

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY: An Ideological Analysis

DAVID L. HARVEY *
University of Nevada, Reno

MICHAEL H. REED
University of Nevada, Reno

ABSTRACT: *For three decades Oscar Lewis's subculture of poverty concept has been misinterpreted as a theory bent on blaming the victims of poverty for their poverty. This essay corrects this misunderstanding. Using a sociology of knowledge approach, it explores the historical origins of this misreading and shows how current poverty scholarship replicates this erroneous interpretation of Lewis's work. An attempt is made to remedy this situation by arguing that Lewis's subculture of poverty idea, far from being a poor-bashing, ideological ploy, is firmly grounded in a Marxist critique of capital and its productive contradictions. As such, Lewis's work is a celebration of the resilience and resourcefulness of the poor, not a denigration of the lower class and the cultural defenses they erect against poverty's everyday uncertainty.*

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY PARADOX

Few ideas in the social sciences have been as widely used, or as thoroughly abused, as has Oscar Lewis's (1964, 1966, 1968) subculture of poverty thesis.¹ Two reasons account for this abuse: one is endemic to the social sciences; the other is of an ideological nature. In the social sciences we are all too familiar with the first of these reasons. Every so often a concept comes along with such a ring of authenticity there is a rush to employ it in several areas of research. Several examples of this come to mind: in sociology, the concept of alienation; in social psychology, prisoner's dilemma research; in econometrics, the recent flurry of activity in mathematical catastrophe theory; and, in history, the concepts of *conjuncture* and the *longue durée*. Sometimes it is the very *sound* of a word or a phrase that sets off this frantic rush. We suspect this is the case with the recent flowering of such

*Direct all correspondence to: David L. Harvey, Department of Sociology, 300 University of Nevada, College of Arts and Science, Reno, NV 89577-0067; e-mail (c/o): laurie@equinox.unr.edu.

terms as “post-structuralism,” “postmodernism” and “post-Marxism.” Indeed, there is no small humor in the panic to add the prefix “post-” or the adjective “critical” to thread-bare concepts in order to breathe new life into them. Such widespread borrowings and popular applications of a term share a common fate. Moderate and judicious adaptations of a concept quickly give way to massive misappropriation as an idea is removed from its original context and altered to fit increasingly remote projects. The original meaning is soon wrung from the term and all that is left is its linguistic shell. At that point the idea is either reduced to a myth or a cliché, or it is so laden with secondary connotations as to render it scientifically useless.² At this point the profession’s gatekeepers and trend setters pronounce the concept *passé*, and urge their wards to move on to newly uncovered linguistic lodes.

Ideological motives can also give rise to the use and/or abuse of a scientific idea. Examples of ideological manipulation would include the Enlightenment’s conception of progress, the end of ideology thesis of the 1950s and the 1960s, the recurring debate over the universality of the nuclear family and the gender roles associated with it, and, finally, the never-ending debate over race, class, and intelligence. A sociology of knowledge approach allows us to analyze the ideological import of such controversies and discover the sources of their abuse. It not only gives insight into a concept’s evolution, but also instructs us about the social forces shaping a profession. Such analyses also provide a mirror by which we in the social sciences can gain a measure of self-understanding about the material forces bracketing our everyday work. In such circumstances the sociology of knowledge becomes a tool of reflexive insight—an instrument by which the teacher is taught.

These observations are especially apropos when we review the curious history of Oscar Lewis’s “subculture of poverty” concept. A sociology of knowledge approach instructs us not only in the politics of poverty research that governed the ideas’s original reception three decades ago, but also provides disturbing insights into the limitations of the current poverty debate. In this paper we will use the sociology of knowledge paradigm to examine the ideological fire storm that has swirled around Lewis’s subculture of poverty concept almost from its inception. Our hope is to understand the evolution of poverty research over the last three decades so that we can better grasp where poverty studies have been and where they may go. At the same time, we hope to gain more than retrospective insight, for Lewis’s work has withstood the many abuses and misreadings to which it has been subjected. We believe this resilience springs from the fact that the subculture of poverty concept taps into a social reality that has not been articulated by other poverty theories.

When compared to other approaches to poverty, the virtue of Lewis’s thesis lies in the clarity with which it demonstrates that poverty’s subculture is not a mere “tangle of pathology,” but consists, instead, of a set of *positive adaptive mechanisms*. These adaptive mechanisms are socially constructed, that is, collectively fabricated by the poor from the substance of their everyday lives, and they allow

the poor to survive in otherwise impossible material and social conditions. By underscoring the positive content of the subculture of poverty, Lewis's model is also politically significant for it speaks in defense of the poor and their creative abilities. It keeps open the possibility that under propitious political circumstances the poor contain within themselves the skills necessary to forge their own self-liberation. If given access to and control of the resources and expertise public planners possess, they could build, maintain, and govern their own communities. Finally, Lewis's model speaks honestly and in a balanced way about the personal damage the poor sustain at the hands of a society that has ceased to care. Unlike other explanations of poverty, it concedes the poor have been damaged by the system but insists this damage does not clinically disqualify them from determining their own fate. This last judgment is something many social scientists of both the left and the right have forgotten.

If we have learned anything after three decades of poverty research, it is that a positive conception of poverty's subculture cannot be excised from scientific discourse. Such exclusion has been tried and it has failed. While the subculture of poverty idea can be misrepresented and ignored, such dissembling carries with it a heavy scientific cost, for the more poverty researchers sidestep the subculture of poverty's positive content, the more they are forced to limit the explanatory range of their own work. And, in turn, the more effectively poverty researchers suppress a discussion of the poor's adaptive potential, the more distant poverty's real amelioration becomes.

In order to explore the various facets of this paradox, we divide this paper into six parts. In the section following this introductory, we trace the history of the idea of a subculture of poverty by documenting some of the erroneous criticisms lodged against Lewis. In parts three and four we discuss one of the most serious criticisms leveled against the subculture of poverty thesis—that it “blames the victim.” In the fifth section we deal with the problem of the conceptual incompleteness of Lewis's model and demonstrate how it can be integrated into a larger critical perspective. Finally, a concluding section speculates as to why Lewis's ideas, for all their conceptual richness, have been neglected by those engaged in the New Poverty Debate.

THE CAREER OF A CONCEPT

Lewis first introduced the idea of a subculture of poverty in July 1958, in San Jose, Costa Rica, at the International Congress of Americanists (Rigdon 1988:69). In the next decade his family studies and the subculture of poverty concept made him a public figure and gave him access to political personalities of the highest rank. Lewis's celebrity brought him the kind of media attention few academics ever know. It is no secret his sudden renown exacerbated the already difficult relationships the abrasive Lewis had with many in his profession. These professional and personal jealousies must, however, remain a wild card in our account, for while they undoubtedly played a role in shaping scholarly criticism, it is difficult to

assess the extent to which they actually influenced evaluations of his work. We do know, however, that these antagonisms, whatever their source, were kept relatively in check until the late 1960s. By then Lewis was approaching the zenith of his career. Though far from analytically complete, the most extensive statement of his subculture of poverty thesis had already been given in *La Vida* (1966). By 1968 he had moved his culture of poverty research from Mexico to Puerto Rico, and was planning a study of the Cuban Revolution. In that year Charles Valentine's *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* was published. Valentine's work was both an assessment of the culture of poverty thesis and an emotionally charged critique of Lewis himself. When reading Valentine's wide-ranging polemic today, it is difficult to see why it was given such prominence, and why left scholars so readily accepted so many of its charges. Valentine was not the first to raise questions about the empirical reliability of Lewis's work, nor was he the first to challenge the validity of the concept that made Lewis famous. Nevertheless, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* is remembered by many as the watershed "refutation" of Lewis's work.

If we are to understand the impact of Valentine's book on the subculture of poverty debate, it must be put into its proper historical context. First, *Culture and Poverty* is primarily an ideological treatise. It reflects the deep schisms that were beginning to appear on the left generally, and within the War on Poverty in particular during the 1960s. Even though the New Left appeared to be at its high water mark politically, by 1968 cracks were beginning to show in its solidarity. African-Americans were choosing to go their own way with the Civil Rights Movement, Hispanic-Americans were unifying behind the charismatic Caesar Chavez, the Anti-War Movement was reaching its peak, and domestic programs were beginning to feel the first effects of federal funding being diverted from the home front to Vietnam. On American campuses, these strains manifested themselves in the opening of a generation gap between New Deal Liberals and Old Left scholars, and the cadre of young faculty, graduate students, and gifted community organizers that made up the "New Left." The latter saw their elders as getting cold feet as the government began to increase its activities against radicals on campus, while the former were increasingly dismayed by the ideological rigidity and growing intolerance of its progeny.

It was at this juncture that an "ultra-bolshevism," incipient among sectarian radicals for more than a decade, began to sweep the New Left.³ Sensing the tide was beginning to shift, and helpless to do much about it, many Leftists began to engage in a fruitless game of radical one-up-manship. In many ways this game of who was the "most radical," or who was the "most dedicated" to protecting the poor, had its roots in the furor that had raged for 3 years over the so-called Moynihan Report (Rainwater and Yancey 1967:39-124). The Moynihan controversy involved academics, the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, and members of the "permanent government" in Washington, DC. The focus of that struggle was over how the federal government could best aid the black, urban poor.⁴ Liberals who defended Moynihan correctly stressed the Report was not a

“subtle racist” assault on the black family, nor was it a crude attempt at “blaming the victim.” Instead, the Moynihan Report was a call for federal action to create, among other things, jobs for black, male heads of households in the inner city. There was little in it that could be interpreted as arguing that urban blacks and their culture were the cause of their own poverty. Nonetheless, in opposition to the Report, radicals and civil rights leaders of differing political orientations rushed to the defense of poor blacks. They argued white racism was the problem, not the state of the black family and that analyses focusing on black culture were a smoke screen masking a campaign of cultural genocide.

In retrospect, two things are striking about this debate: first, both sides were talking past one another; and, second, as Katz (1989:44-48) points out, few who took part in the debate had actually read the document in question. Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* was an internal government document presented to President Johnson in 1965. It had supplied the stimulus for the President’s famous Howard University speech where he called for the convening of a White House conference in which social scientists, government representatives, and civil rights leaders could gather together and lay out new ways of assisting black America. Despite charges of “conservatism,” the Moynihan Report actually represented the best Liberal thinking had to offer.

The White House conference as originally conceived never occurred. In the time between the President’s speech and the convening of the conference, the Watts Riots shifted the parameters of the debate, and governmental infighting discredited Moynihan and his work. During this same period the report’s contents were leaked piecemeal to the media and to various factions in the Civil Rights Movement by those in the permanent government who were opposed to Johnson and Moynihan’s attempt to redirect federal policy. The details of this drama were laid out in 1967 by Rainwater and Yancey and make fascinating reading even today. In the end, however, what Moynihan actually said or meant was of little significance. By the time the Report became public record, ideology was scripting both sides of the dialogue.⁵ The Moynihan Report, as far as the New Left and its allies in the Civil Rights Movement were concerned, had sounded the claxon of struggle. But more importantly for our purposes, the alignments shaped by this controversy formed the template for future blood-lettings; and not the least of these was the debate over Lewis’s idea of the subculture of poverty.

This was the polarized setting in which Valentine’s *Culture and Poverty* appeared. The book’s format reflects the ideological tenor of the times. More than a critical examination of Lewis’s subculture of poverty concept, *Culture and Poverty* is a defense of lower class black culture and the black family from what is perceived as the unwarranted criticism of conservatives and fading Liberals. The book begins with a rejection of what Valentine calls the “pejorative tradition” of black family studies begun by E. Franklin Frazier (Valentine 1968:20-24). Underlining the bourgeois and assimilationist biases of that tradition, Valentine argues that Nathan Glazer’s and Patrick J. Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) is in the same patronizing, moralizing “Frazier tradition.” In making this charge, he

enters the embroglio over the Moynihan Report, denouncing it as a latter-day extension of the "Frazierian vision" (Valentine 1968:29). Having situated his broadside both culturally and politically, Valentine then turns to the work of Oscar Lewis. Beginning his analysis of the subculture of poverty thesis with a series of technical criticisms of Lewis's work, he quickly moves to his main point: Lewis, if not by design, then by inadvertence, has framed a model of poverty's subculture whose very "negativity" lends itself to a "blaming the victim" interpretation of poverty. Valentine claims such a stance must eventually result in a call for the abolition of those deviant subcultures that are the alleged cause of poverty. As such, Lewis's work belongs to that "pejorative tradition" of black family studies stretching from Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1966[1939]) to Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). It is less dedicated to eliminating poverty than to eradicating a deviant subculture that offends bourgeois sensibilities. Expressing perplexity over a "cryptic" passage in which Lewis discusses the possibility of using social work-based techniques of intervention to combat poverty in America, Valentine brings his critique to a head, writing:

Ultimately, [Lewis] is saying that the alleged culture patterns of the lower class are more important in their lives than the condition of being poor and, consistently, that it is more important for the power holders of society to abolish these lifeways than to do away with poverty—even if eradicating poverty can be done more quickly and easily.

What can be the basis for this set of judgments and valuations? It is difficult to imagine what this might be, except a profound implicit conviction that the lifeways of the poor are inherently deserving of destruction. If it is relatively easy to do away with poverty itself, then why not do so and then let the ex-poor live as they please? Or if we believe there is a "culture of poverty" which is not good for those who live by it, then why not first tackle the more tractable problem of relieving their material deprivation and then go on to build upon their more comfortable circumstances in order to save them from those more difficult and deep-seated culture patterns? No, it is the "culture" that must go first before the poor can be given what everybody else already possesses and many of us take for granted. In short, the poor must become "middle class," perhaps through "psychiatric treatment," and then we shall see what can be done about their poverty.

This is indeed the "social-work solution," as Lewis calls it. The only alternative to it is revolution, and that is allowable only far from home in backward countries where there are not enough psychiatrists and social workers to go around. Even there, the chief interest in revolution is that it may change the culture, whether or not it relieves material want. (Valentine 1968:74-75)

Lest we miss the relevance of Lewis's work for the debate over race, poverty and lower class culture, Valentine concludes:

Now care must be taken not to read too much into a few brief passages. So let us return to the literal meaning of our sources. Lewis says that the social-work-cum-psychiatry approach of altering the behavior of the poor is "the major solution" for problems connected with poverty in the United States. This is no different in essence from the writings by sociological and other proponents of "lower-class culture" which indicate, either by implication or quite bluntly, that the poor must first of all conform to conventional standards of respectability, until they find some way (none suggested) to eliminate their socioeconomic dependency. Thus the twin concepts, "culture of poverty" and "lower-class culture," have essentially identical implications in relation to major issues of public attitudes and policies. The salient common element is the insistence on absolute priority for doing away with the perceived behavioral, or "cultural," distinctions of the lower class. (Valentine 1968:76)

Using the rhetoric that marked the Moynihan controversy, Valentine asserts Lewis's subculture of poverty writings are tainted by the same "Frazierian vision" that mars Moynihan's writings. Through the alchemy of treating the "culture of poverty" and "lower-class culture" as if they were "twin concepts," Valentine delivers a sermon to the converted, painting Lewis as a bourgeois reactionary and accusing him of the sin of psychological reductionism when it comes to understanding poverty, its root causes, and its root cure.

What Valentine's work said was not half as important as *what it was*—a set piece in a developing internecine struggle between two progressive factions, both of which were in crisis. This same period marked a major turning point in the kind of criticism Lewis and his ideas would thereafter encounter. In order to better grasp the evolution of this ideological struggle, and its impact on the profession's reception of Lewis's work over the next three decades, it will help to sample various aspects of the debate over what Oscar Lewis actually said and meant when he spoke of a "subculture of poverty."⁶

We begin with commentaries framed some 30 years ago and which were typical of the misapprehensions of the time. Many of the criticisms of that era are elaborations of Valentine's basic thesis: they treat Moynihan's and Lewis's ideas as though they were interchangeable. Hence, in Eleanor Burke Leacock's (1971) "Introduction" to her influential volume *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique*, she writes:

...However, some of the writings by anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, that deal with concepts as "lower-class culture," "cultural deprivation," and the popular "culture of poverty," have contributed to distorted characterizations of the poor, and especially the black poor. The fact is that, through the "culture of poverty" and similar notions, the nineteenth-century argument that the poor are poor through their own lack of ability and initiative, has reentered the scene in a new form, well decked out with scientific jargon...

The major assumption made by many "culture of poverty" theorists is that a virtually autonomous subculture exists among the poor, one which is self-

perpetuating and self-defeating. This subculture, it is argued, involves a sense of resignation or fatalism and an inability to put off the satisfaction of immediate desires in order to plan for the future. These characteristics are linked with low educational motivation and inadequate preparation for an occupation—factors that perpetuate unemployment, poverty, and despair. For example, Oscar Lewis makes a statement to this effect:

“The culture of poverty is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. 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 changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.” (Lewis 1966:xliv.)

Along similar lines, the position taken by Daniel P. Moynihan in his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* was that the “tangle of pathology” he described as characterizing the Negro community was “capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.” Its basis was to be found in the Negro family, which, “once or twice removed... will be found to be the principle source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (Moynihan 1965:30, 47). [Leacock 1971:10-11]

Here we find a compact statement in which Lewis and his work are made part of a conservative tradition that stretches back to the poor law debates of the last century. There is also the attempt to treat cultural deprivation, the subculture of poverty, and the idea of lower class culture as interchangeable constructs, claiming that all three emphasize “negative” aspects of the poor and their everyday conduct. Finally, through selective quotations and the use of such connectives as “...Oscar Lewis makes a statement to this effect...” and “Along similar lines, the position taken by Daniel P. Moynihan... [emphases ours], Leacock shoehorns the canonical critique of Moynihan and his Report into her criticism of Lewis’s work.

Some 3 years later, in her classic study of lower class, black family life, *All Our Kin*, Carol Stack (1974) discusses the culture of poverty thesis as if it were a “negative” portrayal of the poor. In so doing, she uses Valentine’s charge that Lewis has penned a conservative ideology that blames the victims of poverty to bracket her own approach to poverty.

... The culture of poverty, as Hylan Lewis points out, has a fundamental political nature. The idea matters most to those political and scientific groups attempting to rationalize why some Americans failed to make it in American Society. It is, [Hylan] Lewis (1971) argues, “an idea that people believe, want to believe, and perhaps need to believe.” They want to believe that raising the income of the poor would not change their life styles or values, but merely funnel greater sums of money into bottomless, self-destructing pits. This fatal-

istic view has wide acceptance among scholars, welfare planners, and the voting public. Indeed, even at the most prestigious university, the country's theories alleging racial inferiority have become increasingly prevalent.

The complex forces that inhibit the poor from changing their economic situation are in sharp contrast to the explanations provided by the well-known culture of poverty concept... The culture of poverty notion explains the persistence of poverty in terms of presumed negative qualities within a culture: family disorganization, group disintegration, personal disorganization, resignation, and fatalism. An underlying assumption of the culture of poverty notion is that the social adaptation of the poor to conditions of poverty would fall apart if these conditions were altered. It is assumed that the subculture would be left with no culture, or with wholly negative qualities. But early on, Hylan Lewis (1965), then Hannerz (1969), Liebow (1967), and Valentine (1968) demonstrate that many of the features alleged to characterize the culture of poverty—unemployment, low wages, crowded living quarters—are simply definitions of poverty itself, not of a distinct “culture.” (Stack 1974:23)

It seems plausible that Stack, like Leacock and Valentine before her, has used the Moynihan controversy as an implicit model for framing her critique of Lewis's ideas, for what she says about Lewis echoes the arguments already mounted against Moynihan. It is significant that Stack begins this passage with a quote from Hylan Lewis, for in the passage cited he ties the subculture of poverty idea to the subject of race, and in doing so evokes some of the acrimony of the Moynihan controversy.⁷ This is apparent when the Hylan Lewis passage to which Stack refers is cited more fully:

Like the idea of race, the idea of a culture of poverty is an idea that people believe, want to believe, and perhaps need to believe. The belief, and especially its associated assertions and inferences about the reasons why some Americans have failed and will continue to fail to make it in the system, constitute a reality that matters; scientific questions aside, this is the important reality that must be dealt with. The idea of a culture of poverty is a fundamental political fact. There are times when it seems chillingly like the idea of race. (Lewis 1971:347)

The type of criticism Stack and Leacock raised is now part of the received tradition in American sociology, so much so, that their interpretation of the culture of poverty thesis is now canonical to the current poverty debate. While that debate has expanded to include both a feminist component and a malthusian-based neoconservative position, the paralogisms regulating the culture of poverty controversy in the 1960s remain unchanged in the 1990s. In the current debate over race, class, and poverty, those espousing the new “politics of identity” (Gitlin 1993) use the same ideological substitutions to excoriate present-day “social democrats” as was used to criticize Lewis's idea of a subculture of poverty.

This new "ultra-Bolshevism" is seen in the reception many on the left gave William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). A work on black, urban poverty that promoted a program for eliminating poverty in the inner cities, *The Truly Disadvantaged* operates at three different levels. First, it effectively refutes many of the key findings of Charles Murray's neoconservative tract on poverty, *Losing Ground* (1984). Second, drawing upon the best that liberal social philosophy has to offer, Wilson develops a "social isolation" model of black, urban poverty, and outlines a series of programmatic remedies and political strategies for dealing with this tragic predicament. Finally, Wilson grounds his critique of neoconservative poverty research, as well as the social isolation thesis, and his own programmatic prescriptions in a theory that emphasizes class over race in explaining black poverty. This latter proposal has drawn considerable fire from the Left for Wilson argues that race, while still a potent factor in generating black poverty, is of diminished importance in explaining the current plight of the black underclass.

Consequently, many progressive scholars have largely ignored Wilson's devastating refutation of Murray's work and the policy contributions implicit in his social isolation thesis. Instead they have concentrated their fire on his assertion that racial factors are no longer the most crucial determinants of black urban poverty. The reaction of such critics is grounded in the old (and justifiable) fear of the 1960s that any move away from underscoring the role white racism plays in determining the plight of American blacks will lead either to a resurgence of victim bashing, or will otherwise compromise our national commitment to racial equality. Thus, for example, we find Adolph Reed, Jr. (1988) in a review of Wilson's book entitled "The Liberal Technocrat" depicting Wilson's work in the following way:

He [Wilson] takes great pains to distinguish himself from the "culture of poverty" theorists—e.g., Murray and the disingenuous Nicholas Lemann—who ascribe the intractability of poverty to the attitudes, values and behavior of the inner city poor. For Wilson the characteristics of "ghetto-specific culture" are pragmatic adaptations to isolation and to limited opportunity, both of which have made it "difficult to sustain the basic institutions in these neighborhoods (including churches, stores, schools, recreational facilities, etc.) in the face of increased joblessness caused by the frequent recessions during the 1970s and early 1980s and changes in the urban job structure." ... Unlike Lemann, Murray et al., Wilson argues that the "key conclusion from a public policy perspective is that programs created to alleviate poverty, joblessness, and related forms of social dislocation should place primary focus on changing the social and economic situations, not the cultural traits, of the ghetto underclass." (Reed 1988:167)

Working from what appears to be an objective framework, Reed's review begins properly enough by differentiating between Wilson's analysis and that of the neoconservative Murray and the "disingenuous" journalist Nicholas Lemann.

Soon, however, the New Left litany of 30 years ago emerges when he upbraids Wilson for his Chicago School orientation to social problems:

To begin with, Wilson's entire interpretation springs from the conjunction of two disturbing and retrograde emphases, which—surprisingly for such a distinguished sociologist—remain unexamined throughout the book. These are first, the focus on “disorganization,” “aberration,” “deviance” and “pathology” that has influenced urban sociological study at the University of Chicago since the days of Robert Park and the Americanization movement of the World War I era and, second, a deeply patriarchal vision of “mainstream” life. (Reed 1988:168)

Altercasting Wilson in the ideological role Lewis-cum-Moynihan was forced to play in the 1960s, Wilson is charged with treating the lives of the urban underclass, their families, and their communities as “tangles of pathology.” Reed does this by exposing Wilson's alleged patriarchal biases and his “Chicago School” preoccupation with social disorganization and pathology. While not employing Valentine's phrase “Frazierian vision,” Reed nonetheless uses the same ideological template as he tries to demonstrate the many ways Wilson's work gives aid and comfort to neoconservative adversaries of the poor.

Moreover, the way Reed introduces the reader to Wilson's position eloquently testifies to the fate of Lewis's scholarship during the quarter century separating our current concerns with poverty and the controversies that swirled around the War on Poverty. Not only is Lewis's original intent and contribution lost to a new generation of poverty scholars, his very name is expunged from memory as the culture of poverty idea becomes the sole property of reactionaries and journalistic innocents. Grounded in this peculiar social amnesia, Reed expands his original indictment:

When Wilson employs a language of social pathology, he is implying a mode of social health from which the “underclass” diverges. What is that model? Because he does not state it explicitly, we must infer it from his list of “aberrant” behavioral patterns that supposedly define the underclass. On that basis, the healthy mainstream apparently is characterized by law-abiding, two-parent families in which women have babies in adulthood with the imprimatur of church and state. Certainly, crime and teenage pregnancy would be endorsed by no sensible person, but why should we be concerned with how adult women choose to organize their reproductive activity and conjugal arrangements? ...He defines the ultimate problem as a shortage of “marriageable” men—going so far as to construct a “marriageable male pool index”—and argues for targeting employment and training programs primarily at unemployed young males who will thus become more attractive as potential spouses...

For all its apparent ingenuousness, this view is abominably sexist, not to mention atavistic. Indeed, Wilson's very definition of the underclass focuses almost exclusively on women's behavior. If it were not for violent crime,

“pathology” would be recognizable only among females. Wilson—like Park and the others of the Chicago pantheon—suggests that the behavioral patterns of the poor warrant concern because they reflect social disorganization, and yet that argument is undercut by his own insistence that they are pragmatic responses to structural environment. The problem is not the social disorganization of the inner-city poor, but Wilson’s and others’ distaste for, and reluctance to examine the institutional and organizational forms that the inner-city poor, particularly women, have devised to survive and to create meaning and dignity in lives bitterly constrained by forces apparently beyond their control. (Reed 1988:168)

Thus, in Reed’s well-honed, ideological reading of Wilson’s work we find the thin threads of error and forgetfulness replicating the critique progressive scholars constructed of Lewis’s work some 30 years ago. Now, however, the charge of blaming the victim’s culture for the victim’s poverty is expanded to include the additional charges of sexism, chauvinism, and atavism. In entering the poverty debate the new politics of identity, instead of correcting the original confounding of Moynihan’s and Lewis’s work, has compounded and ideologically expanded the original errors. In the process, Lewis is personally spared further polemical attack, but only because he has been forgotten by a new generation of poverty scholars.

A MAN OF THE LEFT?

There are of course those on the left who see another Oscar Lewis. Personality and polemics aside, Lewis’s subculture of poverty thesis is seen in these quarters as an impassioned critique of capital’s destructive dialectic as it is lived out by the poor. The late Michael Harrington was first and foremost among the latter. Indeed, he felt called upon as late as 1984 to defend Lewis from his New Left critics. Thus, in *The New American Poverty* (1984) he wrote:

But the notion of a “culture” of poverty need not be conservative. Oscar Lewis, the brilliant anthropologist who edited the tape recordings of conversations with Mexican and Puerto Rican poor people and made a major contribution to the understanding of poverty, proposed an idea from the left. According to him, the people at the bottom of the society developed their own institutions that allowed them to cope with intolerable conditions. The extended family, for instance, offends Victorian morality, for it deemphasizes the husband-wife relationship in favor of grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and neighbors, but it is well adapted to the realities of lower-class life... As a “culture,” this way of dealing with poverty is handed down from generation to generation...

Whatever else one can say, it is clear that Lewis’s intentions were to mobilize people to emphasize the resourcefulness of the poor and the institutionalized tenacity of their poverty. He was a man of the left who wanted to show that misery was a system, a structure, a psychology, *as well as* an economic result.

This last point is not always understood on the left, which sometimes confuses a Lewis and a Banfield. (Harrington 1984:203-204)

Moreover, if interpretive errors and social amnesia are the source of misunderstandings on the left, then an obvious ideological agenda forms the basis of the neoconservative's misappropriation of Lewis's ideas. Again, Harrington rises to Lewis's defense:

...there are some who hold that poverty is itself a culture. When that is said on the left, for example by the late Oscar Lewis, the intention is to emphasize the tenacity, the institutionalization, of misery in the United States. When it is urged on the right, say by an Edward Banfield, it is a tactic for making poverty something ephemeral and individualistic, a state of soul rather than a condition of the society. (Harrington 1984:181)

Of course, Banfield's analysis of poverty smacks too much of a crude neomalthusianism to be convincing.⁸ A much more sophisticated misappropriation of the subculture of poverty concept by neoconservatives can be found in Gertrude Himmelfarb's (1983) *The Idea of Poverty*. In this work we can see how the culture of poverty concept, when interpreted "negatively," becomes an ideological linchpin for buttressing the neoconservative *denial of poverty*. Ostensibly, Himmelfarb's volume is an intellectual history of the notion of poverty as it developed among reformers and intellectual elites in 19th century England. In reality it is a thinly-disguised polemic against the tradition of cultural history instituted by E. P. Thompson (1966), and an attack on the progressive reading of the subculture of poverty concept that Harrington, Lewis, and others advocated. Drawing parallels between Henry Mayhew and his depiction of England's "unknown country," that is, "the country of the poor," and Lewis's subculture of poverty, Himmelfarb writes:

The effect of Mayhew's revelations, the images and fears evoked by them, and the distortions and exaggerations induced by them, might seem improbable were it not for the fact that the same thing has happened in our own time. When Oscar Lewis (exactly a century, as it happened, after the publication of *London Labour*) gave the "culture of poverty" that label, he carefully defined and delimited it, locating it not in some "unknown country" but in a real and identifiable foreign country. The "children of Sanchez," one might think, would not be confused with the children of Smith. Yet the term, "culture of poverty" was picked up by journalists, commentators and even some sociologists as if it pertained not to a culture of poverty but to *the* culture of poverty, the culture of the poor as a whole. It took a second round of discussion and reevaluation to clarify the concept and to understand how the misapprehension came about.

We can see how we were beguiled by the romantic appeal of dissidence and deviance, how we were shocked by the vulnerability of the dominant culture and by the weaknesses of those processes of acculturation and "bourgeoisifica-

tion" which we had once relied upon to assimilate marginal and immigrant groups, how we were disillusioned by a "Great Society" that had boldly undertaken to wage a "war against poverty" only to find itself confronted with a moral, psychological, and cultural (spiritual, one might have once said) poverty more debilitating and refractory than material poverty. Yet even now the dramatic image of the "culture of poverty" tends to overwhelm the prosaic image of the ordinary, conventional poverty of the "working poor." And even now that dramatic image is often seen as the extreme condition of all poverty instead of as a special condition of a very distinctive kind of poverty. (Himmelfarb 1983:369-370)

In Himmelfarb we find the kind of confounding of Banfield and Lewis that Harrington warns against: the reassertion of the hoary dogma that, on the one hand, there are the good, deserving poor who will help themselves, and, on the other hand, the spiritually impoverished upon whom all help and charity is wasted. There is also the suggestion that Lewis carefully delimited the culture of poverty concept to a "foreign country." But did he? And if there was "a second round of discussion and reevaluation," was Lewis himself a participant? Since Himmelfarb does not tell us when or where, or among whom these sobering second thoughts took place, we cannot comment. We can, however, let Lewis speak for himself, using his own words to help us decide if it was only the poverty of another country he had in mind, or America's own "country of the poor," as well. Here is Lewis on the subject:

The culture of poverty can come into being in a variety of historical contexts. However, it tends to grow and flourish in societies with the following set of conditions: (1) a cash economy, wage labor, and production for profit; (2) a persistently high rate of unemployment and underemployment for unskilled labor; (3) low wages; (4) the failure to provide social, political, and economic organization, either on a voluntary basis or by government imposition, for the low-income population; (5) the existence of a bilateral kinship system rather than a unilateral one; and finally, (6) the existence of a set of values in the dominant class which stresses the accumulation of wealth and property, the possibility of upward mobility and thrift, and explains low economic status as the result of personal inadequacy or inferiority.

The way of life which develops among some of the poor under these conditions is the culture of poverty. It can best be studied in urban or rural slums and can be described in terms of some seventy interrelated social, economic and psychological traits. However, the number of traits and the relationships between them may vary from society to society and from family to family. For example, in a highly literate society, illiteracy may be more diagnostic of the culture of poverty than in a society where illiteracy is widespread and where even the well-to-do may be illiterate, as in some Mexican peasant villages before the revolution.

The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society. Indeed, many of the traits of the culture of poverty can be viewed as attempts at local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions and agencies because the people are not eligible for them, cannot afford them, or are ignorant or suspicious of them. For example, unable to obtain credit from banks, they are thrown upon their own resources and organize informal credit devices without interest.

The culture of poverty, however, is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. 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 changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.

Most frequently the culture of poverty develops when a stratified social and economic system is breaking down or is being replaced by another, as in the case of the transition from feudalism to capitalism or during periods of rapid technological change. Often it results from imperial conquest in which the native social and economic structure is smashed and the natives are maintained in a servile colonial status, sometimes for many generations. It can also occur in the process of detribalization, such as that now going on in Africa.

The most likely candidates for the culture of poverty are the people who come from the lower strata of a rapidly changing society and are already partially alienated from it. Thus landless rural workers who migrate to the cities can be expected to develop a culture of poverty much more readily than migrants from stable peasant villages with a well-organized traditional culture. (Lewis 1966:xlili-xlv)

The five traits he uses to identify the social conditions giving rise to poverty could serve as a description of the United States, not just a "foreign country." Indeed, it was not Mexico, but *capitalism* ("...a cash economy, wage labor, and production for profit") that was the focus of Lewis's concerns. Capitalism uses machines to revolutionize labor's productivity as no other historical mode of production has. In transforming labor, however, a profound contradiction unfolds from within its mode of production. As capitalism produces ever greater quantities of material wealth, it also creates, *of necessity*, an industrial reserve army of the chronically unemployed and subemployed whose lives are continually haunted by poverty. That industrial reserve army, along with its superfluity and poverty, is as necessary a byproduct of the capitalist mode of production as is the physical waste and dross generated daily by the material process of production. Whether generated in the world's cosmopolitan centers, or by the colonial

degradation of the Third World, as capital penetrates and wrecks traditional cultures, it of necessity produces an unending residue of poverty and pain among those rendered marginal to its productive process. If there is an enduring law of capitalist development, it is this inherent tendency to produce both wealth and poverty simultaneously. It is this contradictory productive requisite, not some supposed defect of the poor themselves, that produces modern poverty from one generation to the next.

For Lewis, the mechanics of capitalist production for profit, not the folkways of its victims, caused poverty. It was among the economically marginal and superfluous populations that Lewis lived and worked. When he wrote, he knew full well that his subculture of poverty thesis was placing the capitalist mode of production, not the poor, in the docket. If Lewis drew his examples of a culture of poverty from Third-World countries, the cited passage above makes it clear that for him the crux of the problem lay not with the poor and their subculture, but with the capitalist mode of production.

MARXIST ROOTS

The subculture of poverty thesis must be understood within the context of the socialist ethos in which it was conceived. Oscar Lewis was, to use Michael Harrington's phrase, "a man of the left," and such a man would not blame the poor for the short-comings of the capitalist system. Lewis's progressive credentials are fully documented in Susan Rigdon's (1988) *The Culture Facade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis*. Objective and even-handed to a fault, Rigdon has written a sensitive, scientific biography of Lewis and his era. In it we are introduced to Lewis and to his wife Ruth, a gifted woman, who—like many academic wives both then and now—was an unsigned collaborator in her husband's work. We also learn that Lewis grew up in the kind of marginal, lower-middle-class poverty George Orwell described in the autobiographical portions of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1958:121-153). This form of gentile penury was deep enough to scar Lewis, but not so severe as to cripple his spirit. Although Lewis was Jewish and was raised in a deeply religious household, he was not himself religiously inclined. Rigdon (1988:10) suggests this made him an "outsider in his own family," yet he was never so much the stranger that he actually broke with his parents. For these and other reasons Lewis would remain a marginal man.

Lewis's marginality also marked his Marxism. Though not as active as some in his generation, Lewis embraced Marxism in his youth, and retained a lifetime commitment to that world view. He was introduced to Marxism in his early teens by a friend who was a communist organizer. As he matured intellectually during the Great Depression, he was integrated into the radical culture of the 1930s intelligentsia and assimilated from it a commitment to the arts, intellectual excellence, and a passion for socialism. There is nothing in his biography to suggest Lewis ever abandoned these commitments or lost for long his faith in the proletarian cause. Even when he was humiliated during his study of the Cuban Revolution

by party apparatchicks and forced to leave the country, he refused to express open disillusionment with Castro or with the principles of the Cuban revolution—although he had by then begun to reassess the length of time it would take for a revolution to rectify the evils of the past.

Lewis's Marxism permeated both his ethnographic work and his subculture of poverty thesis. You will not find it, though, in a glib spouting of dialectics, or in a fatuous waving of rhetorical red banners. There seems to have been nothing in Lewis's personality that would have predisposed him to such histrionics. Instead, Lewis's Marxism, like that of so many of his generation, could be seen in his working class sympathies, in his support for unionism, and in his championing of the causes of the downtrodden. It expressed itself above all in that uneven mix of cynicism and respect his generation adopted when dealing with the lower classes and their diverse subcultures. Lewis's family ethnographies, in fact, resonate with the curiously eclectic politics and aesthetic realism of a Depression Era Marxism in which proletarian artists celebrated the "resourcefulness of the poor."

This sense of respect and celebration may explain why Lewis never went along with his colleague Carolina Luján and her strict psychoanalytic interpretations of the projective tests they used in investigating the subculture of poverty (Rigdon 1988:64-68). Though sympathetic to the plight of the poor, Luján was so appalled by the psychological "damage" of her informants she was convinced that, while the lot of the poor could be improved by compassionate, top-down, political reforms, the poor themselves would never be capable of directing their own liberatory quest. Lewis thought otherwise:

By providing Lewis with an explanation of the negative consequences of poverty, Luján helped him, in turn, to explain the significance and uniqueness of poverty experienced in modern urban settings. Lewis used this interpretation, all the while rejecting as nonscientific the psychoanalytic principles on which it was based. While Luján wrote about individual personality, Lewis generalized about the universal social-psychological characteristics of the culture of poverty. Over the years Luján criticized him for misapplying her interpretations, but Lewis claimed he had a right to use them in his own way, to rephrase them to fit the context of his research. He believed he had an obligation to protect his informants from prejudice by readers and to spare his readers the burden of wading through clinical diagnoses and trying to make sense of psychoanalytic jargon. In addition, Lewis had his own interpretation to present: he wanted to emphasize the suffering, exploitation, and damage wrought by extreme poverty, but he did not want to make his informants appear beyond help or, for that matter, even beyond self-redemption. Herein lay one of the most difficult and sensitive differences with Luján: whereas Luján feared political action by the poor, Lewis thought it would be their salvation. (Rigdon 1988:67)

The last few sentences sum up the differences between Lewis's approach and Luján's purely psychological interpretation of poverty's subculture. For Lewis,

informed as much by Brecht as by Freud, the poor were never simply a degraded lumpenproletariat. Demographically, socially, and intellectually they were much more complex. If not moral paragons, the poor still possessed an unshakable sense of justice and a cunning that allowed them to finesse their betters, and thereby survive the rigors of their harrowing life space. The poor had developed a collective, problem-solving style that, although disguised as "common sense," was a unique social construction which facilitated survival at the bottom. The poor lived poor because capital gave them little choice. Being politically powerless, they seldom had the wherewithal to alter the social relations that kept them poor. But, they survived on what they had, learned to adapt to poverty's uncertainty, and knew how to exploit their impoverished niche with amazing success. *Hence, the poor did more than passively adapt to a pre-established social niche, they constructed collective responses to it and shaped poverty's life space so as to ease the pain of living poor. To this extent we can speak of the culture of poverty as a positive social construction—the result of a process by which the poor pragmatically winnow what works from what does not, and pass it on to their children.* The result of this systematic learning, careful sifting, and the unceasing exploitation of poverty's latent possibilities asserted itself as the subterranean wisdom of the lower orders. That wisdom was what Lewis called the subculture of poverty. Many elements of this subculture were, to be sure, flawed or "dysfunctional" (to use the latest clinical cliché), but such flaws seldom rendered the poor incapable of meeting poverty's immediate challenges.

In mapping the cultural constructions of the poor, Lewis looked beyond this superstructural damage and saw that under revolutionary conditions, the poor might yet be forged into a political instrument of self-emancipation. When it was demanded of them, and in accordance with their own schedule, the poor would abandon in piecemeal fashion the various elements of the culture of poverty, not because they were pathological or inferior, but because they no longer met their evolving needs. Lewis also knew the poor would not jettison overnight what it had taken a lifetime to build. It would take more than a transparent quick-fix or shabby political promise to get the poor to abandon what they had built. The poor knew from experience what actually worked. Possessing a cultural conservatism and interactional caution that comes from losing too much, too often, the poor would be circumspect about rushing to adopt new ways. This wariness would especially be the case when those who urged the reforms were the same persons who had so recently despised and oppressed them. When the time came, they could and would change, not at a rate that kept pace with an abstract reformist timetable, but at a pace that suited them. Thus he wrote in a letter to Eric Wolf in 1962:

Once the poor begin to identify with larger groups or with larger causes, once they become class conscious or become socialists or Communists, they rapidly begin to lose some of the crucial aspects of the culture of poverty. They begin to

take on an internationalist rather than a provincial, locally oriented world view.
(Rigdon 1988:231)

There are few greater compliments to be paid a people than what Lewis says in this passage. These are not the words of a scholar bent on victim bashing, nor are they the sentiments of someone who sees the subculture of the poor as a tangle of pathology. Lewis's words express a faith that the poor, once armed with a revolutionary ideology and swept up in a revolutionary cause, can settle their own scores for themselves. For better or for worse, Lewis's ideas were those of a Marxist humanist who looked at the poor, past "warts and all," and found himself in the company of man.

THE CULTURAL REPRODUCTION OF POVERTY

Thus far we have used the sociology of knowledge to identify some of the structural and historical sources of the misinterpretations that have plagued the culture of poverty model for almost 30 years. In the midst of this exploration we appealed to Lewis's biography and argued the subculture of poverty is grounded in what today is called "Marxist humanism." In this section we will further this thesis by showing how Lewis's ideas are enriched by placing them in an explicit Marxist framework. At the same time, we will suggest Marxism itself can benefit from Lewis's ethnographic explorations in culture and personality. Finally, once we have situated the subculture of poverty thesis in a Marxist problematic, we will be in a better position to understand why Lewis's ideas have been ideologically eclipsed.

Even before Lewis's death the methodological foundations of his work had been severely criticized. He was often chastised for being too "arty," and insufficiently scientific. He was also scorned for not using proper sampling frames when selecting his subjects. At other times Lewis was reproached for being attracted to subjects who were behavioral extremes rather than average representatives of persons living in the culture of poverty. Rigdon sums up these objections when she writes:

In relying heavily on his impressions to make and support his generalizations, Lewis gave full vent to personal characteristics that actually worked to distort his data: he was more influenced by visual stimuli than by reasoned analysis; he was fascinated by extremes in personality and behavior; and he tended toward hyperbole in his speaking and writing. The most extreme cases of poverty and the most extreme responses to it overshadowed the more typical or ordinary, and it was often these exceptional cases that Lewis singled out for publication...

Lewis wanted to convey to readers precisely those observable aspects of his informants' lives that had so influenced him. During the last ten years of his career, this objective affected both his choice of informants—those who could

most graphically present their lives to readers—and of format. The underlying message sent to readers was no longer, “This is what I have come to understand about how poor people live their lives,” but rather, “This is what I have seen; don’t you see the same things too?” The weakness of this approach was well summarized by Barrington Moore in his review of *La Vida*, when he reminded Lewis that “vivid impressions by themselves are no substitute for knowledge.” (Rigdon 1988:125)

Such observations would be damaging if Lewis’s research goals had been developed according to the ascendant positivism of his day. They are, however, largely beside the point for Lewis was self-consciously a humanist scholar who practiced a singular form of “ethnographic realism.” Stepping outside the artificial strictures of positivism, he drew freely on the expressiveness of art and the intimacy of human biography. He also insisted on the intellectual autonomy of the observer. While this ethnographic realism was not without its problems, Lewis used it to achieve stunning results within the humanist framework.⁹ In his writings he tried to communicate the same phenomenological immediacy the artist tries to establish between himself and his audience (“This is what I have seen; don’t you see the same things too?”). His goal was to transform the image into an icon, and to have the immediacy of the icon replace formal academic casuistry. Lewis’s forte lay in his ability to elicit poignant narratives from his respondents and to sculpt family ethnographies that told us what it meant to live in poverty day in and day out. He strived to craft an aesthetic object that communicated to his readers a full sense of the everyday plight of poor people.

Seeking to be as much an artist as a scientist, Lewis used aesthetics to enrich, if not to transform, the ethnographic act itself. His work can best be understood as an aesthetic reconnaissance into the world of the social sciences—one that used biographical and other ethnographic materials to tease out elements of an ideal typical depiction of poverty. Hence, the issues of sampling and positivist canons of truth are largely irrelevant in judging the adequacy of Lewis’s accomplishments. He sought to grasp not the average parameters of poverty, but its expressive essence. While issues pertaining to survey research techniques might be useful in mapping poverty’s material correlates, or in later stages of research when ascertaining the actual distribution of traits across various poverty populations, they are not germane to the qualitative methodologies Lewis employed.¹⁰ Once this is recognized, it is best to accept Lewis’s efforts for what they are, and to bring scientific order to his aesthetic soundings by placing them in the context of a global theory of sociohistorical processes.

Ironically, the above criticisms actually carry less weight today than they did in Lewis’s day when the social sciences were virtually swamped by positivistic dogma. Since then, the social sciences have taken a critical, humanist turn and have learned to appreciate the kind of cultural hermeneutics that was at the core of Lewis’s method. A second criticism of Lewis’s work, however, has not diminished over time. It has been argued that Lewis’s data, drawn as they were from

the subjective domain of culture and personality studies, were neither robust enough nor comprehensive enough to deduce sociologically the full list of culture of poverty traits he assembled. And, indeed, if Lewis had tried to make such a deduction, he could be faulted on that count. Quite obviously any attempt to derive the full content of poverty's subculture from culture and personality materials alone is doomed, for it puts far too much explanatory pressure upon the subjective and superstructural dimensions of social reality. To expect a "science of the superstructure" to generate in full the manifold structures of objective class relations and material contradictions animating the capitalist mode of production would be folly. Such a project would merely replicate, on the opposite side of the equation, the reductionist fallacy a former generation of Marxists made when they attempted to reduce both culture and personality to mere reflexes of objective class positions and productive relations.

Lewis was aware of this idealist trap and avoided it. As we have already seen, he felt it necessary to include in his discussion of the culture of poverty and its traits the larger sociohistorical context in which these traits emerged. Though he seldom explicitly grounded his subculture of poverty work in the intricacies of Marxist political economy, there are enough allusions to Marx's ideas in Lewis's writings and personal communications that a synthesis of Lewis's unfinished work and Marxian political economy is a relatively simple task. As we (Harvey and Reed 1992; Harvey 1993:11-32) have argued elsewhere, Lewis's culture of poverty model gains its fullest significance when placed within a critical theory of capitalist production such as that offered by Marxist political economy. The innovative crux of this critical Marxist model is to differentiate between the genesis of poverty, on the one hand, and its social reproduction in everyday life, on the other. As we noted earlier, Marxism sees the origins of poverty as residing in the contradictory conditions of the capitalist mode of production. Once the objective, systemic source of poverty is identified, then it is relatively easy to ascertain the reproductive role the subculture of poverty plays in reproducing subjectively from below what is objectively imposed from above. *By making Lewis's implicit Marxism manifest, and by integrating it into a larger reproductive model of poverty, much of the theoretical unevenness of the subculture of poverty thesis disappears.* The benefits of such an interpellation, moreover, flow in both directions. Not only does Marxist theory satisfactorily contextualize Lewis's work, but the subculture of poverty thesis compliments the premises of Marxist political economy, providing the latter with an ethnographic starting point for developing a critical conception of poverty's superstructural foundations.

THE IDEOLOGICAL ECLIPSE OF LEWIS'S CONTRIBUTION

In this essay we have argued that the many negative characterizations used to depict Lewis's work over the last few decades have been both unfair and erroneous. Contrary to the depictions of Lewis's work now in vogue, there is nothing of a substantive nature in the subculture of poverty thesis that blames the victims of

poverty for their poverty, nor, when properly understood, does it lend support to neoconservative analyses of poverty. Methodologically, many of the criticisms mounted against Lewis's ethnographic realism have been weakened or rendered moot as the methodological foundations of the social sciences themselves have widened over the intervening years. Indeed, when Oscar Lewis's subculture of poverty thesis is given a dispassionate, even-handed reading, it proves to be a splendid tool for understanding poverty's cultural superstructure.

A moment's reflection will show, moreover, that the argument we have made could have been mounted almost any time in the last 25 years. Why has no one attempted it in the interim? We argue the reason does not lie not in the scientific merits or defaults of Lewis's work *per se*, but in the shifting social and ideological contexts of the social sciences. Over the last 30 years a new regimen of diminished expectations, political reaction, and growing economic apprehensions has haunted every aspect of American life. The social sciences, as much a cultural product as the institutions they study, reflect these trends, and, in some instances, have contributed to this right-ward drift. This is certainly the case in the area of poverty research where dialectically structured, class-based explanations of poverty in late capitalist society have been either circumvented or denied altogether.

This new "denial of class" occurs at all levels of problem formation and is all the more remarkable because it is often practiced by scholars on the left.¹¹ We have already noted one version of this denial in Adolph Reed's (1988) critical review of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. In that review he excoriated Wilson for his privileging of class over the causal roles racism and patriarchy play in generating black poverty. Sometimes this genera of arguments attempts merely to augment class-based explanations of poverty by adding racial, ethnic, and gender considerations. In other instances one or more of the latter are actually substituted for class itself. In the latter case ideology is served, but only at the expense of sociological understanding. In the former, the class paradigm is refined by sensitizing us to the role such factors as racism and gender bias play in shaping the contours of poverty and its subculture.

A second form of class denial is found in the writings of "Post-Marxists" who argue capital has shown a surprising resilience in its ability to survive its many self-induced crises. It is argued this resiliency is so enduring, in fact, that those seeking social and economic justice in late capitalist culture will have to do so within the inherent inequality of existing class arrangements. This unanticipated resilience we are told resides in the success the capitalist state has shown in developing "steering mechanisms" by which the economic contradictions of capital are either eliminated or managed. These steering mechanisms have been so successful, in fact, that class and class conflict are no longer effective forces driving late capitalism's structural evolution.

The most sophisticated rendering of this position is found in the writings of Jurgen Habermas (1987:332-373). According to Habermas, the monetary-bureaucratic complex (of which the "democratic welfare state" is an integral element) has converted economic contradictions into political-administrative problems.

Through a process he calls "juridification" (Habermas 1987:356-373) problems such as poverty are stripped of their revolutionary potential and converted into purely administrative conundrums that are best dealt with by those institutional elites managing the monetary-bureaucratic complex.

Such juridified solutions, however, also carry a substantial price, unleashing a new order of social contradictions. If the monetary-administrative elites are to legitimate these new juridical pacifications, they must appropriate the institutional substance of the lifeworld—the domain of consensually validated norms and community values which integrate society, and, indeed, give us our humanity. In fact, the very processes making up the lifeworld must be "colonized," that is, made to conform to the rationalized premises of the bureaucratically structured, monetary-administrative complex. The very nature of this instrumental rationality, however, is anathema to the functional requirements of the lifeworld. Consequently, its colonization can only be achieved at the cost of the progressive destruction of the lifeworld itself. Hence, the anomie inherent in the colonization of the lifeworld, not the issues of class-induced poverty, are the primary problems facing modern society. Indeed, Habermas (1987:374-403) argues the destruction of the lifeworld is so great a threat to social order that its preservation, not the combating of economic injustice and unwarranted class privilege, must become the primary focus of a rejuvenated socialism. In this way the crises of bourgeois culture must take political priority over the crises of political economy and poverty on socialism's agenda.

While such an argument might have appealed at one time to an economically secure class of professionals and new middle class technocrats, the events of the last few years have begun to destabilize the life chances of even the most privileged elites. For this reason, much of the original luster of Habermas's Parsonian-inspired, cultural analysis has disappeared. Indeed, in the New America of flexible accumulation, Rust-Belts, NAFTA, the growth of low-paying service sector jobs, and the concomitant decline of well-paying jobs in the industrial sector, there is a feeling Habermas has put the cart before the horse. There is, indeed, something incongruous about a rallying cry in defense of the lifeworld in a society where class-based polarizations of wealth and privilege are rapidly destroying the material foundations of democratic discourse itself.

A third form of contemporary class denial seeks refuge in the promise that a technological quick fix can eliminate persistent poverty. Of course, this is not the first time a technocratic myth has promised escape from the spiraling contradictions of capital. From Fourier's phalanxes and Bentham's workhouses of the last century, to the dreams of leisure-based societies in the American Century, capitalist culture has periodically bred utopian-based, futurist visions of technological progress. The latest myths look to robotics, computers, and the so-called information revolution to move humanity away from capital's destructive commodification of institutional life. We are promised, even now, that the cybernetic revolution will usher in a new post-capitalist society in which Marxist political economy is to be rendered *passé*, just as the dynamics of class and class conflict

will be technologically nullified. The Post-World War II welfare state in America, replete with its complex of class compromises, is being all but dismantled by flexible accumulation's new system of unfettered production. Moreover, we are promised that the new mountains of commodity wealth to be produced by this unfettered technology will make chronic need largely a thing of the past. Similarly, the old forms of cultural oppression will usher in a post-capitalist order that will provide a viable alternative to the twin modernist evils of American monopoly capitalism and Soviet Communism.

The promised technological fix is now upon us with a vengeance. Flexible accumulation and its concomitants—increasingly unregulated, international markets and the “freeing-up” of productive inputs—have transformed the monopoly capitalism of three decades ago. In the process, the cultural liberation pledged such a short time ago is faltering as forces of cultural reaction have seized the ascendancy. The freedom the new information technologies were to deliver to the many has been achieved for only the few—and, as usual, at the price of uncertain futures for the many. As Harvey (1989) has so convincingly demonstrated, this failure of the information revolution to live up to these expectations is lodged in the capitalist mode of production itself. Capital's commodification of the lifeworld, its alienation and uneven development, and, above all, its continued exploitation of labor, has allowed it to endure this latest technological transformation. Indeed, flexible accumulation's cooptation of the new information technologies has circumvented Habermas's juridical restraints and has now engulfed the modern lifeworld in a new wave of destructive colonization. Moreover, this new colonization has been achieved by renegotiating class boundaries to such an extent that the emerging extremes of wealth and power increasingly resemble the capitalist stratification systems of the last century. Hence, flexible accumulation and its cultural ally, postmodernism, are destroying the social foundations of the old welfare capitalism and its lifeworld much in the same way Marx and Engels saw the capitalism of their day destroying the last remnants of feudalism:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up the single, unconscionable—Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct brutal exploitation. (Marx and Engels, 1983[1848]:16)

Clothed in the new technological promises of information processing, and outfitted with new ideological rationales, what is happening to our society resonates with what Marx and Engels saw happening in their day. Despite the new

wave of electronic technologies, the political economy of present-day growth has not changed that much. Taking place within the logic of late capitalism, the fundamental contradictions are still in place, regulating and directing in the name of profit the scope and pace of technological innovation. Capital, unable to resolve its basic contradictions short of its self-abolition, merely seeks to forestall their final outcome. Consuming new technologies and entire cultures in its struggle to survive—and in the process leaving shattered lifeworlds wherever it touches down—capital can do little more than chart an ever-narrowing set of courses between historical insolvency and a descent into barbarism.

Hence, despite the new technologies being instituted under capital's auspices, it should not be surprising to find the economic situation of Americans, both in and out of the academy, worsening as a neomalthusian pessimism and resurgent individualism, as well as a fiscal tight-fistedness in matters of public policy, takes hold in almost every sector of American life. And as postmodern sociology has increasingly neglected class and class conflict in favor of interpretative studies of culture and subjectivity, its perception of the poor and its assessment of the possibilities of eliminating material poverty, have changed accordingly. In an age of diminished expectations, the poor remind us of the possible fate awaiting us in this brave new world of flexible accumulation and just-in-time production. In contrast to the euphoria of the 1960s, when poverty was something to be eliminated through collective effort, poverty is regarded today as something that threatens even those who are presently well-off. It is no longer a problem from which we can safely distance ourselves, for now poverty has assumed a discomfiting immediacy. The superfluity and impoverishment we once identified as the exclusive property of the urban slum dweller or rural proletarian is now a pending problem for those of us working in the academy as well. Hence, something which may well be our future fate can no longer be studied with the social distance and clinical calm it once was.

As society has changed in the last three decades, so has the politics of science that undergird poverty research. Instead of being a problem to be eliminated by the mobilization of national resources, poverty has become a powerful specter to be feared by all but the very rich. Instead of being victims of a flawed system of production, the poor today are criminalized, much as they were in the 1950s. Having been reschooled in the old fears of the Depression Era, two new generations of rich and poor alike have been indoctrinated in the ideology of diminished expectations, while simultaneously being handed new justifications for individual greed and anti-social aspirations. Not immune to this shift in world view, nor the accompanying reallocation in the relative wealth and power among the classes, a new ideological landscape has taken shape in the academy as public policy questions have been reformulated and debated on new grounds. The general parameters of that debate have been hegemonically truncated so that the traditional left and its proactive conception of government planning and programs have been all but eliminated from "serious discourse." Such a truncation has given neoconservatives and baby boomer liberals alike a virtual monopoly in staking out the "real-

istic parameters" and limits of "reasoned" policy discussions. And given the vested interests of these groups, neither can countenance a theory of poverty grounded in an analysis of capital's class-based contradictions.

Neither baby-boomers nor neoconservatives, given their present political agendas, have an interest in exploring the possibilities made manifest by a class-based analysis of poverty. Needless to say, both parties, for widely differing reasons, would find equally objectionable that part of Lewis's work claiming that the culture of poverty contains a positive, redemptive kernel. The possibility that the poor could possess either alternative wisdoms or cultural virtues cannot be countenanced. If the poor were to appear as relatively competent partners in solving their predicament, they would once again, as they were in the 1960s, have to be given a significant voice—some degree of "maximum feasible participation"—in charting their path out of poverty. This contingency was unsettling enough 30 years ago when America was economically and morally solvent. To suggest the poor are something more than a pathological residue would require a redistribution of power and social resources that neither faction to the current poverty debate is willing to countenance seriously, much less implement.

Hence, the subculture of poverty thesis has been walled off and denied access to the current poverty debate. While such a hegemonic silence can be enforced in the short term, it cannot be intellectually justified. Hence, the idea of a subculture of poverty must be ignored and banished to the shadows for fear that things might get out of hand—as they did once before. Given their overall agenda, none of the parties to the New Poverty Debate can afford to allow the poor to become full partners in that debate. This converging consensus among ostensibly opposing parties in the debate may in part explain the curious silence prevailing among progressives when neoconservatives so outrageously misstate and misappropriate Lewis's ideas. Indeed, New Age Liberalism seems content to hold its tongue lest a defense of Lewis expose its own condescending hatred for the poor. New Age Liberals are fully aware that a return to the issues raised by a poverty perspective grounded in class and class conflict would undermine their advocacy of such "class-transcending issues" as gender parity, gaining equity for victimized ethnic and racial minorities, and the currently embattled defense of alternative life styles. While the latter are unquestionably worthy causes, they are causes complicated, if not embarrassed, by New Age Liberalism's insistent denial of class. Rather than allowing poor women, poor Hispanic-Americans, poor African-Americans, etc. to speak in their own voice—one which would raise *class-based concerns* and alienate the middle-class leadership of such groups—a dissembling silence is maintained. Once encapsulated in this hegemonic silence, all parties to the New Poverty Debate can proclaim the perversity of the poor and their subculture. Using such a disclaimer they can express their desire to uplift the "hard-working and moral" portion of the industrial reserve army, while promoting their own self-serving agendas. One of the few signs that something might be amiss in this project, that an act of premature ideological closure among all parties to the New Poverty Debate might have occurred, is that we must accept the double-

think proposition that a man of the left penned a theory of poverty that blamed the victims of capitalism, rather than capitalism itself, for the continued existence of barbaric need in a land of plenty.

NOTES

1. In this paper we treat the terms "subculture of poverty" and "culture of poverty" as being synonymous. The more precise of the two is the term "subculture of poverty," but popular usage seems to prefer the term "culture of poverty." We will use both terms, alternating between them as situation and context dictate.
2. Here we have in mind the process of mythogenesis depicted by Roland Barthes (1972:109-159) in his classic essay "Myth Today." The secret to analyzing modern myths, according to Barthes, is to see them as once-legitimate cultural forms that have been "drained of their content." Hence, all that remains of the original myth is a "sign," in this case a hollow semiotic shell, which can be "filled" with any transitory content one chooses. What makes such myths so hard to debunk, is that the "shell" has no anchoring in reality, and thus evades critical understanding.
3. The politics of what we have called "Ultra-Bolshevism" has been recently discussed by Maurice Isserman in his two volumes, *Which Side Were You On: The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (1982), and *If I had A Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (1987). The latter volume discusses the roots of the Ultra-Bolshevist tendencies among the New Left, while the former explains the circumstances and schismatic struggles that led to the "death of the old left" during the war years.
4. The term "permanent government" is used by Rainwater and Yancey (1967) to refer to the federal bureaucracy that stays in place even as the residents of the White House come and go. They counterpose the permanent government to the "presidential government." A prime thesis of Rainwater and Yancey is that much of the controversy raised by the Moynihan Report sprang from the fact that Moynihan and his report were the product of the presidential wing of government. As such, the Report was seen by the permanent government as an attempt on the part of the president's men to end-run the various departments, agencies and commissions, as well as the nongovernmental constituencies they served. Members of this permanent government were among those who leaked news of the report and its contents to various interest groups. Around this intra-government cadre was formed one of the original nodes of political resistance to the Report. In this essay we have relied heavily on Rainwater and Yancey's *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (1967) and their interpretation as to what happened. Their account of the multifaceted nature of the Moynihan controversy, and the Byzantine politics surrounding it, is still an indispensable source for understanding this watershed moment in American race relations.
5. One can get a fair gauge of the ways in which the ideological lines were drawn by reading Moynihan's (1967) insider's account of what the liberals had on the drawing boards in the mid-sixties and what the Moynihan Report itself had been meant to foreshadow had the radicals not created such a brouhaha over the Report.

In a very real sense this debate is still with us today. For those interested, Moynihan has recently written a small volume based on the Godkin Lectures he gave at Harvard in 1984-1985. Entitled *Family and Nation* (1985), the volume gives Moynihan's retrospective account of the background of the controversy over the Report, much as he did in his 1967 article. Like *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, the substance of *Family and Nation* is what Rainwater and Yancey (1967) call a "persuasive" document, not a fully developed scientific argument. Not entirely free of the pain of the earlier controversy, nor free of self-vindicating claims of "I told you so!," *Family and Nation* documents the evolution of the family and poverty debate over the last 25 years. Hence, Moynihan argues quite convincingly that the last quarter century has born out his original predictions and misgivings. He recants little of his original position, one that is still a judicious combination of cultural conservatism and a measured political philosophy.

The radical rejoinder can be found in Stephanie Coontz's (1992:232-254) historical account of family life in America, *The Way We Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Bolstered by an aggressive feminist reading of the history of American domestic life, Coontz's treatment of Moynihan's approach to family

and economy is not significantly different from many of the left-based rejoinders to the original Moynihan Report.

6. At this juncture we must be clear on one point. We respect the scholars whom we are citing. The fact that we believe their understanding of Lewis's conception of the subculture of poverty is wide of the mark does not reflect our overall evaluation of their work. We could, in fact, have chosen much more egregious misreadings. We have, instead, selected works whose general intellectual merits have stood the test of time. Thus, despite the misreadings we are about to pinpoint, these works are valuable contributions to the poverty literature. Their very quality, in fact, serves to underscore our central thesis: *The misinterpretation of Lewis's subculture of poverty concept was not so much the result of flawed scholarship, as of powerful ideological currents that surfaced among progressive scholars during the time of the Moynihan controversy.*
7. In this respect it is no small matter that this passage begins with a quote taken from Hylan Lewis, the author of "Agenda Paper No. V: The Family: Resources for Change." Lewis's paper was a key planning document for the family section of the White House Conference "To Fulfill These Rights," the ill-fated conference on black family life Johnson called for in his Howard University Speech. The conference had originally been intended to examine black family life along the lines originally suggested by the Moynihan Report. But as Rainwater and Yancey (1967:248-251) tell us, one of the main tasks of Hylan Lewis's working paper—itsself an excellent piece of scholarship—was to reframe the problem of lower-class, black family life in more positive terms. The effect, intended or not, was to divert the attention of the Conference participants away from the fire storm that had broken over Moynihan, his Report, and the Johnson White House, and to formulate elements of an ameliorative action plan—something the Moynihan Report had not taken up.

In the above agenda paper Hylan Lewis had discussed Oscar Lewis's conception of the subculture of poverty in a somewhat critical manner, writing:

The term "culture of poverty" is used by Oscar Lewis in a dynamic sense to express the interplay of circumstance and attitude. There is no special issue when the term is used in this way. Issues arise when the term is used to mean a world outlook or style of life that has become a thing in itself. At this edge of the term, there is an implication that the source of such a world outlook lies in other people—parents, peers—who hold the same attitudes and that the attitudes persist, whatever their relation to reality. (Rainwater and Yancey 1967:339)

By 1971 when Hylan Lewis writes "Culture of Poverty? What does it Matter?," his view of the subculture of poverty concept has darkened significantly. Considering the political ramifications of the idea, he writes as if the concept is a linchpin of political reaction. Identifying the contours of schism which we have underscored in this essay, he writes:

The idea of a culture of poverty is an example of a major social science idea and preoccupation that has contributed to the increasing estrangement of the poor, the black and the youth from old-line intellectuals and established men of science. The credibility, the relevance, the politics and the humanity of the scientists are being questioned by the poor, the black and the youth. Although the idea of the culture of poverty has helped focus on the problem of the poor in our society, the effect of some of its versions and uses has been to divert energies and attention from the critical crunches of our society related to the fact that new generations of black youths—black lower- and middle-class youths—are "seeking for power [and radical change now] as against an older generation [and other ethnics] satisfied with just a little more opportunity (N.C. Mills 1969:59)... (Lewis 1971:352-353)

In these two passages we find in microcosm the alienation of New Left radicals and Liberals that we posited as being a key source of the misunderstandings which has so distorted the image of the subculture of poverty thesis in present-day social science.

8. As to Harrington's insistence that we not confuse Banfield and Lewis, we can let Banfield speak for himself on poverty being a "state of soul" rather than a social condition:

"...The poverty problem in its normal-class form consists of people (especially the aged, the

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

The lower-class forms of all problems are at bottom a single problem: the existence of an outlook or style of life which is radically present-oriented and which therefore attaches no value to work, sacrifice, self-improvement, or service to family, friends, or community. Social workers, teachers, and law enforcement officials—all those whom Gans calls the “caretakers”—cannot achieve their goals because they can neither change nor circumvent this cultural obstacle.” (Banfield 1970:211)

9. On this point we can do no better than cite Rigdon’s poignant evaluation of Lewis’s plight in a discipline that was fast fetishizing positivism’s reading of the scientific method:

For his attitude of wanting to do it all, and consequently of not doing some things well, Lewis has had to pay in reputation in a discipline that is vastly different from the one he entered 50 years ago. He ignored the postwar trend toward specialization, scientism, and “objectivity” and maintained a commitment to the holistic approach and to the arts and humanities tradition. There is evidence that Lewis felt increasingly isolated and in danger of being left behind by the new social science. As early as 1961 he wrote to a friend about the scarcity of like-minded colleagues: “The anthropologists whom I most admired and whose evaluation of my work would have meant most to me, are now gone. I refer to Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton (my teachers), Robert Redfield, Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber. These were the great humanists in anthropology and I’m afraid the humanistic focus has become a scarce commodity among the younger generation.” (Rigdon 1988:180)

10. The attempts to study empirically the culture of poverty in general, and various of its traits in particular, have produced mixed results. Parker and Kleiner (1970), for example, confirmed the existence of an adaptive subculture of poverty among a large sample of African-Americans in Philadelphia. Their main finding was that the subculture of poverty served a largely analgesic function, allowing persons at the bottom of society to rationalize the fact of their lack of occupational achievement and status attainment. In contrast, Irean, Moles, and O’Shea (1969) studied the distribution of attitudes associated with the culture of poverty (dependency, alienation, fatalism, and certain family and work values) as they existed among low-income representatives of three ethnic groups: African-American, Spanish speaking, and Anglos. They hypothesized that if the culture of poverty thesis were correct, there would be no differences between the three groups. They found, however, that the Spanish-speaking sample scored consistently higher on their attitudinal measures than did the Anglos or African-Americans. They concluded, given these results, that Lewis’s culture of poverty thesis might not be a generalizable class phenomena, but one specific to Spanish-speaking peoples alone. Perlman (1975) in a study of social marginality in three Brazilian squatter settlements, found little evidence of a subculture of poverty. Similar findings have been reported by Padfield (1970): in a study of “hard-core” unemployed, he found little evidence that the unemployed of his sample were subject to a subculture of poverty. Carmon (1985) looked for a subculture of poverty among a sample of poor Israelis. While confirming the existence of various subculture of poverty traits among specific individuals, she concluded that, overall, her data could not support the culture of poverty thesis. Finally, Roach and Gursllin (1967), and Billings (1974), while finding some empirical support for subculture of poverty thesis, reject Lewis’s interpretation in favor of an explanation centering on economic deprivation and exploitation.

In that most of these studies define the subculture of poverty in a purely negative way, they do not constitute a valid test of Lewis’s ideas. The very partial and abstract nature of the studies, and the fact that they pick only one or two dimension in isolation from the totality, weakens the scope and effectiveness of these tests. We must therefore conclude that attempts at confirmation or refutation of Lewis’s ideas using positivist methodology have not been convincing—one way or the other.

11. For a detailed discussion of the idea of the “denial of class” and how it relates to the present poverty debate, see Harvey (1993:271-277).

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