

Poverty Scholars Program Strategic Dialogue #1
Re-Igniting the Poor People's Campaign:
Finishing the Unfinished Business of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King
September 18-21, 2008

Who Are the Poor? Why Are We Poor? The Current Economic Crisis
Saturday September 20th, 9:30 – 12:30

4 Theories of Impoverishment

Poverty as Accident

The concept of poverty as accident suggests that poverty is an outgrowth temporary weakness/crisis in the economy. When the economy slows down, corporations are forced to lay off employees and close down businesses. This leads to a weak demand for labor and makes some people vulnerable to impoverishment. In turn, people become poor because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

- "... poverty simply reflects temporary weakness in the economy, to be corrected by (also temporary) public generosity" (8).
 - William W. Goldsmith and Edward Blakely
"Separate Status: Top-Down Economics and Bottom-Up Politics." *Separate Societies: Poverty and Inequality in US Cities*, 1992.
- "John McCain has proposed a new "HOME Plan" to provide robust, timely and targeted help to those hurt by the housing crisis. Under his HOME Plan, every deserving American family or homeowner will be afforded the opportunity to trade a burdensome mortgage for a manageable loan that reflects their home's market value."
 - <http://www.johnmccain.com/Issues/JobsforAmerica/relief.htm>
- "With cooler weather surely around the corner, Southern California Edison is asking its customers to help those who have lost their jobs, are disabled or are elderly pay their electric bills by donating to the Energy Assistance Fund."
 - Los Angeles Times, Sunday, Nov. 27, 2005
<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/nov/27/realestate/re-short27>

Poverty as Pathology

A conception of poverty as pathology suggests that ongoing poverty is a result of problematic behaviors, attitudes and values, which are learned by individuals as members of a 'culture of poverty' or societal 'underclass.' At points, poverty as pathology or individual failing is traced to a 'decline in family values,' said to cause and to perpetuate a 'cycle of poverty.'

- Culture of Poverty: Anthropologist Oscar Lewis was the originator of the 'culture of poverty' concept, in his attempts to explain the persistence of poverty in Mexico and the US. He allegedly identified dozens of psychological and ideological traits that characterized a so-called 'culture of poverty,' which supposedly developed among the poor and was passed onto their children. These traits included feelings of inferiority and powerlessness, lack of historical thinking, and a focus only on their own troubles and immediate conditions. In *La Vida* (1966), Lewis wrote:

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 (xlv).

These arguments were adopted and adapted by other social scientists, social workers, and government officials, immediately influencing the interventions proposed in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," a 1965 report to President Johnson in which Moynihan identified the 'Negro family' as "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." As a Democratic Senator from New York, Moynihan would continue pointing to pathological behaviors and family structure, particularly children born to unwed parents, as the primary causes of the 'cycle of poverty,' in support of welfare reform.

- **Black Underclass:** In the 1980s and 1990s, debates around the 'culture of poverty' transformed into discussions of an 'underclass,' centered on the moral deviance or pathological behaviors of black inner city residents. In *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy (1987)*, William Julius Wilson suggests that a 'black ghetto underclass' has developed amid urban deindustrialization and the mobility of middle- and working-class African Americans out of inner cities. However, while noting deindustrialization and supporting some forms of public support, he focuses attention on the loss of (middle class) role models and institutions that would allow the ghetto underclass to overcome their isolation and 'social pathologies.' These pathologies include crime, welfare-dependency, and particularly female-headed households. Significantly, Wilson (a Harvard professor, now advising Barack Obama) did support race-neutral policies to create jobs and provide skills, explicitly challenging the neo-conservative Charles Murray, whose *Losing Ground (1984)* influenced the policy agenda of multiple Republican administrations, particularly in relation to welfare reform. Murray argued that welfare programs, like AFDC, rewarded behaviors that are causing multiple societal problems, instead of helping those in temporary need. He alleged that welfare provided financial incentives to single mothers, encouraging them to remain unmarried and to have additional children, which led to the further decline of the black community (notably Murray's focus). Instead of stigmatizing or condemning the poor, particularly those who were dependent on any type of state assistance, welfare discouraged individual efforts to overcome poverty and instead created a parasitic underclass, whose values and goals were contrary to the majority of Americans.

Poverty as Justified by Scripture

- **God ordains some to be rich and some to be poor.**
 - "The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts." – 1 Samuel 2:7
 - "For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." - Matthew 26:11

- “For what wrong does one do, if, by being careful and living frugally before coming to faith, one gathered sufficient means of living? Or even less reproachable, if one was immediately established by God, the distributor of life, in a household of such people, a wealthy family, strong in funds and powerful in riches?” - Clement of Alexandria
- “No one who wishes to be thought religious dares outright to deny predestination, by which God chooses some for the hope of life, and condemns others to eternal death.” - Calvin’s Institutes

- **Poverty is a gift from God – a blessing for the poor and the rich.**
 - “...For I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” - Philippians 4:11b-13
 - “It is not great or enviable to be without wealth except for the reason of eternal life. In this way those who have nothing at all but are destitute and beggars for their daily needs, the poor who are cast out on the streets though they are ignorant of God and God’s justice, would be most blessed, most dear to God, and the sole possessors of eternal life, simply because they are utterly destitute and live without necessities of life and because they lack even the most minimal means.” – Clement of Alexandria
 - “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” - Deuteronomy 15:11
 - “Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing.” – Proverbs 28:27a
 - “Instead of fields, then, purchase souls that have been afflicted, insofar as you can, and take care of widows and orphans and do not neglect them; spend your wealth and all your furnishings for such fields and houses as you have received from God. For this is why the Master made you rich, that you may carry out these ministries for him. It is much better to purchase the fields, goods, and houses you find in your own city when you return to it. This kind of extravagance is good and makes one glad; it has no grief or fear, but joy instead.” - The Shepherd of Hermas, 1:8-10

- **God helps those who help themselves. Poverty is a result of laziness.**
 - “Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread, but one who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.” – Proverbs 28:19
 - “Poverty and disgrace are for the one who ignores instruction, but one who heeds reproof is honored.” – Proverbs 13:18
 - “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” – Proverbs 10:4

- **God desires all people to be prosperous. Poverty is a result of lack of faith.**
 - “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.” - Deuteronomy 8:18
 - “Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!’” – 1 Chronicles 4:10
 - “If we desire to receive God’s blessings and promises, we must stand on the foundational basics of godly living – especially in the area of prosperity. God designed us to prosper as our souls prosper. Learn how to seek God’s Kingdom first and you’ll begin to grow financially as you grow spiritually.” – Gloria Copeland
 - “Throughout the Word, God plainly shows that His will is for His covenant people to have a surplus of prosperity. He promised to make Abraham rich, and the promise of Abraham is ours today (Galatians 3:13-14; Genesis 17:6). God’s will is prosperity for you.” – Kenneth Copeland

Poverty as Structure

Quotes from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on structural poverty:

- “The emergency we now face is economic, and it is a desperate and worsening situation. For the 35 million poor people in America-not even to mention, just yet, the poor in the other nations – there is a kind of strangulation in the air. In our society it is murder, psychologically, to deprive a man of a job or an income. You are in substance saying to that man that he has no right to exist. You are in a real way depriving him of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, denying in his case the very creed of his society. Now, millions of people are being strangled that way. The problem is international in scope. And it is getting worse, as the gap between the poor and the ‘affluent society’ increases.” (Trumpet of Conscience – the Massey Lectures - November-December, 1967)
- “We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the oil?’ You begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the iron ore?’ You begin to ask the question, ‘Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?’ These are words that must be said.” (Where Do We Go from Here? - August 1967)
- “We must recognize that we can’t solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power... this means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together...you can’t really get rid of one without getting rid of the others... the whole structure of American life must be changed. America is a hypocritical nation and [we] must put [our] own house in order.” (Speech to the Staff Retreat - May 1967)