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**POVERTY AND CULTURE:
POSTWAR AFFLUENCE AND THE ORIGINS OF
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POVERTY AND CULTURE: POSTWAR AFFLUENCE AND THE ORIGINS OF HEAD START

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ABSTRACT

POVERTY AND CULTURE: POSTWAR AFFLUENCE AND THE ORIGINS OF HEAD START

By

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This essay examines the origins of the War on Poverty's Head Start program. It argues that poverty as a national issue was largely invisible between World War II and the early 1960s because of the relative level of affluence enjoyed by the majority of the nation and because the federal government took the maintenance of this affluence as its main goal. When poverty was "rediscovered," definitions of it and solutions for it tended to lay blame for poverty on the poor themselves. In the case of Head Start, this tendency had roots in the work of two social scientists - Allison Davis and Oscar Lewis - and their cultural conceptions of poverty. Their ideas had profound effects on the Head Start program and help explain why it was so popular and, ultimately, why it failed to address the material and economic problem of poverty.

With Love, to Louis and Frances Krasovic

In Loving Memory, to Richard and Lorraine Matthews

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INTRODUCTION

The This-Sidedness of Culture

Amidst widespread postwar affluence in the United States, poverty was viewed as an aberration. The general shift in the nation's fortune after its recovery from depression provided the majority of Americans with unprecedented opportunities for better housing, geographic and status mobility, and economic security. Yet this prosperity left many other Americans behind. Since their numbers were relatively insignificant compared with those victimized by the Depression or those workers who suffered regular periods of unemployment and poverty prior to that, there was a general apathy toward their plight. And whereas in the 1930s the roots of poverty seemed fairly obvious, a new explanation was needed for the paradox of deprivation amidst plenty. Inevitably, the blame came to rest on the poor themselves.

Begun by the Kennedy administration, and implemented by Lyndon Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the War on Poverty consisted of a range of initiatives and programs designed to eliminate the nation's poverty, rural and urban. Among such initiatives was an early childhood development program designed to intervene in the "cycle of poverty" and

save poor children from the circumstances in which they had been raised. When the Office of Economic Opportunity published its first précis of Project Head Start, Lady Bird Johnson lamented that poor children were "lost in a gray world of poverty and neglect." She claimed that the program would "lead them into the human family" since "circumstance [had] stranded them on an island of nothingness."[1] At the foundation of this program was the belief that this vacuum of which the First Lady wrote was cultural. The way to free poor children from their poverty was to fill this empty space with a culture deemed relevant or valuable to a certain conception of the mainstream.

The American mainstream was decidedly affluent. In the early 1960s, the nation was enjoying its longest sustained period of economic growth on record. Aided by federal housing and highway policy, an unprecedented number of people had moved from rural and inner-city areas to the suburbs in the postwar years. Suburban enclaves, such as the well-known Levittowns, became racially and economically homogeneous communities. They were deemed safer than urban areas and potentially more profitable than the agricultural countryside. With the rise in automation in both industry

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[1]Quoted in Annie Stein, "Strategies for Failure," *Harvard Educational Review* 41 (1971), 182.

and on the farm, the majority of American workers were supported by a burgeoning demand for middle-class, white-collar, professional labor. This was the age of the "Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" - young, prosperous, and suburban with a stay-at-home wife who took care of the home and the children. The ideal family was productive and responsible and worked to further their own ends which, in the affluent society, were identical to those of the husband's employer and the nation as a whole.

External forces, however, threatened this seemingly idyllic world. The specter of Communism loomed on the horizon. Anything remotely suggesting class politics was often seen as potentially destructive of American progress. Sometimes these accusations remained just that, but at other times they inspired congressional hearings and criminal charges. This partly explains the relative lack of federal antipoverty initiatives in the fifteen years following the end of World War II. What little effort exerted in this time period proved unsuccessful in the face of postwar anticommunism. It is in this context - of affluence and antiradicalism - that one must understand the roots of Head Start and the War on Poverty in general.

Since a radical restructuring of the American economy was simply outside the purview of much of postwar America,

another route toward the elimination of poverty was followed. Rather than viewing the existence of poverty as a structural component of capitalism, postwar economic discourse, as John Kenneth Galbraith argued, held poverty to be the result of either temporary economic downturns or the result of the productive forces of the nation not being used to their full capacity. In other words, the poor were unproductive members of society and the goal of any antipoverty legislation was to make them productive, to have them give their lives over to national economic progress in the same way that the ideal "organization man" had. Not only would this provide a better life for the individual worker, but also it would serve to contain radicalism by demonstrating the vibrancy of capitalism.

The goal for antipoverty reformers, then, became the removal of barriers to the achievement of this "productive citizen" status. These barriers, it was too commonly believed, resided in the character or abilities of the poor themselves. In this way, the larger societal and economic context in which poverty thrived could be forgotten. It was a sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle way to blame the poor for their own "unproductive" situation. In the case of Head Start, the barrier to breaking out of poverty was believed to be the culture of the poor. What was needed was

a way to compensate for the lack of the culture that would, as Lady Bird Johnson tellingly phrased it, "lead them into the human family."

Poverty, however, is not a cultural phenomenon. It is profoundly economic and material. It cannot be solved by recourse to cultural or conceptual reforms. Nor can it be eliminated simply by the removal of barriers to full participation in the economic life of the nation. So long as the system of American capitalism relies on a labor surplus to control inflation, it will have a stake in the impoverishment of a segment of the population. Yet it is important to note that a radical or revolutionary solution to the problem of poverty in postwar America was not the only alternative available to the War on Poverty. Galbraith, for example, offered up the idea of a guaranteed income for the poor. As part of a larger argument about the detrimental effects of the affluent society's emphasis on production as the key to wealth and social standing, Galbraith proposed that unemployment compensation be brought much closer to the average weekly wage and that alternative sources of income be found for those unable to participate effectively in the larger national economy.[2] The idea was not as far-fetched at

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[2]John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 220-22.

it may sound today. In August 1969, President Nixon proposed the establishment of a national guaranteed income. Jimmy Carter made a similar proposal in 1977.[3] Eventually, these efforts were abandoned. Yet their existence, especially at such a level of power, suggests that the route Head Start and the War on Poverty took was not the only one available to the federal government. There were historical alternatives. The larger context of American postwar affluence and anticommunism provides us with an explanation for why the route of economic redistribution was not followed. It explains why the existence of poverty was so often blamed on the poor themselves and why, specifically, Head Start could blame the culture of the poor.

This is a historical study of the roots of Project Head Start in postwar America, its sociological bases, and its relative popularity with reformers, government officials, and the American public. Yet it stems from recent debates over cultural theory and its ability to deal with material issues in relation to conceptual ones. In approaching this study, a nod to some major arguments in western Marxism is

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[3]For a history of these efforts, see Alice O'Connor, "The False Dawn of Poor-Law Reform: Nixon, Carter, and the Quest for a Guaranteed Income," *Journal of Policy History*, 10 (1998): 99-129.

appropriate. The idea for this essay grew out of a study of Marx and his descendents.

In his first thesis on Feuerbach, Marx takes the German idealist to task for his definition of materialism. In Marx's revolutionary scheme it is crucial that humans make their own history and it is exactly this revolutionary activity that Feuerbach neglects in his notion of materialism. For him, the world is rigidly divided between the object and concept and there is no space for a practical-critical activity that would work on both areas. Furthermore, the material is actually denigrated: "He regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical form of appearance." Thus, the only activity is developed by idealism, "but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such." In response to this, Marx emphasizes the need for conceiving human activity as material.

Yet, in the second thesis, it is clear that Marx believes it is not as simple as merely conceiving of human activity in a material way. It becomes so only in practice. Without practice, the debate over the reality or non-reality of thinking is merely pedantic. "In practice," Marx writes, "man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power,

the this-sidedness of his thinking."[4] The dialectic, then, does not function automatically. A change in the conceptual does not automatically become self-evident in the material. Still, Marx continues in the third thesis, neither side of the dialectic is to be regarded as superior. Rather, they are two essential areas that must both be subjected to revolutionary activity. To engage the material forces - such as poverty - that move or confine people, it is not enough to think them, or be conscious of them, or interpret them, or make of them something conceptual or cultural. The point is to change them through direct, material action.

Georg Lukács, about eighty years later, took up this call in his landmark work *History and Class Consciousness*. In his criticism of Engels's conception of the dialectic, Lukács insists that the relation between subject and object is most vital in the historical process. Engels is guilty of "a failure to recognize that in all metaphysics the object remains untouched and unaltered so that thought remains contemplative and fails to become practical."[5] For Lukács, the process is made up of at least two steps. The first is the achievement by the proletariat of class consciousness.

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[4]Karl Marx, "Theses On Feuerbach," *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works in One Volume* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 28-30.

But this "thoughtful" achievement cannot be the final step. In fact, it means very little since, without the next step, there is no progression of history. The achievement would be solely conceptual. The next step, of course, is revolution. Again, the dialectic does not function automatically; humans must make their own history and not assume it will simply advance upon them. According to Lukács, then, the interaction between object and concept must be proven or the dialectic is not a revolutionary one because it is not historical.

This essay is intended to push this issue further by examining the efforts of a single federal antipoverty program to eliminate a material condition through conceptual, or cultural means. As far as many Great Society reformers were concerned, poverty was not so much a material condition as it was a cultural one. For others, it was only secondarily material. Drawing on several contemporary theories in the social sciences, the designers of Head Start believed that poor people had their own culture that confined them to lives of destitution. For some, this "culture of poverty" could not legitimately be called a "culture" at all. The poor, in this case, were seen as

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[5]Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 3.

"culturally-deprived." Either way, Head Start was intended to compensate for the culture that poor parents were not providing their children.

It is clear from the above discussion that two major figures in Marxist theory believed that conceptual "action" without a corresponding move in the material realm was worthless. Not only did the planners of Head Start believe that conceptual or cultural "action" would affect their subjects' material condition, but they sometimes thought of poverty itself as a cultural entity. In this case, reform was not a matter of the material-conceptual dialectic at all; it was seen as all cultural. It is the premise of this essay that the unwillingness, or perhaps inability, of these reformers to see poverty as a profoundly material condition can tell us much about the economic and cultural atmosphere of the majority of postwar America.

This is not a scholastic debate. It is a debate over the identity and limitations of cultural studies itself. Can or should it direct its critical gaze only at what is commonly regarded as "cultural" and what has here been variously called the "conceptual" or the "thoughtful"? Can or should it do much more than that? Can or should it also address itself directly to the material? The interaction between the two realms is often taken for granted. Often, a

glib argument about the inseparability of the two realms is made. But is there some political and ethical efficacy to seeing them as separate? From outside the field of cultural studies (as commonly conceived as a field within the humanities) has come the voice of political scientist Nancy Fraser. She has persuasively argued for separate and simultaneous actions in what she calls the "politics of recognition" and the "politics of redistribution." In her attempts to salvage a materialist outlook in our "postsocialist" world, Fraser points to the necessity of slighting neither one.[6] As Marx said, neither one is to be viewed as superior. However, it seems as though cultural theory indeed often does elevate cultural alternatives and "cultural work" over the material. Does this play directly into the hands of material forces that are not automatically altered with every change in the cultural field? This dialectic should not be taken for granted. The this-sidedness of culture needs always to be proven.

The first chapter of this essay, then, sets the stage for the arrival of Head Start and the War on Poverty by describing postwar affluence and its affect on the only

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[6]Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York:

major antipoverty proposal to come out of the federal government in the 1950s. The chapter begins with the New Deal's bifurcation of social welfare into entitlements on one hand and more denigrated forms of welfare on the other. The rise of a rights-based liberalism lead many to believe that it was the federal government's responsibility to secure their newfound prosperity through entitlements. This prosperity, however, did not reach all Americans. For them, what we today simply call "welfare" was available. The newly emergent middleclass - affluent, young, mostly white and suburban - tended to overlook this destitute minority despite (or perhaps because of) its increasing concentration in "depressed areas" and city centers. When the existence of this paradox of privation amidst plenty was addressed, attitudes ranged from contempt to sympathy. Yet both extremes shared a belief in the ultimate responsibility of the poor to help themselves and an unwillingness to address the problem of poverty in any structural way. In an era in which, as several contemporary critics observed, the major goal of individuals and the nation was to produce in order to maintain affluence and contain the dangers of radicalism, members of society deemed unproductive were easily

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Routledge, 1997).

overlooked or shunned. The result was an utter lack of federal antipoverty reform in the 1950s.

Chapter Two examines more specifically the roots of Head Start in the context of postwar social sciences. The 1930s and World War II had forced the social sciences to abandon theories of genetic determination of social phenomena. Sub-fields such as social stratification sought alternative explanations for their objects of study. Two major figures in American social sciences - Allison Davis in education and Oscar Lewis in anthropology - devised remarkably similar models for describing poverty. Davis's model held that poverty was the result of the culture of the poor themselves that maintained social barriers to status advancement. The idea later evolved into the notion of "cultural deprivation" - that the poor were poor because they lacked the requisite culture that imbued a longing and an opportunity for success. Oscar Lewis was well known for his development of the concept of a "culture of poverty." Yet his elucidations of this concept were often contradictory. Ultimately, it is unclear whether he believed culture to be the cause of the economic phenomenon of poverty or whether he believed it to be a result of poverty. Because of the phrase's ambiguity, it was easily

appropriated and used in ways that Lewis may never have intended.

The final chapter, then, examines how Project Head Start did just that. It argues that Head Start was the most popular War on Poverty project because it relied on such cultural logic and, in so doing, was regarded as a safe program within the potentially radical Community Action Program. In the central offices of the War on Poverty and the early planning sessions of such specific programs, the idea that poverty was primarily a cultural entity was deeply embedded. The influence of Davis and Lewis, both direct and indirect, is eminently evident in the early rhetoric, aims, and practices of Head Start. The central tenant of the program was that poverty could be eliminated through the attainment by the poor of the cultural skills necessary to succeed in school. Since success in school meant success in the workplace, the ultimate aim was the creation of productive, middle-class citizens to further the economic progress of the nation.

Chapter 1

THE POSITION OF POVERTY IN THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY

The economic crisis of the 1930s collapsed social boundaries on a scale never before seen. Since the creation of an American working class, there had always been a good deal of fluidity between this class and those below it. Seasonal and industrial cycles made most jobs tenuous and necessitated the creation of local relief agencies to aid those workers suffering downturns. Unemployment levels during the Great Depression, however, were unprecedented. As a result, joblessness affected both skilled and unskilled workers and, moreover, reached into the middle classes. Between 1929 and 1933, national unemployment climbed from 3.2 percent to 24.9 percent. In some locales, the crisis was even more dire: in Akron, unemployment reached 60 percent, while in Toledo it hit 80 percent. Old stereotypes concerning the laziness or ignorance of unemployed "tramps" were no longer tenable when 13 million Americans were without work. "We are now dealing with all classes," Harry Hopkins noted before the National Council of Social Work in 1933. "It is no longer a matter of unemployable and chronic dependents, but your friends and mine."[7]

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[7]Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 214-19. On pre-Depression cycles of unemployment see Katz, 95-102; and Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed:*

Though the New Deal's primary goal was to remedy this mass unemployment, it actually reinforced the social boundaries between the chronically poor and the rest of American society. As Michael B. Katz has demonstrated, the New Deal's implementation of social security bifurcated notions of social welfare. On one hand, there was public assistance - a highly stigmatized service that was often seen as giving something for nothing to the poor and was not as generous in its payments as the other form of welfare - social insurance. This form of social welfare included social security, unemployment insurance, and Medicare. In effect, these programs were "welfare for the middle class," yet did not carry the same stigma as poor relief. Serving almost the whole gamut of American society, the social insurance system was not contingent on a means test and, furthermore, was contributory. Never mind that any person may contribute much less then he or she received from the system, it was not getting something for nothing. "By pointedly distinguishing social security from relief," Katz argues, the architects of the social security system "froze the distinction between social insurance and public assistance into federal policy, where it has stuck ever

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America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

since, and built a regressive system that reinforced economic inequalities."[8]

This split in the system of social welfare was part of a larger struggle over the meaning of New Deal liberalism.[9] A more radical definition favored state regulatory intervention in the American capitalist economy. This view, which held sway in the earlier part of the twentieth century, held that something was inherently wrong with capitalism and that it was the responsibility of government to remedy it. This definition, however, was superceded in the late 1930s by the more conservative approach of compensatory intervention in the economy. Through fiscal policy, the federal government would foster consumption, growth, and eventually full employment. In 1943, the National Resources Planning Board reported, "The road to democracy runs along the highway of a dynamic economy, to the full use of our national resources, to full employment, and increasingly higher standards of living. . . .We stand on the threshold of an economy of abundance. This generation has it within its power not only to produce in plenty but to

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[8]Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 242-52.

[9]See Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State" in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

distribute that plenty."[10] This distribution, however, would take place along the new lines of social welfare policy. Any people or areas that were left behind by the "economy of abundance" would be aided by public assistance. Social security, meanwhile, became a right for those who already enjoyed a relatively affluent lifestyle. As Thomas Sugrue has argued, this new "rights-based liberalism" fostered "a newly empowered citizenry, one that looked to the government to provide economic and social security."[11]

It was this conflict between definitions of liberalism, the function of the state, and the purpose of social welfare that shaped public policy and responses to it in the postwar years. The newfound affluence enjoyed by the majority of the nation was fostered by federal fiscal, housing, and anticommunist policies. This had a profound impact on the poor of the nation. During the decade and a half immediately following World War II, poverty (with one important exception) was largely forgotten. The New Deal coalition had sunk its roots so deep into American society that not even a change of party in the White House could dislodge it. It gained strength because of the newly emergent middle-class majority and despite the continued existence of an American

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[10]Quoted in Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," 108.

[11]Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 58-9.

underclass that pointed to this coalition's shortcomings. Ultimately, as Ira Katznelson has persuasively argued, political movements of the New Deal coalition in the 1940s proved key in creating limitations within which the Great Society programs of the 1960s had to work.[12] In order to understand the failings of the War on Poverty, then, the geography of political power in the 1940s and 1950s must be taken into account.

As poverty is primarily a question of economic class, its virtual disappearance as an issue in postwar America can be thought of in the context of American liberalism's larger shift away from class issues. Although this movement quickened after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision and the resulting increased interest in racial issues, it also had roots in an earlier eclipse of labor unions as the essential defender of the rights of the working class. As Steve Fraser has demonstrated, "the political chemistry of the New Deal worked a double transformation: the ascendancy of labor and the eclipse of the 'labor question.'" Essentially, the New Deal struck a compromise between corporate America and the union. Through the National Labor Relations Act, the unions gained "institutional stability and normalizing of the collective

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[12]Ira Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?" *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

bargaining relationship." In return, "the corporation expected maintenance of order and discipline and recognition of its prerogatives." Calls for workers' revolt were no longer appropriate in an age in which the job of the union had become the assurance of the American standard of living for the working class.[13] Therefore, absolute duty to the corporation was required of the workforce. In turn, workers enjoyed the perquisites of postwar affluence. This process of "interclass accommodation," Nelson Lichtenstein argues, was furthered by the weakened position in which "labor liberalism" found itself vis-à-vis Sugrue's middle-class "rights-based" liberalism. First, as some southern politicians feared the New Deal's potential challenge to systems of segregation, southern agricultural interests defected from the New Deal order. Furthermore, they were disillusioned by the failure of programs designed to save southern agriculture. Second, manufacturing interests were greatly strengthened by their wartime alliances with the state. Lastly, the Democrat's traditional power base in the cities was being splintered along racial lines.[14]

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[13]Steve Fraser, "The 'Labor Question,'" *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

[14]Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era," *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

As class-based issues fell to the wayside, poverty either became invisible (as most Great Society reformers would claim in the 1960s) or was viewed in terms of "conventional economic discourse." This discourse held that some amount of poverty was a necessary and even desirable evil because it assured the prosperity of the majority. In order to maintain a high level of productivity, a labor surplus was necessary. Having a constant supply of labor kept inflation under control. The only way out of poverty, therefore, was to become a productive member of society and thereby to share in its abundance. The contradiction is obvious; it cannot be had both ways. How could every citizen enjoy the trappings of the affluent society if that society's wealth was at least partly based on the necessity to keep a certain number of people in poverty so as to form a surplus labor force? Conventional wisdom, nonetheless, held that increased production would benefit all. But as John Kenneth Galbraith pointed out, "This latter is untrue. Increasing aggregate output leaves a self-perpetuating margin of poverty at the very base of the income pyramid. . . .Production has [only] eliminated the more acute tensions associated with inequality."[15] These tensions would become

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[15]This "conventional wisdom" was the main target of Galbraith's critique of postwar America in *The Affluent Society* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1958); see especially chapter 22, "The Position of Poverty." The above quote is from 79-80.

apparent at the turn of the decade. But during the immediate postwar period, they were largely invisible as the majority of the nation was enjoying economic abundance.

Henry R. Luce made good use of the discourse of affluence in his February 1941 *Life* editorial in which he called on the nation to make the twentieth century "The American Century."[16] Luce was concerned primarily with America's position in international affairs, believing that it stood on the brink of becoming the "dominant power in the world." Yet, he argued, the nation was confused and lacked a spirit equal to this task. There was, however, a cure: "to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit." For Luce, this was a heavy burden to bear. For the first time ever, humankind had the ability to produce "all the material needs of the entire human family." The United States was to take the lead: "The promise of adequate production for all mankind, the 'more abundant life'" was a characteristically "American promise." It was America's duty to help feed the hungry a destitute of the world. In this way, Luce promoted an image of America as abundantly wealthy, "rich in food, rich in clothes, rich in

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[16]Henry R. Luce, "The American Century," *Life* 10.7 (February 17, 1941), 61-65.

entertainment and amusement, rich in leisure, rich." The nation was exceptional because of its ability to produce wealth for its own people as well as the people of the world. The reality, however, was that it had never even accomplished the former, let alone the latter.

Though blind to cracks in the image of American affluence, Luce did sense a threat to America's promise. This was the specter of "planned economies." After all, he believed, "the abundant life is predicated on Freedom. . . .Without Freedom, there will be no abundant life. With Freedom, there can be." It was, therefore, a major goal of "a truly *American* internationalism" to combat Hitler's planned fascist state (and later Communism). Only without governmental interference in economic matters could America make this century its own, extend its influence over the globe, and promote democracy and affluence. Luce declared, "It is for America and America alone to determine whether a system of free economic enterprise - an economic order compatible with freedom and progress - shall or shall not prevail in this century."

Thirteen years later, in *People of Plenty*, David Potter expanded upon Luce's examination of mid-century American exceptionalism. For Potter, abundance was central to all things that could definitively be called "American." It had created a unique American democracy, defined the nation's mission in the world, had constructed a status-less society, and most importantly shaped the American individual's

behavior and character. "It approaches the commonplace," he claimed, "to observe that the factor of relative abundance is, by general consent, a basic condition of American life." This abundance was created not only by the nation's bountiful natural resources, but also by the extraordinary resourcefulness of its citizens. These elements combined were "vital in supplying the flow of usable goods which constitutes American abundance." This standard of production, however, could not be maintained without liberty. Each individual had to be free to seek opportunity in an open market. Abundance had made the availability of these opportunities equal for all Americans.[17]

Abundance, according to Potter, shaped the character and view of the American citizen from her or his birth. It effected the child's physical environment and what he or she ate, and it also determined parents' attitudes toward raising children: "By reason of the desire of his parents that he should excel in the mobility race and give proof during his youth of the qualities which will make him a winner in later life, he is exposed to the stimuli of competition before he leaves the nursery." Inevitably, the American child would be successful in economic competition since there was enough of "the pie" to go around. In America, it was not finite. Potter briefly pays heed to

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[17]David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1954), 84-93.

counterevidence - "such as the treatment of American Negroes" - but quickly dismisses it as unable to invalidate his generalizations. After all, he wrote, as "mobility became note merely an optional privilege but almost a mandatory obligation. . . .The man who failed to meet this obligation had, to a certain extent, defaulted in his duty to society." Any "minor position" in American society was regarded as "the penalty for and the proof of personal failure." There simply was no excuse outside the individual for not partaking of the nation's abundance. At a time in which the majority of Americans enjoyed affluence, anyone not able to obtain middle-class status was viewed as an anomaly and easy explanations for their "failure" were constructed.[18]

The rise of the middle class to majority status, however, did not escape criticism of its own. Several social scientists took pleasure in noting the postwar society's alleged slavishness, especially its slavishness to larger productive forces. The most bitter of these commentators was C. Wright Mills who skewered the ascendant middle class in his 1951 classic *White Collar*. He found the new middle class in a deep state of alienation: "What men are interested in is not always what is to their interest; the troubles they are aware of are not always the ones that beset them." Mills recognized the great shift of interest from labor to the

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[18]*Ibid*, 207, 118-22, 96-7, 105.

American standard of living. This new concern brought with it certain anxieties, most notably the infamous Keeping-Up-With-the-Joneses syndrome, or what Mills called "status panic." For many members of the middle class, their status vis-à-vis their neighbors was the greatest worry that beset them. For Mills, however, the real reason for anxiety was the loss of liberty that accompanied interclass accommodation. The blurring of state and economic bureaucracies and the rise of the "managerial demiurge" threatened intellectual freedom and made "cheerful robots" of the American workforce. "Unlike farmers, and unlike wage-workers," he wrote, "white collar employees were born too late to have even a brief day of autonomy; their structural position and available strategy make them rearguarders rather than movers and shakers of historic change. Their unionization is a unionization into the main drift and serves to incorporate them as part of the newest interest to be vested in the liberal state. . . .If the future of democracy in America is imperiled, it is not by any labor movement, but by its absence, and the substitution for it of a new set of vested interests."[19]

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[19]C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford UP, 1951), xix, 63-111, 233, 239, 322-23. Similarly, Lichtenstein argues that labor became just another interest group in the 1940s; see "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining," 123.

Five years later, in *The Organization Man*, the sociologist William H. Whyte extended Mills's argument. Whyte mourned the death of what he labeled the "Protestant ethic" of individualism and competition. In economic thought, this competition was, of course, to take place in a totally open market. But with the rise of bureaucracy in New Deal and wartime America, this ethic had been eclipsed by the "social ethic" or "organization life." He argued that "the dominant ideological drift in organization life is toward (1) idolatry of the system and (2) the misuse of science to achieve this." As in Mills, the new middle class willfully gave itself over to the "organization," whether that be the state, the corporation, or, as was likely, both. In fact, "the goals of the individual and the goals of the organization will work out to be one and the same. The young men have no cynicism about the 'system,' and very little skepticism - they don't see it as something to be bucked, but as something to be co-operated with." What was good for the organization was thus good for the "organization man" and its fate became his.[20]

Whyte went further than Mills, however, and explored the mechanisms that established feelings of organizational belongingness. These mechanisms were crucial, he argued, "for there is always the common thread that a man must

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[20]William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 171, 129.

belong and that he must be unhappy if he does not belong rather completely." The key to maintaining the organization was through a calm and ordered life. Life was ordered by scientism which, to be distinguished from science itself, was false and designed to achieve certain a priori ends. Scientism was most blatant in testing of all sorts, especially scholastic and employment testing. Whether manifested in psychological or basic academic skills tests, such scientism was designed to locate each member of society in a certain place from which he or she could best serve the organization. The resulting hierarchy was made to look natural and, of course, as if it best served the needs of the individual. In effect, Whyte argued, the tests "are loyalty tests, or rather, tests of potential loyalty. Neither in the questions nor in the evaluation of them are the tests neutral; they are loaded with values, organization values, and the result is a set of yardsticks that reward the conformist, the pedestrian, the unimaginative - at the expense of the exceptional individual without whom no society, organization or otherwise, can flourish."[21] The stakes were no less than the possible death of creative society. In exchange for such freedom, affluence and security were provided the majority of Americans.

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[21] *Ibid*, 32-46, 182.

This majority was most readily found in the suburbs. As Kenneth T. Jackson has demonstrated, preference for suburban life stretches far back into the nineteenth century.[22] Yet with the help of the federal government, the postwar period witnessed an unprecedented rate of suburbanization. During the Depression, foreclosures took place in unprecedented numbers. In an effort to protect the small homeowner as well as real estate interests, the Roosevelt Administration created the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) that refinanced thousands of mortgages and granted low-interest loans for those who had lost their homes. One of every five mortgages on urban dwellings would be refinanced by the HOLC.[23] As the first large-scale federal intervention into this market, the HOLC extended the New Deal's rights-based liberalism into the realm of housing. From now on, working and middle class Americans could look to their government to help secure decent housing for them and their families.

Since one-third of America's unemployed during the Depression were construction workers, the Roosevelt administration sought ways to jump-start the building industry. Somewhat reluctantly, the President agreed to the

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[22]Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

[23]William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 53; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 195-203.

creation of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). The FHA was designed to stimulate building without the government having to make massive interventions into the economy. Under the FHA, the government cooperated with private lending institutions by insuring long-term mortgage loans to families planning on building or repairing their homes. Later, with the adoption of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the Roosevelt administration helped military personnel buy new homes through the Veteran's Administration (VA). Between 1945 and 1960, the FHA counted more than 4 million new housing starts and the VA counted more than 2.4 million. Through these measures, the federal government subsidized the growth of the American suburbs.[24]

Suburbia, of course, was not without its critics. Even William H. Whyte, who provided perhaps the most sympathetic take on the social system of suburbia, believed that it reflected the conformity of "organization man" himself. In fact, allegiances to organizations actually proliferated in the suburbs. Whether involved in the local PTA, or more informal block clubs and Kaffeeklatsches, suburbanites were "imprisoned in brotherhood." Lewis Mumford was a bit more scathing in his assessment of the suburban "low-grade uniform environment," and described it as "a multitude of

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[24]Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*, 134-35; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 203-18, 326.

uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold."[25]

Yet, beneath this seemingly serene, if not dull, surface was a world of worry. This new suburban middle class was quite mobile, both in terms of geography and in terms of status, and this mobility could conceivably lead in either direction on the social ladder. Rootlessness for some was to be feared. This new generation that had grown out of the Depression was extremely willing to defend its interests. As Whyte put it, "They are not going back, and if their fears were exploited, their discontent could become ugly indeed. If our economy has an Achilles' heel, this might be it."[26] Indeed, threats to postwar affluence, most notably Communism and an economic underclass, loomed large in the public imagination.

Affluence itself, however, had created means to ward off the danger. First of all, the suburbs allowed for

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[25]Whyte, *Organization Man*, 267-68, 365; Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1961), 486.

[26]Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 267, 309.

insular living. Undesirables of all stripes could be and largely were excluded from new developments. These included the poor and racial minorities as well as Communists. William Levitt, one of the founders of the (in)famous Levittowns, was open about his refusal to sell new homes in his developments to blacks. In 1960, of the Long Island Levittown's 82,000 inhabitants, not a single one was black. Levitt was equally open with his thoughts on the anticommunism fostered by his housing projects: "No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do." Thus, the increasing geographic mobility of many middle-class citizens, as one 1950s real estate advertiser phrased it, allowed them to "escape from cities too big, too polluted, too crowded, too strident, to call home."[27] This description of urban America was a thinly veiled reference to the ascendancy of a racialized economic "underclass" in the nation's cities. The affluent majority and its desire to maintain its wealth at all cost combined to refuse radical class politics a place on the national agenda and fostered American anticommunism.

Many came to appreciate the benefits accrued from such an ordered, if seemingly slavish, life. These benefits were nurtured in the suburban home and reached their highest expression, as Elaine Tyler May has argued, with a domestic

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[27]Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 241; Levitt quoted, 162; advertisement quoted, 285.

ideology centered around the nuclear family. The home itself, in this domestic ideology, became a safe place, a "haven in a heartless world."[28] The home was held out as a compensation for the time given over to the workplace. But on a larger plane, May argues, the home became important for the haven it provided from the dangers of cold war. It was first and foremost a symbol of abundance and the fruits of American capitalism and consumerism. It was also indicative of the era's "containment culture." This most obviously referred to the containment of Communism in foreign affairs, but also provided a framework for constructing security through a controllable domestic environment.[29] The home, therefore, became the prime symbol of middle-class respectability at the same time that it served to allay fears generated by that novel status and perceived threats to it.

Keeping the domestic front in order, therefore, was a task of utmost importance. It was left to the suburban housewife and, therefore, reinforced traditional gender roles. In her analysis of the Kelly Longitudinal Survey of

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[28]The phrase is used ironically by Christopher Lasch who argues that "the sanctity of the home is a sham in a world dominated by giant corporations and by the apparatus of mass promotion." See *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), xvii.

[29]Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 13-16.

600 white middle-class men and women with families, May notes the striking willingness of women to surrender their independence for domestic and familial duties. The most important of these duties was motherhood. This postwar "revival of the cult of motherhood" enforced "the notion that motherhood was the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality." This was demonstrated not only by the blatant adherence to this notion in myriad pieces of popular culture, but by the increased birth rate, the increased marriage rate for females, and the lowering of the marriage age for females and males in the 1950s.[30] Clearly, as the men in gray flannel suits were making their daily duties to The Organization, their wives were ideally at home, raising the children and keeping an orderly domestic front. The alternative was a fall from their newly gained, and very comfortable, middle-class status.

During the 1950s, the specter of Communism consistently threatened to bring about this fall. Central to the story at hand is the aftermath of the Soviet's early entry into the space race. The launching of the first Sputnik in October 1957 caught the nation by surprise and gave the Russians a psychological boost in their competition with the United States. Although the Eisenhower administration largely denied it, the Soviet's success was perceived as a vital

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[30]Ibid, *Homeward Bound*, 140; statistical tables, 6-7.

threat to America's national security. When, less than a month later, Sputnik II was launched, the "national crisis of confidence" quickened. The final blow to American confidence came with the disastrous failure of its first attempt to launch a satellite into space. The fiery collapse of the Navy's rocket was greeted, in the words of one engineer who worked on the project, with "complete disbelief. . . .This just couldn't be. The fire died down and we saw America's supposed response to the 200-pound Soviet satellite - our four-pound grapefruit - lying amid the scattered glowing debris, still beeping away, unharmed."[31]

Scapegoats were needed and were quick in coming. The most significant among them was the American school system. A book entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read, and What You Can Do About It* became an immediate bestseller after having languished on bookstore shelves for two years. The President of Harvard urged the federal government to devote more of the GNP to education. Meanwhile, six months after the launch of Sputnik, his colleague at the University of Kansas declared, "The message which this little ball carries to Americans, if they would but stop and listen, is that in the last half of the twentieth century. . .nothing is as important as the trained and educated mind. This sphere

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[31]Quoted in David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993), 627.

tells us not of the desirability, but of the utmost necessity of the highest quality and expanded dimensions of the educational effort."[32]

The most stinging criticism of America's schools came from Admiral Hyman Rickover, the man credited with the development of the atomic submarine. In his 1959 book, *Education and Freedom*, Rickover decried the apparent superiority of the Soviet educational system vis-à-vis its American counterpart and accused John Dewey's liberal ideas of being responsible. Far from advocating the guaranteed availability of schooling to all American children regardless of economic or intellectual background, Rickover believed that the most talented and gifted were being neglected. Instead of quantity, he advocated quality: "Now that we have been aroused to the dangerous effect which poor education has on our strength and influence as a world power, let not men of little vision with their soothing words hold back our righteous anger. We must sweep clean the temple of learning and bring back quality." As Herbert M. Kliebard has pointed out, there was an element of "social efficiency thinking" in Rickover's critique. Intellectual growth was not an end in itself, he believed. Rather, it was a means to strengthening the nation's position as a major

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[32]Ibid, 626; Chancellor of U of Kansas quoted in Henry J. Perkinson, *The Imperfect Panacea: American Faith in Education, 1865-1965* (New York: Random House, 1968), 214.

world power.[33] Thus, in a manner all too typical of postwar affluent society, Rickover held up education as a way to further the interests of the nation (The Organization) as a whole. It was not so much that the interests of the individual were subordinated to that larger aim, but that his or her interests were deemed identical with those of the nation at large. The school was not a place to pursue one's own selfish goals, but a place to make these goals match the greater good of the nation. In this case, that meant that American schools were to provide properly trained manpower for the ongoing competition with the Soviets. Only if the schools were reformed could the United States catch up and secure its postwar affluence from the Communist threat.

Congress and the Eisenhower administration cemented these aims in public policy when they passed the National Defense Education Act less than one year after the launching of the first Sputnik. The act was mainly concerned with fostering further interest in mathematics, the sciences, and foreign languages. The first paragraph read, "The Congress hereby finds and declares that the security of the Nation requires the fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women. The present

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[33]Hyman Rickover, *Education and Freedom* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1959), 207; Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 264-66; Perkinson, *The Imperfect Panacea*, 214-15.

emergency demands that additional and more adequate educational opportunities be made available. The defense of this Nation depends upon the mastery of modern techniques developed from complex scientific principles." But unlike earlier educational reform efforts that offered funds directly to professional educators, the federal government further showed its distrust of the school system by funneling money through the National Science Foundation. The centralization of curriculum development in a body of experts culled from major universities reversed the traditional location of educational reform in education departments proper and foreshadowed the professionalization of reform that would firmly take hold in the early 1960s.[34]

Yet, the loss of faith in American schools was not matched by a loss of faith in education. Government officials, antipoverty reformers, and even critics like Admiral Rickover still believed in education as the most efficient route to an affluent, productive, democratic society. The schools may have failed in their mission to educate responsible citizens, but educational reform was far preferable to major changes in economic structure or distribution. It was a truly American alternative - not only would advances in education contain the Soviets, but they

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[34]Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 266-70.

would accomplish this task without tampering with American capitalism.

The most visible characteristics of the postwar years, then, were affluence and the rise of a new, professional middle class that was largely suburban and whose interests were commonly thought of as identical to those of the nation as a whole. Because these trends affected a majority of the American population and because, for good reason, they were so very popular, dissent or difference was either viewed as subversive and quickly squashed (as in McCarthyism) or was overlooked all together. The latter, I would like to argue, pertains to the position of the poor in the postwar years until the reawakening, on a large scale, of awareness of poverty in the early 1960s. Yet, without a doubt, poverty was alive and well amidst America's widespread affluence and was at least as devastating for those who suffered it as at any other time in history. In fact, however, it became even more vicious for its neglect and its increasing concentration in the fifteen or so years after the end of World War II and the nation's recovery from depression.

As Jacqueline Jones has demonstrated, the postwar years witnessed a continuation of poor people's movements in search of a better life. She notes that the 1950s was the decade of greatest out-migration from the South. Fifteen percent of whites from Kentucky and West Virginia left their home states while 25 percent of blacks from Mississippi and Alabama left. Overall, one out of every ten black

southerners left for the Midwest, Northeast, or the far West. Continuing a search that began for many poor southerners during the Civil War and amidst the ensuing debates over southern labor, the majority of these people headed for northern industrial plants. Most of them had been agricultural workers for whom opportunities were declining in the postwar period. Mechanical cotton-picking had eliminated the need for 80 percent of the southern sharecropping force. In areas of rural nonagricultural work, joblessness was on the rise. The Appalachian counties of West Virginia lost 25 percent of their population in the 1950s while their counterparts in Kentucky lost 35 percent. With declines in the mining and rail industries, unemployment reached a staggering 80 percent in some areas of Kentucky.[35]

Ironically, these people left the South at the same moment that job opportunities for unskilled workers in the major industrial centers of the North were becoming scarce. The jobs suitable for unskilled workers were commonly the most menial, dangerous, and lowest-paid. African Americans were disproportionately represented in this job sector while their white counterparts were much more likely to be moved up the social ladder because of preferences in hiring, promotion, and apprenticeship. But with advances in

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[35]Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed*, 209, 230.

automation, unskilled jobs were declining in number. As Thomas Sugrue has demonstrated with Detroit, deindustrialization truly began the process of urban decay. With federal complicity, capital moved out of northern cities and into the suburbs and the Sunbelt (especially with the rise in Cold War military-industrial complexes). The result was devastating for those confined to postindustrial urban centers. Already experiencing extremely high levels of postwar segregation and confinement to inner cities, poor blacks were hardest hit by these discrepancies in postwar affluence.[36]

Postwar attitudes and beliefs about poverty and affluence condensed on the one major piece of antipoverty legislation to have emerged from the 1950s. Although not signed into law until the arrival of the Kennedy administration in Washington, the Area Redevelopment Act had a history stretching back to 1954. The debates that filled

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[36]For a detailed case study of industrial decline in Detroit, see Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, especially 89-178. Another important case study is John T. Cumbler, *A Social History of Economic Decline: Business, Politics, and Work in Trenton* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989). See also Michael B. Katz, *The Underclass Debate* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) especially the essays by Joe William Trotter, Jr., and Harvey Kantor and Barbara Brenzel. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton argue that racial residential segregation was the "principal structural feature" responsible for the rise of the black urban underclass; see *America Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

these seven years provide a glimpse into the workings of some defining traits of postwar American political and economic thought in the making of public policy. The most important of these traits concerns beliefs about the proper extent of government involvement in the workings of American capitalism vis-à-vis local or individual involvement. An intersecting issue was the assigning of blame for poverty. Was it to be regarded as temporary, a sign that production needed to be quickened? Or was it to be regarded as structural? If so, was it benignly normal or did it suggest structural shortcomings of the capitalist system of production itself? The differences and similarities in the responses to these questions tell the story of why so many people in government overlooked poverty as a major public issue. Some of them realized its importance too late and it ended their careers. For others, it was this issue that brought them to power in 1958 and 1960 and helped create the atmosphere in which the War on Poverty was born.

Unemployment as an entity, of course, was not new. It was actually one of the more visible cracks in the image of the affluent society. Yet in the face of general prosperity, it was regarded as a minor crack. Henry Luce declared in 1941 that the paradox of privation amidst affluence was an "inherently better" paradox than those of other time periods since America had "poverty and starvation. . .only in the

midst of plenty."[37] President Truman, in his first economic report in 1947, noted the existence of labor surpluses in certain areas. After the war economy had slowed, unemployment came to be concentrated in what came to be called "depressed areas." Truman noted that approximately two million Americans were without work but believed that this amount was essential to the nation's progress, claiming "this is probably close to the minimum unavoidable in a free economy of great mobility such as ours." Although calling for a more equitable distribution of unemployment, the President hoped that the Employment Act of 1947 would maintain that necessary level of unemployment.[38]

Poverty as a social problem, however, did appear in congressional debates several times in the 1950s. The real breakthrough came when the recession of 1953-54 hit.[39] In March 1954, the Eisenhower administration appointed a task force to study and report on local unemployment. In Congress, legislators began to design bills that would provide aid to the worst hit areas. The key player, and the

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[37]Henry Luce, "The American Century," 64.

[38]*Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry Truman, 1947* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 14, 19-20.

[39]The following narrative of the events surrounding the Area Redevelopment Act is put together from James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1968), 60-85; and Sar A. Levitan, *Federal Aid to Depressed Areas: An Evaluation of the Area Redevelopment Administration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1964), 1-29.

one best positioned to assert some influence on any possible legislation, was Senator Paul Douglas, a Democrat from Illinois, who was at that time the chairman of the Senate's labor subcommittee and of the Joint Economic Committee. In the fall of 1954, Douglas took a campaign tour through southern Illinois where he became convinced of the seriousness of the problem and came to believe that the federal government had a responsibility to aid those in need. The need in this region was indeed immense. Unemployment there would prove to be among the highest in the nation during the mid-1950s. In 1956, 11.4 percent of workers in Harrisburg were without work and in West Frankfort, 15.8 percent were unemployed. In both cities, the number would rise above 19 percent by 1958.[40]

Douglas really began work on the issue after Eisenhower's Economic Report was released in January of 1955. The report asserted that the only role the federal government could play in economic matters was a very limited one. In very general terms, it said that government should foster a "high and stable level of employment in the Nation at large," something it was already held to by the Employment Act of 1946. It went on to declare that "a large part of the adjustment of depressed areas to new economic

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[40]All unemployment statistics used come from U.S. Senate, Committee on Banking and Currency, Area Redevelopment Act, Report 61, 87th Congress, 1st Sess., March 8, 1961, 69-74.

conditions both can be and should be carried out by the local citizens themselves."[41] Nowhere did it suggest that the government should extend aid to these areas in any direct way. Rather, the idea was to use their plight to push for a quickening of the economy through federal fiscal intervention. The unemployment suffered by people in "depressed areas," the administration believed, was only temporary and certainly not structural. The solution, therefore, lay in the system itself and not in a larger restructuring of it. It also did not exist in extending public services to these areas. Ultimately, in a subtle case of "blaming the victim," the responsibility for the alleviation of their plight belonged to the residents of the depressed areas themselves.

For a Democratic Senator, the inaction and apparent insensitivity of the Republican administration in regard to the poor served as a call to partisan arms. The Democratic majority of Douglas's Joint Economic Committee issued a demand for federal movement on the issue. Specifically, they called for the establishment of public work projects, long-term credit for new business and industry, technical assistance in studying and solving unemployment, retraining of jobless workers, and an extension of unemployment benefits for those being retrained. In 1961, when Kennedy

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[41]Quoted in Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 62.

signed the Area Redevelopment Act, it contained forms of all these things.

On July 28, 1955, Douglas submitted a bill (S. 2663) whose purpose was "to provide assistance to communities, industries, enterprises, and individuals of depressed areas to enable them to so adjust their productive activity as to effectively alleviate excessive unemployment within such areas." In explaining why his bill was so important, the Senator pointed out that "it is inhuman to let these areas rot away. The lives of too many human beings are at stake to sit by and do nothing for these pockets of depressed industries and localities while much of the rest of the country enjoys a high standard of life." By appealing to a basic human decency, Douglas was able to attain the moral high ground on this issue and contrast the Democratic-backed bill with the President's ideas on the issue. In a direct indictment of the President, Douglas asserted that "the administration has done virtually nothing for these areas. Yet we know that the unemployment problem will not be solved by continuing high economic levels. . . .That is to say, these areas have not participated in any major way in the recent upswing in economic activity and they probably will not do so in any great degree."[42]

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[42]*Congressional Record*, Vol. 101 (July 28, 1955), 11754, 11756.

Douglas's remarks reveal an obvious break with the administration's approach to poverty but also a shared underlying attitude toward the nation's economic system. The difference, obviously, was that Douglas and his Democratic colleagues who sponsored the bill (including John F. Kennedy) favored government intervention in the economies of these regions. Both, however, assumed that the answer to these problems resided in the capitalist economic system itself. Both called for an adjustment in the "productive activity" of depressed areas. No one, not even a former leftwing New Dealer like Douglas, would dare to suggest in 1955 that the solution was a radical restructuring of the entire economic system of the United States. Instead, capitalism could be made to benefit all citizens. The difference was that, for some, the initiative had to be taken by poor citizens themselves; for others, citizens needed a helping hand from the government.

In terms of rhetoric, however, even these differences soon disappeared. Sensing that the Democrats had gained the upper hand on this issue, the Eisenhower administration reversed its take on aid to depressed areas and, in the President's Economic Report of 1956, called for "bolder measures" to be enacted by a federal area assistance program.[43] That January, Senator H. Alexander Smith, a New

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[43]Quoted in Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 63.

Jersey Republican, submitted the administration's bill to Congress. The differences from the Democratic bill were found in the particulars and not the ideology. Both versions of the legislation, for example, continued to hold out a primary role for the poor in their own recovery from depression. Furthermore, as Douglas said, the purpose of the bill was to enable them to "adjust their productive activity." Both parties, therefore, agreed in their belief that the problem of poverty had roots in the shortcomings of poor people themselves, whether these were shortcomings in production or in responsibility. Neither, of course, considered larger redistributive or structural change. The differences were in calculations of the government's share in the recovery effort. Smith's bill called for less loan money for industrial facilities, was more stringent with loan terms and eligibility requirements, and did not allow for retraining subsistence allowances or loans and grants for public facilities that would be necessary to attract industry to depressed areas.

In the short debate that ensued, only Barry Goldwater - who would, eight years later, become the most vocal opponent of the War on Poverty - voiced a firm opposition to the very idea of federal aid to depressed areas. Senator Kennedy led the debate on the floor on 25 July. He began by asserting, "The responsibility of the Federal Government to aid [depressed] areas is commonly acknowledged. . . .These communities cannot escape from the economic doldrums unless

some Federal aid is extended to them." Compromising with the administration's position, he continued, "It should be stressed, however, that [the bill] does not assume that the Federal Government will take over the total responsibility of rehabilitating distressed areas. On the contrary, we fully recognize that there is no substitute for self-help and that the initiative to rehabilitate a community must come from the residents in the area. We only propose that Federal help should supplement the needs of areas striving for rehabilitation."[44]

Goldwater was utterly unimpressed by his colleague's politicking. He called the proposed legislation "an unwarranted invasion of private rights. . . .premised upon the faulty hypothesis that Federal intervention is the only alternative and sole redemption to the problem of so-called distressed areas." He claimed that such conditions "are normal to the economic cycle of American enterprise." Charging the legislation with betraying "the time-honored virtues of incentive and self-sufficiency," Goldwater warned the Congress and the American public of "the awful specter of the planned super-state." The Senator concluded, "I intend to rise at every opportunity to try to defeat those who are endeavoring to destroy the last bastion of freedom

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[44]*Congressional Record*, Vol. 102 (July 25, 1956), 14438.

in this world - the American private-enterprise system."[45] Goldwater thus espoused the conventional economic wisdom of the normalcy of privation and the enduring faith in the ability of the economy to be either self-correcting or correctable by the individual efforts of those who had fallen behind.

As it turned out, Goldwater need not have been so worried. The Republican leadership of the House Rules Committee failed to report the Senate legislation before the end of the eighty-fourth Congress. Furthermore, the administration's bill was never allowed onto the floor. When Democratic Representative Daniel J. Flood of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, sought a compromise and the release of the administration's bill, he was advised "that the administration was adamant and against any bill whatsoever" by Republican Representatives after they had conferred with the Department of Commerce.[46] In fact, Commerce Secretary Sinclair Weeks may have been instrumental in killing the legislation. Senator Smith had already expressed the administration's unwillingness to create an independent Area Redevelopment Administration and its desire to house any such agency in the Commerce Department. The Democrats, of course, feared that the legislation's mission would be

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[45]*Congressional Record*, Vol. 102 (July 25, 1956), 14445.

[46]Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 65.

seriously compromised by any agency charged with the fostering of production and trade rather than with the relief of depressed areas.[47]

In 1957, the legislation never saw the light of day. In the midst of the second recession of the decade, Congress and the Eisenhower administration were unwilling to agree on any new, expensive federal programs. Douglas submitted his bill again but the Senate Banking and Currency Committee, headed by Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, never even voted on it. And in the House, no hearings on depressed areas were ever scheduled that year.

Facing a tough 1958 re-election campaign in Maine, Republican Senator Frederick Payne decided to break with his party and offer a compromise to Douglas. Their bill (S. 3683) successfully navigated the requisite committees and passed in both chambers of Congress only to be vetoed by the President. Calling it an "unsound program," Eisenhower claimed that it would "greatly diminish local responsibility." The loan terms, he believed, were too liberal and he repeated the call for placing the program in the Department of Commerce.[48] Two days later, Senator Payne lost his re-election bid. Later that season, the two

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[47]*Congressional Record*, Vol. 102 (July 25, 1956), 14441.

[48]The President's veto message of September 6, 1958, is printed in the *Congressional Record*, Vol. 106 (May 3, 1960), 9290.

Republican Senators from West Virginia were also defeated. The Republican administration's failure to extend aid to depressed areas in these states had cost it key Congressional support.

Douglas once again introduced an area redevelopment bill (S. 722) in 1959. After being held up in the House Rules Committee for almost a full year, it finally came to a vote in the Senate in 1960. In dramatic fashion, John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey flew back from their campaign in West Virginia to cast their votes. (West Virginia, as we shall see, proved to be a key primary state for Kennedy whose experience there helped launch the antipoverty measures of the 1960s.) Once again, the President vetoed it, declaring that the bill "contains certain features which I find even more objectionable than those I found unacceptable in the 1958 bill." He called the bill "defective" and claimed that it "would squander the Federal taxpayers' money where there is only temporary economic difficulty." Echoing his previous veto message, Eisenhower asserted that the proposed legislation would weaken local and individual initiative in the recovery of depressed areas. Election-year lines were quickly drawn and Douglas attacked the Republican administration's inaction. The President's message, he told the Senate, "betrays ignorance, it is unctuous and hypocritical, and it is greatly mistaken in its attitude toward what is happening in this country." He called for forthrightness on the issue: "Let there be no hypocrisy in

this matter. The administration is opposed to area redevelopment. It is opposed to helping the areas of this country with high and chronic unemployment. At the same time it is opposed to aiding these areas, it is demanding $4 billion for foreign aid."[49]

By 1960, unemployment in some areas of the nation had reached levels unseen since the 1930s. In southeastern Kentucky, where unemployment was over 13 percent in some cities, an unemployed father of eight children shot himself in the head with his shotgun, no longer able to bear the deterioration of his home and the health of his children.[50] In Beckley and Welch, West Virginia, unemployment stood at 24.4 and 29.4 percent respectively. In the Scranton-Wilkes Barre area of northeastern Pennsylvania, unemployment was over 12 percent. The numbers were not much better in the old textile towns of Massachusetts or in such urban centers as Newark, Philadelphia, and Toledo. By this time, poverty had become a major Democratic issue. Recognizing that poverty played a major role in his nomination and then election as President, Kennedy signed the Area Redevelopment Act in May of 1961. It was the first major legislation of the New

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[49]*Congressional Record*, Vol. 106 (May 13, 1960), 10302-04.

[50]Testimony of Thomas E. Gish in Unemployment Problems, Hearings before the Senate Special Committee on Unemployment Problems, 86 Congress, 1st Sess. (Nov. 17, 1959), 2543-44.

Frontier and it would help pave the way for Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

Postwar affluence helped most Americans achieve a comfortable middle-class status, but it left many behind. These people became all but invisible in the postwar years as poverty was no longer a widespread, even if temporary, condition but was seen as a special case, an aberration. Concentrated in deindustrializing urban and rural areas, the poor suffered an "economic redundancy" and found themselves with few advocates in public policy corners. With one important exception whose failure proves the rule, poverty dropped out of the public and governmental eye for much of the 1950s. "Urban economic troubles were marginalized in a national debate that was framed by discourses of growth, affluence, and consensus," as Sugrue puts it.[51] The same can be said for rural poverty. The ultimate failure of the federal government to provide relief to the nation's poor in the 1950s had its roots in these discourses. Because of this postwar emphasis on economic growth, production, and affluence, those who were poor were simply defined as unproductive members of society. The belief that the responsibility for this "failure" belonged mostly to the poor themselves ultimately prevented the passage of area

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[51]Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 155; Jones, *The Dispossessed*, 238.

redevelopment. With the decline of class politics and the rise of anticommunism, American liberalism moved toward the political center and public policy debates largely ignored the plight of the burgeoning underclass. It was not until the turn of the next decade that important and powerful people began to take notice of the widespread existence of poverty amidst America's affluence and decided to do something about it.

Chapter 2

CULTURES OF POVERTY: SCHOOLING, SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY, AND THE POOR

Yet how could the affluent society come to grips with so much privation amidst such plenty? This was the primary dilemma of the War on Poverty years. As the majority of the public was enjoying its prosperity and as the major locus of political power shifted out of the cities and rural areas and into the predominately white suburbs, there was little incentive or desire to make the sweeping structural changes that would have been necessary to truly attack poverty. During the Depression, the nation may have been willing to accept such New Deal efforts at income redistribution as social security and unemployment insurance. But amidst a widespread prosperity, any such plan would have been exceedingly difficult to sell to the nation, let alone to pass through Congress. From the beginning, the nation's relative wealth and social atmosphere "ruled out any serious attempt to redistribute wealth, guarantee incomes, or tamper with the structure of American capitalism."[52]

The answer was to design, publicize, and (for the public) swallow the antipoverty program with a complicated

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[52]Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 259.

mixture of historical attitudes toward the poor and a genuine desire by a new generation of postwar reformers to address the discrepancies in the American economy. Ultimately, these desires - as well intentioned as they may have been - came up against entrenched biases and the politics of consensus. In fact, however, the Johnson administration never came close to conceiving a radical plan. Furthermore, actions taken by both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations sought to strengthen capitalism and continue the unprecedented economic growth. Walter Heller, Kennedy's chief economist, proposed an antipoverty program to the President only after they were assured passage of their 1963 tax cut. Johnson did the same, signing an $11.5 billion tax cut in February 1964 - six months before the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act. Moreover, some have pointed out, the antipoverty program was discussed outside the realm of central economic policy - forever focused on sustaining growth - and was put in the hands of less powerful labor economists and sociologists. The resultant programs, therefore, paid no heed to the effects of the fundamental economic processes of capitalism on the lives of the poor, to the fact that growth had left people behind. Of course, this oversight was not a problem for those who held to the belief that if someone was poor in a period of widespread affluence, it must be his or her own fault. As a result, political insiders and reformers spent much time in the early 1960s debating and designing "programs that can be

sold to the overwhelmingly middle-class electorate, without seeking to redress the class bias in the electorate itself." To sell their antipoverty programs, major players in the War on Poverty consciously or unconsciously shaped their plans to a conservative, non-material definition of poverty.[53]

Despite this non-radical approach, fears of what the antipoverty program might accomplish and concerns about its worth were quick in coming. As might be expected given his reaction to the area redevelopment proposals, Senator Barry Goldwater was the most vocal detractor. One week after Johnson's declaration of "war" in the State of the Union address, Goldwater addressed the Economic Club of New York and turned his own militaristic rhetoric against "the Santa Claus promises of the State of the Union message." He spoke of "the need for a frontal attack against Santa Claus - not the Santa Claus of the holiday season, of course, but the Santa Claus of the free lunch, the Government hand-out, the Santa Claus of something-for-nothing and something-for-everyone." In his prepared text, he claimed that the United States had already won the war on poverty and questioned the

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[53]Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 259; New York Times, 27 Feb. 1964, 1:8; Margaret Weir, Ann S. Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, "The Future of Social Policy in the United States," in Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988); Thomas F. Jackson, "The State, the Movement, and the Urban Poor: The War on Poverty and Political Mobilization in the 1960s" in Michael B. Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debate: Views From History*, 403.

worth of education and skill training: "We are told, however, that many people lack skills and cannot find jobs because they did not have an education. That's like saying that people have big feet because they wear big shoes. The fact is that most people have no skill, have had no education for the same reason - low intelligence or low ambition." His demagoguery did have its fans, like a Staten Island man who wrote to the *New York Times* asking, "Why should people who do earn a living and are willing to be responsible for their own lives be forced to support those who are not?" Concern was also expressed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors which, for the most part, did not welcome a federal program in their cities, especially one that held the potential for organizing the poor in Community Action Programs. Not keen on the thought of federal funding for organizations hostile to municipal governments, the mayors attempted to do something about it. The conference formed its own antipoverty committee and appointed Richard Daley, well-known as the mayor without whose approval absolutely no antipoverty work could be undertaken in Chicago, its head. The message was clear - city governments, wary from the beginning that their authority would be undermined by the War on Poverty, would not relinquish any power without a fight. And they never had to, as the control of funding for local CAPs was eventually handed to them.[54]

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[54]*New York Times*, 16 Jan., 1964, 21:2; 28 Jan., 1964,

The designers of the War on Poverty had to be sure that their programs did not impinge on the interests of middle-class America. Lyndon Johnson was undoubtedly aware of the potential threat posed by his political opponent in the 1964 election. The President, therefore, worked hard to convince voters that his program was designed to uphold core American values, that it would turn poor tax-eaters into middle-class taxpayers, and that it would curtail radicalism (and, later, racial violence). He even went so far as to tell the United States Chamber of Commerce, "What you have and what you own is not secure when there are men that are idle in their homes and there are young people that are adrift in the street." The War on Poverty, it was thought, would eliminate such dangers. The ultimate and most commonly expressed goal, however, was the creation of productive citizens. At a May 1965 Rose Garden press conference, Johnson remarked of Head Start that "this program this year means that 30 million man-years - the combined lifespan of these youngsters - will be spent productively and rewardingly, rather than wasted in tax-supported institutions or in welfare-supported

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30:6; U.S. Conference of Mayors, *Economic Opportunity in Cities: Local Anti-Poverty Programs* (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1966), 26-8; John C. Donovan, *The Politics of Poverty* (New York: Pegasus, 1967), 56-7; Matusow, *The Unraveling of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 248-50.

lethargy."[55] In the end, these two things - detractors from the right and class biases across the political spectrum - compromised any real hopes of redressing inequality.

Instead, the War on Poverty focused its efforts on opportunity - to the removal of barriers to the success of the poor. As Michael B. Katz has written, "No approach to poverty could be more conventional or more American." Out of an unwillingness to view the American political economy as the cause of the constant existence of poverty in the world's wealthiest nation, Katz continues, arose two alternative approaches to antipoverty work: the moral argument, which held that the poor themselves were in need of reform, and the aforementioned unnatural barriers argument. Both existed at the time the War on Poverty was declared. Though the latter was the guiding force behind much of the planning and design of the program, the moral argument also found its way into much of the rhetoric surrounding it. The barrier was the culture of the poor and they themselves were responsible for fostering this culture. In that way, this argument was a combination of both

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[55]Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 218; *Public Papers of the Presidents - Lyndon Baines Johnson, 1965*, 556. There were also voices from further to the left on the political spectrum. Saul Alinsky, for example, expressed a fear of a growing politics of consensus and its potential affects on antipoverty efforts. See Saul D. Alinsky, "The War on Poverty - Political Pornography," *The Journal of Social Issues* 21, no. 1, (1965): 41-47.

alternatives. Without this compromised stance, in fact, the "full frontal attack on poverty" may never have been launched.[56]

The most obvious arena in which such a program could be carried out was education. Since the War on Poverty defined the problem of poverty in part in cultural terms, one of its goals was the change in or replacement of the culture of the poor. The problem, defined in this way, could not be solved through economic measures. The poor were to be educated out of their culture. Specifically, the poor child was to be saved from the cultural influence of his or her parents before succumbing to the hereditary "cycle of poverty." In this way, the blame came to rest on the poor themselves and their cultural and familial environments. As researchers involved in one pre-War-on-Poverty early childhood education program wrote,

> It has been well established that the cultural background which surrounds a child affects directly his achievements in school. Children in low socio-economic areas are faced with enormous cultural hardships. The characteristics of the slum culture are poor and crowded housing, inadequate diet, untreated physical defects, lack of privacy and economic pressures -- all of these features and others contribute to the inability of the child to profit from our educational system. A lack of supervision after school hours and the fatigue with which parents meet their children after work prevent communication between adult and children. Books and even newspapers are non-existent,

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[56]Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 263.

> and interest in the child's work is secondary to the basic needs of living.

This blatant conflation of economic and "cultural hardships" as well as the emphasis on parental neglect would become permanent fixtures in the War on Poverty's conception of early childhood programs.[57]

For some reformers, this approach to poverty, like the appearance of Sputnik in the autumn skies of 1957, also signaled the failure of America's schools. They had not succeeded in turning all the nation's citizens into productive members of society and were therefore unnatural barriers to the success of poor children. If children did not succeed in school, how could they be expected to get jobs and play a part in the nation's unprecedented economic expansion? Unwilling to rely on the school system proper, the planners of the War on Poverty's early childhood education program wanted to catch poor children before they began grade school and give them a "head start" on their schooling. They had to be prepared for the predominantly middle-class world of schooling and, eventually, work. The process of becoming a productive and responsible citizen had to begin early.

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[57]Henry J. Perkinson, *The Imperfect Panacea*, especially 152-59; Patricia Sexton et al., *An Assessment of the All Day Neighborhood School Program For Culturally Deprived Children* (New York, 1965), 1.

The Head Start program was a perfect solution - it fit the atmosphere of the times and had a long tradition in sociological circles. At once, it blamed the poor themselves and poor schools but maintained a faith in education as the way out of poverty. It was logical and non-threatening. This made the Head Start program marketable to the American public. It was hoped, in fact, that Head Start, which was categorized as a Community Action Program, would divert attention from its increasingly controversial CAP colleagues and help restore the public's faltering faith in the War on Poverty and, by extension, the Johnson administration. Lady Bird Johnson, the first chairperson of Head Start, hoped that "I could help focus attention in a favorable way on some aspects of Lyndon's poverty program." After all, who could oppose a program aimed at young children, especially when it included an indictment of their parents and the environment "they provided" for their children? Thus, by combining Katz's two alternatives, a way had been found to "solve every social problem without recourse to conflict or redistribution."[58]

These ideas, however, were not pioneered by Head Start. Rather, they grew out of some strands of American sociological thought stretching at least as far back as the

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[58]Edward Zigler and Jeanette Valentine, eds., *Project Head Start: A Legacy of the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 44; Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 263.

1930s. At this time, a renewed emphasis on environmental, rather than biological explanations, for a variety of social problems came to the forefront. The literature on socially and intellectually deprived individuals had focused mostly on hereditary explanatory models. Out of this way of thinking came such studies as Henry H. Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (1916) and *The Criminal Imbecile: An Analysis of Three Remarkable Murder Cases* (1915), and the more recent work of Raymond B. Cattell. In the late 1930s, however, several social scientists began to offer alternatives to this work by emphasizing the effects of environment on deprived peoples. The most important of these was the 1939 study by Harold Skeels and Harold Dye that resulted from their research on a group of mentally retarded children in a state orphanage. After splitting this initial group into two and taking one group out of the orphanage to be raised by mentally retarded women, they discovered that those who stayed behind suffered decreases in IQ while the latter group's average IQ was raised. Several corroborating studies and some reactionary criticism followed. Yet, in the early 1960s, social environmentalists returned to Skeels and Dye's study to support their own belief in the necessity of early childhood education.[59]

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[59]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 9-10; Henry H. Goddard, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (New York: MacMillan, 1916); *The Criminal*

Out of these debates came the sociological thought of Allison Davis, a professor of education at the University of Chicago who held degrees in English, anthropology, and education. While serving as a very popular professor of English literature at the Hampton Institute, Davis began to worry about the relevance of his teaching to a larger social context and decided to abandon the humanities for the social sciences. After earning a masters degree in anthropology from London University, where he studied under Lancelot Hogben and the legendary Bronislaw Malinowski, Davis returned to the States and enrolled in the anthropology program at Harvard. There he met W. Lloyd Warner, an anthropologist who had recently returned from a field trip to Australia. Warner wanted to study an American town in the same way that he had studied a particular tribe in Australia. He concluded that in order to properly understand

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Imbecile: An Analysis of Three Remarkable Murder Cases (New York: MacMillan, 1915); Raymond B. Cattell, *The Inheritance of Personality and Ability* (New York: Academic Press, 1982); Harold Skeels and Harold Dye, "A Study of the Effects of Differential Stimulation on Mentally Retarded Children" *Proceedings of the American Association of Mental Deficiency* 44 (1939), 114-36. Concurring studies include B.R. Simpson, "The Wandering IQ" *Journal of Psychology* 7 (1939), 351-67; G.D. Stoddard and Beth Wellman, "Environment and the IQ" *Yearbook of National Society for Studies in Education* 39 (1940), 405-42. Detractors include Florence Goodenough, "A Critique of Experiments in Raising the IQ" *Educational Methods* 19 (1939), 73-79. For an early 1960s use of Skeels and Dye, see J McVicker Hunt, "The Psychological Basis for Using Pre-School Enrichment as an Antidote for Cultural Deprivation" *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 10 (1964), 209-48.

American society, one had to understand social class. He believed that the dynamism of the United States was due to the insatiable desire for upward mobility. His move away from a simple three-tiered class division, to one that included "upper-upper" and "lower-lower" made him famous.[60]

Warner's work on class and caste would exert a profound effect on his student. Davis's first major work was a collaboration between himself and his wife, and a white married couple. Following Warner's lead, they decided to focus their study on a single American community and chose Natchez, Mississippi. The resultant book, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, was published in 1941. The 1930s had witnessed a heightening of the "nature vs. nurture" debate, and Davis and his colleagues made their own contribution. They firmly held to the belief that social phenomena were learned, not inherited. In fact, they provided a sophisticated economic analysis of the racial caste system in the American South. Prejudice, they argued, was not hereditary but was a

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[60]For Davis's early academic life, see St. Clair Drake, "In the Mirror of Black Scholarship: W. Allison Davis and *Deep South*" in *Education and Black Struggle: Notes from the Colonized World*, The Institute of the Black World, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1974). Warner's study of Newburyport, Massachusetts, is *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1941); see also W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis, "A Comparative Study of American Caste" in *Race Relations and the Race Problem*, Edgar T. Thompson, ed. (Durham: Duke UP, 1939).

constructed means of social control that allowed a dominant group to exploit the labor of their subordinates. This system was kept in place by learned behavior determined by one's position in society. In other words, the exploitative economic system was maintained, they argued, by culture. In this way, *Deep South* foreshadows much of Davis's later work on cultural deprivation. In effect, he was saying, it was the lack of a higher-class culture that prevented the lower classes from moving upward.[61]

Compounding this problem was the fact, Davis believed, that this culture was self-perpetuating. The culture of the lower classes was not created anew with each generation. Instead, it was passed down from parents to children. What was being learned was, of course, a culture of failure. Davis wrote, "Children have a trick - comforting or embarrassing as the case may be - of taking their parents' shape." From a lower-class perspective, though, this "shape" was never embarrassing. According to Davis, it was expected by the parents and desired by the children. The drive for social acceptance in one's class culture became a major motivation of the child's behavior. Though social relationships ultimately determined the nature of this

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[61]Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1941). See especially the chapter entitled "The Intimidation of Labor" for Davis's economic analysis of the caste and class system.

influence, Davis said, "the most important social influence upon the child's growing personality is his family."[62]

Furthermore, this learned culture was nearly impossible to shed. Once ingrained in a child's behavior, this culture could be altered, but could rarely be eliminated. According to Davis,

> Many people, who would like to improve their position in the world, fail because they still follow the old pattern of cultural behavior, learned in their earlier and more humble days. Although they have learned to speak better English, still a persistent 'ain't' or 'git' slips into their conversation. By keeping a sharp eye in their heads, they have learned more now about choosing 'proper' neckties and shirts, but they still turn up with very tight-bottomed trousers, probably for old time's sake. Even their table manners have changed to include the use of two forks, but somehow they always find they've forgotten to take their napkins. First learning, one discovers, has a stubborn grip. . . .It seems to become a natural or automatic part of a man's behavior.

This is actually one of Davis's milder examples. Later in his career, he would claim that things actually became progressively worse for the culturally deprived individual through a "cumulative-deficit phenomenon." Since, as Benjamin S. Bloom had effectively demonstrated in 1964, one-half of a child's intelligence was developed by age four, any gaps in early childhood learning - such as those

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[62]Allison Davis and Robert J. Havighurst, *Father of the Man: How Your Child Gets His Personality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 29, 38, 46.

fostered in culturally deprived households - would only widen as an individual aged. It was necessary to "save" them early. There was no room, Davis wrote, for extreme pessimism. Ultimately, he refused to believe that, despite its remarkable stubbornness, "the early personality is as irrevocable as the crack of doom."[63]

Since the middle class did not properly understand culture as a rational adaptation to one's social class position, Davis argued, it was partly responsible for the perpetuation of cultural deprivation. "The habits of 'shiftlessness,' 'irresponsibility,' lack of 'ambition,' absenteeism, and of quitting the job, which management usually regards as a result of the 'innate' perversity of underprivileged white and Negro workers, are in fact normal responses that the worker has learned from his physical and social environment," Davis argued. "These habits constitute a system of behavior and attitudes which are realistic and rational in that environment in which the individual of the slums has lived and in which he has been trained."[64] Since each social class had its own set of norms and attitudes,

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[63]Davis, *Father of the Man*, 44, 214; Allison Davis, et al. *Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 73; Benjamin S. Bloom, *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964).

[64]Allison Davis, "The Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker" in *Industry and Society*, William Foote Whyte, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1946), 86.

the middle-class majority tended to misread these traits as innate rather than cultural. For this reason, it adopted a laissez-faire approach to "improving" the poor. Such an endeavor was doomed to failure from the beginning. To them, the fault was biological; to Davis, it was cultural. In either case, however, the poor were nearly impossible to improve. In the end, then, the fault - whether biological or cultural - belonged to the poor individual.

First published in 1940 and reprinted in 1964, Davis's *Children of Bondage* was the first work to consider the practical ramifications of his class analysis. Despite the apparent stickiness of cultural deprivation, Davis wanted to find a way to help the lower classes succeed. A professor of education, he "naturally" turned to the nation's schools. Just as the industrial worker's cultural deprivation kept him in bad standing with management, Davis argued, so a poor child's culture fostered his or her lack of success in school. But again, the situation was not helped by the inevitably middle-class teacher who believed that a poor student's disinterest or lack of ambition (two hallmark's of cultural deprivation) were signs of innate mental incapacities. These biases showed up in the classroom, in the poor student's interaction with staff and fellow students, in extracurricular activities, and in intelligence and competency tests. It was incumbent on the school faculty to come to understand the culture of their poor students.

Understanding this culture, it was believed, would lead to its abolition.[65]

Davis saved the bulk of his criticism for the testing practices of schools. He spent much time identifying middle-class biases in the questions and tasks. Because of these biases, educational testing necessarily miscalculated the poor child's intelligence (this, in turn, led to even greater bias against them): "Those intelligence tests which present, in middleclass language, certain tasks learned in middleclass life, are really tests only of intelligence as developed in that kind of physical and social environment." Davis closely examined many such tests and discovered numerous items that discriminated against poor students. In one experiment, he altered the terms used in a question that required the student to identify like things. The original question required the student "to be familiar with the term 'sonata' - a word which will clearly be heard more often in a home in the high socio-economic group." The revised question required the pupil "to apply the concept of a 'cutting tool' so as to distinguish between this type and several other types of implements. Both the tools and the other implements are common to all socio-economic groups." He found a wide discrepancy in the number of middle-class

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[65]Allison Davis and John Dollard, *Children of Bondage: The Personality Development of Negro Youth in the Urban South* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1940).

children who answered the original question correctly as compared to the number of lower-class children who did. With the revised question, the percentages were nearly identical for each group of students.[66]

Davis's desire to unearth such biases in testing and elsewhere is admirable, and no doubt relevant to this day. Yet his final insistence on assigning a cultural reason for these discrepancies pushes the larger economic context into the background. A poor child may not know what a sonata is not because of his or her "lower-class culture," but because they have never had the money to attend a concert or to purchase a radio or phonograph. Cultural explanations of class deflected attention from the material base of class structure and therefore required a cultural solution. For most of his career, Davis insisted that it was the middle class that needed to change its views of poverty. The culture of the poor was not to be condemned but studied and understood. Only then could the poor be lifted out of their dire situation.

However, as the mid-twentieth century wore on, Davis's thought became more conservative when it came to the education of the poor child. If his work of the 1940s focused largely on the shortcomings of teachers and schools

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[66]Davis, *Father of the Man*, 61, 115; *Social Class Influences Upon Learning* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1948), 38-46.

operating with middle-class biases, his work of the 1960s made middle-class life the ideal. He made it clear that recent circumstances had made the education of the culturally deprived child an urgent national priority. His rhetoric had tellingly shifted from a mild derision of middle-class bias to a desire for the "acculturation" and "socialization" of the poor into the middle class itself. Although the surging national economy had passed many people over, those same people, according to Davis, were now needed in order for the nation to sustain its growth. This meant that schools had to better prepare the lower-class labor reserve to join the rest of the nation in achieving unprecedented production levels. In 1965 Davis wrote, "A central factor in the entire problem of education and cultural deprivation is the rapidly changing economy and job-distribution system which requires more and better education for the entire population. It is this new set of requirements which force changes in education to meet the special needs of cultural deprivation in various groups in our society." He continued, "If adequate basic learning cannot be provided in the home, it is the responsibility of the schools to insure that the culturally deprived children have as good a set of initial skills and intellectual development as children from more culturally advantaged homes." Once again, the home environment had failed the poor child. This time, however, the school was seen as the solution rather than an exacerbating agent: "For both white

and Negro low-status groups, the school is one of the most powerful factors in changing their culture and their way of life." Furthermore, Davis claimed, "Usually the school is the one place where the student from the slums has the chance to know and to want to become like a middle-class person." Never before had Davis been so blunt with his own middle-class biases. If previously he had favored the improvement of the poor child's culture in order for that child to enjoy the trappings of a productive life, he now made it very clear that the poor child was to become a middle-class person not for her or his own well being, but for the health of the nation. "Acculturation," according to Davis, was "in the air, in the spirit of the time."[67]

This nationalistic sentiment was at an all time high not only because of the prosperity of the American economy, but also because the nation was deep in cold war. Economic health was essential to total victory over communism and would also serve as a rebuttal to Nikita Khrushchev's promise to bury the United States. Writing seven years after Sputnik I and only two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Davis believed the schools had a crucial role to play in America's battle against communist hegemony. "Our efficiency

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[67]Davis et al., *Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation*, 5, 16; Allison Davis, "Changing the Culture of the Disadvantaged Student" in *Working With Low-Income Families* (Washington, D.C.: American Home Economics Association, 1965), 24, 30, 32.

as a nation, and the preservation of our position vis-à-vis the Communist powers," he wrote in an essay submitted to the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, depend "largely upon our learning how to motivate and teach the lower socio-economic groups in our schools. . . .The only way we can keep ahead or abreast in this race is by finding and using a higher proportion of our able people in the lower socio-economic groups. . . .The question is now a matter of how many such people we can develop within the next ten years." The Soviets could only be defeated if the totality of the American populace took part in the effort. The problem was that a large segment - the poor - had never learned to care much about schooling, production, or political affairs. A key component of their culture, Davis believed, was a present-time orientation that prevented them from seeing themselves as involved in any context larger than their day-to-day survival. The tension between the cultural patterns of people in the lower socio-economic group and the Cold War goals of the American middle-class majority was most evident in America's schools. "Usually the school is the one place," Davis concluded, "where the student from the slums has the chance to associate with and to want to become like a middle-class person."[68]

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[68]Allison Davis, "Society, the School, and the Culturally Deprived Student," *Improving English Skills of Culturally Different Youth in Larger Cities*, Arno Jewitt et al., eds. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office,

As the only scholar from the field of education to have been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Davis's impact on the field of education was profound and his involvement with seminars and studies funded by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare provided opportunity for his ideas to become influential in questions of public policy. Eventually, his ideas of cultural deprivation and compensatory education would play a formative role in the development of the Head Start program. It is clear that Davis regarded the American economic class structure as inherently discriminatory. Yet he continued to view the middle-class status and possessions that these structures prevented the poor from attaining as constitutive of success. Furthermore, what prevented the lower classes from overcoming these barriers, in his view, was their culture or the lack of the culture necessary for such mobility. The means of social control had been internalized and had come to be accepted by the poor themselves as well as society at large. This cultural view of poverty and inequality foreclosed the possibility of any societal restructuring or economic redistribution. Although he was well aware of economic inequality, Davis ultimately assigned the blame not to that economic context, but to the alleged cultural shortcomings of the poor.

1964), 10-11, 15. For the slightly different first draft of this essay, see ERIC: item ED001723.

If Allison Davis provided Head Start its theoretical underpinnings, Oscar Lewis provided its catchphrase - "the culture of poverty." Everyone involved with the War on Poverty seemed to have been familiar with the concept and deployed it with ease. Michael Harrington and Dwight Macdonald, important voices in drawing attention to poverty in the early 1960s, both used it; so did President Johnson and the First Lady; James L. Sundquist cited Lewis's concept as the source of a "sense of failure" in the field of public action; and a Council of Economic Advisors staffer involved in the early interagency meetings that planned the War on Poverty, claimed that a HEW report on intergenerational poverty introduced the phrase to that group.[69] The phrase, as it turned out, was too facilely appropriated and Lewis felt compelled to fully explain and defend it once the War on Poverty had popularized it. Nevertheless, because, like cultural deprivation, it made the problem of poverty a cultural rather than an economic phenomenon, it had a lot of appeal to those reformers who could not effect radical change even if they had so desired and the majority of the voting public that was the reason for such an inability.

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[69]Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* ((New York: MacMillan, 1962), 15; Dwight MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor," reprinted in *Discriminations: Essays & Afterthoughts, 1938-1974* (New York: Grossman, 1974), 83-4; Sundquist, "The Origins of the War on Poverty," 8; Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 44; Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 9.

Oscar Lewis was an anthropologist at the University of Illinois when he did the fieldwork that would lead to the development of the culture of poverty concept. As an undergraduate at City College of New York, Lewis had studied with the Marxist American historian Philip Foner. Although originally planning a career as a history teacher, Lewis was persuaded to visit Ruth Benedict at the Columbia University anthropology department. Like Davis, he became very interested in class stratification and the interaction between culture and economics. Failing to obtain an academic appointment upon earning his doctorate, Lewis went to work for the National Indian Institute, Department of the Interior. It was as the U.S. representative to the Interamerican Indian Institute that Lewis had his first opportunity to spend a significant amount of time in Mexico. The Institute sponsored an Indian personality study in the fall of 1943 and Lewis chose the village of Tepoztlán as its focus. It was here that Lewis first encountered Pedro Martínez, the man whose family would become the starting point for Lewis's ventures into the culture of poverty.[70]

Lewis hoped to improve upon past scholarship that had focused on cultural patterns that were too large to allow

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[70]On Lewis's background and early work in Tepoztlán, see Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Facade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988), 9-47. Lewis's first Mexican book was *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1951).

for detail and variety. Wanting to venture more deeply into a culture, he decided to focus on family-level everyday life. He wanted to examine a world firsthand and not stand apart from it on some abstract plane. To foster this sense of proximity to his subjects, Lewis allowed them to speak for themselves. The use of a tape recorder, he believed, effectively bypassed the filter of the middle-class anthropologist. Because of this approach, the majority of Lewis's books were written in the first person, using the voices of the informants, and read more like oral history than anthropological texts. In this way, Lewis hoped to improve upon previous, mainly literary, descriptions of the poor that were either overrun with sentimentalization or with derision.[71]

In his early writing on the culture of poverty, and most famously in *Five Families*, Lewis was quite ambiguous about where the culture of the poor originated. This ambiguity may have been a factor in the abuse of his ideas by many planners and administrators of the War on Poverty. Lewis's biographer and student has written of her mentor's grounding in Marxism but notes that his allegiance was nondogmatic. In fact, Lewis often referred to himself as an "eclectic materialist," a way of "claiming an association

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[71]Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Vintage, 1961), xi-xii, xxi-xxii; Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 3-4.

with Marxism while at the same time dissociating himself from historical materialism and announcing that, in the study of cultural formation and culture change, he would not be locked into any one theory of causation." At times, he used Marxist language and could claim that poverty in modern nations "suggests class antagonism, social problems, and the need for change." Yet at other times, he abandoned notions of class or economic determination and spoke of culture as the determinative factor: "One can speak of the culture of the poor, for it has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members."[72] If in Allison Davis's early writings it was clear that the inherent discriminations in caste and class structures created the isolation out of which grew subcultures of poverty, it is unclear in Lewis's definition of the problem if it is culture itself which prevents "participation in the larger national culture" or whether that a priori lack of participation leads to isolation and the culture of poverty. Lewis's unwillingness to be dogmatic would come back to haunt him as the blame for poverty began more and more to be placed on the poor themselves.

Nevertheless, other features of Lewis's concept were quite similar to Davis's early take on poverty. Lewis shared Davis's belief in the ultimate practicality of the culture

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[72]Rigdon, *The Culture Facade*, 2; Lewis, *Five Families*, 2.

of the poor and in its transmission through familial routes. "In anthropological usage," he writes,

> the term culture implies, essentially, a design for living which is passed down from generation to generation. In applying this concept of culture to the understanding of poverty, I want to draw attention to the fact that poverty in modern nations is not only a state of economic deprivation, of disorganization, or of the absence of something. It is also something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on. In short, it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines.

Lewis drew up a list of approximately seventy traits by which the culture of poverty could be identified. The most prominent of these were the lack of participation in societal institutions, poor housing, crowding, gregariousness (but not organization), absence of childhood, aggressiveness and vulgar (though often creative) language, inability to hold in check basic physical urges, and a local and present-time orientation. All of these things, Lewis said often, were not to be viewed through middle-class eyes, but rather were to be understood in the context of the culture of poverty. In this way, their adaptive and practical aspects could be more fully appreciated.[73]

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[73]Lewis, *Children of Sanchez*, xxiv; Rigdon, *The Culture Facade*, 114-15; Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty - San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1965), xlv-xlvii.

According to Lewis, one had to distinguish between physical poverty and the culture of poverty. Even if the former were eliminated, the "tenacious cultural pattern" of poverty would survive. When asked if he was trying to solve the problem of poverty, Lewis responded, "To expose and to convince, but not to solve. I don't think I have the solution, nor do I think that it is my task." As an anthropologist, he believed his main role was to be descriptive, to provide his readers with what he liked to call "ethnographic realism." He also said, on numerous occasions, that he believed physical poverty was relatively easy to solve. The culture of poverty was more tenacious and could be carried across economic, age, and geographic boundaries. Thus, in *Five Families*, Lewis tells the story of David Castro, a self-made millionaire who had managed to pull himself out of the slums of Mexico City, but who still used profanity and physically abused his family. Similarly, in *La Vida*, he notes several members of the Ríos family who had carried their culture with them when they left Puerto Rico for New York. Only the passing of generations could fully eliminate the culture of poverty.[74]

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[74]Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives From the Social Sciences*, Daniel P. Moynihan, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 193; Lewis, La Vida, xi, li, xxvii; Rigdon, *The Culture Facade*, 5, 151; on David Castro, see Lewis, *Five Families*, 295-350.

Once the War on Poverty was underway and despite his own emphasis on poverty as a cultural entity, Lewis quickly became dismayed with the ways in which his concept had been appropriated. He received confirmation from Michael Harrington that he had never heard the phrase "culture of poverty" before reading *Five Families*. Lewis lamented this news and responded by saying, "The phrase is a catchy one and has become widely used and misused. Michael Harrington used it extensively in his book *The Other America* (1961), which played an important role in sparking the national anti-poverty program in the United States. However, he used it in a somewhat broader and less technical sense than I had intended." Furthermore, Lewis ascribed the blame for much of the program's infighting - especially the debates over community action versus social service approaches to combating poverty - on the misunderstanding of his concept. In fact, Lewis claimed on several occasions that he did not even believe that a culture of poverty existed in the United States to any significant extent. "I suspect," he wrote, "that the culture of poverty flourishes in, and is generic to, the early free-enterprise stage of capitalism and that it is also endemic in colonialism." The capitalism of the United States, with its "advanced technology, high level of literacy, the development of mass media and the relatively high aspiration level of all sectors of the population," was too far advanced to allow it to flourish. Harrington and people involved with the War on Poverty, in Lewis's eyes,

had clearly misappropriated his ideas and, worse still, were using them to shape public policy.[75]

In trying to make his ideas clearer, Lewis confused the issue by resorting to contradictory statements about the nature of poverty and the effectiveness of various solutions. Ultimately, whether Lewis believed the causes and solutions to poverty were primarily cultural or economic depends on when he was writing or to what crowd he was speaking. Though he never abandoned the notion of a culture of poverty, he gave priority to the alleviation of material poverty at times, and at other times on the development of a revolutionary class-consciousness among the poor. At other times still, and much to the dismay of War on Poverty planners, he spoke in favor of social work solutions.

Lewis began his revolutionary rhetoric in *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (1964) in which the phrase "culture of poverty" never appeared. In this book, Lewis deliberately attacked the notion that the poor peasant classes are an essentially conservative and stabilizing force in society. Rather, he believed, the story of Pedro Martínez was essentially one of participation in the greatest revolution of the twentieth century in the Americas. The same year this book appeared, Lewis wrote

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[75]Rigdon, *The Culture Facade*, 170n7; Lewis, *La Vida*, xlii-xliii, l-li; Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *On Understanding Poverty*, 196-97.

elsewhere, "It may be more important to offer the poor of the world's countries a genuine revolutionary ideology rather than the promise of material goods or of a quick rise in the standard of living." This idea was very much in line with Lewis's belief that one of the traits of the culture of poverty was a provincial social and political orientation. Unlike Davis's solution, the answer was a revolutionary rather than a middle-class consciousness. "One way," Lewis said, "of abolishing the culture of poverty is the abolition of capitalism - that's quite clear." Nevertheless, this abolition of capitalism could only be won after a cultural consensus - a class-consciousness - had been achieved by the poor.[76]

At other times, Lewis gave attention to economic and structural solutions. In response to being blamed for the shortcomings of the War on Poverty, Lewis declared, "My own position is that in the long run the self-perpetuating factors [of the culture of poverty] are relatively minor and unimportant as compared to the basic structure of the larger society. However, to achieve rapid changes and improvement with the minimum amount of trauma one must work on both the 'external' and 'internal' solutions." Later, he made it very

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[76]Oscar Lewis, *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (New York: Vintage, 1964), xxx-xxxiv, 73-110; "The Culture of Poverty," *Explosive Forces in Latin America*, John J. TePaske and Sydney Nettleton Fisher, eds. (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1964), 159; Rigdon, *The Culture Facade*, 156.

clear which was to be regarded as the determinative factor: "I would agree that the main reason for the subsistence of the subculture are no doubt the pressures that the larger society exerts over its members and the structures of the larger society itself. However, this is not the only reason." Because the culture of poverty was self-perpetuating, "improved economic opportunities, though absolutely essential and of the highest priority, are not sufficient to alter basically or eliminate the subculture of poverty." And finally, in a conversation with Robert Kennedy, Lewis reiterated his belief that the culture of poverty could survive the elimination of economic poverty. "Nevertheless," he continued, "I think the highest priority should be given. . .to some minimum family income - and jobs." Therefore, Lewis at times made it very clear that he was aware of the materiality of poverty. Although not always prioritizing it, he believed that direct action on that "aspect" of poverty needed to be at least part of the solution.[77]

Although he spoke boldly to Robert Kennedy and was quite critical of the government's involvement in Vietnam and its effects on the antipoverty effort, Lewis lost his

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[77]Oscar Lewis, "Reply to Charles Valentine," *Current Anthropology*, April-June 1969, 192; Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *On Understanding Poverty*, 199; "A Redbook Dialogue: Robert Kennedy and Oscar Lewis," *Redbook*, Sep. 1967, 104.

boldness speaking before some of the major planners of the War on Poverty. At a seminar on race and poverty sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1967, Lewis exchanged ideas with the likes of James Sundquist, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Lee Rainwater. Sundquist would later note that Lewis was one of the very few who believed that "the services strategy" could work. He quoted the anthropologist as advocating "mass, socialized therapeutic measures." His ultimate solution, according to Sundquist, was to deploy an army of middle-class caseworkers who had been trained "to overcome the great sense of distance they feel toward the poor." At no time was Lewis's conception of poverty as close to Davis's than at this point. Both, in effect, were holding middle-class culture as the ultimate and proper goal for those who would be productive members of society.[78]

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[78]James L. Sundquist, "The End of the Experiment?" *On Fighting Poverty*, 235-51; Lewis quoted, 246-47.

Chapter 3

THE POPULARITY OF HEAD START

Lyndon Johnson's declaration of an "unconditional war on poverty" in his 1964 State of the Union address marked the culmination of a process, more than a year in the making, that began shortly after John F. Kennedy's 1963 tax bill had been submitted to Congress. Confident that the tax cut would smoothly make its way through the legislature, Kennedy's chief economist, Walter Heller, began to push for a comprehensive antipoverty program. According to several of the early planners of what would become Johnson's famed War on Poverty, it was primarily Heller's efforts that convinced Kennedy of the need for such a program. With the President's encouragement, the economist organized a series of informal Saturday brown-bag lunches held during the summer of 1963. Among those invited to begin the discussion were people from the Bureau of the Budget; the Health, Education, and Welfare Department; the Department of Justice; and the Department of Labor. It was this group that laid the groundwork that allowed Johnson to declare his assault on the recently "rediscovered" social problem of poverty. In fact, after another series of interagency meetings throughout the fall, Heller met with Johnson on the first day of the latter's presidency and told him of the planned antipoverty program. With increasing enthusiasm,

Johnson responded, "I'm interested. I'm sympathetic. Go ahead. Give it the highest priority. Push ahead full tilt."[79]

Still enjoying its postwar affluence, however, the majority of the nation had to "discover" the problem of poverty anew, as if the hard times of the 1930s had been wiped from the national consciousness. Although the origins of the War on Poverty were multiple and complex, several things were clearly essential to this reawakening of interest in the plight of the nation's poor. Some predated Johnson's declaration while others were contemporaneous with, or even later than it. Combined, they issued a wake up call to the nation and instilled a sense of failure in key government officials and social reformers.

Perhaps the most obvious contributor was the civil rights movement. Quickened by the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the movement gained national spotlight with the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956. The following year, federal troops enforced the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School and the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction was passed through Congress. In 1960, the sit-in movement, begun in

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[79]*Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon Johnson, 1963-64* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), 114; Michael L. Gillette, *Launching the War in Poverty*, 1-12; Lyndon B. Johnson, *Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 71.

Greensboro, spread like wildfire, eventually challenging Jim Crow in approximately 140 cities. But shortly after Martin Luther King lead the fight for desegregation in Birmingham in 1963, he and others began to note the emphasis on ending segregation that had dominated the work of the movement up until that point and began to articulate the complications of intra-racial class differences and poverty. Reverend King asked, "Of what advantage is it to the Negro to establish that he can be served in integrated restaurants, or accommodated in integrated hotels, if he is bound to the kind of financial servitude which will not allow him to take a vacation or even to take his wife out to dine?" And when he led the March on Washington in August 1963, King asked not only for voting rights and an end to discrimination, but also for jobs. Without, certainly, abandoning the work of desegregation, civil rights rhetoric had increasingly come to include poverty as a major target of its efforts and, in that way, helped bring it to the nation's attention.[80]

The War on Poverty also had its roots in the development of juvenile delinquency programs. Alongside the area redevelopment bill, a delinquency bill had been

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[80]Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 62; William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), 125-26; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 149; Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, 260.

languishing in Congress since the mid-1950s and Kennedy made it a goal of his administration to break the malaise into which reform had fallen during the Eisenhower years. He sought to restore a New Deal coalition not around a client constituency, but a small group of intellectual reformers. Under Robert Kennedy's Department of Justice, a special group was formed to develop a delinquency program with an old friend of the Attorney General's, David Hackett, at the helm. Hackett, in turn, brought in Lloyd Ohlin, a sociologist from Columbia University, to design the program.[81]

Ohlin came to the project with considerable experience in working with juvenile delinquency. His theories and prior work would prove to have a profound impact on the design of Johnson's antipoverty program. Ohlin and his colleague Richard Cloward had developed a theory about the origins of delinquency that broke with widespread conceptions of individual criminal pathology. Their "blocked-opportunity theory" posited that delinquency resulted from the frustration felt by lower-class youth who were effectively disfranchised from basic societal and institutional structures such as schooling, health care, the job market, and political participation. In a society that so highly

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[81]Daniel Knapp and Kenneth Polk, *Scouting the War on Poverty: Social Reform Politics in the Kennedy Administration* (Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books, 1971); Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 263-64.

valued material success, Cloward and Ohlin argued, "the disparity between what lower class youth are led to want and what is actually available to them is the source of a major problem of adjustment." To combat these conditions, the two began work on a grant to create Mobilization for Youth (MFY) in the late 1950s. The program involved skills training, home visits, remedial education and other actions designed to help lift lower-class youth over the barriers to success. After having failed to obtain funding from the National Institutes of Mental Health, Ohlin immediately made MFY the model for the Kennedy administration's delinquency program. In early 1962, it became the first organization to be funded by the Office of Juvenile Delinquency (OJD).[82]

MFY's real impact, however, came in the summer of 1963 when it formally declared war on poverty. While Walter Heller was organizing an antipoverty planning committee, the federally funded MFY proved to be a few steps ahead of the administration. A statement adopted by MFY in June declared three "general objectives" in order of priority: "Reduce poverty. . . .Increase the responsiveness of conventional and powerful persons and institutions to the needs, wants, and cultures of impoverished persons. . . .Overcome the

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[82]Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960), 86; Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 264; Knapp and Pollack, *Scouting the War on Poverty*, 79-80.

debilitating effects upon lower income persons of their impoverished circumstances." In this way, like the civil rights movement, MFY and the OJD began to define the foundational problem not as delinquency, but as impoverishment.[83]

There were several other key voices that spoke to President Kennedy more directly. Without these, and the President's responses to them, poverty may never have obtained such a high-priority status in the 1960s. The first such voice was that of the people of Appalachian West Virginia whom the Democratic hopeful met on a campaign swing through the region in 1960. Like much of Appalachia, as well as northeastern Pennsylvania and southern Illinois, this region found itself impoverished after the death of its coal mines and their subsequent abandonment by the major fuel companies. Kennedy vowed to do something about it and promised to submit the area redevelopment bill to Congress shortly after his inauguration. When passed, it created the Area Redevelopment Administration that was essentially a loan-granting body designed to serve "depressed areas." Yet poverty was still not seen as a national problem. It was conceived as existing in several "pockets" throughout the

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[83]Knapp and Pollack, *Scouting the War on Poverty*, 109-11.

country. It would take two more years before this fact really hit home for the President.[84]

It came from perhaps an unexpected place - not from congressional reformers (of which there were very few) nor from within the young reformist administration. Rather, it came largely from two men whose books would prove to the President that the problem was more widespread than he, or anyone else, had realized. In his 1962 history of the rise and fall of eastern Kentucky, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, Harry Caudill declared, "Coal has always cursed the land in which it lies." In October, 1963, Caudill's story of "the rape of the Appalachians" and the "politics of decay" was followed by a front-page *New York Times* article by Homer Bigart that foretold a desperate winter for those who lived in "poverty, squalor, and idleness in [the] mountain area." The immediate response to this article was the creation of an emergency "crash program" that concentrated existing federal funds and programs in eastern Kentucky.[85]

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[84]For the story of JFK's primary success in West Virginia, see Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 97-114.

[85]Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1962); Homer Bigart, "Kentucky Miners: A Grim Winter," *The New York Times* 20 October 1963; Sundquist, "Origins of the War on Poverty," 20; Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 1-4, 9.

The second book to catch the President's attention was *Catholic Worker* alumnus Michael Harrington's *The Other America* that also appeared in 1962. Like Caudill, Harrington implored his audience to take notice of a neglected and impoverished place. He wrote, "There is a familiar America. It is celebrated in speeches and advertised on television and in the magazines. It has the highest mass standard of living the world has ever known. . . .[Yet throughout the 1950s,] there existed another America. In it dwelt somewhere between 40,000,000 and 50,000,000 citizens of this land. They were poor. They still are." Harrington provided a shocking portrait of this forgotten land that was populated by a variety of people - alcoholics, the mentally and physically ill, urban blacks, rural whites, and most disturbingly, millions of children and the elderly. As was the case with Caudill, Harrington's message reached its largest audience via another writer, this one a left-wing book reviewer for the *New Yorker*. With the simple declaration, "It is an important book," and some stinging indictments of presidential inaction, Dwight MacDonald may have been the one to finally bring the point home to President Kennedy. According to several members of Kennedy and Heller's early interagency taskforce, it was these few written works that truly spurred the administration to action.[86]

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[86]Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the*

No longer able to ignore poverty, the presidential administration was called to action. "In the atmosphere of dissatisfaction and criticism in each field, the streams of innovative thought and action arose, grew, and gained momentum. . . .The sense of failure and the resulting ferment created the intellectual climate in which the War on Poverty was born." These several voices - the civil rights movement, MFY, Harrington, Caudill, Bigart, MacDonald, and many others - combined to define the ultimate problem as poverty. People began to realize that the various social problems around which so much action had swirled all had their roots in poverty. As social programmers came to life, an unmistakable sense of optimism - so often associated with the early part of the 1960s - spread throughout the administration, social reform circles, and the nation in general.[87]

This optimism, however, would eventually founder on the persistence of poverty despite these major efforts to

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United States (New York: MacMillan, 1962); Dwight MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor," reprinted in *Discriminations: Essays & Afterthoughts, 1938-1974* (New York: Grossman, 1974); on testimony concerning the affects of these writings on Kennedy, see Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 1-11 and 33, and Sundquist, "Origins of the War on Poverty," in Sundquist, ed., *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 20.

[87]James L. Sundquist, "Origins of the War on Poverty," 8-9; on early 1960s optimism, see Edward P. Morgan, *The 60s Experience: Hard Lessons About Modern America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991), 15-18.

alleviate it. Its persistence was due to the reformers' inability to see poverty as a structural economic problem, and their insistence that it was a problem of blocked opportunity. For them, the path to the elimination of impoverishment involved the removal of barriers to opportunity. In the case of Project Head Start, the most popular of Great Society programs, the barrier consisted of the poor's "culture of poverty" and their being deprived of an "appropriate" middle-class culture. Allison Davis and Oscar Lewis contributed much to this approach.

For the most part, the influence of Lewis and Davis on the War on Poverty and Head Start was indirect. Susan Rigdon has claimed that "Head Start was the only antipoverty program with which Lewis had direct involvement, and it was the one for which he reserved his greatest respect." Even if this were so, Lewis's influence also reached the early planners of the War on Poverty through the popularization of his concepts, most notably by Michael Harrington in *The Other America*. We have seen that Lewis was disappointed with Harrington's broad use of the concept. But it was exactly this use, in this book, that made its way into the minds of the early planners of the antipoverty programs. Most importantly for the case at hand, the Community Action Program (CAP), under which Head Start was housed, unquestioningly adopted the concept for its programs. As Harris Wofford, an early director of CAP, wrote, "Little thought, if any, was given by those who helped administer

CAP to a distinction between poverty (a lack of money) and the 'culture of poverty' (the life style that goes with poverty). If we had been forced to say which of these concepts was a more central target of CAP, we probably would have responded that the emphasis (and it was only a matter of emphasis) was on attempting to deal with the life style of the poor." Thus, the most potentially radical and certainly the most controversial of the War on Poverty programs - the one that mandated the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor - had its roots in an extremely conservative concept. In fact, the only thing that made CAP controversial was that in a few cities poor people actually did organize. The question is whether that signifies a change in the culture of poverty or a weakening or elimination of institutional barriers to political empowerment. Wofford's claim suggests that the former would have been the more likely of the two interpretations.[88] To a certain extent, many of the War on Poverty programs lived up to Wofford's assessment of CAP.

The impact of the concept of cultural deprivation also seems not to have come directly from the social scientist who pioneered it. Rather, Davis's ideas were seized upon and

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[88]Rigdon, *The Culture Facade*, 156; despite having no reason to doubt Rigdon's claim, I have been unable to verify it. Harris Wofford, "The Politics of Local Responsibility," *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience*, James L. Sundquist, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 71.

used often, usually without proper credit. During the 1960s, the literature on the subject was voluminous as the attention of many academic fields - especially sociology and education - turned toward the problem of poverty and its possible remedies. In 1962, Frank Riessman published the oft-cited *The Culturally Deprived Child* in which he asserted that "it is essential to democracy to combat the anti-intellectualism, prejudice, and intolerance" that are typically characteristic of the culturally deprived. Although liberally critical of the middle-class orientation of the public school system and, indeed, of the use of the term "culturally-deprived" itself, Riessman nonetheless continued the reification of culture as the basis for poverty, removing the problem entirely from an economic context.[89]

Yet there was a more blatant use of the concept in a program that fed directly into the founding of Head Start. On President Kennedy's Panel on Mental Retardation were three physicians - Edward Davens, Robert E. Cooke, and Reginald S. Lourie - who would become active members of the original thirteen-member planning committee for Head Start.

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[89]Frank Riessman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 2. There were several writers critical of the concept of cultural deprivation, especially in the latter half of the 1960s; for one that directly addresses Riessman's book, see Bernard Mackler and Morsley G. Giddings, "Cultural Deprivation: A Study in Mythology," *Teachers College Record* 66, 7(April 1965): 608-13.

In fact, Cooke, a pediatrician at Johns Hopkins, was the committee's chairman. Furthermore, Eunice Kennedy Shriver served as a consultant to the panel. When her husband, Sargent Shriver, became convinced that any full-scale attack on poverty must include special programs aimed at children, he immediately consulted Cooke. As Shriver tells it, "We came to the conclusion that a lot of poor kids arrive at the first grade beaten or at least handicapped before they start." He noted the discomfort with which children in general approach school and claimed, "If that's true for the normal child, it's often a lot worse for the poor child." The goal became to "give them some acculturation to academic work."[90]

In fact, much of the theoretical underpinnings of the Head Start program came from its ties to the President's Panel on Mental Retardation. The vast majority of the attitudes and goals of Head Start were foreshadowed in the panel's 1962 Report of the Task Force on Prevention, Clinical Services and Residential Care. Using rhetoric similar to that of Sargent Shriver, the writers of the report declared that "the basic aim of all services joined together in logical progression should be to integrate the

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[90]Edward Zigler and Jeanette Valentine, eds., *Project Head Start: A Legacy of the War on Poverty*, 8, 49-53, 89; Michael L. Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 217-18. These two works are *indispensable* collections of essays and oral histories by the early planners of the War on Poverty and Head Start.

retarded individual, within the limit of his capabilities, into normal society." In another move that would be adopted by Head Start, the panel recommended a more holistic approach to the treatment of mental retardation. Rather than simply institutionalize the mentally retarded, the panel called for a combination of social, medical, and educational services. The panel broke down preventive measures into three areas: biological (prenatal care, education on "battered child syndrome" and lead poisoning, for example); psychogenic (the "absence of sufficient or appropriate stimulation" and deprivation of maternal care); and cultural (poor home environment and lack of motivation, for example). Those whose retardation was rooted in biological causes were seen as lost already. The real tragedy was those who could be "saved," because their problems were psychogenic or cultural, but had not yet been. "The culturally-deprived," the report asserts, "represent today a tragic loss of manpower, both in industry and the Armed Services, a major problem of education in the schools and. . .a source of potential dynamite in our American society." In order to remedy this tragedy, the panel recommended the establishment of "nursery centers" that "should be directed toward the specific development of the attitudes and aptitudes which middle class culture characteristically develops in children." Their other major recommendation was that the parents of the children being served should attend training centers in which workers and volunteers "might work toward

the building of attitudes in young mothers that would help them develop child-rearing practices more conducive to the intellectual and educational progress of their children." Finally, in a recommendation that foreshadowed developments in many War on Poverty programs that made extensive use of volunteers, including Head Start, the panel called for the establishment of a "domestic Peace Corps."[91] These three things - an emphasis on the acculturation or integration of the culturally-deprived child into "normal" society, a holistic approach implemented in local service centers, and a call for parental and voluntary participation - would become the guiding ideas behind the development of Head Start and many of the panel's recommendations would be put into practice by the program.

Yet, as mentioned above, the story of Head Start is a very complex one and resists any glib generalizations about its goals. That all three of the areas addressed by the Panel on Mental Retardation made their way into the Head Start project is undeniable. The difficulties arise when trying to allocate these goals and areas of intervention to specific actors on the Head Start stage. Part of the problem stems from the fact that Head Start was the most popular of the War on Poverty programs and continues to be. Not only

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[91]President's Panel on Mental Retardation, *Report of the Task Force on Prevention, Clinical Services and Residential Care* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1962), 1-2, 8-15.

did it survive the Nixon administration's dismantling of the war, but after a brief period of stagnation and decline in the early 1970s, actually continued to grow in size and in funding. That it was initially so successful and that it became a sort of congressional "darling" among War on Poverty programs suggests that there was a certain quality to the program that appealed to Congress and, indeed, to the suburban, middle-class, white majority of the American public. At a time when the Community Action Program was taking a lot of heat for, as some interpreted it, fomenting revolution among the poor, Head Start hit the scene and assuaged these fears. High-ranking officials in the Johnson administration, including the President himself, had a very real stake in selling Head Start to the public. This was accomplished, in part, through an emphasis on the cultural deprivation of the poor.

Of course, there were differing levels of emphasis on the cultural. Discrepancies among the people involved with Head Start are ultimately what made the program so digestible for the American public and Congress, and what allowed it simultaneously to provide some essential services to the poor. In fact, for the early planners, the main priority of the program was not to be cultural at all. That element was certainly present, but as it was designed as a comprehensive program, there were other, more important objectives. While the selling of Head Start as a solution to cultural deprivation continued, local Head Start centers

were providing important and needed services to America's poor children. One of the requirements to be met by a community action agency seeking Head Start funding was that it provide health exams and at least one hot meal to each student daily. Although clearly not addressing the economics of poverty, this service approach was designed to soften some of the effects of poverty. As such, it held a high place in the Planning Committee's recommendations. As Reginald Lourie recalls, "Our committee report to President Johnson established seven priorities for the program that was to be called Head Start. Of these, the health of the children was to be listed as the first priority, or of first importance." For some, this meant not only diagnosis but also treatment. One planner felt "momentarily euphoric at the possibility that in many communities Head Start might act as a catalyst to precipitate a comprehensive approach to health care!" A physician on the committee felt differently and expressed his fears that this would segregate care for Head Start children and deny them access to larger systems of health care. But as the first director of Head Start, Julius B. Richmond, himself a pediatrician, would note, when Medicaid was passed, such worries became null and void. In any case, it is clear that what the early designers of the program had at the forefront of their plans was quite

different from what was being used as the public selling point of Head Start.[92]

Although neither the administration nor the planners proposed structural economic reform as a solution to poverty, it would be too easy to say that Head Start was in any simple way a "tool of the establishment." And it would be wrong to say that it accomplished nothing of any worth. However, like the War on Poverty in general, there was never any radical intent to it and, as some reformers would come to admit later, there was never really any chance that poverty would be eliminated. Whether it was naiveté, shortsightedness, actual unwillingness, or outright prejudice that ultimately undermined the government's efforts to rid the nation of the "paradox of poverty amidst plenty," the fact that the blame for poverty often came to rest on the poor themselves certainly contributed to this failure. Whether they lacked skills, ambition, or culture, the fault always resided in them. This deflection of blame away from a larger socio-economic context was indeed a popular move. Early proponents for radical changes in the economic structure of the nation existed, but it was not until people began to notice the persistence of the problem after several years of the war, that a deluge of voices noting the inadequacies of the programs appeared. It is

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[92]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 98, 102-3, 110, 124; Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 226.

impossible to draw a line on one side of which would rest the successes of the program, and on the other side the failures. That it did fail to alleviate poverty in any substantial way is undeniable. But one has to recognize that while in name poverty may have been identified as the problem, in practice the problem too often became the character of the poor themselves. Ironically, then, the very notion that made Head Start so popular caused the program to fail at its original mandate under CAP guidelines - to contribute in a substantial way to the alleviation of poverty.

The public face of the program was much more optimistic. As a way to assuage the public's fears of maximum feasible participation, sell Head Start to the public, and thereby salvage CAP and possibly all of the War on Poverty, the cultural conception of poverty and an educational conception of the solution to poverty were deployed. They were non-threatening and did not so much as hint that anyone but the poor themselves was responsible for the maintenance of poverty in the affluent society. An easy solution to a simply defined problem had been found. To overcome the poor child's cultural deprivation, he or she would be given a head start in their schooling and would therefore have a better chance at success in school and life. The President's Panel on Mental Retardation had convinced Sargent Shriver that a person's IQ was not a fixed entity. Shriver said, "Look, if we can intervene with

mentally retarded children and raise their IQ, we surely ought to be able to intervene with children who are not mentally retarded." Furthermore, the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity wholeheartedly adopted the Panel's contention that cultural deprivation was a key cause of a stunted IQ. As one Head Start planning committee member recalls, "Mr. Shriver informed [Robert Cooke] that he was convinced by the evidence that social and cultural deprivation was a major factor in producing a poverty cycle in which a deprived child became the mother and later the grandmother of similar retarded, dependent, and inevitably unemployable individuals. He had decided to launch a massive effort to attempt to interrupt this vicious cycle." In some people's minds, this massive effort became so intertwined with a cultural definition of poverty that one planning committee member called cultural deprivation "the underlying conceptual framework for Head Start."[93]

A major part of this cultural framework was a tendency to focus on the child's environment as an a priori entity without making any inquiries into a larger socio-economic reason for its existence. The blame for this environment usually came to rest on the poor parents of the culturally deprived child. In response, Head Start was designed not just to influence the poor child but the community and

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[93]Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 216; Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 89, 481.

family to which that child belonged as well. The program, as one planner put it, "was more than an educational experience (as nursery schools have been for the middle class). It was concerned with the whole child, including his or her family and cultural milieu."[94] Class distinctions were clearly a matter of economics, but the reasons provided for their existence had nothing to do with economics. They were born, supposedly, of different cultural attitudes bred in utterly different home and community environments.

The poor environment was marked by several different, and often contradictory, items. Unsurprisingly, descriptions of communities in which Head Start centers were organized included the filth and decrepitude that are commonly seen as the hallmarks of poor areas. Lady Bird Johnson emphasized these elements while on a heavily publicized tour through several Head Start programs in New Jersey. In a "congested" Newark "slum," she said, "I remember concrete, screeching trucks, and signs in store windows reading: 'Bedbug Spray Sold Here.'" After visiting a family living in "a long row of drab flats," she traveled south to Lambertville on the Delaware River. As she described it, Lambertville "was a place of tarpaper shacks, dirt roads, outdoor toilets, and a general appearance of shiftlessness." Clearly, these were

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[94]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 73, 109.

not areas in which the First Lady believed children should be raised.[95]

For some observers of this environment's effect on children, the real problem with spending one's formative years there was that adequate mental stimulation was unavailable. This, it was believed, stunted the child's cognitive development. Ultimately, as Shriver put it, "they stand ten, twenty, thirty feet back from the starting line; other people are way ahead of them. They don't get a fair, equal start with everybody else when they come to school at age six." Environment, then, was where the "cycle of poverty" began. The contemporary literature on the topic of neighborhood and home environment was massive. But a common theme was that the child was being deprived of the requisite (middle-class) culture that would allow her or him to succeed in school. Children of poor families, it was believed, were hardly spoken to, were certainly not read to, and spent much of their day in front of the television or with their poor friends who simply reinforced the effects of the culture of poverty. Alternately, a small number of scholars argued exactly the opposite - that with all its noise, crime, and violence, the slum actually provided too

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[95]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 45-6.

much stimulation for the poor child, effectively overloading his or her brain and again stunting cognitive development.[96]

Responsibility for the creation and perpetuation of this deprived environment ultimately fell on poor parents. The disdain for poor parents was oftentimes quite blatant and public. They were the ones who did not speak to their children or, when they did, did so only in monosyllables. They did not read to their children or take them on educational field trips. And worst of all, they set a bad example for their own children by being unproductive members of society. In short, they cared so little for their children, some believed, that they would condemn them to a perpetual cycle of poverty. Head Start's focus on children as helpless, but luckily redeemable victims was one aspect of the program that made it very popular with the American public. But it ingeniously went further and managed to blame the poor (parents) at the same time that it tried to "save" their children. Reflecting on her visit to New Jersey, the First Lady was quite open with her thoughts on the subject:

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[96]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 51; examples of this literature on environment include, J. McVicker Hunt, "The Psychological Basis for Using Pre-School Enrichment as an Antidote for Cultural Deprivation," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 10 (1964): 209-48; Boyd McCandless, "Environment and Intelligence," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, 56 (1952): 674-91; J.L. Frost and T. Rowland, "Cognitive Development and Literacy in Disadvantaged Children: A Structure-Process Approach," *Early Childhood Education Rediscovered*, Joe L. Frost, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

"I hoped fervently we would not have to turn America over to another generation as listless and dull as many of these parents. I yearned for better for their children. Head Start might help." In a Rose Garden address to the nation, President Johnson declared that "parents will receive counseling on improving the home environment" and claimed that "five and six year old children are inheritors of poverty's curse and not its creators. Unless we act these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark."[97]

In the American affluent society, the nuclear family was a bulwark against the encroachment of communism at the same time that it provided sanctuary from the fiercely competitive world of postwar productive work. This dual purpose of the family was what made an investment in women's domestic roles so important. On both counts, the poor woman was viewed as a disgrace to the domestic ideal. As a tax-eater rather than a tax-payer, she was an unproductive member of society. She therefore needed no sanctuary in the home. Of course, even if she did, she would not find it since the poor home was not properly ordered or cultured. Instead of providing her children with a middle-class upbringing that taught them how to become useful and productive citizens, the poor mother was raising more

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[97]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 46; *Public Papers of the President - Lyndon Baines Johnson, 1965*, 556.

service-dependent people and was thereby perpetuating the culture of poverty. The views of the President's Panel on Mental Retardation on poor mothers were successfully recycled by Head Start.

The image of the inept poor mother did indeed influence the thoughts of at least one member of the original planning committee. Reginald Lourie, perhaps still struck by the rhetoric of the President's Panel on Mental Retardation on which he had served, told of Head Start "teachers and aides learning from children that there was a child in real trouble who lived in the same apartment house or project. When the Head Start staff person visited, the alcoholic or drug-addict mother would be delighted to have the staff person take the child to the program. Thereafter the child would attend the program when the teacher or aide came into the house, dressed and fed him, and took him by the hand to the Head Start center." In language reminiscent of nineteenth-century charity workers as well as of Ronald Reagan's infamous "welfare queen," Lourie was sold on the popular image of the uncaring, rundown poor mother in whose place the middle class Head Start worker had to perform the role of parent. This image was undoubtedly an important element in selling the program to the majority of the American public.[98]

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[98]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 125, 99.

For some, the existence of these incompetent poor parents raised an ethical question. As Julius Richmond put it, "Since the parents didn't come to us for any intervention, should we try to intervene?" Recently, there had been scholars who favored taking children away from their "inept" parents, but the early Head Start planners rejected this approach. Rather, part of the program's mission became the education of the parents alongside their children. Although there was no *in loco parentis* facet of Head Start, there was certainly a feeling that poor parents were in some way inadequate to the task of raising children. Fortunately, like their children, they were salvageable. What Richmond hoped to do, in keeping with CAP dogma, "was to encourage active parent interest and participation in all aspects of the program so that they could reinforce at home the experiences the children were having in the centers."[99] Not only, then, were poor children culturally deprived, but their parents too would benefit from compensatory education. The parenting skills learned at local Head Start centers would be carried back to their homes. In this way, the middle class conception of successful parenting would take up residence in the cultural vacuum of the poor home.

To the credit of the majority of the early planners, however, blame did not fall entirely on the parents. The poor child's "failure" in school, they believed, was due

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[99]Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 219.

also to the failures of the American public school system. In part, this also might help explain the great popularity of the program. As noted above, the launching of Sputnik had drawn a lot of attention to the supposed failure of American schools. By the time Head Start was developed, this feeling was widespread and, indeed, became a part of the program. One of the surprisingly few experts on early childhood education who were members of the planning committee "sensed in the early Head Start planning days an 'anti-public school feeling,' a feeling that the school had let the poor down, and that only the schools had done this - not the health and legal professions, not the churches, not government." The national assistant director, Jules M. Sugarman noted that the early planners "were deeply skeptical about the public schools and already committed by their experience to a belief that learning could not take place without major changes in the child's environment. These attitudes were perfectly compatible with the prevailing view of the OEO staff. . . .In my judgment these attitudes were correct." So the idea was not only to save the poor child from his or her home and community environment, but also from the failing schools. To the ineptness of poor parents was added the ineptness of poor schools. In both cases, as James L. Hymes, a member of the national planning committee for Head Start, suggested, many other agents in larger contexts were ignored, and never did critics ask why schools failed. Yet, as in the case of the post-Sputnik reaction, no one thought

to question the notion that education was at all a viable solution to the problem at hand. Despite the belief that schools had failed poor children, many continued to believe that education was a powerful antidote to poverty because the ultimate problem was that poor children were not being provided the appropriate cultural influences. For this purpose, special schools, outside the educational system proper, were established. These Head Start centers would educate poor children for middle class schools.[100]

The popularity of Head Start caused a lot of tension between the program and the hierarchy of CAP and provides a lesson about the selling of poverty reform to a middle-class oriented Congress and American public. Various CAP programs had been in the news. At Syracuse University in 1965, for example, CAP funded a center designed to test the community organizing techniques of the "professional radical" Saul Alinsky. After the ensuing CAP-funded voter-registration drive (whose stated purpose was to replace the Republican mayor of the city) caused a major brouhaha, Sargent Shriver was forced to cut the program's funding. In Chicago, where the southside Woodlawn Organization had been a thorn in the city administration's side even before it began receiving CAP funding, Mayor Richard Daley responded by illegally having all funding decisions be channeled through his

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[100]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 96, 115, 503.

office. When, in June of 1965, the U.S. Conference of Mayors sponsored a resolution calling for city-hall control of all local antipoverty programs, Hubert Humphrey was sent to appease them. The Vice-President arranged to have OEO grant them their wish.[101]

Amidst all this controversy, Head Start emerged to thunderous applause. There was much at stake for CAP, and indeed for the entire War on Poverty, in having a successful and popular program. As Sugarman put it, "Suddenly in the midst of growing criticism of OEO, its Job Corps, and its Community Action Program, here was an idea that looked like a winner. Who could be against little kids!" Ultimately, this need for acceptance compromised much of the promise of Head Start as a comprehensive service to poor children and, of course, foreclosed any possibility of radical change in the distribution of wealth. For this reason, it enjoyed more Congressional support than any other War on Poverty program. And even though, Sugarman continued, "here and there an academician raised alarms about the quality of the program. . .these voices were obscured by the torrent of public support that quickly emerged."[102]

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[101]Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 248-52; Donovan, *The Politics of Poverty*, 56-7.

[102]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 115-16, 477.

Because of its popularity, and because with it came so much money, Head Start attracted much criticism from within CAP. Some CAP programs, for some of the reasons outlined above, were not looked upon with favor by the public, Congress, and even the OEO itself which ultimately controlled their funding. As Richard E. Orion, staff director and then successor to Dr. Richmond, said, "Those who were associated with these less successful [CAP] efforts were envious of our visibility - and particularly our capacity to obtain more funds. Another reason was that there were many CAP purists who felt that 'canned' programs like Head Start were not real 'community action.'" These "purists" had a point. Although local flexibility was allowed in Head Start, the major decision-making apparatus was centralized in Washington. There were certain requirements that each Head Start center had to fulfill, including the provision of health examinations and hot meals. This rigidity, though slight, was viewed as completely antithetical to CAP doctrine that held that local communities knew best their own problems and the solutions that were likely to be effective. Furthermore, Head Start was so heavily staffed by trained professionals, para-professionals, and volunteers, that some worried about its ability to fulfill the mandate of maximum feasible participation of the poor. Head Start maneuvered around this by insisting on parental involvement. However, this involvement was not in the decision-making mechanism and

therefore betrayed the spirit of the mandate if not its letter. It comes as no surprise that the Community Action Program, dedicated to the political and social empowerment of the poor, should regard with disfavor a program whose publicized goal was to remedy cultural deprivation and which was lauded (and funded) for it.[103]

Yet again, it would be unfair to quickly classify Head Start as a complete sell-out. In fact, the view of Head Start as an anti-radical antidote to the more dangerous local CAPs turned out to be rather ironic, for it was a Mississippi Head Start program that provided one of the most enduring controversies of the entire War on Poverty. The Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) was one of the most successful of all CAPs in organizing local participation of the poor. Hoping to continue the successes of the 1964 Freedom Summer, several civil rights groups quickly took the initiative in applying for Head Start funding in May 1965. Poor blacks made up the majority of staff members at the resulting early childhood centers. Senator John Stennis succeeded in having CDGM's funding revoked by arguing that OEO was subsidizing civil rights groups and was therefore mishandling funds. Their grant was renewed the following February only to be revoked once again that summer after vague accusations of links to the Black

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[103]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 132, 486; Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 230-31.

Power movement. Ultimately, the real threat to the white power structure was the creation of a federally funded, majority-black educational institution that had as its goal the preparation of poor blacks for integrated schools.[104] Although funding was eventually restored, the raging controversy that surrounded CDGM made it very apparent that despite Head Start's emphasis on the provision of certain middle-class cultural traits deemed necessary for success, such traits were not to be used for certain purposes. Most notably in this case, school performance and cognitive ability were to be improved upon only if the student was to contribute to the productive efforts of the affluent society. If one were to use Head Start in order to become more politically vocal or empowered, the program was thought too radical. To an extent, Shriver was forced to cut CDGM's funding by the belief that this controversy had the potential to dismantle all of Head Start or all of CAP or, perhaps, the entire War on Poverty. Yet this episode demonstrates that Head Start's mandate did not go beyond the cultural enrichment of its "culturally-deprived" students and parents. In Mississippi, that mandate most emphatically did not extend to the integration of the races.

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[104]Pat Watters, "CDGM: Who Really Won?" *New South* 22 (Spring 1967), 49-64. See also Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 279-90; Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 61-4.

A final source of popularity for Head Start - aside from its position vis-à-vis CAP in general and its focus on the posited cultural aspects of poverty - was its feminization. Although the original thirteen-member planning committee had only one woman on it, the public face of the program was decidedly female. The most prominent example of this was the formal public announcement of the Head Start program from the White House. As the project's chairperson, Lady Bird Johnson decided to sponsor an afternoon tea in February 1965. Aside from Sargent Shriver and some Head Start planners, this tea was attended exclusively by women, including governor's wives and several leading women in the worlds of business and entertainment. Furthermore, as Jules Sugarman noted, news of this tea received national news coverage primarily in the feminized pages of newspaper society sections: "While Community Action. . .was being bloodied every day on the front page, Head Start was receiving glowing tributes in the society and community-news pages." Because the organization of Head Start's first summer had to be accomplished in such a short period of time, the program received assistance from many sources outside the OEO. The major source of this aid was women. In order to better publicize the program and to encourage local agencies to submit grant applications, a "committee of congressional wives, who got together from both sides of the aisle," began a phone campaign during which they phoned contacts in their local districts and stayed on the line

until they could track down people working in the appropriate fields. Meanwhile, the programmatic core of Head Start was being assembled back in Washington by a team of early childhood experts. For this task, about 150 women flew in during a snowstorm, accompanied by "five or ten men." And when applications began to pour in, a call was sent out to Washington-area substitute teachers, the majority of whom were women, to help review them. So although women were largely cut out of the earliest planning days of the program, they played essential roles in publicizing, organizing, and making funding decisions for Head Start.[105]

There were three reasons for the feminization of Head Start. America's educational system was staffed primarily by women in the role of teachers. This was even truer in early childhood education, the realm in which Head Start worked. A more general feminization of education had been a mainstay since at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century and likely accounts for much of this dynamic in Head Start.[106] But it was also because of the program's focus on the culture of the poor home and of poor child rearing that

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[105]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 44, 117; Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 221-22, 224.

[106]For a study of the "historical connection between elementary school teaching and the ideologies surrounding domesticity and the definition of 'women's proper place,'" see Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 54-78.

women may have seemed a more "natural" presence in its workings. If poor mothers were unable to provide a proper middle class culture to their children, then middle class women could either take their place or show them how it was done. Finally, in the context of CAP, the feminization of Head Start may have served to further "soften" the larger program's radical image. Surely a heavily gendered afternoon tea held no potential for a radical restructuring of the American political or economic systems. In any case, gender divisions within the War on Poverty are a largely unexplored issue and await another and more thorough study.

Another effect of Head Start's public focus on the culture of the poor pertains to the evaluation of the program. In the 1960s, the emphasis in determining the success of Head Start was not placed on the medical and nutrition programs, nor was it focused on the program's ability to involve the poor (as in Mississippi) in powerful and significant ways. The vast majority of evaluative approaches focused on quantifiable signs of success, especially the intelligence quotient. This was partly the result of a more general trend toward statistical analysis and hard data that had begun to take over the social sciences in postwar America, but it was also in part because of the focus on the poor child's cultural deprivation which, as we have seen, was believed to result primarily in a stunting of intellectual growth. And as intellect became measurable via the IQ test, this method of evaluation could

be used to determine the extent to which the poor child had been integrated into the "proper" culture. As Reginald Lourie recalled, "Unfortunately, the major emphasis was on the improvement of measurable intelligence. . .while little attention was given to the ways in which Head Start was affecting health and family adjustment problems, areas that were of the highest priority in the original intent of the program." Julius Richmond lamented the fact that "a cottage industry examining IQ changes in Head Start children grew up in the late sixties, and it largely missed the point of the comprehensive, multidimensional nature of this program."[107]

The most influential evaluation to emerge from this "cottage industry" was the notorious Westinghouse Learning Corporation Report that appeared in 1969. Its release was dubbed "the blackest day in the history of the program." The researchers had performed IQ tests on Head Start graduates who were now in grade school and found that their IQs had dropped significantly. This was glibly interpreted as the failure of Head Start. Clearly, these poor children had not been supplied the culture needed for success in school. Ironically, this focus on the cultural/cognitive enrichment of poor children actually lead to the extension of the program via the creation of Follow Through. Because of the perceived failings of Head Start, an identical program was

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[107]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 100, 126, 133, 417-20.

established at the grade-school level. Follow Through certainly extended Head Start's biases, but it also brought its much-needed health and nutrition services to children for whom they had previously been unavailable.[108]

The one-dimensional evaluation of their program infuriated the planners of Head Start. They had always envisioned the program as a comprehensive one and any attempts to judge its success by a single standard were deemed unfair. Since the presidential administration and the Office of Economic Opportunity needed to sell the program and pander to this mode of evaluation, tensions grew between the planners and those publicizing the program. Forced to defend their tactics in the face of a growing onslaught of criticism, the planning committee backed away from its original claims that Head Start was an antipoverty program. As Edward Zigler, the man given the task of evaluating the program from the inside, wrote, "The thinking behind Head Start was based on the assumption that preschool intervention could contribute to the ultimate elimination of poverty by preparing poor children for school. . . .Head Start can have some positive effects, as nearly fifteen years of evaluation research has shown, but it most surely

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[108]Westinghouse Learning Corporation, *The Impact of Head Start: An Evaluation of the Effects of Head Start on Children's Cognitive and Affective Development: Executive Summary, Report to the Office of Economic Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: Clearinghouse for Federal Scientific and Technical Information, 1969).

cannot be considered an antidote to poverty. . . .Expectations were too great, and highly unrealistic, because the assumptions upon which these expectations were based - that is, assumptions about the roots of poverty, the characteristics of poor children, and the potential of early-intervention programs in and of themselves - were at best dubious and at worst erroneous."[109]

In the end, Head Start reformers were forced to back away from their public mandate to contribute in a significant way to the elimination of poverty. To the extent that it had ever really been an antipoverty program in practice, Head Start defined poverty as cultural. For that reason, and despite some valuable service components, Head Start could never achieve a lasting contribution to the elimination of poverty. Ironically, it was its inability to conceive of poverty in economic terms and its resulting inability to do much about it that allowed the program to provide important medical and nutritional services to poor children. In this awkward balance, Head Start continues to this day to provide valuable services to the nation's poor at the same time that, by way of its theoretical underpinnings and its concomitant unwillingness or inability to eliminate the material base of poverty, it in fact contributes to the maintenance of their condition.

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[109]Zigler and Valentine, *Project Head Start*, 478.

CONCLUSION

The Culture of Welfare Reform

Almost from the time it was enacted, the War on Poverty began to be dismantled. This process came to a head with the enactment of "welfare reform" in 1996. The shift from the Great Society to a war on welfare was quickened by Ronald Reagan's fable of the "welfare queen [who] has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve social security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four nonexisting deceased husbands."[110] From then on, the mood dramatically shifted away from antipoverty efforts and toward anti-welfare reform. The elimination of poverty lost out to the elimination of "welfare as we know it." As Representative Deborah Pryce of Ohio said on the House floor, "President Lyndon Johnson launched his much-celebrated War on Poverty with the hope of creating a Great Society here in America. Well, here we are in 1996, 30 years and more than $5 trillion dollars later, ready to launch a new war. Only this time, the war is not so much against poverty itself, but against a failed welfare system that has trapped the less fortunate in our society in a seemingly endless cycle of

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[110]When journalists tracked down this woman, they discovered she was collecting $8,000 per year, using two aliases to collect twenty-three public aid checks. See Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 518.

poverty and despair."[111] As several other proponents of welfare reform phrased it, welfare recipients remained poor because of their "pathology of dependence" on government funds.[112]

The dismantling of the welfare state was not a partisan issue. Both Democrats and Republicans agreed that welfare's status as an entitlement program should be ended. With exceptions, the major differences were in the details rather than the spirit of welfare reform. In the House debate, the Democratic detractors from the Republican proposal were most concerned with provisions they believed would harm poor children more than their parents.[113] As a focus on the children of the poor contributed much to the popularity of Head Start, so some legislators may have tried to save the welfare state by the same tactic. In both cases, poor adults were held responsible for bequeathing poverty to their children.

As always, there was little attention to larger economic forces in the debate over welfare reform. In a rehash of David Potter's abundance thesis, supporters of welfare reform simply assumed that the mighty American

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[111]*Congressional Record*, Vol. 142 (July 18, 1996), 7792.

[112]See for example, Karl Zinsmeister, "Welfare Reform Should Emphasize Family Unity" *Welfare Reform* (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1997), 81-86.

[113]*Congressional Record*, Vol. 142 (July 18, 1996), 7787, 7789.

economy could accommodate all those who would be pushed off welfare by new time limits. And instead of seeing poverty as a profoundly material and economic problem, welfare reformers found alternative explanations of the existence of privation in the world's wealthiest nation. Instead of possessing cultural deficiencies, welfare recipients, it was asserted, possessed either a pathological dependency on the state or a pathological immorality that most commonly manifested itself in out-of-wedlock births. The poor, therefore, were no longer in need of education. They lacked personal responsibility. They needed to be forced off welfare and into the workplace and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRAWORA) made this the official goal of the federal government.

Although Bill Clinton had promised to "end welfare as we know it" in his 1992 presidential campaign, the push that would eventually result in the passage of PRAWORA came two years later when Newt Gingrich and his coterie of Republican representatives and hopefuls revealed their "contract with America."[114] This group proved to have a profound influence on the terms of the welfare reform debate. They initiated the rhetoric of morality and personal responsibility:

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[114]For a concise history of how the welfare bill became law, see Anne Marie Cammisa, *From Rhetoric To Reform? Welfare Policy in American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 76-93.

"Government programs designed to give a helping hand to the neediest of Americans have instead bred illegitimacy, crime, illiteracy, and more poverty. Our *Contract With America* will change this destructive social behavior by requiring welfare recipients to take personal responsibility for the decisions they make."[115]

The legislation they proposed was simply called The Personal Responsibility Act. Their act would have denied benefits to teenage parents and all noncitizens. They claimed that most welfare families began with a teenage birth and that immigrants came to this country for the sole purpose of living off the generosity of the state. William J. Bennett came out in support of his conservative colleagues and claimed "welfare is illegitimacy's economic life-support system." Many believed, as Bennett put it, that "having children out-of-wedlock is *wrong*. Not simply economically unwise for the individuals involved, or a financial burden on society - but morally wrong.[116] As for immigrants, as Representative E. Clay Shaw of Florida said, "we do not believe that American taxpayers should simply still be required to shell out their money to pay welfare to

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[115]*Contract With America: The Bold Plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Armey, and the House Republicans to Change the Nation* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 65-77.

[116]William J. Bennett, "Welfare Reform Must Address the Crisis of Illegitimacy" *Welfare Reform* (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1997), 87-91.

noncitizens."[117] In short, since welfare recipients were not responsible enough to support themselves, the government would have to force them to do it. PRAWORA maintained the ban on aide to unwed teenage mothers unless they were in school or lived with a parent and denied aide to noncitizens with few exceptions.

Compared with this, the shortcomings of the War on Poverty seem slight and its rhetoric tepid. Not only did the 1996 welfare reform legislators and pundits ignore the economics of poverty and continue to assume that the nation's economic system could provide for all Americans, but it replaced poverty as a social problem with the boogey-man of pathological welfare dependency. The underlying logic is the same - the poor must be changed - but now the question of whether or not they remain poor is often overshadowed by the desire to do away with welfare and its allegedly concomitant evils. The nation continues to blame the poor (and their "culture" or "pathologies" or "immorality") for their economic situation and moves further away from the possibility of eliminating the paradox of privation amidst plenty.

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[117] *Congressional Record*, Vol. 142 (July 18, 1996), 7794.

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