resides in their chosen lifestyle and value preferences. Echoing Malthus, modern neo-classicists suggest that the culture of the poor impedes their efforts to secure economic and social autonomy. Consequently, the poor must not only be re-skilled, they must also be re-socialized in terms of the way they think, value and act. Lewis Coser (1969) has given this position its clearest sociological expression to date. He argues that poverty can only be eliminated once the poor obtain skills which will increase their productivity and labor market attractiveness. Implicit in the latter is the proposition that the poor must abandon those cultural orientations that are "dysfunctional" to occupational mobility.

Coser holds that any celebration of the cultural practices of the poor is a barrier to the elimination of poverty and existing class arrangements. On the basis of this logic, he challenges those social scientists who have in the past defended the legitimacy and strengths of lower class culture to rethink their position. He singles out Walter Miller's (1958) work defending the inner logic and autonomy of lower-class subculture, claiming that such misguided relativism works only to "keep the lower class in their place" (Coser, *op. cit.*, 264).

Coser has thus employed a functionalist argument to link a neo-classical analysis of poverty's economic origins to a negative culture of poverty thesis. This prototypical neo-classical approach to poverty doubles the process by which the victims of poverty are blamed for their own poverty. Echoing the stance of classical Malthusianism, the poor are upbraided on two counts: economically, their productivity is marginal and because of that, they cannot effectively compete on open labor markets. Culturally, as with classical Malthusianism, their way of life impedes their chances of social mobility and stable job-holding. In each case, if poverty is to be eliminated, it is the poor, not the economic system as such, that must undergo radical change.

E.

Secular Malthusianism

The fifth paradigm, like that of classical Marxism in Cell B, assumes that poverty is primarily economic in nature and has little need for a culture

of poverty concept one way or the other. Unlike the family of Marxist paradigms, however, this approach does not emphasize the exploitive nature of production, nor the mechanism of class conflict to explain the existence of poverty in a given social formation. Like the neo-classical paradigm, it appeals, instead, to the market-based mechanisms of supply and demand when discussing poverty and wealth.

Following the lead of Robert Brenner (1976), we will label this fifth paradigm "secular malthusianism." The term was originally used to refer to the orthodox historiography that has dominated medieval economic history for some four decades. According to Brenner, secular malthusians treat the tension between population pressures and subsistence as the prime mover of medieval social and economic development. They differ from classical Malthusians on two points, however. First, though they insist on the general applicability of Malthusian demographics for analyzing the developmental cycles that regulated life in the middle ages, they deny that the same natural cycles operate in modern industrial societies.⁶ Instead, secular malthusians maintain that the unparalleled productive capacity of modern society since the mid-seventeenth century preempts the possibility of the widespread demographic catastrophes that once set the developmental tempo of life in the middle ages.

Second, while the secular malthusians use population increase and positive checks as explanatory variables, they do not treat these demographic variables as unalloyed forces of historical development. Instead, in the manner of marginalist economists, they turn to variations in the marginal productivity of land, labor, and technology, and the way that these effect the supply of food and other resources to explain the ebb and flow of medieval history. The forces driving the cyclic fluctuations of poverty and prosperity in the Middle Ages are thus grounded in the relative productivity of industrial and agricultural inputs. These productive processes are, in turn, mediated by the mechanism of supply and demand as they are worked out in market-based price struggles.

The secular malthusians use Malthus's principles of population to grasp the dynamics of the medieval economy, but avoid any tendency toward crude demographic determinism by nesting their demographic analyses in a market-based, social ontology. They use prices to infer demographic shifts, and demographic shifts to estimate shifts in the value of market commodities. Brenner sums up secular malthusian analysis as being a "two-phase model" in which cycles of economic growth and accumulation alternate with cycles of retrenchment and need.

If one takes as *assumptions* first an economy's inability to make improvements in agricultural productivity, and secondly a natural tendency for population to increase on a limited supply of land, a theory of income distribution seems naturally to

follow Moreover, the model has a built in mechanism of self-correction which determines automatically its own change of direction and long term dynamic. Thus the ever greater subdivision and overcrowding of holdings and the exhaustion of resources means "over-population" which leads to malthusian checks, especially famine/starvation; this results in demographic decline or collapse and the opposite trends in income distribution from the first phase (1976; 33).

Brenner critiques this position from a Marxist perspective, claiming that secular malthusianism does not sufficiently incorporate into its market-oriented, explanatory framework the exploitative agrarian relations of the middle ages. Nor does it give proper weight to the extensive use of those class-based, extra-economic forms of political coercion which so often typified feudal relations of production. One might also question secular malthusianism's reliance on market-price data to explain cycles of wealth and poverty in a medieval social formation that (1) made extensive use of in-kind barter, and (2) had at its base in many regions an economy based on manorial insularity and self-sufficiency.

In sum, secular malthusianism combines demographic principles and neo-classical economic analysis to explain historical cycles of poverty and wealth, yet makes few assumptions about the culture of poverty. By historically punctuating the "law of diminishing returns" with periodic bursts of intense technological and organizational innovation, it represents a crucial revision of classical Malthusianism. And, finally, in a twist not seen thus far in this review of possible paradigms, by formulating its explanations of past poverty within the context of a radical historicism it can invoke Malthusian thinking in explaining past poverties while not being committed to a conservative interpretation of modern forms of poverty. In adopting this historicist stance, secular malthusianism gives itself a sophisticated means of escaping, in most instances, the trap of rigid demographic or biological determinism.

F.

The Social Democratic Paradigm

Paradigms positing a positive culture of poverty implicitly contain an ideological critique of class society and its hegemonic norms. Such critiques assume that poverty theory must sooner or later address class issues directly. This is true of several paradigms already surveyed, and is especially true of the social democratic paradigm. Like the Marxist and reproductive paradigms, it favorably contrasts the culture of the producer to that of the capitalist.

The diverse strands of early twentieth century British social democratic thought exemplify this paradigm. It assumes that poverty originates in class struggle, but places the locus of that struggle in the domain of

circulation, rather than production. The classical expression of this line of thought is found in the works of Piero Sraffa, a colleague of John Maynard Keynes at Cambridge. In a 1926 article, "The Laws of Returns Under Competitive Conditions," Sraffa provided a critique of Marshallian economics that effectively exposed the special assumptions that were required to allow the competitive model to be the sole explanation of economic organization. By severing the supply curve from its roots in marginal productivity theory, Sraffa showed that the limits on the size of the firm were not given by the law of diminishing returns.

This meant that the class struggle was no longer restricted to the productive sphere, but might henceforth be carried out in the politically mediated sphere of commodity distribution. Sraffa would extend this argument in *The Production of Commodities by Commodities* (1960). This work develops a Ricardian model of political economy which is at once at odds with both Marxist and neo-classical economics. On the one hand, it is predicated on a theory of worker exploitation, and, as such, challenges the neo-classical assumption that market transactions are free of coercion and marked by the independence of all concerned parties. On the other hand, he argues that the class struggle is rooted in distributional processes, not the antagonistic relations of production as Marxist theory would posit.

Labor's ability to collect "its fair share" of the total social product, *once it has been produced*, determines the level and extent of poverty in this paradigm. Hence, distributive justice in Sraffa's theory of capitalism does not require so much the elimination of exploitation at the point of production as it does the construction of a political apparatus that will assure the just apportioning of society's wealth. In such a scheme, poverty can be eliminated politically, without actually abandoning capitalist production.⁷

Amartya Sen is currently doing work that fits within this paradigm. Following his earlier work in welfare economics, he has written extensively about hunger and poverty. In contrast to absolute and relative definitions of poverty, he develops an "entitlement" approach to understanding these issues. He is concerned with the ability of some members of a given population to be without entitlement, i.e., legal claims on existing resources. His historical studies, for example, have indicated that "starvation . . . is a function of entitlement and not of food availability as such. Indeed, some of the worst famines have taken place with no significant decline in food availability per head." (Sen, 1981; 7)

What is paradoxical about his work, though, is the manner in which it builds upon, and modifies prior positions. He argues that "*absolute* deprivation in terms of a person's *capabilities* relates to *relative* deprivation in

terms of commodities, incomes, and resources." (Sen, 1984; 326) Personal capabilities, of course, are not distributed equally. Nor is access to the state. Sen uses the metaphor of a chain to understand the relations within a society that help to define the production and distribution of food. (Sen, 1990a). He is shrewd enough to know that markets alone do not perform these tasks. The state actions that he discusses, though, are predicated on the assumption that the state is open and manipulable for all members of the population. For Sen there is no reason to discuss class; though, there is much need to discuss access to the state. Indeed, in his latest writing, he equates the relative reduction of famines in recent years with the ability of the formerly powerless to put pressure on the state. According to Sen, like those social democrats who have gone before, the openness of modern society has helped to mitigate disaster by creating more social entitlements for the population. (Sen, 1990b). Turning to its cultural component, the social democratic paradigm morally legitimizes the right of producers to direct society and, if need be, control the lion's share of commodity wealth. This ideological justification has two parts: (1) it must deny the right of those in power to stay in power by showing that they have somehow defaulted in their moral right or ability to lead; and (2) it must identify a group that, while not presently in power, if it were allowed to assume power, would be capable of securing a just social order. In the British case, these ideological claims were filed separately, by two men whose politics more often than not clashed. One constructed a withering critique of the investor/rentier mentality, while the other shaped a bold, if sentimental, defense of the producing classes and their culture.

The critique of the rentier capitalist mentality is found in John Maynard Keynes' *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* ([1935] 1964). In addition to being a classic of macroeconomics, this work is also an analysis of class-based *mentalities*. Its technical economics is grounded in a set of social psychological assumptions, key of which is the claim that the culture and mentality of the capitalist class, especially its non-productive, investor faction, has become socially unproductive. Keynes argues that the capitalist class has evolved from a risk-taking, entrepreneurial class to a timid group of persons that seeks only to protect their accumulated wealth.

Since their capital is sorely needed to set in motion both production and employment, their cautious decision to withhold investment during times of uncertainty merely exacerbates capital's present crisis tendencies. As long as the subculture of the capitalist class encouraged risk taking in investment, the self-interest and social character of the capitalist class served society. When, however, investors adopt a more cautious social psychology, and fail to perform their social function, the state must step in

and regulate investment until such time as economic growth and full employment is restored. In such circumstances, the rentier class can no longer justify its financial power.

This profile of timidity is in sharp contrast to R. H. Tawney's powerful brief for the producing classes and their claims for economic and social justice. In *The Acquisitive Society* (1920), he draws upon arguments which are deeply rooted in Britain's past to celebrate the culture and social character of the producer. Tawney praises the lifestyle of craftsmen, yeoman farmers, self-employed petty producers, and proletarians as if they were cut from a single piece of cloth. With equal vigor he denounces the rentier class and all who gain their livelihood by means other than self-disciplined labor. Rooting his social ethic in the Lockean defense of the producer's right to control what he or she has produced, and harkening back to a golden age of English village life to substantiate his position, Tawney calls for justice under a form of socialism that would return the control of society to its producers.

Sraffa's economic constructions, when combined with the cultural reflections of Tawney and Keynes, provide the outlines of an ideal typical social democratic paradigm. Reformist in nature and committed to preserving a system based on production for profit, poverty's elimination centers around the politically mediated redistribution of consumables.

G.

The Social Darwinist Paradigm

Like the Malthusian and neo-classical approaches, this paradigm argues that chronic poverty is "self-inflicted." Loosely rooted in a Malthusianism world view, the social Darwinist paradigm differs from Malthus's in that it has assimilated elements of Spencerian naturalism and, more recently, modern "systems theory."⁸ Spencerian anthropology differs from Malthus's to such an extent that the emancipation of the poor through public education is often down-played, and Malthus's call for government intervention in order to create jobs for the poor during especially hard times is now anathema. Poverty from the social Darwinist perspective is now part of a larger process of social differentiation and social decay that guide the general processes of social evolution. The processes that produce poverty are now seen as "natural," largely autonomous, and objectively determinant forces which direct the evolution of the social organism.⁹ As such, these natural forces of development are only partially, if ever, amenable to reformist efforts. Poverty, like so many other attributes of the social organism, is produced by social mechanisms whose filtering action resemble

those of natural selection. Unfettered competition allows individuals to rise or fall to their own "natural level" of excellence or mediocrity.

Stripped of its historically specific character, poverty is both a final judgment and a purgative by which society selectively eliminates the unfit. Any attempt to alter this natural process only impairs the natural functioning of institutions. Because its meta-theory subsumes both societal structures and processes under a deterministic, natural systems rubric, we will classify it as a paradigm that traces poverty's objective origins to a fundamentally non-economic source.

Edward Banfield's work is representative of this approach. In *The Moral Basis of A Backward Society* (1958), he uses William Graham Sumner's conception of "cultural ethos" to account for the poverty of a southern Italian village that he calls "Montegrano." He asks why Montegrano cannot take advantage of modernity's material rewards and answers that the Montegranses are poor because they adhere to a "cultural ethos" which he calls "amoral familism."¹⁰ Amoral familism views every public office as an opportunity for increasing the value and power of a kin group's estate at the expense of the community as a whole. Hence every office holder is constrained in his efforts to mobilize community-wide cooperation since he is suspected of putting family interests above the community's welfare.

While the concept "amoral familism" disappears from Banfield's later work on inner city poverty, the cultural culpability of the poor remains. In fact, the social Darwinist roots of his efforts are clearly visible in *The Unheavenly City* (1968) where he uses modern systems theory to understand the structure and function of poverty and urban development. Analyzing urban poverty as if it were a natural by-product of evolutionary processes, Banfield draws upon the legacy of Malthus and Spencer to identify two types of urban poverty—one normal, the other, pathological. The first is "normal-class" poverty, a product of the systemic forces that regulate the social and ecological development of urban areas. He argues that the natural evolution of the urban system normally eliminates this first type of poverty. Normal-class poverty is thus self-correcting; it can be eliminated or significantly ameliorated by either processes of personal maturation, social mobility from one class to another, or cultural assimilation. Education and training can also help eliminate poverty among the normal-class poor. In a passage reminiscent of Malthus he writes that:

"The effect of the new knowledge . . . has been to increase the value of people's time both absolutely and relative to that of physical capital, and, in particular, to put a premium on the skill and 'quality attributes' of individuals. This [increase in value] has caused—and is causing—millions of parents to have fewer children both in order that they (the parents) may acquire and use the skills and attributes

so much in demand and in order to give their children better opportunities to acquire them also." (Banfield, 1974; 239).

The second urban poverty is "lower-class" poverty, and is rooted in the intractable habits and attributes of the lower-class poor.

"... The poverty problem in its normal-class form consists of people (especially the aged, the physically handicapped and mothers with dependent children) whose only need in order to live decently is money; in its lower class form it consists of people who would live in squalor and misery even if their incomes were doubled or tripled. The same is true with other problems—slum housing, schools, crime, rioting; each is really two quite different problems.

The lower-class forms of all problems are at bottom a single problem: the existence of an outlook or style of life which is radically present-oriented and which therefore attaches no value to work, sacrifice, self-improvement, or service to family, friends or community. Social workers, teachers and law enforcement officials—all those whom Gans calls the "caretakers"—cannot achieve their goals because they can neither change nor circumvent this cultural obstacle." (1968; 211)

What separates the two poverties is that lower-class culture is not subject to natural correctives, nor does it provide a toe-hold for moralistic reformers to launch a crusade to lessen the moral distance between these "disreputable poor" and their caretakers. Accordingly, those in "lower-class poverty" must be left to shift for themselves, and reformers must be periodically chastened to be more realistic in their expectations.

H. Reductionist Paradigms

The last two families of paradigms are the least sociological. They locate poverty in either a non-social stratum of human behavior or emphasize a voluntaristic form of poverty. Thus reductionist readings of poverty deny the economic and cultural antecedents of poverty and place poverty's source in either the geographical, meteorological, racial, or biogenetic aspects of the human condition. While not currently in vogue in the academy, racist and sexist theories of differential achievement and failure abound in the history of the human sciences. While one is more likely to find bio-genetic explanations being used to explain the poverty of entire races or social collectivities, the social sciences are still littered periodically with reified explanations of the differential social distributions of talent and achievement by appeals to innatist or individualistic explanations of achievement.¹¹ Given the present politics of the academy, most current accounts choose safer ground, relying heavily on the psychology of individual differences or some form of biological determinism to support their arguments.

Willing to explain both the inevitability of racial- and class-based advantages in terms of individual differences, those employing this paradigm must eventually appeal to an alleged set of natural limits which blunt all

efforts to achieve a viable egalitarian order. The ideological dimension of such accounts has recently been dissected by Levins, Kamin, and Rose (1984). In a critical survey of biological determinist theories of distributive justice, intelligence, gender, and mental illness, the authors conclude that most claims for the "heredibility" of talent and intelligence cannot be scientifically substantiated. In an attempt to affirm the justness of the existing social order, reductionism invariably employs a one-dimensionalizing logic that either discounts the systemic complexity of interacting elements or ignores the historicity of the evidence being marshalled. Such reifications would usually disqualify such accounts from serious scientific consideration, but as the authors demonstrate, there are a surprising number of instances in which ideology triumphs and even the best of scientists honor the claims of this otherwise flawed approach.

I.

Programmatic Poverty

This final paradigm refers to a voluntary poverty, one which regards poverty as either a virtue in itself or as a propadeutic to virtue. Made paradigmatic by St. Francis, it may now be found among those who today labor in the Christian "base communities" of Latin America. The term "programmatic poverty" is taken from Irving Howe's work *The World of Our Fathers* (1976). It refers to the poverty which bourgeois Bohemians of the last century actively assumed in order to purge themselves of the materialist ambitions which clouded their aesthetic sensibilities and intellectual visions. Howe notes that this willful adoption of poverty occurs more among the children of the well-off than it does among proletarian intellectuals who are often scarred by a lifetime of chronic need.

This concept has been usefully employed by Russell Jacoby in his *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) in examining the decline of a radical public intelligentsia in America. Like the reductionist paradigms, this type of poverty is of marginal interest to social scientists investigating the structural roots of poverty. As Jacoby has shown, however, it is an important concept for those among us who study the sociology of culture.

IV.

ECLECTIC APPROACHES TO POVERTY

Some researchers employ a mix of paradigms in their studies of poverty. The intellectual style of the researcher, the historical specificity of a given poverty, say, or the complex political forces surrounding a particular piece of research often result in a theoretical eclecticism. In such situations

our typology can be used not only to identify the actual mix of paradigms being employed, but can aid in locating contradictions or other disconformities in the way the theoretical mix has been assembled.

In order to illustrate how the typology might be used in such cases, let us consider William Julius Wilson's recent work on the black, urban underclass, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). Wilson's work is thematically divided into four sections. He begins by locating his work both sociologically and ideologically. Tracing the history of three decades of poverty research, he surveys the theoretical options that have been pursued (and often abandoned) during this period. In recounting that history, he pauses occasionally to situate his own efforts. With rare and remarkable candor he discusses the personal politics of white and black social scientists doing race relations research, and the policy options that often flow from the predicaments of doing such research.

This introduction is followed by a series of chapters that empirically describe the plight of the black, urban poor. The data assembled is used, among other things, to refute the research findings and neoconservative policy recommendations that dominated the 1980s (Charles Murray's work is a special focus of critical treatment) on black inner city poverty, the economic and social transformation of ghetto economies, illegitimacy among unmarried women and the causes of collapse of many lower class, black families. Wilson then develops his own "social isolation" thesis to explain the singular plight of poor, inner-city blacks. He concludes his work with a chapter entitled "The Hidden Agenda" in which he proposes a series of broadly-stated policy recommendations for the amelioration of black, urban poverty. At the heart of these recommendations is a political strategy designed to eliminate ghetto poverty and its social isolation through a series of universal welfare programs that would entitle all Americans, rich and poor alike, to an "equality of life chances". Through such a universalistic welfare agenda he hopes to correct not only the economic ills of the truly disadvantaged, but correct as well the social ills that flow from the increasing social isolation of pariah groups such as the black, urban underclass.

Wilson's work has been praised as well as criticized from several political positions. We are not interested, however, in the varied receptions of his work, as such. Instead, we want to examine the theoretical basis of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Let us begin by noting that Wilson uses a "negative method" to develop the theoretical foundations of his work. Instead of deducing his perspective from a bounded body of propositions, he gradually develops his position discursively by critically considering and discarding several motifs which have guided past poverty research. Threading his way between several established paradigms, he gradually situates

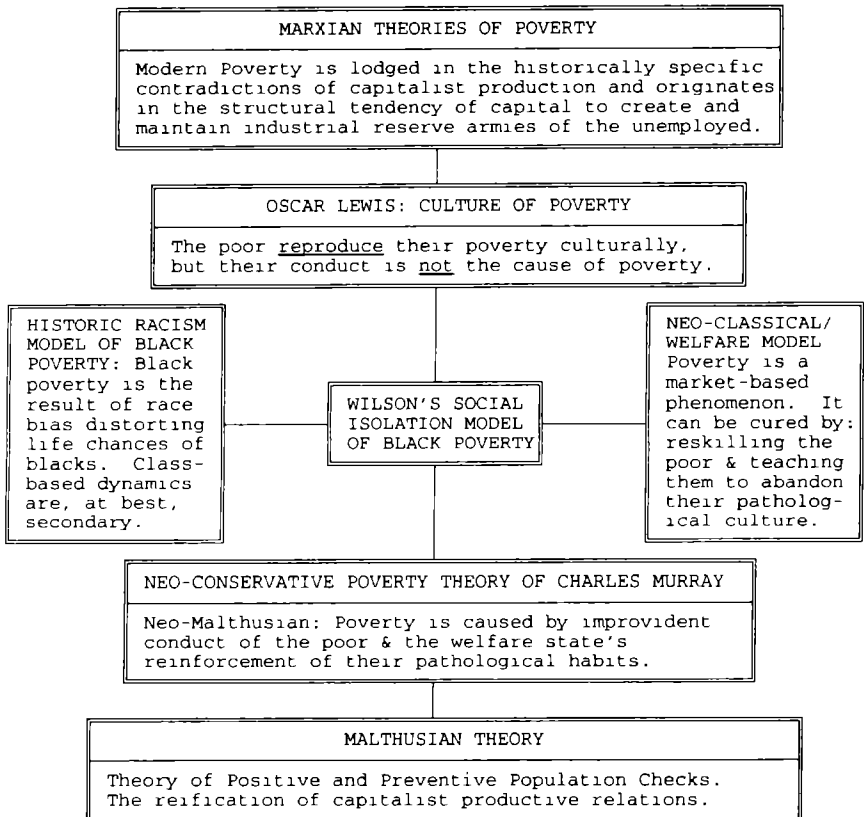


Fig. 4. Schematic of poverty model used in W. J. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

his work at the confluence of four paradigms. As we show in Fig. 4, these four paradigms can be conceptualized as lying along two polar axes, with Wilson's approach being located at the origin.

In developing his position, Wilson first takes up the issue of race and class, and their relative contribution to causing black poverty. Elaborating upon a theme which he first broached in his *The Declining Significance of Race* (1980) (for which he drew heavy fire from many black activists and cultural radicals), he distinguishes between *historic racism* and *contemporary racism*. He argues that whatever impact slavery and discrimination once played in historically shaping the black condition, they have now diminished and given way to a new set of social dynamics. Modern black poverty is no longer solely the product of talented and hard-working blacks being

barred from equal opportunity by racial bias. Instead, black poverty is increasingly rooted in the dynamics of class. To this "historic racism" interpretation of black poverty and its origins, Wilson counter-poses the ideas of Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

The latter's thinking on problems of black poverty and the crisis of the black family have been both misunderstood and misrepresented. His approach, in fact, can best be seen as being a synthesis of what we have called in this paper the Neo-classical and Social Democratic Paradigms. In seeking a solution to black, urban poverty and the collapse of the black family, Moynihan has concentrated on the occupational erosion of the black male's life chances and the impact which it has had on his domestic role as father and provider. In keeping with the neoclassical Paradigm, Moynihan's solution has consistently emphasized the low productivity of underclass labor and the need to increase its marginal productivity. Also consistent with that paradigm, he has emphasized the negative aspects of the culture of poverty, insisting that the "pathological" aspects of ghetto culture be confronted and dealt with. He has tempered the more austere elements of this neoclassical paradigm with elements of the social democratic paradigm which emphasize the interventionist role of the welfare state in legislatively obtaining social justice for the lower orders.

In framing his research, Wilson maneuvers between those who downplay the dynamics of class and argue that black poverty can only be dealt with by eliminating racial discrimination, and those, such as Moynihan, who seek to combat black poverty by reforming the economic lives and cultural commitments of the poor. At the same time he borrows freely from both and assumes a mediating position between them. Thus, Wilson maintains that black poverty is rooted more in the dynamics of class than in the structures of bias. At the same time, he wants to claim through his social isolation thesis that the singularity of black, urban poverty is such that more than general economic reform will be needed to deal with it.

On the second axis, Wilson situates himself between a Critical Marxist Paradigm, and a neo-conservative account of poverty. He simultaneously critiques and rejects Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty model and Charles Murray's Neo-Malthusian explanations. In denying Murray's bizarre claims that black poverty and family collapse are by and large caused by welfare institutions, Wilson is able to shift the locus of debate from welfare payments to the political economy of the inner city itself. Using such a gambit, he also disposes of the dubious thesis that welfare programs encourage family breakup by making the state a

surrogate father, and concentrates instead on the causes of the economic plight of black males.

At the other pole of this axis is Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty thesis. As with the other three paradigmatic positions, Wilson sets about to critique this perspective. Unlike the others, however, Wilson's treatment is, at best, inconsistent. He begins well enough, using Oscar Lewis's own words to correctly depict the culture of poverty as "both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society." (Wilson, 1987; 13). He then rejects Lewis's critical Marxist approach to poverty, noting that it has been taken over by neo-conservatives such as Auletta (1982) and Banfield (1974), and used to blame the poor for their own plight. In Wilson's words:

"Although Lewis was careful to point out that the basic structural changes in society may alter some of the cultural characteristics of the poor, conservative students of inner-city poverty who have built on his thesis have focused almost exclusively on the interconnection between cultural traditions, family history, and individual character. For example, they have argued that a ghetto family that has had a history of welfare dependency will tend to bear children that lack ambition, a work ethic, and a sense of self-reliance. Some even suggest that ghetto underclass individuals have to be culturally rehabilitated before they can advance in society." (Wilson 1987; 13)

Later, in discussing the social isolation thesis, Wilson attempts to distance his approach from that of Lewis's, and, in doing so, again conflates Lewis's culture of poverty with the conservative reading of that concept:

"... what distinguishes the two concepts is that although they both emphasize the association between the emergence of certain cultural traits and the structure of social constraints and opportunities, *culture of poverty*, unlike *social isolation*, places strong emphasis on the autonomous character of the culture traits once they come into existence. In other words, these traits assume a "life of their own" and continue to influence behavior even if opportunities for social mobility improve. . . . Although Lewis later modified his position by placing more weight on external societal forces than on self-perpetuating cultural traits to explain the behavior of the poor, conservative social scientists have embellished the idea that poverty is a product of "deeply ingrained habits" that are unlikely to change following improvements in external conditions." (Wilson, 1987; 137)

While this is not the place to launch a defense of Lewis's position, it is obvious that Wilson has misconstrued the nature of Lewis's culture of poverty idea, needlessly conflated his work with that of conservatives, and, consequently, held Lewis's work accountable for its misappropriation by others. By interpreting the culture of poverty concept as he has, however, Wilson is able to: (1) borrow certain elements of Lewis's model and use them to deal with the singularity of ghetto poverty while distancing his work from a family of theories that locates poverty in the productive life of capitalism, and, hence, advocates a restructuring of class relations as a necessary condition for the elimination of all poverty, black

and white. Indeed, only after effectively dispatching the culture of poverty as an effective model for understanding poverty can the social isolation thesis serve as a valid grounding for his reformist agenda, one that presumes a more or less homogeneous set of values for all classes, races and ethnic fractions in American society. Thus, when analyzed from the perspective of the poverty typology Wilson's intellectual and political agendas are placed in high relief, as are the interpretive flaws upon which his research is theoretically based. At one level, the theoretical and political strength of his work lies in its synthetic and ameliorative nature. At the same time, if it has a weakness, it lies in the way it has balanced contradictory premises and paradigms.

V.

CONCLUSION AND CRITIQUE

The poverty typology has shown itself to be robust in its ability to (1) formally categorize existing paradigms and (2) systematically map a theoretical space that lends order to a diverse set of theories. Formally, then, it has demonstrated its heuristic value in ordering conceptually a diverse and often confusing area of social thought. The typology also seems practically promising. In the preceding section we demonstrated how the typology might be used to critically evaluate a working model of poverty. Finally, an unanticipated result of our analysis suggests that in addition to their scientific values, each paradigm carries with it a strong ideological propensity.

That is, the contours of the paradigms when taken as a whole conform to a pattern that is typical of ideologies in general. With few exceptions, poverty debates in the public sphere are carried out in a "hegemonically safe" ideological space that defines poverty in terms of temporarily impaired market mechanisms and ignores perspectives which would require large structural shifts in wealth and power. That hegemonically bounded space, in turn, is surrounded by a buffer zone of "radical" or "dangerous ideas" that locate poverty's roots in the class-based relations of production.

In normal times, when crisis does not threaten the system, a dynamic equilibrium symbiotically regulates relations between the legitimated core and its protean periphery. That is, hegemonically approved debate proceeds apace, working within the limits of a fixed circle of paradigms that define poverty as a distributive problem and seek its cure in the domain of improving the individual life chances of the "deserving poor." At the same time, the core paradigms are expanded by mining theories which have been relegated to the shadows. By so doing the core is able

to revise, and refurbish their market-based models of poverty, with more radical insights.

During periods of social and economic crisis, by contrast, the boundaries separating the two are weakened to such an extent that radical paradigms successfully breach the hegemonic lines that officially define the parameters of reasoned debate. Entering the problem-solving dialogue they usually reorient discussion but seldom supplant old orthodoxies. With the passing of the crisis, certain "radical" conceptions become assimilated into a reconstituted arena of hegemonic discourse. As the boundaries separating core and periphery are re-established along new dimensions, peripheral doctrines and their fractious adherents are relegated to the shadowy periphery.

As we have said this has been the pattern for more than a century. The paradigms generated in this paper do not differ greatly from those that dominated debates during the last century. Both conceptually and ideologically, the explanations of poverty discussed here have their strict counterparts in the *fin de siècle* theories of a century ago, a period now commonly referred to as the classical era of sociology and political economy. Then, as now, the most thorough-going and effective critiques of poverty in capitalist society have come from the pen of those Marxists who historicized poverty and located its roots in the class-based contradictions of production itself. Concomitantly, the ideologically most effective defenses of the status quo were those of Malthus and the social Darwinians who reified the foundations of capitalist relations. Treating historically specific and evolving social relations as though they were part of an obdurate natural order which could be altered only slowly and respectfully, such theories were natural vehicles for protecting the interests of dominant elements. And, finally, then, as now, an ameliorative centrist sociology and political economy held the mediating middle ground between the two extremes.

ENDNOTES

1. The classification scheme outlined above is, of course, overly exclusionary. In reality, most works on poverty, while emphasizing one theme or another, ultimately touch on all three. Feagin's (1975) *Subordinating the Poor*, for example, deals in varying degree with welfare and its reform, elite and mass definitions of the poor and their situation, and the political economy of poverty itself. Ultimately, however, his work is concerned chiefly with the restructuring of public welfare.
2. The most open expression of this ideological tendency in recent years is to be found in Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984). Typical of the thinking of the Reagan years, this conservative tract holds the welfare system responsible for poverty's continued existence in that welfare is held to destroy individual initiative.
3. This position which sees Malthus primarily as a demographer is best represented by William Petersen (1979) in his well-researched and polemical work, *Malthus*. Others, such

as Patricia James (1979) and Donald Winch (1987) are more inclined to treat Malthus as primarily a political economist. While inclined to side with the latter two writers, we believe such labeling is of limited value. The imposition of current academic categories and divisions of labor upon past modes of organizing intellectual inquiry is always a risky business. In Malthus's day political economy embraced what we today call the social sciences, as well as philosophy, and various of the humanities. Petersen (1979; 3-20, 58-99), despite his claim, in fact goes to great pains to make such a point as he situates Malthus and his work relative to the intellectual and social revolutions which were sweeping England and Europe in Malthus's day.

4. This is not to say the *First Essay* does not stand on its own as a great work. It is not an "early work," in the sense of being an immature effort whose major virtue lies in its being a harbinger of greater things to come. Rather, it communicates the viewpoint of an already mature mind that is deep into the political economic and other scientific debates of his time. Moreover, there is a great deal in *The First Essay* which anticipates the future direction of Malthus's intellectual development.
5. Marx was aware of the cultural component of the problem. He regarded, however, the subjective or cultural component of capitalism as relatively minor in its overall capacity to generate the kind of poverty which he analyzed in *Capital*.
6. This historicist trait is most clearly seen in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *The Peasants of Languedoc* (1974; 309-311) in which he argues that the cyclic nature of poverty and prosperity which typified the middle ages was significantly altered by the end of the sixteenth century. He argues that after 1750 the productive forces on the land and in the city "took off" to such an extent that Malthus' theory of impoverishment "... would be too late ..." (*ibid.*) to explain the poverty which would thereafter develop in industrial settings.
7. Adam Przeworski (1977, 1980, 1980a) in a trio of articles has explored the basic economic and political contradictions of social democracy. In doing so he has re-emphasized not only the internal contradictions faced by all those who attempt to reform politically an economic system based on class exploitation, he captures much of the pathos of those who devote their life to such efforts.
8. The affinity between Spencerian evolutionary thought and later forms of systems theory, such as that of the late Talcott Parsons, has been convincingly argued by Jonathan Turner (1985) in his *Herbert Spencer: A Renewed Appreciation*.
9. Turner (*op. cit.*) firmly underscores the idea that Spencerian evolutionary processes are predicated on a dialectical balance of growth and decay.
10. The term "cultural ethos" and its meaning, as Banfield (1958;10) tells us, is patterned after William Graham Sumner's "ethos" as it appeared in *Folkways*.
11. Stephen J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981) provides a critical survey of such theories as they relate to the idea of racial determinants of intelligence, and the bearing of both on alleged social competency. See also the early chapters of Marvin Harris' *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (1968) for a discussion of the role which culture theory played in preparing the ground for similar reified accounts.

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