How Poverty Lost Its Meaning

F. Allan Hanson

After decades of dashed hopes and expenditures that have produced no tangible benefits, the nation seems tacitly to have acknowledged that we fought a War on Poverty and poverty won (see Sawhill 1988: 1085). Many see a brave title—the "Personal Responsibility and Employment Opportunity Act of 1996"—as merely papering over a wearied and frustrated withdrawal from the War on Poverty.

It has been possible to withdraw from the War on Poverty partly because the poor exercise very little political clout. They are a minority, many of them do not vote, and they do not otherwise participate in political life. Thus, when Congress was revamping poverty policy, the halls were empty of lobbyists arguing the case for the poor (Clymer 1996).

But, of course, the poor have always been relatively powerless. More importantly, the non-poor seem to have become less engaged in the issue of poverty, making it easier for politicians to dismantle federal welfare programs without antagonizing the middle and upper classes which constitute their power base. The deeper questions are therefore social and cultural rather than specifically political: Have the non-poor lost interest in poverty? If so, why?

My answer to the first question is yes, and, to the second, because poverty today has lost much of its meaning. In the past poverty signified something more than just economic destitution, and it was its larger significance that attracted the non-poor to the issue and motivated them to try to do something about it. Now the larger meanings have for the most part disappeared, leaving poverty as a drab, purely economic issue with little to excite the involvement of the non-poor. The purpose of this essay is to examine how this transformation came about, and to suggest a reason for it.

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The History of Poverty: An Overview

A brief sketch of poverty's history will throw its present form into sharper relief. The fundamental question about poverty has always been who or what causes it. Western thinking on this question has oscillated between placing the responsibility for poverty squarely on poor people and locating it in systemic conditions beyond the control of individuals. The distinction is visible in recent debates about why we lost the War on Poverty, with liberals adopting a systemic perspective and conservatives taking the individualist view. Their arguments contrast intriguingly with the reasons these same constituencies advance for why we lost the other, hotter war that we were fighting in Vietnam at roughly the same time. Now it is the liberals who espouse a Rambo-type philosophy that we lost the War on Poverty because we didn't fight hard enough and we lacked the will to win. Poor people are in their unfortunate condition due to circumstances beyond their control. Because the source of poverty lies in the socioeconomic system, the solution to it must also be at the societal level: large-scale interventions to rectify systemic inequities. But with the drastic cuts in social programs of the Reagan administration, those in the front lines were stripped of necessary resources and not allowed to press on to victory. The war on poverty was fought with popguns and ultimately it gave way to neglect and indifference (Quadagno 1994: 178, 197).

Conservatives counter that the war was misconceived from the beginning, born of misunderstanding of the situation and the nature of the adversary. They insist that poverty is at bottom an individual problem. Able-bodied poor should take responsibility for their own lives and extricate themselves from poverty by getting and holding a job. Large-scale interventions such as the government programs of the War on Poverty only make the situation worse by fostering dependence of poor people on handouts (Murray 1984: 218, Mead 1986: 65, Olasky 1992: 231).

Simple oscillation between systemic and individual causes is not sufficient, however, to capture the larger history of poverty. Since the Middle Ages each of the two basic points of view has dominated twice, but each moment had its unique characteristics. I will try to capture both the similarities and differences in the four versions of poverty with the following terminology: medieval piety, rugged individualism, state welfare, and contemporary individualism.

Medieval Piety

In the early Middle Ages the condition of poverty, or being "poor" (*pauperes*), was not necessarily defined in terms of economic destitu-

tion at all. In England and northern France of the 9th and 10th centuries the category *pauperes* referred to free commoners: people who were neither nobles nor clergy. While they were certainly not well off economically, their most distinctive feature was that they did not bear arms. Thus, they stood in need of protection. This was the duty of the king and men at arms in France, while in England the king was bound to protect them against "knightly violence" (Mollat 1986: 95, 98–99, 296; Hyams 1980: 261–62).

Even as poverty became associated with economic hardship, it was not viewed as a social pathology. To the contrary, the poor formed an intrinsic part of an organic society, the three orders or estates of which—warriors, clergy, poor agricultural and other workers—were thought to reflect the order of heaven (Duby 1980: 3–4). Thus around the year 1000 people had a "mental image of a society one and triune like the divinity who had created and would ultimately judge it" (p. 5).

Given the divine origin of the social order, the poor were not held individually responsible for their condition. Prosperity and poverty alike were attributed to the grace of God, and all should accept their lot with humility. Nor were the poor stigmatized. If anything they were thought to be morally superior to the rich, particularly if they had voluntarily renounced secular wealth and power. Monks, nobles, and wealthy persons would wash the feet of the poor and invite them to dine. St. Louis, King of France in the 13th century, cut bread and poured drink himself for the paupers whom he fed at his own table. In a society that condemned this-worldly things, the poor represented a religious ideal. Moreover, they were downright useful to the rich and powerful as an outlet to atone for their sins through the Christian charity of alms-giving (Geremek 1994: 7, 17–20, 42; Waxman 1977: 73–77; Mollat 1986: 44).

Rugged Individualism

The transition to the next social construct of poverty was a lengthy one, not fully completed until the 18th or even the 19th century. Probably the process started when people began to attribute significance to the close link between poverty and unemployment, which began in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. This period experienced numerous poor harvests, famine, plague, severe winters, and bad times generally. Many peasants lost their land, and others were unable to support their families on their small holdings. These individuals formed a kind of rural proletariat that moved from place to place in search of work (Mollat 1986: 158–60). The numbers involved were large: in 1300 half the peasant households in England required outside wages earned by the family head to survive, and some 35 to 40 percent

of the population of Europe could be classified as poor (pp. 168, 174–76). When no work was to be found the itinerant poor had few options other than begging and crime. The prospect of hordes of vagrants begging, robbing, and assaulting their way across the countryside inclined people, for the first time, to think of poverty as a social pathology. By the second half of the 14th century the image of the pious, meek pauper was undergoing a dark transformation. As Mollat (p. 251) describes it,

> More than ever there was a sharp contrast between the idealization of spiritual poverty and the visibly sordid realities of material poverty. . . . What did hideous tramps and fierce bandits have in common with Christ? How could people tolerate rebellion and violence against the established order and the will of God? What justification allowed able-bodied men to go begging, contrary to the natural law of labor?. . . . People were afraid . . . of the beggar's . . . idleness, his rootlessness, and his anonymity. They no longer knew with whom they were dealing.

The number of itinerant paupers increased greatly with rampant inflation in the 16th century, leading many municipalities to outlaw begging and almsgiving (Geremek 1994: 133–34, 146–47, 211). By this time the notion of poverty as a morally and spiritually superior state had long since been abandoned. The deserving poor (the aged, infirm, orphans, widows with young children) were distinguished from the undeserving poor (able-bodied paupers). While there was willingness to assist those in the former category, the undeserving poor were despised for idleness and moral debauchery, and they were subject to flogging and even death for infractions of the laws and decrees designed to restrict their wandering and force them to work (Waxman 1977: 95).

A second ingredient in the redefinition of poverty was the humanistic philosophy of the Renaissance. The image of the humble pauper had splendidly exemplified the medieval ideal of pious acquiescence in one's God-given lot in life, whatever it might be. It was totally at odds with the new humanistic emphasis on individual effort and aspiration, self-reliance and self-realization. From the perspective of those ideals, the able-bodied poor came to be viewed as incompetent, ludicrous, and dangerous human failures deserving neither self-respect nor the respect of others (Waxman 1977: 256).

A third ingredient, related to humanism, was the development of capitalism and the liberal political philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries. The relation between the individual and society changed from an organic community in which groups were more important than individuals to a collection of independent, atomized individuals

all pursuing their private interests and ordering their relations with each other by means of formal, explicit contracts (Kamenka and Tay 1975: 136–38). While an honored place had been reserved for paupers in the organic community of the early Middle Ages, they were useless, shameless drones in the context of the new values of individualism and self-reliance.

The fourth and final component in the transformation of poverty to be considered here is the notion that natural law decrees that the fit will survive and the unfit perish. An important corollary to this is that while the operation of this law may seem harsh, in the long run it works to the benefit of species and societies, and we interfere with it at our peril. This idea is of course most commonly associated with Darwin, and its application to social situations typically goes under the name of social Darwinism, but it actually emerged at least three-quarters of a century before *The Origin of Species* (Townsend 1971: 40–41; Malthus 1992: 14–15, 215–16, 227–30). From this point of view paupers belong to the category of the unfit and it might be better, as Ebenezer Scrooge said (in a work also written before Darwin's *magnum opus*), for them to die and decrease the surplus population.

With these four developments, the condition of poverty was utterly transformed from its representation in the Middle Ages as ideal piety and moral superiority. While there had been an intelligible—even honored—place for paupers in the organic, group-centered, medieval view of the relation between the person and society, poverty no longer made sense in the context of the newly ascendant humanistic and individualistic values. The unemployed, unambitious, dependent pauper was now seen as a contemptible anomaly. Poverty became a cancer on society, a cesspool of indolent misfits draining the resources of honest people who were willing to support themselves. Moreover, entirely in keeping with the individualistic ideology, responsibility for the bane of poverty was placed squarely on the poor themselves (Gans 1968: 202, Waxman 1977: 82–84).

State Welfare

The systemic view of poverty experienced the beginnings of a resurrection in the latter 19th century. The hallmark of this vision is the subordination of individual rights and interests to public policy and the public good, as these are articulated, planned, and administered by centralized, bureaucratic agencies (Kamenka and Tay 1975: 138–39). Briefly stated, this is the world of big organizations, big government, big bureaucracy, and thick volumes of administrative rules and procedures.

With this transformation comes the assumption that social problems have systemic, societal causes and solutions. Elements of state welfare thinking are clearly visible in thinkers of the latter 18th and early 19th centuries such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henri de Saint-Simon, but the first theorist to develop a systematic account of poverty from this perspective was Karl Marx. He proposed, as a basic characteristic of capitalism, that with the accumulation of wealth, the demand for labor also increases, but in a constantly diminishing proportion (Marx 1967: 629). Capital grows, that is to say, faster than the demand for labor. This inevitably produces unemployment, and those who are chronically unemployed are the paupers, "the dead weight of the industrial reserve army" (p. 644). The responsibility for poverty is thus to be found in the nature of the economic system, not in personal failings of poor people.

While medieval piety and state welfare share the notion that the cause of poverty does not rest with paupers as individuals, they are divided by several crucial differences. Most important, the theological basis of medieval piety gives way in state welfare to secularism, and assumptions about a rigidly hierarchical society are replaced with egalitarian ideals. Moreover, while in medieval thought poverty was an ideal condition, state welfare theory shares the rugged individualist notion that it is a problem to be solved—although by very different means.

An important component of the state welfare mode of thinking was the growth, since the late 19th century, of sociology and anthropology, for it is the stock-in-trade of these disciplines to analyze events more in terms of social systems and institutions than individual considerations. Of special relevance here is the "culture of poverty," introduced by anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959). This is the idea that poverty is a whole way of life, marked not just by economic destitution but also by the absence of a prolonged and protected childhood, early initiation to sex, a low rate of formal marriage, frequent abandonment of wives and children, maternal dominance, and strong psychological feelings of marginality, dependence, and inferiority. The culture of poverty is resistant to change, because "by the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of the changing conditions or increased opportunities that may occur in their lifetime" (Lewis 1968: 188).

This idea has important implications for the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. From the individualist perspective able-bodied paupers are to blame for their poverty and are undeserving of public assistance. But if, as Lewis claims, the culture of

poverty reproduces itself in individuals by the age of six or seven, then it is unjust to hold them personally responsible for their inability to extricate themselves from their condition. While they may be able-bodied they are not "able-minded" or "able-cultured," and the ranks of the deserving poor should be expanded to include them.

Lewis worked largely in Third World societies, but in the widely read book *The Other America*, Michael Harrington (1962) applied the notion of the culture of poverty to poor people in the United States. He succeeded in sensitizing many Americans to the plight of those living among us who, through circumstances beyond their control, are condemned to lives of want and misery. Another influential work in the state welfare paradigm was *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. This confidential government report was prepared by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1967), then assistant secretary in the Office of Policy Planning and Research at the Department of Labor, and submitted to President Lyndon B. Johnson in March 1965. It contended that the cycle of black poverty would not be broken so long as the pathological pattern of illegitimacy, divorce and desertion, and female-headed families remained in force. This report had a major impact on public policy, for the president relied on it in his commencement speech on black poverty, delivered at Howard University in 1965 (Katz 1989: 24).

These developments produced a sea change in thinking about poverty in the United States. According to Charles Murray (1984: 29), "What emerged in the mid-1960s was an almost unbroken intellectual consensus that the individualist explanation of poverty was altogether outmoded and reactionary. Poverty was not a consequence of indolence or vice. . . . It was produced by conditions that had nothing to do with individual virtue or effort. *Poverty was not the fault of the individual but of the system.*"

Many thinkers working within the state welfare paradigm—e.g., Robert Merton, Talcott Parsons, Charles Valentine, William Julius Wilson, and Michael Katz—deny that there is such a thing as a distinctive culture of poverty. The cause of poverty is an institutional structure that denies equal opportunity to the lower classes, often exacerbated by racial discrimination (Duncan 1968: 102–103, Fried 1968: 147–50, Thernstrom 1968: 176–79). From this perspective, the solution to poverty is to provide more opportunities for the poor, such as training, good jobs, or, simply, money. They can then be relied upon to exercise their own values (which are not that different from everyone else's) to take advantage of these opportunities and improve their situation. The extreme expression of this point of view came from a Johnson administration official, whom Marvin Olasky (1992:

174) quotes as saying: "The way to eliminate poverty is to give the poor people enough money so that they won't be poor anymore."

Despite disagreements over matters such as the culture of poverty, state welfare thinkers are unanimous that poverty is not the fault of poor people. This view enabled poverty to regain a kind of respectability that it had lost under rugged individualism. The poor did not, of course, attain the integral and honorable position they had held in medieval piety, for the state welfare goal is not to acquiesce to poverty but to eradicate it. Still, to be poor became less humiliating. Poverty did not result from some individual aberrancy or failure, but from a flawed system. As victims of the system, poor people deserved not contempt but a helping hand.

And because the problem lay in the system, the solution to it must be to fix the system. That is a tall order. The only agency capable of designing and enforcing change in something so huge and sprawling as the overall socioeconomic system is government. Hence the centralized planning and administration, and the elevation of public policy over personal interests, that characterize state welfare thinking. This point of view dominated, of course, in communist countries, but it also prevailed in the social democracies of Western Europe. In the United States it informed the establishment of Social Security and the federal welfare system in the 1930s and, three decades later, it was represented in civil rights legislation, affirmative action, and the War on Poverty.

Contemporary Individualism

But, as was conceded at the outset, the War on Poverty was lost. The state welfare programs and policies did not work, and they came under fierce criticism. The worm has turned again and, in the last decade or so, a different version of poverty has emerged.

A common theme among authors who criticize the state welfare approach to poverty is that the Great Society programs designed to help the poor were not only ineffective but, in fact, have made the situation worse (Banfield 1974: ix, Mead 1986: 65, Murray 1984: 155–62, 218). Charles Murray develops the argument via the economists' model of decision-making by rational agents. Poor people, he posits, use the same calculus of self-interest that everyone else does. The problem is that, in their precarious circumstances, it is rational to orient toward short-term rather than long-term gains. Great Society programs designed as solutions to poverty actually create dependency on welfare because getting a job and trying to become self-sufficient produce no short-term advantage over relying on public assistance.

Hence, the rational choice is to stay on welfare and avoid the drudgery of work (Murray 1984: 155–63).

The attitudes toward poverty fostered by the state welfare way of thinking also had detrimental effects. As we have seen, from that perspective poor people are not responsible for their poverty. Many of them learned that lesson so well that they "tended to view themselves as barred from work by lack of training, child care, transportation, and so on. They thought of overcoming these obstacles as government's obligation rather than their own. They could hardly imagine going to work without a government guarantee or protection of some sort" (Mead 1986: 65). Simultaneously, poverty began to shed its stigma. Prior to the 1960s it was humiliating to accept the dole, leading about half of those eligible for welfare to refuse it. The Great Society brought with it the contrary notion that the humiliation lay in doing low-paid work, and that one could maintain one's dignity by going on welfare (Olasky 1992: 168–69, Sandel 1996: 68).

Murray's proposal is to do away with virtually the entire federal welfare system. He would maintain a national unemployment insurance system to tide over those who have lost their jobs for a reasonably short period while they find another, and he would rely on private charities and municipal agencies to take care of the truly deserving poor who are incapable of work and have no family to support them (1984: 227–33). As for the able-bodied poor, Murray is unmoved by the argument that they deserve support because they fell into poverty due to circumstances beyond their control. In a passage that betrays an interestingly staccato concept of human experience, he writes: "people—all people, black or white, rich or poor—may be unequally responsible for what has happened to them in the past, but all are equally responsible for what they do next" (p. 234).

Murray seems unforgiving when compared with thinkers in the state welfare paradigm, but relative to other critics of the welfare approach his views are benign. With a collaborator, he has recently enunciated a vision of an organic society where everyone has a place, and all work—no matter how menial or poorly compensated—is dignified and confers an honorable place in society (Herrnstein and Murray 1994: 527–52). Other authors, such as Lawrence Mead and Edward Banfield, are more austere. Mead takes the stance of a hard realist. Abandoning any notion that all work is dignified, his remarkably Hobbesian account rejects the prospect that people will voluntarily take the dirtiest and lowest-paid jobs out of a motivation to support themselves and get ahead. We need policies to force them to work (Mead 1986: 13).

Banfield tips his hand in the very first words of the Preface to *The Unheavenly City* (Banfield 1968: vii): "This book will probably strike many readers as the work of an ill-tempered and mean-spirited fellow." He hastens to assure us that he is really well-meaning and even soft-hearted, but that his work emerges from a staunch refusal to shy away from "the facts." As he sees them, the facts are grim indeed. There is no possibility to organize lower-class people to work for their own improvement because "the lower-class person (as defined here)[1] is incapable of being organized" (p. 130). Lower-class people don't mind the squalor of slum living; actually they like it. Nor is the lower-class person disturbed by the absence of libraries, parks, good schools. "Indeed, where such things exist he destroys them by acts of vandalism if he can" (p. 62).

The outlook is not hopeful. Banfield (1968: 258) sees little possibility of the lower class being absorbed into the dominant culture. So dedicated is he to the proposition that programs to alleviate poverty do more harm than good that he views it as a "frightening fact" that middle and upper class people want to donate their time and allocate money in an effort to solve the problem (pp. 253–54). The measures that Banfield is willing to countenance are made of sterner stuff: removing lower-class children from their parents either temporarily or permanently (pp. 229–37), and placing young lower-class males who have not (yet) broken any law under varying levels of surveillance, parole, or incarceration according to the probability that they will commit future crimes (pp. 182–84). Although written over a quarter century ago, *The Unheavenly City* continues to appeal to conservatives. As Robert J. Samuelson (1997: 49) writes: "The Banfield theory ignited outrage, because it meant that, beyond some point, the effort to end poverty would fail. In the prevailing climate—all problems were then deemed solvable—this was heresy. But it has stood the test of time and taps into popular ambivalence about social welfare."

Poverty Loses Its Meaning

Differences between contemporary individualism and its rugged precursor are less readily apparent than those between medieval piety

[1]Banfield's definition of the lower class has nothing to do with wealth. The exclusive defining feature is that a lower class person "is incapable of conceptualizing the future or of controlling his impulses and is therefore obliged to live from moment to moment" (Banfield 1968: 48). Thus, if you find someone whom you thought was lower class but who proves capable of organizing his or her efforts and activities for future benefits, the proper move in Banfield's logic is to say that person was not lower class after all, or is no longer. This preserves his view of the lower class as incapable of self-improvement, but at the cost of smuggling a good deal of tautology into the argument.

and state welfare. Indeed, many recent accounts of the nature of poverty and what should be done about it initially seem indistinguishable from rugged individualism at its apogee in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The able-bodied poor are once again blamed for their condition; they are viewed as pitiful, even contemptible anomalies who lack the will and perseverance to sustain themselves. The concept of human nature has returned to the view of people as lazy and corrupt, willing to turn to productive labor only if circumstances require of it of them. Charles Murray's diagnosis that public welfare breeds dependence and should be abolished recapitulates with remarkable fidelity the proposals advanced in 1803 by Thomas Robert Malthus in his celebrated *Essay on the Principle of Population* (Malthus 1992: 228, 263–64, 266, 328; see also Malthus 1986: 9–10). Hardline views from Mead and Banfield about keeping the lower class in its place and forcing them to do menial tasks resonate with 18th-century opinions in Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (Mandeville 1970: 294–95) and Joseph Townsend's *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws* (Townsend 1971: 35–36). Marvin Olasky makes such recidivist ideas explicit (Olasky 1992). He adopts an overtly Christian view of the corruptibility of human nature and recommends that policy toward poverty stress the tough love of uncompromisingly requiring work and moral improvement from the poor, just as our ancestors did from one to three centuries ago.

All these similarities tempt one to think that, state welfare having exhausted itself, thinking and policy about poverty are returning to rugged individualism. However, an anecdote from Olasky himself belies this conclusion and encourages deeper probing into what turn out to be quite fundamental differences between the rugged and contemporary varieties of individualism.

As part of his research on the condition of poverty, Olasky stopped shaving for a few days, dressed in ragged clothing, and joined the throng of the homeless in some of Washington's soup kitchens. In one of them, he asked a volunteer server for a Bible. It was necessary to pose the question twice before the person understood what was being requested, and then the answer came that no Bibles were available. That he raised the question is evidence that Olasky himself conceptualizes poverty in terms of the rugged individualist model; that he received the answer he did is evidence that, today, poverty for much of the rest of society has become something quite different.

In the 19th century, the Protestant ethic decreed that Christian living entailed sobriety, responsibility, and self-sufficiency. Those sunk in poverty were degraded spiritually as well as economically, and an important motivation for rescuing people from poverty was to save

their souls. This attitude may still be found in the Salvation Army and store-front missions, but by and large, as Olasky's vain attempt to acquire a Bible demonstrates, the spiritual significance of poverty has disappeared.

Several other meanings associated with the rugged individualist view of poverty are also absent from the contemporary version. One of them is the Social Darwinist idea that nature's way of maintaining the health and well-being of a population or species is to weed out the least fit individuals. This notion was explicitly applied to the poor by Townsend, who argued in 1786 that whenever a population faces scarce resources, the weakest members will suffer and, if the situation is serious enough, die. This is the order of nature. Any interference with it, such as relief for the poor, will only "increase the number of unprofitable citizens, and sow the seeds of misery for the whole community; increasing the general distress, and causing more to die for want, than if poverty had been left to find its proper channel" (Townsend 1971: 40–1). Today this sort of explanation continues to dominate the presentation of other species on television nature programs, but it would cause instant outrage if it were advanced with reference to human poverty.

From the rugged individualist perspective poverty also provided insights into human nature, human civilization, and its progress. Malthus held that the two dominant human drives are for material comforts and sex. The latter causes population to increase faster than food production. Within limits this discrepancy is actually beneficial, for if food were easily obtainable man's natural indolence would deter him from hard work. But a population massively outstripping its food supply would suffer severe want and strife. Hence, it is necessary to control population growth. This is achieved by constraints on the sex drive; specifically, by delaying marriage and children until one is financially able to support a family. By encouraging industriousness, production, and the exercise of reason over base passion, these conditions stimulate economic and social progress and build individual character (Malthus 1992: 209–16; see also Montague 1886: 61).

Malthus continued that the poor do not understand these things. Placing no rein on their passions, they marry early and have many children. Thus, they unwittingly plunge themselves into destitution, and they fail to develop the finer qualities of character that come from self-control (Malthus 1992: 227). Hence, while Malthus favored abolition of welfare, he wanted to do this gradually and only *after* his primary proposal for solving the problem of poverty had been put into effect, which was to educate the poor. Once they realized that the cause of their poverty was their own profligate reproduction, most

of them would mend their ways. This would have the multiple salutary effects of enabling present paupers to escape their poverty, preventing young people from falling into it, and turning them all into more productive citizens and more civilized human beings as they bring their animal drives under rational control (pp. 274–77, 328).

The larger significance of poverty is diminished in contemporary individualism. To be sure, the notion that destitute dependence erodes the character while responsible self-sufficiency bolsters it remains. It manifests itself in annoyance and impatience with people who cannot get and hold a job, who as unmarried teenagers place no restraint on their sexuality and take no responsibility for the children they produce. However, these sentiments are targeted at the poor as individuals and the link with the rise of civilization has largely vanished. Rugged individualism's virtue of controlling impulses and faith in social progress have both been devalued of late. Departing with them are the notions that what raises us above a brutish existence is voluntary, rational government of our natural instincts, and that precisely that self-control spurs the upward growth of civilization.

The difference emerges from a closer comparison of Murray's present proposal to end public welfare with the ideas proposed by Malthus nearly two centuries ago. Malthus' convictions about the value of controlling base passions and social progress are embedded primarily in his desire to educate the poor, and this part of his program Murray does not recapitulate. Indeed, where Malthus believed that the poor could escape their poverty if they were educated, Murray joins Richard Herrnstein in the very different view that limited innate intelligence restricts the degree to which the lower class can be educated (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). In this sense, contemporary individualism is leaner and meaner than rugged individualism for it sees fewer prospects for the poor to improve their state. And since better education is not likely to benefit the poor, given their limited intellectual capacity, the rest of society is justified in declining to allocate the resources to provide it for them.

The meanings associated with contemporary poverty are much reduced in comparison not only with rugged individualism but with medieval piety and state welfare as well. Medieval poverty represented much that was honored at the time: a Christ-like existence, pious renunciation of worldly things, humble acquiescence in what God had ordained, and an opportunity to seek divine favor through alms-giving. In the state welfare paradigm, poverty represented a challenge to the just and humane society that people were trying to build. The prospect of eradicating it symbolized what could be achieved in a Marxian utopia or a Johnsonian Great Society if only sufficient national will,

expert planning and management, and community resources were devoted to the task.

The poverty of contemporary individualism has no meaning comparable to these. In its depressing self poverty denotes want, stagnation, and hopelessness. Its larger connotations are even more sordid: drug addiction, violence, and crime. Of course the non-poor would like to see all of these things come to an end. But that is no longer anything more than an end in itself. It is not linked to some shining image or transcendent crusade such as advancing civilization, saving souls, or creating a truly equal and just society. The motivation to commitment and self-sacrifice in the cause of ending poverty has gone slack, with the upshot that sufficient numbers of the non-poor no longer devote themselves to the task. Past failures seed their doubt that poverty can be eradicated, and present values do not provide them with any great incentive for continuing to try.

Discontinuity and Paralysis

If the contemporary view of poverty is distinguished from all three of its predecessors by the lack of a larger meaning, the critical question is why. My suggestion is that current notions about the nature of poverty foreclose all possibilities of doing something constructive about it. This contrasts sharply with the earlier conceptualizations of poverty, each of which included appropriate courses of action for dealing with it. This is not to say that what was to be done was in any sense easy. Supreme human effort was frequently required to respond properly to poverty, and there was no guarantee of success. It was precisely this challenge that sparked the aspirations and engagement with poverty of those who were determined to make singularly positive contributions with their lives. In the medieval view poverty was part of the order God had ordained for the world, and the proper human response was to acquiesce in it with humility. It cannot have been easy for the rich and powerful to demean themselves so far as to honor and serve the poor, and it was more difficult still voluntarily to renounce the world and its material rewards for the miserable life of a pauper. Yet these were powerful signs of Christian piety and devotion, and many strove mightily to embody them so that they might approximate in their own lives the highest values of their culture.

In the view of rugged individualism the cause of poverty was a natural order of society that had no tolerance for human ignorance and indolence. This too provided an opportunity and a challenge for activists who would work for the betterment of humanity. For Malthus it was to extend the benefits of civilization and education to the poor,

and thus contribute to human progress. It is even possible that the temper of the time found a severe nobility in the flinty recommendations of Malthus and clergyman Joseph Townsend that the poor who had disdained the opportunity for self-improvement should be left (together with their innocent children) to die. This policy, they claimed, was inspired not by lack of compassion but by the conviction that to assist unregenerate paupers would transgress nature's (and God's) law and inevitably result in greater human suffering in the long run.

The state welfare paradigm also entailed a clear course of action for dealing with poverty. Since poverty is caused by a deeply flawed socioeconomic system, the solution is to reform the system. Again, while obvious, this is by no means easy. It asks those in privileged positions to forfeit much of their fortune for the sake of a more equitable distribution of wealth, it requires massive effort and expenditures by society at large to provide equal opportunity for all, it might even demand the sacrifice of partisans' lives in a violent Marxist revolution.

While each of the three earlier versions of poverty identified a meaningful, appropriate, and challenging response to poverty on the part of the non-poor, this is no longer the case. Today we agree that poverty is of human origin, stemming either from inequities in the socioeconomic system (for those who continue to hold the state welfare perspective) or from the shortcomings of poor people (for those of a contemporary individualist persuasion). But in either case, we have lost the conviction that, collectively, we can do much about it. Not because the obstacles seem more difficult to surmount than in previous epochs; I have argued, in fact, that the very difficulty of taking appropriate action regarding poverty was an important factor challenging people of those periods to devote themselves whole-heartedly to the task. The present situation differs from the other three in that, today, no appropriate course of action relative to poverty is readily apparent.

The reason for this, I suggest, is that contemporary culture has generated an unprecedented inconsistency. We think, on the one hand, that social reality is a human construct, but, at the same time, we doubt that human beings can exercise any significant control over it.

The first part of this proposition can be stated in weaker and stronger forms. Most people would assent to the weaker formulation, which is that the origins of our social institutions (capitalism, democracy, marriage, etc.) are to be found in human history rather than, say, divine ordination or natural law. The stronger version is more controversial, with a distinctly postmodernist ring. It is that we actively create our physical and mental habitats, forming them of artifice and

simulation, and that these are just as "real" as anything else. As Ada Louise Huxtable (1997: 1) put it, "I do not know just when we lost our sense of reality or our interest in it, but at some point it was decided that reality was not the only option. It was possible, permissible and even desirable to improve on it: one could substitute a more agreeable product." Her specific reference is to architecture, but the same process has been recently observed in the formation of computer-generated virtual realities and online communities, political ideologies, the representation of the historical past and cultural traditions, and in countless other sectors of social life. Although the argument being developed here gains force with the stronger version of the human construction of social reality, it also can be run with the weaker, more generally accepted version.

The second part of the proposition—that humans lack significant control over our humanly constructed reality—is somewhat more esoteric. I will try to establish it first in the context of social theory, and then in the arena of practical life and popular thought. According to Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, one of the most important developments as social theory moved from structuralism through poststructuralism to postmodernism is the decline of humanism. Human beings, that is to say, have relinquished center stage. History and society are no longer seen as processes that move (or can be moved) in the direction of actualizing human potential and freedom, as was the case with Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking. Moreover, human beings are no longer seen as agents with the ability to influence the structure of society and the course of history (Best and Kellner 1991: 19–20, 24). One example of this shift is the debate between Louis Althusser and John Lewis over the driving force in the Marxian view of the historical dialectic. For Lewis, representing the earlier, Enlightenment tradition (one could also call it modernity), it is human striving to overcome bondage and alienation and achieve freedom, justice, and equality. Althusser, taking a poststructuralist perspective, insists that the engine of history is the class struggle perceived as a force in itself and quite apart from any human intentions or aspirations (Althusser 1976: 46–54).

Perhaps the most influential social theorist espousing a nonhumanist perspective on history and society is Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1979), he argued that the evolution of "technologies of power" over the last three or four centuries should be understood not in terms of any human plan or intentions, but as the increasing self-actualization and perfection of Power understood as a thing in itself. Indeed, for Foucault the human subject is neither "transcendental in relation to the field of events' nor "runs in its empty sameness

throughout the course of history" (Foucault 1984: 59), but is itself a product of a certain historical era. Moreover that era may be ending, and if that should happen "man" too may come to an end, erased "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault 1970: 387). The reference here is not to "man" as a representative of a certain biological species, but rather to "man" as a social being, with certain attributes such as free will, individual identity, dignity, intelligence, political rights and duties, and so on. The nonhumanism of this position is explicit: the human individual is a construct of a certain sociocultural configuration, a particular historical moment. It is vulnerable to change or even extinction when that moment passes, rather than transcending and even guiding history.

The nonhumanism of Foucault and other contemporary social theorists has had a major impact on intellectuals. Their ideas may not have directly influenced society at large, but they may have filtered through in other guises. Be that as it may, parallel developments are discernable in the public sphere. Especially important is the 1994 election. This repudiation of the assumptions that underlay the New Deal and the Great Society was simultaneously a denial of the general proposition that, working together to make and implement policy, human beings can bring about intended effects to solve social problems and improve social conditions. Any such effort, so the thinking goes, is as likely to make the problem worse as it is to ameliorate it. Here public opinion concurs with Foucault and other nonhumanist theorists that human beings are not in control of their own affairs and that their corporate, intentional efforts to influence them are not likely to be effective.[2]

A similar message can be read in Robert Putnam's recent writings (1995, 1996) about diminishing social capital and civic engagement in American society. Putnam uses these concepts to refer to a general decline in social networks, trusting relationships, cooperation, and general connection of individuals with their communities. He notes that in the last 30 years participation by Americans in civic clubs and organizations has fallen by about 50 percent, and informal interaction with others through visiting and socializing has dropped by about 25 percent. While I think his identification of television as the culprit is oversimplified, his statistics documenting the decline of volunteerism

[2]One difference may be that public opinion is likely to hold that while concerted high-level efforts to effect change are ineffectual, individuals working privately or in small groups *can* influence issues in their private lives and localities. Nonhumanist theorists would probably recommend another turn of the screw, arguing that what motivates people in these matters are institutional and historical forces with trajectories of their own.

and social engagement do represent compelling evidence for the proposition, paralleling that advanced above for the 1994 election, that many people in our society are losing faith in the possibility of concerted action to ease social ills or improve the quality of collective life. Hence, they turn inward—immersing themselves in their private lives and shunning the larger, public arena.

One of the darker sides of this development is the fact that a majority of states now have laws authorizing qualified citizens to carry concealed weapons. This reflects widespread loss of confidence in the ability of people in our society to live peaceably together and in the capacity of law enforcement agencies to protect citizens. Again the upshot is people turning away from public confidence and public institutions to a purely personal, private solution: I will arm myself because, ultimately, I can rely only on myself to protect myself and my family against the violent elements in society.

We are suspended in the disjuncture between the ideas that social reality is a human creation and that human beings, acting collectively, cannot control what happens in that reality. This impasse accounts for much in our current condition, including why poverty has lost its meaning. Poverty is clearly something of our own doing, but the non-poor are no longer moved to take concerted action to alleviate it. This is not because they think the solution is too difficult or expensive, but because they have lost confidence that any large-scale plan will work. They may, of course, lend assistance on a personal level, doing good in minute particulars. But the notion that this can be part of a program with more cosmic meaning, a program that promises to eradicate poverty for once and for all, founders on the apprehension that humans exercise very little control over the course of development of the social reality they themselves have created.

Not everyone, of course, is willing to live with this uncomfortable and paralyzing combination of ideas. Religious faithful who seek to tailor themselves to a God-given reality persist, as do social reformers who seek to tailor reality to a utopian vision. But if the growing indifference to poverty is any guide, it points to the conclusion that these groups no longer represent majority opinion or sway public policy. Those among the non-poor who are unmotivated to grapple with a problem for which they can discern no solution find it more bearable simply not to think about it. This choice includes ordering where they live, where their children go to school, what they read, and what they expose themselves to in such a way that poor people intrude minimally upon their lives and consciousness.

Actually, this strategy does entail a solution of sorts to the problem of poverty, and a remarkably clean and cheap solution at that: to make

poverty disappear by the simple expedient of not acknowledging it. This is an especially compelling option if one adopts the stronger version of the proposition that social reality is a human construct. That view, it will be recalled, holds that social reality is the product of artifice and simulation. Things are as we say they are, a "virtual reality" extending well beyond our computer screens to encompass our entire social lives. As poverty theorist Michael Katz (1989: 7–8) has clearly recognized, poverty is not so much the existence of poor people as the prevailing discourse about them. It follows that if the prevailing discourse about poverty ceases, if people will just stop worrying and thinking and talking about it, then poverty itself will come to an end. Poor *people*, of course, will continue to exist. But they will no longer represent a social problem, just as leprosy ceased to be a social problem although lepers continued to exist.

If one chooses to take a less radical stance and insist that poverty has a reality of its own apart from what people may think about it, the outcome is not fundamentally different. Even if becoming indifferent to poverty does not alter its basic reality, it obviously does alter what is done (or, more to the point, not done) about it. American citizens of Japanese descent really were interned in concentration camps during World War II but little was done about the outrage until public attention focused on the issue decades later. In the same way, poverty may be a grim reality, but the loss of a larger meaning for it, and the resulting indifference among an increasing proportion of the non-poor, is what, more than anything else, enables legislators to end welfare as we have known it.

Epilogue

In the spring of 1997 President Clinton convened a domestic summit conference on volunteerism, with the aim of encouraging Americans to become more deeply involved in voluntary service. The outcome of that initiative constitutes an empirical test of the thesis of this essay. As of this writing it is too early to tell, but the somber prediction stemming from what has been argued here is that the president's effort will bear little fruit, at least in the area of volunteerism relative to poverty. The reason is that larger meanings necessary to stimulate people to enlist in the struggle against poverty are lacking. If this prediction is wrong and the president's initiative does result in significant numbers dedicating themselves to alleviate poverty, the thesis of this essay would be disproved. In that happy event, my expectation would be that some fresh set of meanings has emerged to motivate

the new volunteers in the war against poverty. An important research question then would be to identify just what those meanings are.

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