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# The Poor as Pawns: The New “Deserving Poor” & the Old\*

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*We mock the idea of the “deserving poor,” which distinguished certain of the poor from all their immoral fellow sufferers who really merited poverty, Halper writes. Now the poor are seen as deserving because they suffer from a poverty not of their own, but of society’s, making. The poor ought to attack the existing social system which oppresses them, the intellectuals argue, so the more aggressive segments of the poor are seen as most deserving. Why do parts of the Establishment support the anti-Establishment “deserving” (aggressive) poor, Halper asks; and do today’s social critics know more concerning the poor than an earlier generation which justified poverty?*

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## I.

If nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come, perhaps nothing is as feeble as one whose time has gone. At best quaint, it more likely seems simply ridiculous, and from the vantage of Now we wonder how our predecessors could have been so naive. For it is really their naivete that strikes us as inexcusable and odd. They were not bad people, our forebears, but merely ignorant.

Few of their ideas strike us as more obsolete than that of the “deserving poor.” The very term conjures up Dickensian images, faded and out of

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date. The “deserving poor” was largely a negative description, referring to those who were not lazy and shiftless, but rather hard-working or, if unemployed, hopelessly infirm. Certainly, they were not poor because they rejected the virtues of hard work or the sanctity of private property. These sorts of persons were simply despised. Paupers, in the words of Robert Hunter, a sociologist and social worker writing at the turn of the century,

did not wish to alter their way of living. . . . However, malarious and poisonous and undrained. they loved their valley of idleness and quiet; they hated the hill upon which they were constrained to toil; they shrank from its disappointments, its bruises, its weariness and bitterness and they were more contented than any other class I have happened to know.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the deserving poor were thought to have accepted the dominant business values, remaining poor through no real fault of their own.

What these people were “deserving” of was some sort of assistance, whether from government or private charity. Not too much, of course, for this would jeopardize “incentive”: the poor’s incentive to rise above their station and the working class’ incentive to keep their jobs and not go on the dole. “If no body did Want no body would work,” as the eighteenth-century wit, Bernard Mandeville observed, “but the greatest Hardships are look’d upon as solid Pleasures, when they keep a Man from Starving.”<sup>2</sup> Or as William Graham Sumner wryly put it when bemoaning the creeping humanitarianism of his age:

Poverty is the best policy. If you get wealth, you will have to support other people; if you do not get wealth, it will be the duty of other people to support you.<sup>3</sup>

One had to be eternally vigilant against the vice of excessive generosity. Thus, the New York State Board of Charities took note in its annual report for 1900 “Men of great literary achievements and profound political research have insisted that distress and poverty multiply in proportion to the funds created to relieve them, and that the establishment of any poor rates is not only unnecessary, but hurtful.”<sup>4</sup> And yet during this period of

1. Robert Hunter, *Poverty* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1904), pp. 321–22.

2. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924 [1714]), p. 287.

3. William Graham Sumner, “On a New Philosophy: That Poverty Is the Best Policy,” in *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York: Harper, 1920 [1883]), p. 24.

4. *Thirty-fourth Annual Report of the New York State Board of Charities for the Year 1900, in Poverty in the Affluent Society*, ed. Hanna H. Meissner (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 6.

industrialization, it must in fairness be pointed out, assistance was in fact enlarged. Public services expanded in fits of stops and starts, and charity became a status symbol for those who could afford it. For the urban party bosses, it became simply as essential as bait to a fisherman.<sup>5</sup>

From our elevated perch built on dozens of reforms that have accreted over the decades like layers of geological sediment, the past seems barbarous. We object, for one thing, to the degrading Calvinistic presumption of immorality which those with money attached to being poor. "Intemperance," the New York State Board of Charities stated drily, "has produced more than two-thirds of all the permanent pauperism in the state and more than one-half of the occasional pauperism."<sup>6</sup> Such a remark is bound to offend the modern reader, who has rechristened the drinking problem "alcoholism" and discussed methods of treating the illness at innumerable cocktail parties.

The old Calvinistic presumption of the immorality of the poor, to be sure, was not irrefutable. It could have been overturned. One way was through "hard work," a term occurring and recurring in nineteenth-century thought like the thud of textile looms in bustling New England mills. "There is no substitute for hard work," declared that great tinkerer Thomas Edison, following the law pronounced by the unacknowledged legislators of his world.

Work and thou wilt bless the day  
 Ere the toil be done;  
 They that work not, can not pray,  
 Can not feel the sun.  
 God is living, working still,  
 All things work and move;  
 Work or lose the power to will,  
 Lose the power to love.<sup>7</sup>

The Protestant ethic, then, meant that work was valued not only for what it produced but also as an activity uplifting in itself.

But though hard work might have been vital to the poor man's salvation, it was insufficient to reverse the Calvinistic presumption on its own; for the presumption lay not in the minds of the poor, but instead in the minds of those with money whose actual acquaintance with the poor was slight. What was significant, therefore, was how the poor *appeared* to the outside world. Hard work was less important than being perceived as hard

5. Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), ch. 9.

6. Meissner, *Poverty in the Affluent Society*, p. 5.

7. John Sullivan Dwight, "Working."

working (and also as uncomplaining). Nor was this as straightforward as it sounds, for those with money, like everyone else, tended to see in others what they wanted or expected to see and to be governed by stereotypes. They “knew” that the poor were repulsive: vulgar, crude, and as Orwell stressed, foul-smelling;<sup>8</sup> and they “knew,” too, that if the root of the poor’s problem was not outright stupidity, it was likely to be sloth, intemperance, or lack of ambition. “Knowing” these things, those with money selected and interpreted facts they came in contact with so as to compel them to conform to their preconceptions. Disconfirming evidence was explained away or ignored.<sup>9</sup> That those making these judgments had little in the way of personal relationships with the poor limited their reality-testing capacities and accentuated these distortion pressures. How hard it was for the poor to surmount an obstacle ensconced in the hostile *minds* of others!

Another way for the poor to overturn the presumption of immorality was to contract a clearly incapacitating malady or injury. Again, it was less important that the person be physically prevented from working than that outsiders perceive him as such. Consequently, illnesses whose damage was internal and not visible to the casual observer, like miners’ black lung, could not grant dispensation from the presumption. This should not suggest, however, that all obvious infirmities met the test, for it had to be plain beyond doubt that they were not the individual’s own fault. Therefore, a person who lost a limb to a factory machine would be suspect and would have to convince outsiders that his injury had not resulted from his own carelessness. This general attitude permeated the law as well. If it could be shown that a worker contributed to his accident through any act of negligence, the employer frequently was relieved of all legal responsibility, even if his negligence had been more serious and long-lasting.<sup>10</sup> Further, those engaged in dangerous work were often considered to have voluntarily assumed the risk of harm by taking the job and thereby to have relieved the employer of his legal obligations to them.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the incapacitated deserving poor had to be perceived by outsiders not only as incapacitated through no fault of their own but also as grateful for the charity bestowed upon them by those acting under press of Christian duty.

The third way to overcome the presumption of immorality attaching to

8. George Orwell, *The Road To Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969 [1937]), pp. 112–115.

9. For a fascinating study of the process of cognitive dissonance reduction, see the classic work of Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

10. William L. Prosser, *Handbook of the Law of Torts*, 3rd ed. (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1964), p. 550.

11. See Note, *Virginia Law Review*, XLVII (1961), p. 1444.

poverty was to cease being—or appearing—poor. This was not easily done; for if it was difficult to escape poverty, escaping too fast and too far might simply transform one from a member of the “deserving poor” into one of the “undeserving rich.” Naturally, this was an improvement; but the galling stigma remained.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the basic intellectual assumption underlying the concept of the worthy poor was individualism.<sup>13</sup> Individuals, it was felt, must be responsible for their own behavior; and if that causes them to be poor, they must live with it. Society does not owe them a living, though doubtless enough good people with money will keep the slackers alive through Christian charity. The most striking thing about these undeserving poor was how numerous they seemed to be as contrasted with the deserving poor who, as exceptions to the rule of individual responsibility, were few indeed.<sup>14</sup> Thus, society’s obligation which extended only to the deserving poor, was quite small. The others could—or should—rise from the depths by themselves.

Another assumption was that, in Jesus’ words, “The poor ye have with you always.”<sup>15</sup> This inevitability derived mainly from oft-observed flaws in human nature, which insured numbers of undeserving poor, and secondarily from the constant trickle of deserving poor.<sup>16</sup> But if some poverty was inevitable, widespread poverty was considered merely temporary, an interlude between prosperities on a business cycle with which man ought

12. See Irvin G. Wylie, *The Self-Made Man in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954), ch. 8; Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), ch. 24.

13. This, of course, was a decidedly materialistic individualism, in which “The faith and philosophy [that any able individual could through his own efforts achieve riches] became the most persuasive siren in American life.” Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York: Ronald Press, 1940), p. 155. During this period, “Business as a whole seldom came under attack” [Thomas C. Cochran, *The American Business System* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 5], though William James wrote bitterly of “The moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success—is our national disease.” Quoted in *The Bitch-Goddess SUCCESS: Variations on an American Theme* (New York: Eakins Press, 1968), p. 4.

14. Some extremists went so far as to argue that there were no worthy poor, since a just God would not consign them to this fate if they did not deserve it. Their sins might not have been apparent to other mortals but, nonetheless, were real enough.

15. Matthew 26:11.

16. Robert Bremner, *From the Depths* (New York: New York University Press, 1958), ch. 2.

not to tamper. Matters would right themselves ultimately, with individual effort the driving force.<sup>17</sup>

A main reason for the great longevity and influence of the concept of the deserving poor was its profound legitimating power. The deserving poor's acceptance of the system—as manifested in their apparent belief in the value of hard work, their refusal to question the larger economic and social system, their unwillingness to complain publicly about their condition, and their obvious gratitude for aid from their betters—helped to convince the nonpoor that the society was just. After all, if the losers did not seem to question the rules of the game, they must be fair enough. Such reassurance was, of course, important to the winners; for they, like the rest of us, preferred to think that they had right on their side, as well as mere might.<sup>18</sup>

All of this seems naive and callous and unforgiveable to us. Yet there is about the notion of the deserving poor a certain rationality in that the economic and psychological self-interest of those with money was, at least, being served by their own artifice. Today, however, things are not quite that simple. This is not because the concept of the deserving poor has ceased to have any force or attraction. Quite the contrary. Though the term has been banished from the popular vocabulary like a vulgar guest from a cocktail party, the deserving poor is a notion very much with us. Nowadays the description is “underprivileged” or “disadvantaged”—words which seem neutral since they are not preceded by “deserving” or equivalent value judgments. Yet this neutrality, even at the verbal level, is mere illusion; the clear implication is that such people unjustly fall below the standard norm—they are not privileged or advantaged enough.<sup>19</sup>

17. Government, of course, was by no means absent from the economic arena, where its efforts were almost entirely pro-business, whether of an outright policy (for example, land grants to railroads, laws governing protective tariffs) or an ostensibly neutral “ground-rule” (for example, laws governing commercial transactions and labor relations) nature.

18. The deserving poor, as a consequence, necessarily excluded members of the labor movement, who did not appear docile and passively accepting of their lot, but instead blamed those with money for their plight, and announced their readiness to change what they took to be an exploitative labor-management power relationship. A considerable amount of violence—by now, of course, largely forgotten—resulted. Yet surely a young urban historian was correct when he observed, “For all the brutality and rapacity which marked the American scene in the years in which the new urban industrial order came into being, what stands out most is the relative absence of collective working-class protest aimed at reshaping capitalist society.” Stephan Thernstrom, “Urbanization, Migration and Social Mobility in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), pp. 172–73.

19. Kristol, taking note of this, chides those who attack the existing distribution

What is confusing, however, is not the alteration in terminology but in those to whom the terms refer. In the days of the old deserving poor, it was pretty clear who they were and what characteristics they had to have. This is no longer the case.

Some persons still think of the “disadvantaged” in traditional terms as the hardworking poor or the incapacitated. The rhetoric has changed and the old assumptions have been modified somewhat, but the basic outlook persists. These are the persons who rail against welfare “chiselers” and those who “want something for nothing,” and fear that expanded state-supported social services will sap lower class incentive and weaken moral fiber.<sup>20</sup> This position is most closely identified with slightly old-fashioned Republicanism,<sup>21</sup> but in its emphasis on hard work and private property it arouses far broader support among such groups as lower-middle-class Democrats as well.<sup>22</sup>

As widespread as this traditional view may be, however, it has been supplanted in print by a newer concept because most of the people doing “serious” writing on the subject of poverty take a different approach. For them, “underprivileged” or “disadvantaged” are probably merely short-

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of income as unfair, pointing out that “no one seems willing to commit himself to a precise definition [of fairness] from which statesmen and social critics can take their bearing.” Irving Kristol, “About Equality,” *Commentary* (November, 1972), p. 41. It is surely true, as Kristol well knows, that it is hard to beat something with nothing; but requiring a high level of precision from broad social goals may, as a practical matter, merely constitute an argument for inaction. Further, the inability to identify some specific future distribution as “fair” may well be paralleled by a similar inability to defend the present distribution, as Kristol himself implicitly concedes when he remarks coyly that he professes “no strong prior opinion as to the ‘proper’ shape of an income-distribution curve” in America. For clearly his adversaries illustrate Edmond Cahn’s famous observation that the sense of injustice, however subjectively defined, has been a far more significant impulse to social action than has the sense of justice.

20. Thus, a national poll revealed that three times as many respondents agreed as disagreed with the statement, “The relief rolls are loaded with chiselers and people who just don’t want to work.” Among those with family incomes less than \$5,000, three-fifths agreed. Further, 27 percent of the total sample thought that lack of effort, either alone or combined with circumstances, is at the root of poverty, rather than circumstances alone; 68 percent of those with family incomes less than \$5,000 concurred. Lloyd A. Free and Hadley Cantril, *The Political Beliefs of Americans* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), pp. 27–29.

21. See for example, Henry Hazlitt’s attack on the negative income tax, “The Coming Crisis in Welfare,” *National Review* (April 18, 1967), p. 416.

22. See Pete Hamill, “The Revolt of the White Lower-Middle Class,” in *The White Majority*, ed. Louise Kapp Howe (New York: Vintage Books, 1970 [1969]), p. 10; Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), ch. 4.

hand for the black poor<sup>23</sup> of the great northern metropolitan cities, though most of the poor are neither black nor metropolitan residents.<sup>24</sup>

And yet the old individualistic assumption, despite all the attacks on it by social scientists and reforming activists, refuses to die. For the notion of individual responsibility remains at the heart of the moral judgment: what makes the deserving poor deserving is that their suffering, unlike that of the undeserving poor, is not of their own making. They, as individuals, are not to blame. However, instead of shifting the locus of liability to fate, modern analysts place it upon society, which is said to have a collective obligation to uplift the millions it has so shamefully abused. Thus, individualism and collectivism support each other like sticks in a lean-to: the lack of individual fault frees the poor from blame, while the presence of the collective duty transforms the very existence of poverty into an indictment of the nonpoor.<sup>25</sup> The deserving poor, then, emerge, in the words of one economist, as victims “bearing part of the costs of other people’s progress,”<sup>26</sup> a wronged group to whom society owes very tangible and substantial compensation. “There is no charity in it,” echoes an urban sociologist, “any more so than there is charity in repaying a debt or paying properly exacted damages.”<sup>27</sup> It is society which oppresses, suppresses,

23. The terms are also sometimes used to refer to other racial minorities (Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and Indians) and, occasionally, poor Appalachian whites.

24. According to the 1970 census, while a third of all blacks are poor, two-thirds of the poor are white. Further, only a third of the poor live in central cities, the remainder living in suburbs or non-metropolitan areas. Also, the region where poverty is most prevalent is the South, where nearly half of the poor may be found. *Des Moines Register*, February 21, 1972, p. 1.

25. Carrying this argument further—and transforming the traditional notion of individualism with savage irony—some advocates have contended that the nonpoor owe their status, comfort, and prosperity to the poor and, as a consequence, are responsible as *individuals* for this social blight. See for example, William Ryan, *Blaming the Poor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), pp. xi–xv (though the author elsewhere concedes generously that those who blame the poor for their condition may “display a deep concern for the victim that is quite genuine,” p. 6); and the Rev. James Bevel, “The Sickness in America Today,” in *Urban America*, ed. Jim Chard and Jon York (Belmont, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 95–102. Thus, even simple inaction on the part of the nonpoor is subject to condemnation, as in Eldridge Cleaver’s famous apothegm, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” Or as a vaguely radical educational bureaucrat has put it, “To be in the urban setting but not of it is to be against it.” William M. Birenbaum, *Overlive* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1969), p. 194.

26. Richard M. Titmuss, *Commitment to Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 133.

27. Lawrence Haworth, “Deprivation and the Good City,” in *Power, Poverty, and Urban Policy*, ed. Warner Bloomberg, Jr. and Henry J. Schmandt (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1968), p. 40.

and represses the new deserving poor, mainly through a racist social structure, but also “as a consequence of the economic organization of society.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the old undeserving poor who were despised as insufficiently motivated have become today’s deserving poor who are denied the opportunities and experiences from which motivation springs;<sup>29</sup> the old undeserving poor who were decried as “shiftless” have become today’s deserving poor who refuse to be passively shunted off to “dead end” jobs;<sup>30</sup> the old undeserving poor who were scorned as criminal ne’er-do-wells have become today’s deserving poor who find themselves forced to respond to unjust conditions by going outside the law;<sup>31</sup> and so on and on. Thus, while today’s and yesterday’s deserving poor both suffer unfairly, only today is there a villain.

If individualism remains potent, other older assumptions have not. In the first place, the inevitability of poverty has been attacked as myopic and defeatist nonsense. It is said that poverty may be inevitable given the present economic system, but this does not mean that poverty is inevitable *per se*. On the contrary, since poverty results not from defects in human nature or occasional cosmic injustices but merely from exploitative economic structures, poverty *can* be eliminated. It is necessary only to restructure contemporary economic institutions and alter attitudes—here, language tends to crumble with vagueness—and exploitation and poverty will end.<sup>32</sup>

28. S. M. Miller and Frank Reissman, *Social Class and Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 53.

29. See for example, William McCord, John Howard, Bernard Friedberg, and Edwin Harwood, *Lifestyles in the Ghetto* (New York: Norton, 1969), ch. 7; June L. Trapp and Arthur H. Roberts, “Hard Core Unemployment,” *Trans-action* (September, 1970), p. 48; Elliot Liebow, *Talley’s Corner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), ch. 2.

30. See for example, David Wellman, “The Wrong Way to Find Jobs for Negroes,” *Trans-action* (April, 1968), p. 9.

31. See for example, Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: New American Library, 1965); Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966). A pair of sociologists, writing during a period of urban rioting, straightfacedly termed looting “a bid for the redistribution of property” by those “demand[ing] a redefinition of property rights [presumably, taking the form: “What’s yours is mine”] through disorder and violence.” Russell Dynes and E. L. Quarantelli, “What Looting in Civil Disturbances Really Means,” *Trans-action* (May, 1968), p. 14. This socio-philosophical apologia for stealing color television sets concluded with a plea that looting not be treated as criminal behavior—a plea tactfully directed at “community leaders” and not at luckless merchants.

32. See for example, Paul Mattick, “Workers’ Control,” in *The New Left*, ed. Priscilla Long (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1969), pp. 376–98; C. George Benello, “Participatory Democracy and the Dilemma of Change,” *ibid.*, pp. 404–19; Hyman Lumer, “Capitalism Outmoded,” in *Outside, Looking In*, ed. Dorothy Buckton

The temporary nature of past and present poverty is also challenged. True, it is argued that the absolute number of poor may wax or wane with boom or bust, but substantial segments have always remained poor, and nearly everyone is, if not poor, then at least underpaid. The nature of capitalism and Marx's surplus value theory require as much.

Clearly, the new deserving poor that is a product of this critique does not, like its predecessor, legitimate the system. Quite the opposite. The poor who seem to accept and support the dominant values and institutions of the society are derided as ignorant, naive, unaware of their true class interest, dupes of the power structure. These formerly deserving poor are now looked on as suckers unworthy of compassion or significant material assistance<sup>33</sup>—in short, as the new *undeserving* poor.

## II.

Why, it remains to be asked, has this transformation from the old "deserving poor" to the new taken place? Why has the term shed its former referent like a *nouveau riche* matron discarding last season's gown? An adequate approach to this question requires a recognition that the changing definitions have themselves been a function of the changing social values of the strata doing the defining. And why have these values changed? No single response is universally accepted, but there is hardly a shortage of confidently advanced hypotheses.

Consider the belligerently optimistic analysis of the distinguished Har-

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James (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 75–97; Andrew McLaughlin, "Freedom Versus Capitalism," *ibid.*, pp. 120–40; Susan S. Fainstein and Norman I. Fainstein, "American Social Policy: Beyond Progressive Analysis," *ibid.*, pp. 212–38.

33. Michael Lerner, "Respectable Bigotry," *American Scholar*, xxxviii (Autumn, 1969), p. 606; Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: Macmillan, 1972). Cf., Robert Alter, "A Fever of Ethnicity," *Commentary* (June, 1972), p. 68. Certain radicals, too, have complained that their brethren are "contemptuous of workers." Hilary Putnam, "From Resistance to Student-Worker Alliance," in *The New Left*, p. 323. But the proletariat that is the object of their affection appears to bear the same relationship to the real working class as does the unicorn to the horse. This is brought out clearly in Steven Kelman, *Push Comes to Shove* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970). Surely Father Greeley was not far wrong when he complained, "Most of those of us who write about politics and about society and who read the important journals in which articles about politics and society are presented . . . know more about what goes on in certain tribal communities in Africa and Asia than we do about what occurs in Hamtramck, Queens, or Avalon Park." Andrew M. Greeley, "Political Attitudes Among American White Ethnics," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, xxxvi (Summer, 1972), p. 220.

vard urbanist, Edward C. Banfield. In *The Unheavenly City* he seems to argue that with the advent of the affluent society has come an assumption that middle class economic standards, loosely understood, ought to be the society's minimum acceptable standards for all. With delicacies apparently so abundant, the feeling grew—first among certain bourgeois intellectuals, and then among certain leaders of the poor—that everyone could and therefore should partake in the feast. Rising expectations, increasing faster than rising living standards, produced a rising sense of “relative deprivation, which is lack of enough to prevent one from feeling poor by comparison with others.” Thus, at the very time that old-fashioned destitution and want were becoming less acute, poverty was perceived as becoming more acute. Carrying Banfield's argument a step further, those segments of the poor who complained loudest were naturally given credit for possessing the greatest sophistication and realism or, in other words, for being the most deserving. The poor who in an earlier day would have been labelled “deserving” were docile and white and, as a consequence, simply ignored by the self-designated “altruistic classes.”

If Banfield is sympathetic to an America in which crisis is largely “spurious,”<sup>34</sup> the same cannot be said for Theodore Lowi, a University of Chicago political scientist who sees the nation as dominated by “interest group liberalism.” In this context policy makers are said to view poverty “as though it were a human characteristic comparable to any other ‘interest’ around which interest groups form.” The Establishment-defined new deserving poor, then, become those who act on that basis. There is a fallacy here, however, according to Lowi; for he contends that the problem is not traditional random poverty but, instead, modern nonrandom injustice. The new deserving poor, ignorant of this insight, fall easy prey to the power structure. “[I]t is astonishing,” he remarks, for example, “how many Negro leaders have become taken in by the appeals of Community Action and the paltry extra sums of money forthcoming.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the new deserving poor are as useful to the economically dominant forces of today as their predecessors were to the elite of a few generations ago.

Yet for all their differences Banfield and Lowi appear to agree on this: the increasing concern for the poor derived not from a worsening of their condition or a growth in their number but rather from their discovery by liberal elite opinion leaders. Banfield, emphasizing the role of politicians, media men, and members of the upper classes anxious “to flex their moral

34. Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 116, 22, 251.

35. Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 217, 244, 245.

muscles,” sees “doing good” as having become “a growth industry, like the other forms of mass entertainment. . . .”<sup>36</sup> Lowi, for his part, stresses the significance of an overconfident Kennedy administration naively ready and willing (if not really able) to eliminate poverty as if it were a pencil smudge about to submit to an eraser.<sup>37</sup> But for both analysts, the changing social values responsible for the redefinition of the “deserving poor” ensued mainly as a product of elite public relations efforts.

A different view seems implicit in the work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, professors at the Columbia University School of Social Work and leading theoreticians of the welfare rights movement. Proceeding from a quasi-Marxist stance, they emphasize the alleged utility of the poor to the nonpoor in a capitalist society. Unemployment keeps wages down and fights inflation; financial deprivation provides a pool of workers ready to perform services cheaply; welfare is used to cool off and “regulate the poor” and otherwise provide “the ritual degradation of a pariah class that serves to mark the boundary between the appropriately motivated and the inappropriately motivated, between the virtuous and the defective.”<sup>38</sup> “Reform”—always enclosed in quotation marks—is a fraud; and only radical, systemic change will suffice. Portions of the poor, like George Wiley’s National Welfare Rights Organization, have grasped this and begun to act accordingly, such as by trying to enlarge the welfare rolls to the point that a crisis is created and the whole corrupt system junked.<sup>39</sup> These portions would seem to qualify as Piven and Cloward’s new deserving poor, though the authors hope that the quiescent poor can eventually be brought around to a sound understanding of the causes and opportunities of their situation.

If Banfield and Lowi can be read as supporting the “trickle down” approach to explain the altered views of the poor, Piven and Cloward might be said to advance a modified “bubble up” model. For in dealing with the changing image of welfare and its clients, they emphasize the importance of the development of “grass roots protest organizations.”<sup>40</sup> Their activities, widely reported in the media, became known to other segments of

36. Banfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 251, 254.

37. Lowi, *op. cit.*, pp. 226, 227, 249.

38. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 149.

39. The assumption that what follows this debacle will be an improvement for the poor may be questioned, however, since a costly and embarrassing collapse would presumably accentuate the hostility of those traditionally antagonistic to the poor and alienate numbers of welfare bureaucrats, social workers, and others hitherto sympathetic to the deprived.

40. Piven and Cloward, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

the poor and to the nonpoor, too. And from among these groups, sizable numbers were won over to the protesters' side, adopting their more critical and militant perspective.<sup>41</sup>

It is interesting to note that the work of Lowi, Piven and Cloward, and even Wiley have all benefited very significantly from financial grants from such traditional Establishment pillars as foundations, research councils, and federal agencies.<sup>42</sup> This fact is not mentioned to score *ad hominem* points at the expense of advocates of the poor, but rather to raise the question of the Establishment's complicity in the development of a concept of the deserving poor which can only be hostile to the *status quo*. Why, to put it baldly, do parts of the Establishment appear so anti-Establishment?

One answer is that the *status quo* is so awful that it repels even some of those who appear to have a stake in its continuation. This is the essential argument of the defenders of radicalized overprivileged youth. Thus, Theodore Roszak's "technocracy's children," facing "an obnoxiously conformist adulthood, experimenting desperately with new ways of growing up self-respectfully into a world they despise," construct a brave new "counter culture."<sup>43</sup> Or Charles A. Reich's bell-bottomed fanciers of unhomogenized peanut butter seeing the selfish, organizational society of Consciousness II for what it is begin to undermine it with a Consciousness III youth culture stressing self-fulfillment, authenticity, and, of course, love.<sup>44</sup> Or Kenneth Keniston's idealistic college students, confronted with "social inequity—the first personal meeting with poverty, injustice, political manipulation, and institutional dishonesty"—become ardent activists. Quickly moving from indifference to commitment, they "seek amongst existing institutions channels for the remedy of injustice." This "naive hope," however, founders on the "failure of the system;" and the students, by now radicalized, turn "toward a Movement that stressed the need for *new* institutions."<sup>45</sup> The System—invariably pronounced with a capital "S"—is

41. Inasmuch as their 1965 paper, "Mobilizing the Poor: How It Can Be Done," can be thought of as providing the fertilizer for the grass roots movement, Piven and Cloward's model is only a *modified* "bubble up" one. *Ibid.*, p. 321–27.

42. Lowi acknowledges the assistance of the Social Science Research Council and the Guggenheim Foundation, and Piven and Cloward of Mobilization for Youth (an antipoverty agency funded by the federal government, New York City, and the Ford Foundation) and the Ford Foundation. Wiley's *nwro* has received federal and foundation grants.

43. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), p. 35.

44. Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970).

45. Kenneth Keniston, *Young Radicals* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), pp. 126, 127. Though Keniston does not say so, plainly the students' rapid

corrupt and “anti-life”; Roszak’s counter-culturists, Reich’s greeners, and Keniston’s young radicals realize this; and they all are at work to change it.

A second answer asserts that the System works reasonably well but that this very success contributes to the Establishment’s attacks on itself. The populist political essayist Eric Hoffer, for instance, sees American society in highly complimentary terms. Recent criticism he blames on the “alienated rich” and the snobbish intellectual, “a would-be aristocrat who loathes the sight, the sound and the smell of common folk.” The rich feel guilty about their success and ill at ease in “the country of the common” and respond by confessing “the sins of our society in public.” Not their private sins, understand, but “the sins of the rest of us, and it is our breasts they are beating into a pulp.” Intellectuals, “fueled by a hunger for power,” join the rich in “an alliance against those in the middle” and, more broadly, against traditional middle-class values in general.<sup>46</sup> The Establishment seems to be at war with itself.

It was left to the great Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, however, to demonstrate most clearly the paradox that success is dysfunctional. The anti-Establishment impulse, he argued thirty years ago, flows not “primarily from grievance” nor can it “be met effectively by rational argument.” Opposition, therefore, arises not from the growth in injustice that Lowi, Piven, and Cloward allege nor from the plastic vacuity Roszak and Reich claim to have found. Instead, it is the inevitable concomitant of the capitalist triumph. For capitalism, Schumpeter pointed out, exalts rationality, which removes “the restraint of sacred or semi-sacred tradition,” loosens family ties, and institutionalizes stinging criticism of the existing order. In short,

capitalism creates a critical frame of mind which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own; the bourgeois finds to his amazement that the rationalist attitude does not stop at the credentials of kings and popes

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disillusionment stems from the same political and social naivete that had earlier produced their excessive optimism. This observation, in turn, provokes several questions: Is it realistic to expect that brief moralistic outbursts of teen-aged activism would cause society to mend its ways? Ought society to be so assiduously responsive to these pressures, when this entails ignoring longer-lived beliefs of larger groups? Are the injustices of society so unambiguous and their remedies so obvious? Is it, in short, possible that the reason the walls refuse to tumble is that the student is not Joshua but instead just another overly ambitious college band trumpeter?

46. Eric Hoffer, “Whose Country Is America?” *New York Times Magazine*, November 22, 1970, pp. 120, 121.

but goes on to attack private property and the whole scheme of bourgeois values.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, capitalism is responsible not only for poverty but also for the moral outrage following it like a scream, a wound; thus, capitalism is responsible not only for the punitive view of the poor of Ronald Reagan, Russell Long, and the New York *Daily News* but also for the humane view of Lowi, Piven, and Cloward; thus, in short, capitalism is responsible not only for the Establishment but also for the hostility towards it many of the more comfortably situated citizens express with such vehemence and pleasure.

Yet, though conceding the accuracy of the Schumpeterian interpretation, it must be stressed that conflicts over the new deserving poor are not mere squabbles about phantoms. In the 1950's, poverty had been banished from liberal talk like a dull brother-in-law from a weekend vacation, and a narcissistic concern with middle class malaise permeated the bourgeois consciousness. Galbraith's affluent society<sup>48</sup> was peopled by Whyte's organization men<sup>49</sup> and Riesman's lonely crowd,<sup>50</sup> but not yet residents of Harrington's other America.<sup>51</sup> By 1973, however, the middle class had long since rediscovered the poor. And while Hoffer and others may be right in blaming this rediscovery on unworthy motives, the fact is that poverty does indeed remain a major national problem. The 1970 census revealed 25.5 million poor persons, as determined by the federal government's floating poverty line. This represented one out of eight Americans, including one out of every six children under age six and one out of every four elderly persons. The "near-poor," whose income was less than twenty-five percent above the poverty line, accounted for another 10.2 million persons. Thus, the poor and near-poor—each of which category is significantly underreported in the census—comprise almost thirty-six-million people or about one-sixth of the entire population.<sup>52</sup>

That the new deserving poor represents a useful conceptual weapon in

47. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), pp. 143, 144, 160. That Schumpeter saw this paradox of success years before the current prosperity is a testament to his prescience. Elsewhere in this magnificent and uncannily prophetic work, he predicted not only the growth in higher education but also the employment problems with which academics are currently all too familiar (p. 152).

48. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1958).

49. William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

50. David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

51. Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

52. *Des Moines Register*, February 21, 1972, p. 1.

the war against poverty, however, remains unproven. Today's deserving poor owe their title to having rejected all that yesterday's deserving poor believed, especially as regards the justice and permanence of the ongoing social and economic order. By so doing, the new deserving poor legitimate not the current system but rather the current opposition to it; and instead of serving the Establishment, now serve its opponents. These opponents, though, may be planning and acting on the basis of a first-hand knowledge of *their* deserving poor that is often nearly as sketchy, sentimental, and inadequate as was the Establishment's knowledge of *their* deserving poor a couple of generations ago. Pawns in other strata's struggles, the new deserving poor may serve their own interests little better than did the old. The past surely counsels skepticism.