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Definitions of the Underclass: A Critical Analysis

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The *underclass* concept has never been consistently defined despite three decades of sporadic use in the United States. Up to now, it appears the term has been used primarily as a rhetorical device to command attention or enhance interest in the situation under study. Rarely has it been used to describe a reasonably defined group, in keeping with prior usage of the term. However, as the term has begun to be widely utilized by both scholars and journalists in recent years, efforts at generating a consensually based and empirically grounded definition, reflecting currently popular usage, have begun to succeed. The central argument of this chapter is that the emerging definition, a behaviorally oriented one, is fundamentally flawed both methodologically and substantively. The attachment of behavioral criteria to the definition, it is argued here, necessarily sustains the ill-advised view that many of the poor are impoverished by their own hand. It is further argued that, if we are to codify a definition, one based on deprivation rather than behavior, this definition is far more appropriate for a number of reasons. Such a definition would be more in line with earlier uses of the term *underclass* as well as with both scholarly and lay notions of "class." More important, such a definition would encompass most of the

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population captured by the emerging behavioral model but would be easier to operationalize with clarity. In addition, a deprivational definition is more readily related to appropriate polity considerations. The major strength of a behavioral model of the underclass is its more closely resembling the image currently implanted in the public consciousness. In our view, however, adopting definitions on that basis must be resisted.

ORIGINS

Although proponents of a behavioral definition of the underclass contend that most observers have agreed with their basic premise, a careful review of the literature undermines that interpretation. The underclass concept was first used in this country by Gunnar Myrdal (1962, 1964), the distinguished Swedish scholar who wrote extensively on American social problems. Although he noted its virtual absence in American discourse, he nevertheless believed this term best captured the social phenomenon he wished to describe. While he neglected to give the term a rigorously precise definition, for him it encompassed those families and individuals in the lowest economic stratum of American society. These were the long-term poor, those experiencing little or no advancement in spite of the postwar economic growth that provided rapid mobility for so many others.

For Myrdal, the problem stemmed primarily from structural unemployment, particularly that resulting from the increasing levels of skill or education necessary for most employment. This tended to skew unemployment toward the least educated and skilled workers, those already likely to be poor. But those individuals were far less able to increase their skill or educational capacities because of their already precarious economic health and related handicaps. Moreover, argued Myrdal, the major governmental redistributive mechanisms of the day often totally or largely bypassed the poor while more generously benefiting the more advantaged (farm subsidies, urban renewal, unemployment benefits, and the like). The minority poor were even more constrained than others under these circumstances because of the additional burden of discrimination they faced, argued the author. In short, for Myrdal, the formation of an American underclass had little to do with behavioral orientations but much to do with material deprivation and a lack of reasonably accessible avenues to mobility for those at the very bottom.

A second use of the concept during the early 1960s was that by Tom Kahn (1964) of the League for Industrial Democracy. Although he cited Myrdal's work, Kahn's use of the concept differed somewhat. He applied it strictly to workers (or potential workers) and argued that the proportion of the unemployed who were long-term unemployed was growing and that these long-term unemployed were slipping into an "under-class" by virtue of the seeming permanence

of their unemployment. He held that this group “is composed mainly of Negroes, males 65 and over, young men, farm laborers, those in unskilled occupations and those with less than 12 years of schooling” (Kahn 1964, p. 19). Like Myrdal, Kahn emphasized changes in the mode of production, the shift in demand for labor from low- to high-skilled workers, and the increasing use of automation as causes of rising long-term unemployment.

Joan Gordon (1965), in an obscure study of welfare families in New York City, actually used the term in the subtitle of her mid-1960s report. Like many subsequent works, however, her report provided little in the way of a definition for the term and, in fact, made scant use of the term beyond its prominent display in the subtitle. Acknowledging Myrdal’s earlier use of the term, Gordon suggested it encompassed the unemployed, the casually employed, and the economically dependent, thereby including the “multi problem” families she studied (1965, p. 9). Interestingly, she found her sample of black, inner-city (Harlem), APDC mothers to largely subscribe to such mainstream values as the importance of education, an orientation to work, setting higher goals for their children, and so on (1965, pp. 132, 134). This suggests that her use of the term was not meant to convey the idea that these families were normatively deficient.

A fairly extensive search through the 1960s literature yields precious few references to the underclass despite the great outpouring of poverty-related work at the time. Primarily used in passing, the term was seldom defined or linked to behavioral deficiencies. Michael Harrington (1969), for example, in the *second* edition of his classic work, *The Other America*, refers in passing to the potential for a “hereditary underclass” to emerge as a result of the predictably severe labor market crowding he foresaw for the coming decade (Harrington 1969, p. xxiv). A more prominent use of the term is found in an editorial by Lee Rainwater (1969) in the February 1969 edition of *Transaction*. The editorial addresses the theme of that issue, “The American Underclass,” which appears prominently on the cover page. In the editorial, Rainwater makes a number of arguments emphasizing the societal causes of the underclass and the political mobilization necessary for effecting solutions, but refrains from defining the term. Nonetheless, from his remarks, it is clear that he refers to the poorest segments of society whom he saw as falling further behind the *average* American’s standard of living in the decades since World War II. Interestingly, although the underclass was the theme for that particular issue, the term appears in not a single one of the six full-length articles in that edition, suggesting its use was still rather limited at that time. Additional passing references to the underclass during the period denoted the group as the socially immobile, least well-off segments of the population, but without the imputation of behavioral deficiencies (Billingsley 1968; Cans 1968; Miller and Roby 1968).

In the early 1970s, some four references to “the underclass” could be found in the literature (Liebermann 1973; “The Underclass” 1974). In three of these cases, the concept referred strictly to the economic dimensions of poverty. First

Lee Rainwater's important (1970) publication *Behind Ghetto Walls* used the term, as did his earlier work, to denote those among the poor experiencing little mobility. Second, a study by Liebermann (1973) reported a comparison of poor whites and native Americans in a predominantly rural area of central Michigan. It defined the underclass, in a footnote, as the "lower lower class" or the unemployed, part-time employed, and low-paid employed. The next of these, a short article in *Time* ("The Underclass" 1974) accompanying a large cover story on the black middle class, simply made reference to blacks under the poverty line with respect to their brief discussion of the underclass.

Only one of the early 1970s publications located for this essay utilized the term *underclass* to denote problem families or individuals (Moore et al. 1973). Appearing in *The Public Interest*, the article focuses on the devastation of a Chicago neighborhood largely from the perspective of housing. In the process, the article makes occasional rambling and disjointed references to problem elements among the poor, labeling them a "destructive" or "dangerous underclass" that is prone to, among other things, "incessant drifting." This latter characteristic is apparently the greatest barrier to rehabilitating the group, according to the authors (1973, p. 57). Perhaps because its main focus was elsewhere, the article does not provide any kind of systematic discussion denoting which elements among the poor constitute "the underclass," other than to blame failed welfare policies, along with poverty, joblessness, and other ineffectual social policies and institutions, for the emergence of the group. In any case, based on the paucity of references to this work by virtually all recent studies on the underclass, it would appear to have had little influence on any of the subsequent research on the underclass.¹

Thus, up to the mid-1970s, while few references to the underclass could be found in the literature, when they appeared, they made reference to the poor generally, the persistently poor, or the poorest of those groups, almost without exception. In only one case did a published work employ residential, ethnic, racial, or behavioral criteria with respect to its definition of the underclass, and it appears to have had little influence on subsequent work in the field whether implied or explicit. It was mainly after the mid-1970s that such criteria began to be utilized.

Usage of the underclass concept to refer to groups suffering from more than a lack of money emerged in full force in the late 1970s. A *Time* magazine cover story in August 1977, probably stimulated by the arson and looting that hit several New York ghettos in July of that year, was titled "The American Underclass" (Russell 1977). Gone was the carefully crafted explanation for the phenomenon of Myrdal and Kahn, replaced by paragraph after paragraph of descriptive prose on the minority poor of large-city ghettos. All 11 accompanying photographs featured ghetto blacks or Hispanics, 10 of which were meant to capture intense deprivation or alienation among these groups. The article held that most members of the underclass were big-city blacks, particularly in the

North, although it noted that some whites and Hispanics were also among the group.

Although *Time's* conceptualization of the underclass, like those cited earlier, was only vaguely defined, several key points were reasonably clear. For *Time*, the underclass was only a subset of the poor, specifically the long-term poor, consistent with earlier work. Hut, for *Time*, the underclass was explicitly, or at least overwhelmingly, urban, though the reasons for this were not specified. In addition, despite several vague references to underclass characteristics such as proneness to crime and violence, weak family structures, and deviant values, the article refrained from incorporating those elements into a definition. Indeed, it laid some emphasis on the lack of reasonably accessible jobs as a key component of the problem, noting, in particular, the movement of manufacturing jobs away from the inner cities of the North. Nevertheless, the *image* of the underclass emphasized in this work was one of a group resignedly crime and welfare prone as well as one holding values at odds with those of the mainstream. This marked a sharp turn away from earlier renditions of the phenomenon (including *Time's* own of two years earlier).

Time's use of the term in association with problem elements of the poor was accompanied by at least one additional important work, an unpublished manuscript titled "How Big Is the American Underclass?" (Levy 1977). Both of these works suggest some association of the *underclass* term with *behavioral characteristics* of the poor, although neither cites any relevant literature on this, and each fails to offer any coherent reason for the attribution. The *Time* article merely implies the connection by numerous references to the dysfunctional behavioral or attitudinal characteristics of segments of their underclass. Levy (1977, p. 30) simply states at one point, "For most people the term 'underclass' says more about behavior than it does about income."²

Yet, in spite of the rather limited extent to which these works sought to establish a tradition, their combined influence seems to constitute the basic foundation for the emerging behavioral definition. The *Time* article, as a cover piece, was highly visual and widely circulated. Appearing on the heels of the widely reported looting spree during New York's blackout, the only major outbreak during the 1970s, it surely provided lasting and frightening first impressions of the concept for much of the public. The piece by Levy, on the other hand, while never published and thereby only of limited circulation when first written, nonetheless became an important historical document and continues to be widely cited by students of poverty. This is because Levy's paper was among the first to produce national estimates of the size of the nation's persistently poor population. Levy reported these estimates using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) data, a longitudinal study, which was then just reaching a mature enough stage for such analysis. Thereafter, use of the *underclass* term increased briskly. Those utilizing a behavioral definition almost

inevitably cited Levy's work, but, following the tradition of the *Time* piece, focused on the urban poor.

Increased use of the *underclass* terminology after 1977 included scholarly works (e.g., Wilson 1978, 1980; Norton 1979; Glasgow 1980; Kusmer 1980; Swinton and Burbridge 1981; Cottingham 1982; Lodge and Glass 1982), government-sponsored reports (President's Commission 1980; Salinas 1980; Committee on National Urban Policy 1982), and journalistic accounts (Auletta 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1982; Treadwell and Shaw 1981; Brotman 1982). Generally speaking, the scholarly accounts tended to vary the most with respect to what population groups were denoted by the underclass concept. Their usage of the term ranged from denoting simply those under the poverty line (Wilson 1978) to the vagabonds and tramps of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kusmer 1980). For most of them, the term emphasized poverty rather than behavior and was used mainly, it appears, for its attention-getting value. Government-sponsored studies, on the other hand, dwelled upon the urban poor and advanced the term more cautiously, noting the lack of a precise definition for it. Journalistic accounts also varied on how the term was used but tended toward the notion that the underclass suffered from more than a lack of income. One such work, that by Auletta (1981), formulated a behavioral definition that became widely circulated and accepted, setting the standard for most subsequent work, as show below.

Among the more influential uses of the underclass concept was that in William Wilson's (1978) *The Declining Significance of Race*, a path-breaking but controversial work. In his first edition, Wilson (1978, p. 1) used the concept to refer simply to those "hit the very bottom of the social class ladder," suggesting in a later footnote that this population could be approximated by those under the federal poverty line. However, in the supplemental chapter included in the second edition, largely a response to critics, Wilson states (1980, p. 157):

The underclass concept embodies a reality which is not captured in the more general designation of "lower class." For example, in underclass families, unlike other families in the black community, the head of the household is, almost invariably, a woman. The distinctive makeup of the underclass is also reflected in the very large number of the adult males with no fixed address --who live mainly on the streets, roaming from one place of shelter to another.

Thus, while we're left with no significant change in definition, we are treated to a more disturbing *image* (female-headed families, unattached street-corner men, and so on). This not only helped firmly establish the term, it also facilitated associating the underclass image primarily with certain segments of the black poor, however unintendedly.

Another influential book, *The Black Underclass* (Glasgow 1980), appeared at the turn of the decade. Glasgow's use of the term was, by far, the most thoughtful up to that time in that he provided a reasonably elaborate explanation of the term that entailed few ambiguities. For Glasgow, the *underclass* term

denoted the persistently and intergenerationally poor, and such persons could be found in many places and be of any racial or ethnic group. It was their lack of mobility that set (hem apart from other poor. Moreover, Glasgow was careful to point out (1980, pp. 8-9) that

the term Underclass does not connote moral or ethical unworthiness, nor does it have any other pejorative meaning; it simply describes a relatively new population in industrial society. It is not necessarily culturally deprived, lacking in aspirations, or unmotivated to achieve. Many of the long-term poor, those who have been employed for most of their productive lives but who have never moved from the level of bare subsistence living, are essentially part of the underclass.

Thus Glasgow's definition, like earlier ones, stressed persistent poverty as the criterion distinguishing the underclass from others in poverty, along with advancing structural *or* societal sources for the phenomenon. Yet, his work, like Wilson's, could easily be misconstrued to imply that the underclass was largely limited to behaviorally deficient inner-city blacks, especially males engaged in various illicit activities, because Glasgow's study was limited to young inner-city black men, many of whom led such unconventional lives.

Among the less influential works utilizing the *underclass* term in the late 1970s to early 1980s, those by Norton (1979), the President's Commission (1980), Salinas (1980), and Cottingham (1982) also failed to tie their use of the term to dysfunctional behavior. The Committee on Urban Policy (1982) in their chapter on the underclass also stopped short of defining the underclass in such a manner. Rather, they approach the idea, along with related ones, as a hypothesis requiring more study. Kusmer (1980), in a dissertation, uses the term to denote the tramps and vagrants of an era preceding the Depression. Only Swinton and Burbridge (1981) suggest that the underclass is generally conceptualized as a group whose behavior contributes to its poverty. However, these authors appear to confuse the underclass concept with that of the "Culture of Poverty," implying that the two are related. Moreover, they are in fact strongly critical of the concept, referring to it as "the underclass theory of racial inequality" (Swinton and Burbridge 1981, p. 1) and concluding that it is empirically flawed. In spite of this, the view that the underclass label largely applied to the behaviorally handicapped gained in popularity. In part, this could have been facilitated by the ease with which such widely read works as those by Wilson (1980) and Glasgow (1980) were subject to misinterpretation. A more substantial boost, however, was undoubtedly provided by the various journalistic accounts that maintained the idea (Auletta 1981a, 1981b, 1981c; Brotman 1982).

The final and perhaps most influential of the early 1980s writers on the underclass was journalist Ken Auletta. Auletta first reported on the underclass in a series of widely read *New Yorker* (Auletta 1981a, 1981b, 1981c) articles that were followed by a full-length, critically acclaimed book, within a single year (Auletta 1982). Auletta traversed much literature and conducted numerous

interviews in his attempt to nail down an understanding of what causes and defines the underclass. But, as he reported early on, "to attempt to discuss the origins of the underclass is to run smack into a ferocious political and ideological debate" (1981a, p. 91). His ability to nail down a precise definition also proved elusive. However, he ultimately concluded that most observers of the underclass believed that the group suffered from *behavioral deficiencies*, along with their poverty, and these were the distinguishing characteristics that separated this group from the rest of the poor.

Auletta's work almost certainly had the most significant impact on how the term would be used. Few subsequent works on the topic appeared without acknowledging him. But his suggestion that "most students" of the underclass believed the group suffered from more than poverty is debatable. Indeed, just four months before Auletta's first article appeared, a team of journalists for the *Los Angeles Times*, also working on a comprehensive story on the underclass, arrived at a different conclusion. Their research, which included interviews with Wilson and Glasgow, among others, led them to conclude that *slaying below the poverty level* for any of a number of reasons was the essential criterion for "underclass" membership (Treadwell and Shaw 1981, p. 10). Nevertheless, after 1982, Auletta's suggestions would often be invoked to justify linking the term to behavioral deficiencies (e.g., Nathan 1983; Carson 1985, 1986; Ricketts and Sawhill 1986, 1988).

AN EMERGING DEFINITION

By 1983, the underclass designation had become well established. The Population Association of America, for example, held a session on the underclass at its annual meeting in the spring of that year, which featured, among others, a paper coauthored by Glasgow (Glasgow and Reid 1983). This would become a regular feature at subsequent meetings (as it has for such other scholarly groups as the American Sociological Association and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management). In addition, a symposium on the underclass, edited by Wilson (1983), appeared in the journal *Society* that year.

Despite the increased frequency of use, the underclass concept continued to be used differently by different writers. The papers in the *Society* piece, for example, continued the tradition of employing the term to denote various segments of the poor without regard to strict definitional criteria (e.g., Kasarda 1983; Whitman 1983; Wilson 1983). Other works suggested that persistent poverty, a measurable construct, would more appropriately define the underclass (Aponte 1980; Ruggles and Martin 1986), while some have used the term to denote concentrated urban poverty (Danziger and Gottschalk 1987; Wilson 1987). A number of observers wrote strongly worded critiques of the ongoing use of the term in general (Gilliam 1981; Sherraden 1984; Beverly and Stanback

1986; Murks 1987), while still others embraced a behavioral definition (Nathan 1983, 1987; Carson 1985; Chicago Tribune Staff 1986; Lemann 1986; Ricketts and Sawhill 1986, 1988). In the case of one of the more influential scholars, William Wilson, usage of the *underclass* term has evolved from denoting a general economic condition to a more elaborate situation that incorporates poverty concentration along with other features.

In his most recent work on the topic (Wilson 1989), Wilson has suggested using the criteria of weak attachment to the labor force in conjunction with residence in a “social environment” that reinforces the weak attachment as the most appropriate way to conceptualize “the underclass.” He acknowledges the work of one of his colleagues (Van Kaitsma 1989) with respect to the formulation and elaboration of such a definition. In previous works, however, Wilson has used (he term differently (Wilson 1985, 1987) and without attaching strictly bounded definitional criteria to its use.³ Hence, Wilson’s work has been cited approvingly, in at least one case, by scholars espousing a behavioral definition of the underclass (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988) even though Wilson has been critical of this work (Wilson 1988).

However, by the 1980s, a number of observers had already begun lamenting the widespread, but inconsistent, use of the term (Muzzio 1983; Kornblum 1984; Sherraden 1984; Carson 1985). The dilemma is best captured by a passage in Muzzio (1983, p. 10, as cited in Carson 1985):

It may be appropriate to ask how much the study of the underclass concept has matured. The evidence is not very encouraging. The core concept – the underclass itself – has resisted definition, for no analyst has been impressive enough to impose his definition on the literature. ... This means that writers on the subject cannot even always agree on what to write about. It also guarantees confusion and misunderstanding in the treatment of all subsequent questions—description, causality, social consequences, policy prescriptions – and thus has enormous practical as well as theoretical implications.

Efforts soon appeared that sought to move the field toward a consensual definition by distilling previous research, developing and operationalizing a definition, and subjecting the latter to empirically grounded analyses (Carson 1985; Ricketts and Sawhill 1986, 1988; Reischauer 1987; Ricketts and Mincy 1988). These efforts received a major boost in an important roundtable discussion by numerous scholars held in Washington, D.C., on March 5, 1987 (McFate 1987). Sponsored and hosted by the Joint Center for Political Studies (JCPS), a well-respected, black-oriented think tank and advocacy group, the meeting was called for the express purpose of achieving a definitional consensus on the underclass concept for research purposes.⁴ While there were a number of research papers distributed to the participants as background material, the centerpiece of the meeting was a paper by Ricketts and Sawhill (1986). This

work, subsequently published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988), established the first empirically based, behaviorally oriented definition of the underclass. After much deliberation on the merits of the paper relative to competing interpretations of the concept, the panel emerged having, by virtue of majority opinion, endorsed a definition that differs only marginally from that of Ricketts and Sawhill.⁵ Their work will, therefore, serve as the major object of this critique.

CRITIQUE OF RICKETTS AND SAWHILL

Ricketts and Sawhill (1986, 1988) determined, from their reading of the literature, that the underclass concept was meant to capture “the coincidence of a number of social ills including poverty, joblessness, crime, welfare dependence, fatherless families, and low levels of education or work related skills” (1988, p. 316). They further contend that previous works attempting to estimate the size of the underclass have tended to treat the underclass as a subset of the poor on the basis of the *duration of their poverty or on the basis of their residence* (e.g., areas of high poverty concentration). Such efforts, according to the authors, do not capture the population of concern to us because (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988, p. 318)

while the poor and the underclass may be overlapping populations, it is unlikely that they are identical or that one is a simple subset of the other. The fact that some members of the underclass engage in illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, suggest that not all members of the underclass are poor. Similarly, many poor people –one thinks particularly of the working poor and of the many persistently poor people who are elderly or disabled –are not usually considered members of the underclass.

Therefore, they set out to capture or measure the *real* underclass, those individuals who *engage in behaviors* “at variance with those of mainstream America (such as joblessness, welfare dependency, unwed parenting, criminal or uncivil behavior, and dropping out of high school)” (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988, p. 317), with particular concern for behavior “likely to inhibit social mobility, to impose costs on the rest of society, or to influence children growing up in an environment where such behaviors are commonplace” (1988, p. 319). In addition, they sought to identify *areas* where such behavior is “commonplace” because such places are likely to be areas where such conduct may be (become) normative. They are also areas that may justify the used *targeted* aid formulas.

Due to the constraints of the available public use data, the authors were able to produce more findings with respect to the second goal, identifying “underclass areas,” than with the first, identifying members of the underclass. Indeed, for reasons not fully apparent, their definition of underclass membership hinges

on first establishing the so-called underclass areas. The underclass areas, in turn, came to be defined, using 1980 census figures, as census tracts with relatively high proportions (one standard deviation above the mean on all indicators) of the following (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988, p. 321):

- (1) high school dropouts (16- to 19-year-olds)
- (2) prime age males not working regularly
- (3) households receiving public assistance (proxy for women not married/not working)
- (4) households with children headed by women (proxy for early childbearing, potential for dependency, and fatherless rearing)

A member of the underclass was then defined as “someone in an underclass area who engages in various socially costly behaviors” (1988, p. 321) such as those that constitute (or can lead to) the indicators.⁶

On the basis of these constructs, the authors were able to ascertain the following: about 2.5 million persons lived in the 880 census tracts that constituted the underclass areas, or about 1 % of the U.S. population. The tracts were overwhelmingly urban and were disproportionately located in the old industrial towns of the Northeast. The authors also found that, while there was a great deal of overlap between the “extreme poverty areas” (that is, those areas found by the census to contain more than 40% of the population in poverty) and their “underclass areas,” the relationship was not perfect. Whereas 61% of the underclass areas were to be found in extreme poverty areas, only 28% of extreme poverty areas could be characterized as underclass areas. The authors go on to estimate, on the basis of statistical proxies, that about one-half million of the residents of these areas constitute the underclass. A more detailed methodological critique of Ricketts and Sawhill has recently been provided by Hughes (1988) and will only be touched on in passing here. Among other things, however, Hughes finds that one criterion of “underclass” membership used by these authors – that of dropping out of high school – is likely to be misspecified. This is because when Hughes looked at changes over time (1970-80) in the incidence of the four indicators of underclass behavior within the census tracts of the eight cities he studied, he found that, while most such behavioral indicators increased over that period, the prevalence of dropping out declined. The possible significance of this point to the arguments made here is subsequently shown.

A more fundamental question for us is just what is it that we are measuring? The authors claim to be measuring “behavior” rather than “poverty,” repeatedly reminding the reader that the underclass and the poor are *not* one and the same and that neither is a mere subset of the other. Yet they end up zeroing in on areas that are overwhelmingly impoverished: 61 % of their underclass areas are in the census-defined extreme poverty areas –an even higher proportion if one con-

siders the standard poverty areas (those with at least 20% of the population in poverty). Moreover, they fail to show (or to argue) that any significant portion of their underclass is *nonpoor*. After all, these are persons with little or no employment and many are on public assistance, not to mention their high probability of living in a poverty area. Thus, for all intents and purposes, what they have essentially done is key in on a *subset* of the poor, particularly those living in areas of poverty concentration. Many of the impoverished in these areas are likely to be the long-term poor as well as in the underclass. And, while some of the "underclass" in these areas may in fact command relatively handsome incomes illicitly, there is little to suggest that any more than a small fraction of them are so fortunate. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that such individuals were nonpoor prior to entering the underground economy.

Another important issue concerns the problem of the dropout indicator. In Ricketts and Sawhill's own analysis, this variable stood out in an important way for our purposes. In the course of the authors' investigation of whether the "underclass areas" were similar to those tracts the census has designated as extreme poverty areas, they found that the prevalence of the *three other* indicators, (female headship, households on assistance; marginal male employment), in terms of their mean values across the two types of areas, were nearly identical. For example, the proportion of families headed by women was 60% in the underclass areas and 59% in the extreme poverty areas. The proportion of households receiving assistance in the areas were, respectively, 34% and 33%; those for marginal employment among men: 56% and 57%. However, the respective proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds who were out of school without diplomas was 36% in underclass areas and 19% in the extreme poverty tracts. Indeed, the similarities and the outlying discrepancy are not lost on the authors, who note:

As shown in Table 2, the incidence of various social problems, with the exception of high school dropouts, in underclass areas is not significantly different from their incidence in areas of extreme poverty.... This suggests that extreme poverty areas can reasonably be used as a proxy for concentrations of social problems. (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988, p. 322)

However, they go on to argue that [the underclass areas are still distinct from poverty areas because they do not overlap any more than earlier noted. Because they do not present a replication of their findings without the dropout indicator, we do not know how much greater an overlap would obtain in its absence.

However, if, following Hughes (1988), the dropout variable were severed from the analysis, the extent to which the revised underclass areas overlap with the extreme poverty areas is likely to increase greatly. Moreover, there are reasons other than those raised by Hughes (though possibly related) for consid-

ering the dropout indicators as an unsatisfactory proxy for underclass behavior. For one thing, many who drop out return or obtain equivalent degrees. But more important is the fact that the *saliency* of dropping out to both the individual and society hinges strongly on external conditions that are likely to vary across situations. For example, under conditions where lucrative unskilled employment is available, such as unionized bricklaying, and where dropouts move directly into such positions, the consequences of the reduction in schooling are minimally significant. A better proxy for dropouts that could more reasonably be related to social distress would be one that captured youths who were out of school, out of work, and lacked a diploma.

Following this, one must question whether the distinction between the underclass members and others in comparable situations is truly meaningful. For example, what is so special about the poor who reside in such areas and can be characterized as deviant that distinguishes them from their nondeviant *neighbors* in poverty, such that the former make up a separate “class” of persons? And what distinguishes them so importantly from other poor and nonpoor who also “deviate” but reside in “less deviant” areas? By the authors’ definition, you can be in the underclass if you are characterized by one of the four “behaviors” (*statuses* might be a better term) in the typology and *reside* in an *underclass* area, but not if you are simultaneously characterized by several of the indicators of the deviance (an unwed mother who dropped out of high school, does not work, and receives public assistance) but reside in a less deviant, neighboring impoverished area.

A related question concerns the spouses, dependent children, and other cohabiting relatives of the underclass who are not characterized by any deviant behavior. Are they not also members of the underclass, or are we to accept the notion that related family members fully *sharing* residential facilities and economic resources can occupy a different social *class* from that occupied by a family head? And what of underclass “turnover”? As the authors note, they have no data on the relative “flows” of people into and out of their underclass. But can the distinctiveness of underclass membership really hold under conditions of high turnover? Does a working, married mother join the underclass immediately upon entering widowhood –and vice versa upon remarriage? Of course not, but the problem really isn’t the methodological issue of whether sizing up the underclass cross-sectionally fails to capture an important component of its makeup over time. Rather, it is whether the status distinctions underlying underclass membership can remain meaningful in the face of potentially brisk turnover.

Nevertheless, singling out *areas* in which certain indicators of undesirable behavior are unusually high may well be justified under certain conditions. This could hold, for example, if there was reason to believe that concurrently high levels of particular behaviors in common areas entailed synergistic effects.

Indeed, the authors hypothesize just such a connection with regard to their underclass areas: the likelihood that high levels of deviance in an area may undermine normative socialization, particularly for the young. However, it is important to point out that this more reasonable argument is based on differences between *places*, not differences between *people*. As such, it would be far more appropriate to label such places “environmentally disadvantaged areas” or “zones of environmental distress” or even the less flattering “pockets of deviance,” rather than underclass areas. Why tie the properties of a *place* to a *class* of people who can hardly be identified, even on the basis of their allegedly deficient behavior?

A final problem with the behavioral definition undermines even the area-level concept so long as it is tied to the concept of deviance. This concerns the essence of what is meant by deviant behavior. Much of what the authors operationalize as deviant behavior –including what they are trying to capture, not just what they are forced to use as proxies –may be far from what ought to be reasonably viewed that way. While able-bodied men eschewing available work might reasonably be deemed behaviorally deviant, those ready, willing, and able to work who *cannot find* work are deviant only in a highly artificial, statistical sense. Widows heading families and abandoned wives on welfare, as well, can hardly be deemed behaviorally deficient simply because of their current situations. Indeed, aside from the dropping out variable, the indicators corralled by the authors, as noted by Hughes (1988), are more suggestive of involuntary hardship than they are of willful deviant behavior, though both may prevail in the identified areas. This renders tying the spatial properties to behavior as problematic as tying them to an *underclass*.

In summary, we have argued that the attempt by Ricketts and Sawhill to quantify an “underclass” is flawed for several reasons. First, they cannot justify distinguishing a “class” of people based upon their behavior, within certain areas, from others who behave similarly elsewhere or from those with whom they reside. They further cannot justify designating the behavior they measure as unambiguously deviant, though much of it may be so. While the *areas* they measure may indeed constitute places of particular social distress, these problems are as easily related to the impoverishment that characterizes the areas as to the indices of deviance that underlie their definition. Finally, even if these areas are uniquely demarcated by their high levels of deviance, the implicated environmental properties do not arise from the unique characteristics of a given set of people. Thus labeling such places as *underclass* areas is intellectually inappropriate. However, the more fundamental issues and the broader implications of the definitional debate are more directly addressed in the next and final section, where we advance an alternative perspective.

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The word *underclass* is almost certainly among the most effective, attention-commanding terms in social science discourse. It is not surprising that it has often been used to designate various subgroups in the population without regard to conceptual clarity or conceptual consistency, though usually with reference to groups at the margin of society. As the term has recently captured the attention of policymakers, media, and the public, social scientists have been asked to codify a definition for research purposes. If the scholarly community is to attach the scientific seal of approval to the label, we argue, the underlying concept ought to be reasonably concrete and scientifically meritorious. We have argued that a definition linked to behavioral attributes falls far short of these necessities; we contend here that the more measurable and empirically validated concept of persistent poverty best meets these prerequisites. Along with this, it encompasses the major portion of the population designated as the underclass by those advocating behavioral definition. Finally, in this last section, we address the fundamental tension underlying the definitional debate on the underclass.

In place of the emerging behavioral definition, we suggest that the population in persistent poverty best exemplifies the underclass concept. We showed earlier that the term was first used to describe such a group. It would consist of that subset of the population that is impoverished year in and year out and that thereby constitutes the lowest stratum of the American class structure. This group can be quantified via existing data sets and constitutes a relatively concrete “class” of people. *Class* in American parlance has variously been defined to refer, in broad terms, to the various economic groupings of our population. In the more classical, usually Marxian, discourse, it is determined by one’s relations to the means of production or, more simply, one’s relative control over societal resources. Hence, it strongly determines and demarcates levels of living. A second, more popular or lay understanding of class, which is closer to the Weberian perspective (see Wilson 1978), stresses earnings capacities and levels of living—the standard “upper-class,” “lower-class,” “middle-class” typology. Such usages have never utilized behavior as a demarcating criteria. Rather, economic class membership has often been analyzed to predict and explain social behavior.

In addition to more resembling a class, the persistently poor, as was earlier shown, are likely to include those citizens in need of policy attention, who reside in Ricketts and Sawhill’s “areas of multiple social ills.” This group, however, is more readily quantified using well-established research techniques, such as the poverty index and a time dimension, which do not hinge on nebulous behavioral criteria. Such a population would include many that the behavioral school would reject, such as the elderly dependent and the impoverished disabled, along with

the working poor, who remained impoverished for prolonged periods. Beyond their equally low standards of living, inclusion of these groups makes sense because full-time workers unable to rise above the barest levels of subsistence are surely as important an object of research and policy as the sporadically or never employed, even if the former are less likely to “hustle” on the side. In addition, low-wage employment and joblessness are two sides of the same coin. The elderly, infirm, and otherwise non-able-bodied persistently poor, on the other hand, are just as *dependent* on governmental goodwill as the despised AFDC families, though the policy prescriptions for the former (more generous assistance) may differ from those for the latter (jobs *and* child care). Though such groups may constitute different segments of the underclass, they are still, by most definitions, part of the same social or economic *class*.

With regard to targeting policy, aiming directly at the poor—individually or in concentrations—makes more sense than shooting for “areas of social ills” to the extent that the latter are not characterized by impoverishment, for important reasons. This is because the behavioral aberrations depicted by Ricketts and Sawhill are not always indications of need for policy intervention. As we earlier argued, dropping out of high school may be of little concern for policy if it is followed by employment prospects. Likewise, families led by women are not *necessarily* an object of public concern. It is the *poverty* often associated with these indicators that gives them their salience as an object of public policy and creates the risk factor of dependency and crime. Thus, whenever an older female celebrity desiring motherhood but unable to locate an acceptable spouse has a child out of wedlock it causes so little concern. In such a case, there is little to fear about the likelihood of dependency, delinquency, and so on. Likewise, the jobless living comfortably on early retirement pensions, intrafamily transfers, and so forth, even if seeking work, pose far less of a problem than the destitute, homeless, or otherwise desperate unemployed, precisely because of the material deprivation experienced by the latter and *its* implications for their potential behavior.

In the final analysis, however, the debate between the economic and the behavioral definitions of the underclass boil down to arguments about the causal linkages between structure, poverty, and behavior. On the one hand, there are those that see self-defeating attitudes and behavior—as in the long-discredited “culture of poverty” thesis—as the primary cause of poverty. On the other, there are those that argue that we must look to the structure of opportunities for the explanation of poverty and the often accompanying pathologies. A behavioral definition of the underclass inherently allies itself with the individual-as-cause thesis, no matter how strongly proponents may claim agnosticism. This is because the perspective seeks out and identifies as a “class” a subset of the poor who are admitted therein precisely on the basis of their acknowledged (by definition) self-defeating, dysfunctional behaviors—in effect, a class of the poor in poverty by their own hand.

Such a viewpoint woefully misdirects our attention from the vast structural problems giving rise to poverty more generally to the individualistic attributes of the most problem-ridden segments of the poor. In this framework, the object of scholarship is no longer the source of the poverty. Rather, the inquiry is directed toward the causes of the behavior. The source of the poverty is known. The source of the poverty is the *individual*; and there is a whole class of *them*. Because they are more dangerous (crime) and costly (welfare) than the non-aberrant poor, they are worthy of, and accorded, research and policy priority. And because their problem is behavior and not poverty, the solutions can be sought in rehabilitative strategies rather than in the reform of opportunity structures or in the redistribution of resources.

Indeed, as Harris (1982) insightfully suggests, a research agenda too narrowly focused on the individual can lead to excessive rumination on such questions as why some make it and others do not, as it did Auletta (1982), the person most responsible for the rise of the behaviorally based underclass thesis. But in the face of the thousands upon thousands of failures generated by the system, concluding, as Auletta did, that the problem is partly systemic and partly individualistic can be likened to what Harris termed (1982, p. 88)

a streak of prurient yahooism such as one might find in Roman spectators defending the sport of throwing people to lions. Every once in a while *someone* manages to avoid getting eaten. Ergo, the reason that people get eaten is partly that the lion is hungry and partly that the victims don't try hard enough. (Emphasis added)

The one redeeming feature of the behavior-based definition of the underclass is its closer approximation to the image of the group held by the public at large, thanks to the often misguided but widely circulated work of some journalists (e.g., Auletta 1982; Lemann 1986). Reflecting the concerns entailed by these beliefs, scholars like Christopher Jencks have contended:

If you don't believe pathological behavior is really a problem worth worrying about, the correct position to take is to stop worrying about the underclass and go back to talking about poverty, which is a perfectly feasible position to take. But it's a tactical error to import poverty back in under the rubric of the underclass, (cited in McFate 1987, p. 11)

But one could just as forcefully maintain that if you want to worry about pathological behavior – a perfectly feasible position to take – then stop worrying about the underclass and go back to studying deviance, criminology, and so forth.

In fact, taking a broad perspective on the problems of poverty and/or the underclass, as we suggest, should in no way impinge on scholarly attention to such problems as dependency and crime. A broader perspective can accommo-

date hypotheses on the right (Murray 1984) as well as the left (Wilson 1987). Insights derived thereby have generated numerous hypotheses about poverty and the resulting problems associated with the underclass rubric such as joblessness, the rise in families led by women among the poor, and even street crime. For example, Sampson (1987) has recently established a link between violent crime among blacks and the rise in female-headed families, which indicates that these are strongly associated with rising joblessness. The recent rise in welfare dependency in the inner cities of the largest metropolises, in turn, have been shown to be highly associated with deindustrialization (Wacquant & Wilson 1989b).

It is probably true that the image of "the underclass" held by the public is as unflattering as the behavioral definition. But, as Wilson (1988) has recently pointed out, the American public, in sharp contrast to its counterpart in industrialized Europe, has consistently clung to the belief that the poor are impoverished by their own hand. Following this, should we modify the definition of poverty to include an element of self-infliction, such as redefining the poor as the "indolent indigent"? If social scientists put forth half the effort expended on individualistic theorizing about poverty toward more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, half-baked conceptualizations like the "deviant underclass" would be far more difficult to sustain.

NOTES

1. Not a single study of the underclass reviewed here cites Moore et al.

2. In a recent personal communication, Levy suggested that, while he could not recall precisely why he used "underclass" in the title of his work or why he felt the term symbolized the problem poor for many, he offered some suggestions. His own use of the term, he believed, was for its exclamatory or attention-getting value. He also suggested it has probably been picked up to refer to the inner-city minority poor because of the heightened concern over the rising crime and riots of the 1960s along with the widely noted welfare explosion of the late 1960s and early 1970s, all of which were thought to be largely a product of big-city poor minorities.

3. Wilson has, at times, relied upon descriptive prose to delineate his conception of the underclass (e.g., Wilson 1985a, 1985b, 1987), referring to the urban underclass at one point, as "that heterogeneous grouping of inner city families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system. Included in this population are persons who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or have dropped out of the labor force altogether; who are long-term public assistance recipients; and who are engaged in street criminal activity and other forms of aberrant behavior" (Wilson 1985a, p. 133). One unintended consequence of using this kind of a definition has been the ease with which readers can interpret the definition in ways inconsistent with that apparently intended by the author (see Ricketts and Sawhill 1988). More recently, Wilson has sought to incorporate the notion of *poverty concentration* (Wilson 1987) as a key element in the formation of an underclass. As of now, however, Wilson has strongly endorsed disattachment to the labor force as the major characteristic of the underclass, as articulated by his colleague Van Haitsma (1989).

4. In attendance at the meeting, as shown in McFate (1987, p. 11), were the following scholars: William J. Wilson and Robert Aponte, University of Chicago; Sheldon Danziger, Institute for Research on Poverty; Christopher Jencks, Northwestern University; Isabel Sawhill, Erol Ricketts, and Michael Fix, the Urban Institute; Sara McLanahan, University of Wisconsin; Robert Reischauer, Brookings Institution; Mark Hughes and Jennifer Hochschild, Princeton University; Peter Gottschalk, Boston College; Harry Holzer, Michigan State University; Mary Cocoran, University of Michigan; James Gibson, the Rockefeller Foundation; Joan Maxwell, the Greater Washington Research Center; Angela Blackwell, Public Advocates, Inc.; Milton Morris, Katherine McFate, Margaret Simms, and Emmel Carson, JCPS.

5. It should be noted that, while the majority of the participants agreed with the outcome, the resolutions were hardly binding. In addition, no "policy paper" by the center or any of the individual participants has appeared attempting to proclaim or codify the definition. Moreover, at least two (aside from myself) of the participants have written papers criticizing the Ricketts-Sawhill formulation (Hughes 1988; Wilson 1988).

6. Presumably, the lack of reasonably usable data on such additional "deviant" activities as drug use (abuse) or criminal acts prevents their incorporation into these behavioral operationalizations.

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