

LABORING

BELOW THE LINE

The New Ethnography of Poverty,
Low-Wage Work, and Survival
in the Global Economy

Frank Munger
Editor

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Preface

Since 1980, inequality of economic opportunity in the United States has grown catastrophically. We know that the wealthiest 20 percent of Americans own a greater proportion of the nation's wealth than ever before, and that the poorest 20 percent own less of that wealth. We know too that the labor market for the poor is organized differently from the higher-wage labor market: jobs are impermanent and inadequately compensated, and attachment to the workforce is marginal for those at the bottom of the income distribution scale. Yet even as they fall further and further behind, many of the poor *are working*. In New York State, for example, more than half of poor families include a wage earner, and more than one third have someone working full-time year round. Failure of the poor to find and keep jobs has fueled arguments that social welfare supports "unearned benefits"—according to those who advocate slashing them—constitute "moral hazards," and undermine "discipline" among low-wage earners and the unemployed. These arguments, along with counterarguments that point to institutional and historical causes of economic and social inequality, rage on within the academy and in national discourse about welfare and welfare reform, as politics makes examples (and stereotypes) of a few poor persons. Unfortunately, policy makers and the public never see more than a glimpse of life below the poverty line, and we hear very little from Americans who are fighting for survival there.

Over the past twenty years, however, scholars have amassed an extraordinary body of ethnographic research that gives voice to the poor and maps the contours of their daily lives. In September 1997, the Russell Sage Foundation funded a workshop at the State University of New York at Buffalo to explore the promise of this new literature on poverty. Together, researchers who pursue ethnography, oral history, qualitative sociology, and narrative analysis shared data about the experiences of poor persons as they struggle—out of the spotlight of public attention—to work in the new low-wage economy, raise families, carry on from one day to the next, and get ahead; and this core group discussed these data with other scholars who use noninterpretive or quantitative strategies for documenting and examining poverty. The energy of workshop participants comes from their belief that acquaintance with the life experiences of the poor enriches our understanding of poverty as personal plight and social phenomenon. At this moment of governmental retrenchment, ethnography's complex, nonstereotypical portraits of individual persons are especially important. Although these studies cannot always offer clear answers to questions about poverty programs or the effects of isolated economic and social factors on the income and behavior of poor

persons, they reveal the ambiguities of real lives, the potential of individuals to change in unexpected ways, and the even greater intricacy of the collective life of a community.

Workshop participants talked at length about the challenges ethnographers face as they examine the implications of the experiences of their subjects and frame those experiences for an audience. Their discussions drew on many fields and disciplines to place ethnography in a larger context of scholarship on poverty and low-wage work. The cross-disciplinary investigation brought into focus the perennial criticism of interpretive or qualitative research by noninterpretive or quantitative researchers: that its objectivity and clarity are limited, and that it fails to illuminate *structural* inequality in the organization of institutions, communities, and the low-wage labor market. This book—which explores the role of interpretive research in understanding the causes and effects of poverty, examines global and local patterns of poverty, and evaluates recent policy making by the welfare state—continues the conversation and represents many of the disagreements among these scholars.

At the core of ethnographic research is an open-ended interpretive process. The interaction between researcher and subject does not proceed within fixed categories, but seeks to create and nurture a shared understanding of the meaning of thought and action. This book invites the reader to become a part of that dialogue between researchers and their subjects, consider the process by which such experiences are presented to others, learn more about poverty, and speculate about what comes next. By revealing a vast human potential, ethnography proves that it may educate us about poverty and serve as a catalyst for social change.

Drawing on the perspectives of the working poor, welfare recipients, and marginally employed men and women, the following chapters anatomize life-course circumstances and experiences that affect personal outlook, ability to work, and expectations for the future—the foundations on which survival and self-sufficiency are based. A picture of the unique social organization of the low-wage labor market emerges from points of contact between the characteristics of individuals and economic conditions and institutions: this helps us understand how and why many low-wage workers find themselves trapped in a low-wage ghetto. In counterpoint to the interpretive research presented herein, commentary by other workshop participants reflects on the role of ethnographic research and provides alternative viewpoints on the goals and methods of studies of poverty.

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Introduction

Identity as a Weapon in the Moral Politics of Work and Poverty

Frank Munger

During an era of plenty, and despite intensive and often sympathetic reporting in the mainstream media about the persistence of poverty in the United States, public discourse continues to invoke negative stereotypes about the lives of the poor and the effects of dependence on welfare payments and other government-funded benefits on their families. Economists, sociologists, and ethnographers tell more complete and nuanced stories about poverty, Herbert Gans laments in his recent book, *The War Against the Poor*, but to no effect: despite research and scholarly argument, false stereotypes persist as journalists in all media tailor their accounts of poverty for an audience comfortable with hackneyed notions of what it means to be poor.

STORIES ABOUT POOR PEOPLE

Consider Jason De Parle's narrative of the life story of a welfare recipient, Opal Caples, in his report on welfare reform in Wisconsin in the *New York Times Magazine*.¹ De Parle uses the facts, dates, and circumstances of Opal's life to frame descriptions of the state's welfare-to-work programs from the perspectives of administrators, caseworkers, and public officials. Opal herself is an ambiguous figure. Bright and apparently capable, she doesn't seem to be fully committed to work. Problems with day care might explain her tenuous attachment to the labor force, but even when all her support systems are in place, De Parle remarks, "it wasn't a complete surprise to discover, earlier this month, that Caples was missing from work. . . . She and her boyfriend had had a fight, and he had moved out. She said she was too distraught the night of breakup to bother calling work." The consequences of her failure to let her employer know she won't be coming to work are uncertain. Opal might keep her job, she might lose this one and quickly get another, or she might find herself unemployed and unable to pay her rent. She might even be forced to give up her apartment and move in with her cousin. The audience doesn't know what comes next, and we're not going to find out; but De Parle does offer us a summary of Opal's

situation: "She's striking off, on shaky legs, into an uncharted, post welfare world."

De Parle is a good reporter. He spends time getting details: Opal's marriage before childbearing and her subsequent single parenting, signs of job avoidance coupled with evidence of unreliable day care and inadequately compensated work. Though we learn much about what has *happened* to Opal Caples, we hear very few of her own words and almost nothing of her thoughts, how she judges her life and struggles for meaning. We don't know enough about Opal to form expectations about her behavior—until De Parle tells us, "it wasn't a complete surprise . . . to discover that Caples was missing from work."

Why not? Because Opal's is the story of the stereotypical welfare mother. The essential elements of her life appear to be those of thousands of her sisters. She moved from Chicago to Milwaukee to obtain higher benefits, her work history is erratic ("I knew I always had that welfare check!"), she looks for permanent employment—and it is relatively easy to find—only under the pressure of impending welfare reform. In this version of her life, Opal's problems are made to seem her own. We infer that she can surmount them if she wants to, if she tries to. The question is not whether she faces hardship or difficult moral dilemmas—we can agree that she does—but what kind of faith we place in her. Is Opal Caples one of us or not? De Parle doesn't answer the question.

In his thoughtful and exhaustively researched series of articles on welfare reform, De Parle presents the imperfect, sometimes perverse machinery of public assistance in precise and vivid terms. Yet the welfare recipients themselves are shadowy. We don't learn how they got into the system, what they make of the support they receive, whether it will help them change their lives. We don't learn much about Opal Caples as a person because she functions here as a type, a framing device. To see *her* steadily and to see her whole, we'd have to know much more about her background, her goals for herself and her children, how she values work and independence, how she has made choices in the past, how she makes them now, how she hopes to make them in the future. Certainly, Opal Caples inhabits the world we have created for poor African American women; but what strategies does she use to engage that world? Does she take the path of least resistance at every critical juncture in her life? Does "too distraught" always turn into absence from her job? What about "very happy"? Is she so marginally attached to work that any unusual event or emotion provides an excuse for staying home?

We see Caples through a narrow lens. This is how she looks now, when her children are small, at a point when she faces choices that are extraordinarily difficult for most women, whether poor or not. The particular material conditions that brought her to this moment are more or less hidden. Undefined as she is, though, we think we know her: she's a welfare mother who lives on handouts. This snapshot is reductive, one-dimensional. Truly to know Opal Caples and women like her, and thus to deepen our discussion of poverty in the United

States, scholars must focus our attention across their life courses. That is what the contributors to this book aim to do.

The issue that underlies welfare reform is moral identity, or in political terms, citizenship. Citizenship encompasses our understandings of mutual and universal obligations between all members of society; it is often said to be embodied in guarantees by the state of fundamental civil, political, or social rights. In the United States, civil and political rights are constitutionally based, but social rights of citizenship—that is, assurances of a minimum quality of life—are controversial and difficult to establish (see, for example, Bussiere 1997). Following hundreds of years of English legal precedents, American social thought distinguishes between the *deserving* poor, who merit social insurance and protection against the hardships of a free labor market, and the *undeserving* poor, who merit help only in times of severe hardship, and under conditions intended to reform their flawed moral character. More strictly than other industrialized societies, we measure the worthiness of all our citizens by the level of their commitment to the labor market, as the Social Security and Medicare systems demonstrate. Both establish contracts under which a lifetime commitment to compensated work is the precondition for benefits. Involuntary work and work for no exchange value, by the enslaved and by women, violates that precondition. In the aftermath of slavery, the tradition that one must work for a wage in order to prove worthiness still disables all American women, and women of color in particular.

Many European countries conceive social citizenship differently: based on the corporatist representation of workers in some places and the strength of the labor movement in others, entitlement to a minimum living allowance extends to all members of society. Against this background of American exceptionalism, De Parle and other journalists try to do the right thing when they explore the moral character of the poor, the foundation of their citizenship. Yet the medium makes symbolic politics and stereotypes hard to avoid. Editors and readers alike expect reporters to construct their stories within the parameters of the public debate. Thus welfare recipients acquire identities that test their deservingness directly: they become heroes, lazy bums, passive victims, able-bodied, self-indulgent, or dangerous clients of a too-generous social support system. Political leaders create these identities for the poor in order to serve their own political, policy making, and administrative ends,² strangling public discourse on poverty policy and on alternative identities for the poor.³

Poverty continues to marginalize millions of Americans. If we expect them to change their circumstances by changing their behavior, we must turn away from the distortions of negative stereotypes and work toward a more accurate *social* understanding of their lives, an effort that depends on a clearer understanding of the interdependence of poverty and wealth and the ways in which our institutions maintain that interdependence.

SYMBOLIC POLITICS IN POVERTY RESEARCH

In two insightful essays written more than thirty years ago, Lee Rainwater and Herbert Gans envision the kind of writing and research that might disrupt the stereotypes on which the public debate about poverty is centered. Rainwater (1970, 9–10) proposes a psychological explanation for these stereotypes: we are susceptible to them owing to the great social distance between mainstream and “disinherited” members of society.

The central existential fact of life for the lower class, the poor, the deprived, and the discriminated-against ethnic groups, is that their members are not included in the collectivity that makes up the “real” society of “real” people. . . . Yet, at the same time, their activities are subject to surveillance and control by society in such a way that they are not truly autonomous, not free to make a way of life of their own.

✱ As a consequence of our discomfort with our perceptions of the poor,

[we] develop some understanding that “explains” the fact that there are people among us who are not part of us. . . . In order to cope with the presence of individuals who are not a regular part of a society, its members develop labels that signify the moral status of the deviant and carry within them a full etiology and diagnosis, and often a folk therapy. . . . The social scientist inevitably imports these folk understandings into his own work. They yield both understanding and misunderstanding for him.

According to Rainwater, recognition that others live their lives under conditions we regard as intolerable starts the engine of stereotyping. We choose to believe that the poor are different from us, either because they have chosen poverty for reasons we would reject (they prefer being poor to working or are happy being poor) or because they are incapable of making choices that would improve their lot. The first assumption romanticizes the poor and celebrates their resistance and creativity. The second assumption denies that the poor are like us and marks them as sick, infantile, irresponsible, or depraved, arguing that theirs is an inferior citizenship that ought to be managed by others.

So we must begin our research anew and “strive first for a phenomenologically valid account both of the inner reality of personal life and of the social exchanges that constitute the pattern of social life of the disinherited. We must learn to become much more precise about how this inner reality and way of life came into being historically, and about how they are sustained by the larger social system in which they are embedded” (Rainwater 1970, 27). As we seek this precision, we put ourselves at some risk.

We will discover that a phenomenologically accurate account of the condition of the disinherited will make us and those who read us even more nervous

because the more accurate the account, the more it will heighten, at least initially, the deeply human perception that "they cannot live like that because I could not live like that." . . . Yet if we are to provide a satisfactory intellectual grounding for systematic policy making in this area, we must somehow achieve such a complex, accurate diagnosis rather than merely a satisfying and anxiety-reducing one. (Rainwater 1970, 27)

The more accurate the account of the condition of the disinherited, the more nervous it makes us, the more discomfort or cognitive strain it causes, and the more strongly we resist it. What kinds of phenomenologically accurate information about poverty will help us overcome such resistance, in ourselves and in others? How will that research address the principal barrier to public acceptance of greater support for the poor, namely, the perceived moral identity of the poor themselves?

In a contemporaneous essay, Herbert Gans (1969, 203) praises Rainwater's insight into the polar formulation (deserving-undeserving) of social support policies for middle-class and poor Americans.

Some feel that the poor share the values and aspirations of the affluent society, and if they can be provided with decent jobs and other resources, they will cease to suffer from the pathological and related deprivational consequences of poverty. . . . [M]any more social scientists share the feeling that the poor are deficient. Yet, others . . . suggest that poverty and the lowly position of the poor have resulted in the creation of a separate lower-class culture or a culture of poverty.

Gans concludes that all such judgments are based on oversimplifications of the kind Rainwater describes.⁴

The debate, however conceptualized, [is] irrelevant and undesirable. . . . Enough is now known about the economic and social determinants of pathology to reject explanations of pathology as a moral lapse . . . one cannot know whether the poor are as law-abiding or moral as the middle class until they have achieved the same opportunities—and then the issue will be irrelevant.

Gans understands that research also must address the critical moral issue that underlies welfare policy, namely, can the poor behave like the middle classes? Scholars who agree that they can, and who hope to influence the development of policies that will help the poor climb out of poverty must, he argues, convey their capacity to secure and hold jobs—passports to participation in mainstream life. To test this capacity, we must look not only at the sometimes maladaptive behavior of poor people, but also at their values and aspirations.

His reformulation of Rainwater's prescription is important because Gans acknowledges the interplay between research and the moral politics of welfare. Like Rainwater, he also recognizes the value of contextualized ethnographic research for exploring the relationship between aspirations and actions. To understand this relationship, Gans observes, scholars must exam-

ine the individual's own interpretations of the "existential situation" through which character, identity, and motivation are formed.

The call by Gans and Rainwater for more phenomenologically accurate research sets a different agenda but nevertheless leaves perplexing questions unresolved. Exploration of the aspirations and values of the poor—the stuff of their identity—ought to undermine the negative stereotypes that hobble effective policy making; but how to organize such research? What kinds of information should ethnographers gather? Are words enough? Can the voices of the poor, direct and unmediated, persuade scholars, journalists, politicians, policy makers, and middle-class Americans that they are enough like us to deserve generous social supports? Or must they muster deeds, jobs they have held, classes they have taken, sacrifices they have made for their children, to win approval and access to resources that many of us take for granted? Rainwater and Gans don't explain how we are to develop a fairer discourse about poverty without constructing simplified counterimages of the poor or making them accountable to idealized aspirations and values that are rarely realized even by those who are wealthier.

What does it mean to hold a single mother with small children to the standards of the middle class? How do we expect her to enact her values under conditions of deprivation, and how could our understanding of the interplay between her actions and her aspirations be enriched? An idealized middle-class standard for self-sufficiency includes a steady job, trust that work will lead to betterment, rational micromanagement of income and work opportunities, instrumental use of social support to achieve some degree of autonomy, and belief in the value of formal education. Standards shaped by middle-class experience and embedded in the language of microeconomics and policy studies structure our public discourse about poverty. Qualitative research must foreground these standards and question their provenance if it hopes to uncover the many layers of impulse and action that feed the apparent deviance of the poor.

Critical to the mobilization of qualitative research in the area of poverty studies is that we acknowledge the effects of the deep racial fault line in American society on the identity, self-concept, and behavior of those we stigmatize as poor. Race is nearly invisible in mainstream policy research on poverty, and this despite an incontrovertible reality: not only are the experiences of persons of color who are poor different, but different at least in part because persons of color are perceived and treated differently. Martin Gillens (1999) observes a fundamental premise—unexamined in most research on poverty—of the public perception of welfare in the United States: welfare (much like crime) is a province populated by African Americans. Although Gillens limits his focus to attitudes toward welfare recipients, Katherine Newman's (1999) study of low-wage workers in Harlem slips almost silently from framing poverty as a debate about the availability of work into one about the moral character of poor African Americans. Newman assumes without saying so that most middle-class Americans view African Americans as potentially shiftless nonworkers

and welfare recipients. Without acknowledgment, Newman confirms what we have known since the mid-1960s—that our public discourse on poverty and welfare is almost exclusively a discussion about the African American poor.

Scholars who want to understand poverty and the public policy debates that surround it must grapple with race-coded discourse. Euphemisms such as the underclass, welfare poor, and cycle of poverty may sanitize language, but they cannot mask our racialized perceptions of poverty. Nor can they mask the continuing processes of cultural and institutional separation that isolate African Americans from the mainstream (Munger forthcoming). Our race-coded discourse about poverty divides the poor and working classes into two groups: whites who suffer the effects of declining wages, benefits, and job security and therefore are deserving; and blacks who a priori are stigmatized as potential welfare recipients and therefore are undeserving (Matsuda 1997). Until this divide is bridged, Gillens suggests, little will change in the symbolic politics of poverty.

Rainwater and Gans take for granted the need to demonstrate that the poor have the capacity to behave as we do, that they are like us. Although Gans suggests that the aspirations and values of the middle class set the standards by which we make moral judgments about the poor, neither he nor Rainwater names the characteristics poor people must demonstrate before we are willing to include them in the category *us*. Evidence shows that most Americans (along with the poor who share their values and aspirations) have complex, not simple or stereotypical, understandings of their own moral stature and dependency. Scholars must work to unravel these understandings and make transparent the process by which power holders, including voters and public officials, forge identities for the poor and judge their deservingness. The last chapter of this volume returns to these issues.

THE NEW ETHNOGRAPHY AS A POLICY DISCOURSE

Since Rainwater and Gans wrote their essays, and especially during the past decade, some journalists, biographers, oral historians, and ethnographers have shifted the ground of poverty research to mark out a larger terrain for their investigations of the lives of the poor. Poverty no longer looks static or monolithic. Now, as Michael Katz (1993) notes, we study it in many different contexts, in many different historical periods; and we begin to see the poor in new ways: not as passive victims of unfavorable circumstances and their own torpor, but as architects of survival strategies, social actors who are capable of political action.

Such shifts in perspective may heighten the ambiguity of the new ethnography as a corrective to familiar stereotypes of the symbolic politics of poverty. Counterhegemonic narratives of the lives of disadvantaged and oppressed persons show the poor as agents who are sometimes able to overcome economic

and social constraints and do for themselves. The more fully we understand the power of agency in poor communities, though, the more self-aware and self-determining the poor appear to be, the greater the likelihood that their poverty may be seen as a choice, the more they may seem to resemble the "dangerous classes" of early modern England. The more varied their circumstances—as immigrants, as members of Hispanic, African American, Native American, or Asian minorities each with its own unique concerns, as ghetto residents, welfare recipients, or part-time service industry employees—the more the poor may resemble a tangle of special-interest groups determined to drain the resources of the dwindling, canonical working and middle classes. As poverty policies move to the top of the political agenda once again, the risk may be that ethnographic research turns into advocacy and the identity of the poor skews toward new stereotypes in a repetition of the very pattern that concerned Rainwater.

Long before the Great Society programs of the 1960s, studies of poverty in the United States focused on the condition of African Americans in the urban enclaves where they lived, separated by custom (and often by law) from their white neighbors (Du Bois 1903; Frazier 1939; Myrdal 1944; Drake and Cayton 1945). Often, though, they were able to leave those enclaves during the day to work in secure and adequately compensated jobs created by the industrial economy. Indeed, the availability of those jobs brought African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, and often they created in their neighborhoods thriving and colorful and self-sustaining communities. Yet economic and social policies after World War II altered conditions for the worse for African Americans in the urban centers, as the ethnographer Elliot Liebow (1967) was among the first to note.

Liebow links deepening poverty with deindustrialization of the inner city through his descriptions of the lives of poor black men who congregated on the street corners of Chicago's South Side. Ethnographic study of these men is important, he argues, because earlier research has targeted different groups—the "female centered" ghetto family, children at risk, and juvenile delinquents. Liebow's methodology is crucial because other approaches—interviews or questionnaires, for example—tend to produce caricature rather than "a clear firsthand picture" of the real lives of real people. Liebow isn't interested in testing hypotheses; he wants to understand the culture of the street corner and the "world of daily, face-to-face relationships with wives, children, friends, lovers, kinsmen and neighbors" of which the street corner is one small part. Above all, Liebow aims "to see the man as he sees himself, to compare what he says with what he does, and to explain his behavior as a direct response to the conditions of lower-class Negro life rather than as mute compliance with historical or cultural imperatives." Attachment to family, feelings of pride, the sense of honor, fears and frustrations—Liebow documents a full range of emotions and values the men share with most other Americans, along with conditions that frequently lead to self-destructive behavior and failure to realize aspirations.