

POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

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POVERTY KNOWLEDGE

SOCIAL SCIENCE, SOCIAL POLICY,
AND THE POOR IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
U.S. HISTORY

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Introduction

THE IDEA that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems has long been an article of faith in American liberalism. Nowhere is this more apparent than when it comes to solving the "poverty problem." For well over a century, liberal social investigators have scrutinized poor people in the hopes of creating a knowledge base for informed social action. Their studies have generated massive amounts of data and a widening array of research techniques, from the community-based social surveys of the Progressive Era, to the ethnographic neighborhood studies conducted by Chicago-school social scientists in the 1920s, to the technically sophisticated econometric analysis that forms the basis of the poverty research industry today. Although its origins can be traced to what historian Daniel Rodgers calls the transatlantic "borrowings" of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century progressives, contemporary poverty research is very much an American invention, with a degree of specialization and an institutional apparatus that is unmatched in other parts of the world.¹ And yet, poverty remains a fact of life for millions in the world's most prosperous economy, stubbornly resistant to all that social scientists have learned about its "causes, consequences, and cures."²

Frustrated by what they routinely refer to as the "paradox" of "poverty amidst plenty," liberal social scientists often charge that politics and ideology are to blame. We know what to do about poverty, they believe, but ideologically motivated policy makers from both sides of the aisle lack the political will to do the right, scientifically informed thing. A powerful expression of such frustration came in response to the "end of welfare as we know it" in 1996, when three highly respected Department of Health and Human Services Department officials resigned in protest over President Clinton's decision to sign the harsh, Republican-sponsored Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—now widely referred to as welfare repeal. "The passage of this new law tells us what we already knew," wrote HHS Assistant Secretary Peter Edelman in explaining his actions. "[P]oliticians make decisions that are not based on research and experience." Welfare reform was a triumph of politics and ideology over knowledge, that is, and a defeat for the policy analysts who had mustered an enormous amount of scientific data showing that the bill would send millions more children into poverty—very much in the hope of preventing politicians from doing the wrong thing.³

Accurate though it may be in its characterization of recent welfare reform, this explanation for what happened in 1996 has one overriding problem: it fails to acknowledge the role that scientific poverty expertise played in bringing welfare as we knew it to an end. Following a well-established pattern in post-

Great Society policy analysis, the Clinton administration's poverty experts had already embraced and defined the parameters of a sweeping welfare reform featuring proposals that promised to change the behavior of poor people while paying little more than rhetorical attention to the problems of low-wage work, rising income inequality, or structural economic change, and none at all to the steadily mounting political disenfranchisement of the postindustrial working class. Approaching the poverty problem within the narrow conceptual frame of individual failings rather than structural inequality, of cultural and skill "deficits" rather than the unequal distribution of power and wealth, the social scientific architects of President Clinton's original, comparatively less punitive welfare reform proposal made "dependency" their principal target and then stood by helpless as congressional conservatives took their logic to its radical extreme. Their helplessness in the matter was not just a matter of "bad" politics laying "good" scientific knowledge to waste. It was also a failure of the knowledge itself.

Taken on its own, the recent "end of welfare" offers evidence for one of the central arguments of this book: that building an antipoverty agenda will require a basic change in the way we as a society think collectively about "the poverty problem," a change that begins with a redirection in contemporary social scientific poverty knowledge. Here I am referring to the body of knowledge that, very much as a legacy of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, has attained a kind of quasi-official status in defining "the poverty problem" and assessing how social programs affect the poor. Besides being social scientific, this knowledge is based principally on quantitative, national-level data. It is produced by a network of public agencies, think tanks, university-based and privately operated research institutes that traffics in the shared language and recognized methods of applied economics and policy analysis. Although liberal in origins, poverty knowledge rests on an ethos of political and ideological neutrality that has sustained it through a period of vast political change. Very much for this reason, it can also be distinguished by what it is not: contemporary poverty knowledge does not define itself as an inquiry into the political economy and culture of late twentieth-century capitalism; it is knowledge about the characteristics and behavior and, especially in recent years, about the welfare status of the poor. Nor does it much countenance knowledge honed in direct action or everyday experience, whether generated from activism, program implementation, or, especially, from living poor in the United States. Historically devalued as "impressionistic," "feminized," or "ideological," this kind of knowledge simply does not translate into the measurable variables that are the common currency of "objective," "scientific," and hence authoritative poverty research.

Certainly I am not the first to make the argument that poverty knowledge, as currently constituted, needs to change. On occasion such an argument has been sounded by recognized poverty experts, exasperated, for example, by

how their colleagues have allowed the political obsession with welfare dependency to overshadow the problems of wage decline, labor market failure, and rising inequality that continually get shunted off to the side in the poverty/welfare debate.⁴ More often, though, the argument for change finds expression in the not-always-articulated frustration of people on the periphery of the poverty research industry—the program administrators, advocates, legislators, community activists, or, as in my own case, the foundation program officers—who since the 1980s have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the narrow, individualized focus of poverty research, who feel cut off from its technical language and decontextualized, rational choice models of human behavior, and who rankle at its refusal to acknowledge the value judgments underlying measures of welfare "dependency" that have come to play such a prominent role in recent policy. To be sure, thanks to poverty knowledge we now have a more accurate statistical portrait of who suffers from substandard incomes, housing, nutrition, and medical care—a far more diversified and shifting population than lingering stereotypes of the "other America" would allow. So, too, has poverty knowledge provided an indispensable picture of actual program spending and benefit levels that contradicts popular notions of welfare mothers living off the fat of the state. Poverty experts have also amassed convincing evidence about the links between poverty and macroeconomic performance, and about the extraordinary effectiveness of Social Security in reducing poverty among the elderly. And yet, however impressive its data or sophisticated its models, poverty knowledge has proved unable to provide an analysis or, equally important, a convincing narrative to counter the powerful, albeit simplistic story of welfare state failure and moral decline—a narrative that, with the help of well-organized conservative analysts, has come to inform policy discourse to a degree hardly imaginable twenty years ago.

I got my first introduction to poverty knowledge as a new assistant program officer at the Ford Foundation in the mid-1980s, when the liberal research establishment was still reeling from the impact of Charles Murray's just-released missive, *Losing Ground*. In that book, Murray used data and techniques earlier honed in predominantly liberal think tanks to argue that the liberal welfare state was to blame for a whole host of social problems, including poverty, family breakup, and crime.⁵ From an empirical standpoint, Murray's argument proved easy to demolish, and a number of poverty experts rose convincingly to the task. But their careful empirical analyses were no match at all for *Losing Ground* as an ideological manifesto: couched, as they were, in the language and conventions of ideologically neutral objectivity, these critiques alone were inadequate as a response to Murray's attack on both the value premises and the performance record of the welfare state. Nor were poverty experts organized to counter the network of explicitly ideological conservative and libertarian think tanks that had managed, through their own organizing and publicity, to gain control of the terms of the poverty debate.

Along with many others at the time, then, I welcomed what has since become a perennial conversation about how liberal and progressive philanthropy can use knowledge more effectively to shape rather than react to public debate. At the same time, I was struck by what is still a pervasive assumption in the network of research institutes that make up the core of the poverty research industry: that knowledge, in order to meet the standards of empirical testing and rigorous scientific scrutiny, must—indeed that it ever is or can be—apolitical if not entirely value- and ideology-free.

In my job as assistant director of the Ford Foundation's Project on Social Welfare and the American Future, I was responsible for managing a portfolio of research grants that purposely ranged across the broad spectrum of social welfare policies, but that inevitably concentrated on the hotly contested issues of poverty, welfare, and what was becoming widely known as the "underclass." This proved my first introduction to the enormous influence of foundations and government agencies in setting social scientific research agendas, through control not just over what and who gets funding, but also over what, at any given time, constitutes policy expertise. To the extent that poverty research agendas were driven by "the science" (a standard foundation question: "what do we know and what do we need to know?"), it was always with an eye to making social science more "policy-relevant"—a virtual guarantee, during an era of rising deficits and antiliberal, antigovernment backlash, that poverty research would confine itself to an ever-shrinking realm of political possibility. The parameters of research were similarly narrow, as captured in what at the time was repeatedly characterized as the central fault line in the social scientific debate: whether poverty was "structural," and hence "caused" by an absence of human capital, or "cultural," as measured through various indicators of bad behavior, including whether dependency and single parenthood were somehow passed along as intergenerational character traits. In neither case was poverty defined as anything other than an individual condition, nor was it seen as susceptible to any other than individual-level reform. Most striking to me, though, was how rarely anyone acknowledged that this constricted, strangely either-or debate was not at all new, and not one that had ever been definitively settled through recourse to empirical data and social scientific models alone. Here again I agreed with the still-current assessment that poverty knowledge needed to be more interdisciplinary, qualitative as well as quantitative, and much broader in scope—and that it could use a good deal more of what we on the Social Welfare Project took to calling "blue sky" thinking in analyzing the possibilities for reform.

A few years later, as a staff associate assigned to the Social Science Research Council's Program for Research on the Urban Underclass, I had an opportunity to work more directly with social scientists to attempt such a broad, interdisciplinary approach, for the purposes of understanding at least one dimension of contemporary poverty—the dramatic economic decline of racially segregated

neighborhoods in the nation's postindustrial urban core. That project, which I joined in the early 1990s, used the work of sociologist William Julius Wilson as the starting point for what was to be a more structural as well as interdisciplinary understanding of the roots of ghetto poverty, one that, in the eyes of its sponsor, the Rockefeller Foundation, could inform the design of community-based programs as well as national policy debates. These aims, as I soon discovered, were more easily stated than achieved. On the one hand were the methodological, conceptual, even linguistic barriers between disciplines, all exaggerated by our effort to broaden the conversation to disciplines that had been sidelined within established poverty research networks in recent years. On the other there were the divisions separating "academic" from "applied" policy research, and social scientists from neighborhood residents and practitioners—divisions rooted as much in professional cultures as in conflicting ideas about what constituted "usable" knowledge for purposes of policy and program. Especially telling, though, was that the efforts to "operationalize" and test the underclass concept continued to rest far more heavily on indicators of individual and group behavior than on comparable measures of structural economic and/or institutional decline in urban neighborhoods—reinforcing the notion that some form of behavioral "pathology" was what caused and sustained the underclass. When the SSRC Underclass Program was ending, in late 1993 and early 1994, it had just barely begun to broach the institutionalized barriers to collaboration and to address the limitations of conventional measures for documenting structural and community-level change. By then, too, poverty researchers had started to pay more attention to the growth in inequality and the decline of wages as defining, structurally rooted conditions of late twentieth-century poverty. Still, social science was a long way from realizing a genuinely different kind of poverty knowledge, one that revolved more around the problems of political economy than the behavioral problems of the poor.

Coming, as it did, from a planning group led by prominent poverty experts, the Clinton administration's 1994 proposal to "end welfare as we know it" seemed more a step backwards than a reflection of the powerful evidence emerging from recent research—particularly in the administration's willingness to make dependency the issue without adequately addressing the more pressing issues of declining wages and available work. Protest though they might once conservative Republicans took over, it was difficult to deny that welfare reform drew its logic from a so-called "consensus" on dependency that the administration's poverty experts had helped to construct—or that welfare, especially in recent memory, was simply not an issue that would be decided on the basis of high-minded, nonideological debate. And yet, the end of welfare has decidedly not spurred efforts to rethink the premises, the organization, or the overwhelmingly individualized focus of poverty research. If anything, it has been the occasion for growth and expansion in the existing research indus-

try—in response to the well-warranted concern for keeping track of what actually happens to people under the new rules.

For me, then, the role of liberal social science in ending welfare confirmed the need to reexamine, and ultimately to reconstruct, the foundations of contemporary poverty knowledge. But while this view is informed by my experience as a funder and a kind of participant observer, it has been more deeply informed by historical research. Through historical analysis I have come to appreciate why poverty knowledge is so loaded with meaning: why “knowing” poverty generates such controversy and so much attention; why what is recognized as expertise can be so consequential—though rarely in ways the experts anticipate—for the poor; and why as a body of knowledge that has been historically constructed, it must be assessed as a part of historical trends in ideology, politics, institutions, culture, and political economy far more than as a disembodied store of learning about poverty’s “causes” and “cures.” By way of introduction, then, and in the chapters that follow, I highlight several insights that can be drawn from historical understanding of poverty knowledge, and that inform my conclusion that reconstructing poverty knowledge is more than simply a matter of generating new research questions for social scientists to pursue.

First and foremost among these insights is that poverty knowledge is fundamentally ideological in nature: It is above all a project of twentieth-century liberalism, dating most immediately from the 1960s and the Great Society, but more deeply rooted in the rise of the “new liberalism” that emerged in late nineteenth-century Euro-American political culture as an alternative to the *laissez-faire* individualism of the industrial age.⁶ Originating, as it did, in this formative period of twentieth-century liberalism, poverty knowledge rests on several characteristic commitments and beliefs: a commitment to using rational empirical investigation for the purposes of statecraft and social reform; a belief that the state, in varying degrees of cooperation with organized civil society, is a necessary protection against the hazards of industrial capitalism and extreme concentrations of poverty and wealth; a commitment, nevertheless, to maintaining a capitalist economy based on private ownership and market principles, however much it need be tamed or managed by public intervention; and, finally, a distinctly secular faith in human progress, not just through the accumulation of knowledge, but through the capacity to apply it for the common good. These core beliefs, to be sure, have been subject to varying interpretations, to internal conflict, and to revision over time. Nevertheless, in one form or another they have defined poverty knowledge as a *liberal* as well as a scientific enterprise, starting with the efforts by Progressive-era social investigators to de-pauperize thinking about poverty—to make it a matter of social rather than individual morality—by turning attention from the “dependent” to the wage-earning poor.

As a historically liberal enterprise, poverty knowledge also reflects the diversity and internal tensions within twentieth-century liberal social thought: differences between labor/ left and corporate/centrist liberals over how to manage the economy; between “top-down,” elite-driven and “bottom-up,” politically empowering approaches to reform; and even between class-based vs. cultural or “identity” politics, as can be seen in a long-enduring debate pitting “race” against “class” as alternative frameworks for explaining and responding to poverty among African Americans. Most fundamentally though, poverty knowledge reflects a central tension within liberal thought about the nature of inequality—not so much over whether inequality is innate or environmental in origin, but whether it is best understood and addressed at the level of individual experience or as a matter of structural and institutional reform. That this tension has more often been resolved in favor of the individualist interpretation can be seen in several oft-noted features in poverty research. One is the virtual absence of class as an analytic category, at least as compared with more individualized measures of status such as family background and human capital. A similar individualizing tendency can be seen in the reduction of race and gender to little more than demographic, rather than structurally constituted, categories. Poverty research treats the market and the two-parent, male-headed family in much the same way, as inevitable, naturally occurring ways of ordering human relations rather than as institutions that are socially created and maintained. The point is that these have not always been prevailing characteristics in poverty knowledge; nor are they simply a reflection of a shift towards economics as its disciplinary base. They grew just as much out of ongoing struggles within liberalism over the ideological boundaries of reform—the outcomes of which, in the name of remaining realistic or “relevant” for political purposes, have repeatedly eclipsed an alternative, more institutionalist and social democratic research tradition, that has challenged liberalism’s individualistic assumptions from within. Nor, for this very reason, should we see the outcome in terms of some self-generating, inevitable ideological trajectory, or in terms of an irreversible end to an expansive, social democratic, or participatory vision of liberal reform. Indeed, the ideological boundaries of poverty knowledge have been drawn and redrawn amidst changing political and economic circumstances, and in an ongoing process of negotiation and debate.

Thus, by paying attention to the history of poverty knowledge, we can see that its very development as a science has been closely tied to the shifting preoccupations, to the political fortunes, and certainly to the major crusades of twentieth-century liberalism. Not all of these crusades were tied so obviously to the expansion of social welfare provision: World War II and the Cold War underwrote the anthropological studies in developing countries that fostered Oscar Lewis’s infamous theory of the “culture of poverty.” So, too, did they provide the occasion for the use of systems analysis in a burgeoning postwar defense industry—a weapon, so to speak, that federal research admin-

istrators imported directly from the Pentagon when it came time to fight the War on Poverty. Poverty knowledge was also shaped by domestic social welfare considerations, and none more powerfully than the experience of postwar economic affluence. Eager to push the expansive economy to its "full growth potential," Keynesian economists in the Kennedy administration cultivated an analysis that linked poverty to sluggish growth and less-than-full employment, and its solution to what skeptics considered the unlikely device of a growth-stimulating tax cut. And it was amidst the great African American migrations of the two post-world war periods that poverty knowledge began gradually to exhibit an assimilationist racial egalitarianism, brilliantly synthesized in Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* during the 1940s, that explained differences of race and class in terms of culture rather than biology while implicating cultural exclusion and pathology in the persistence of black poverty. Here in particular poverty knowledge proved capable of accommodating, and to some degree anticipating, the social movements and world transformations that were reshaping liberalism at the time, and that made it sufficiently flexible as an ideology to sustain a loose consensus within a diverse constituency during the decades after World War II.

Nevertheless, as with liberalism, the capaciousness of poverty knowledge could only extend so far before bearing the brunt of internal conflict and battering from without. Thus, by the late 1960s both the culture of poverty and racial assimilationism had generated deeply divisive debates within a social scientific community that was itself being transformed by civil rights and women's movement politics. Similarly, with the end of postwar affluence and the collapse of the "Keynesian consensus," poverty knowledge lost both its link to macroeconomic policy and its central organizing idea. More recently, poverty knowledge has been profoundly shaken by the rise of the political Right, with its ideological, not-always secularist approach to knowledge and its extraordinary success in keeping the locus of discourse away from the economics of rising inequality and centered squarely on issues framed as "family values," "big government," and the decline of personal responsibility. It is in this context that the direction poverty knowledge has taken in the past two decades reflects the fragmentation of liberalism, and its subsequent efforts to reinvent itself on a more limited social base—this time in the guise of the "third way," "new Democrat," or market-oriented neoliberalism that ushered in the end of welfare while wholeheartedly embracing the private market as the ultimate arbiter of individual well-being and the common good. With the turn to dependency as its central concept, the contemporary neoliberal drift in poverty research marks an important break with the earlier "new liberal" past, for it in effect re-pauperizes the poverty issue while emphasizing individual, rather than social, morality.

A second major insight from historical analysis is that poverty knowledge is highly political in nature, in ways that go beyond its close association with

the trajectory of liberalism, and that have led to the emergence of professional social science as the dominant source of expertise on poverty and welfare policy. To some degree this can be understood as part of the politics of knowledge—the ability of well-placed research entrepreneurs to act as advocates for particular approaches, theoretical frameworks, and for the necessity of social scientific expertise as the basis of enlightened policy. It is thanks to such efforts that poverty knowledge bears the markers of professionalization—specialization, standardized data, experimental methods, a body of theory, or at least a series of "testable hypotheses"—along with the mechanisms for training future generations to uphold established standards of scientific expertise. But the triumph of social science as a way of knowing poverty can also be understood as part of the politics of class, race, and gender in determining who qualifies and can participate as an authority—and who not—in the broader public sphere. Seen in this light, poverty knowledge can be characterized as the project of an increasingly credentialed, formally educated segment of the middle class—one that, despite important contributions from prominent female and nonwhite social scientists, has for most of its history been predominantly white and male. Moreover, the claim to scientific objectivity rests on technical skills, methods, information, and professional networks that historically have excluded those groups most vulnerable to poverty: minorities, women, and especially the relatively less-educated working class, putting poverty knowledge in a position not just to reflect but to replicate the social inequalities it means to investigate.

This is not to say that poverty knowledge can be reduced to a playing out of material class interest (populist and conservative critics to the contrary, there really is *not* much money or professional glamour to be had from studying the poor), nor to deny that individual social scientists have been capable of transcending their class, race, and gender-bound identities. It is to recognize, though, that not only despite but because of its quest for a particular scientific standard, poverty knowledge has been filtered, not just through the experiences and cultural biases of the privileged, but through the social position of "the professors" in relation to "the poor." It is in this regard that recent changes in political economy take on a special significance for poverty knowledge, not just as they affect the demographic "composition" of poverty, but as they pit the more- against the less-educated in the distribution of economic punishments and rewards. In the "new," information-hungry, postindustrial economy, poverty experts are in a position to benefit from the transformations that have destabilized the industrial working class; in economists' language, it is an economy that brings ever-greater "returns" to education while devaluing industrial skills. And yet, poverty experts show little inclination to question whether their own stake in the "new economy" might affect their interpretation that its disparities can be explained primarily as differences in education and skill—

suggesting, in a way reminiscent of earlier cultural criticism, that the poor should simply strive to be more like us.

It is this disparity of status and interest that make poverty research an inescapably political act: It is an exercise of power, in this instance of an educated elite to categorize, stigmatize, but above all to neutralize the poor and disadvantaged through analysis that obscures the political nature of social and economic inequality. By the same token, it is the power to construct and give scientific weight to ideas of what is natural, "functional," or socially desirable, in terms that are exclusive of, if not in direct opposition to, the poor. Finally, it is the power to constitute or at least to influence the categories of social policy in ways that are of material consequence to the poor, whether those categories have to do with determining the particulars of who is eligible (or "deserving") of public assistance or with establishing the broader parameters of the welfare state.

The question of categorization in turn highlights a third important insight from historical analysis, and that is the degree to which poverty knowledge has been influenced by social welfare institutions and the categories they establish for channeling (or denying) aid to people who are poor. For just as social scientists and social research have played a part in shaping policy, so, too, has the structure of U.S. social welfare policy played a central role in designating what constitutes poverty knowledge, and in distinguishing it from labor, or economic, or other bureaucratically influenced categories of research. It was not until the War on Poverty in the 1960s that the state officially recognized poverty as a category for investigation, launching a research operation within the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity, adding poverty statistics to the federal census, and adopting an official "poverty line." Before then, the study of poverty had been segmented according to the categories and constituencies of social policy, acknowledged within the bureaucracy as an aspect of maternal and child welfare, old age, or unemployment but not privileged as a problem worthy of an elaborate investigatory apparatus in its own right. Even when infused with the crusading spirit of the Great Society, poverty could hardly be considered a truly "privileged" research category. Ever aware of its negative connotations, research bureaucrats continually struggled with ways to keep the word "poverty" out of their initiatives, while the institutionalized stigma assigned to "poor people's" or "welfare" programs created an incentive for agencies to sharpen, rather than break down, the distinctions between their own constituencies and the poor.

Poverty knowledge reflects the influence of institutional arrangements in other ways as well, and in particular the uneasy, and changing, relations between the state, civil society, and the private market economy that have characterized the twentieth-century American polity. Made possible from the start by the frequently cooperative ventures of state/federal research bureaus and corporate philanthropy, poverty knowledge has been cultivated primarily

within a changing array of nonprofit research organizations and social policy "intermediaries" which, though established to be nonpartisan sources of knowledge, presumably independent of politics or the state, have themselves been affected by three major developments in the public/private "mix."

The first is what was, at least up until the 1980s, a fairly steady expansion of the state in the production of social scientific knowledge, resulting in a proliferation of agency research bureaus, along with opportunities for social scientists to move in and out of official government posts. It was not until after World War II, however, that the prospect of often large federal government contracts became a mainstay, as well as a source of legitimacy, in social scientific research. Like other large-scale government undertakings, the War on Poverty played a pivotal role in this regard, generating the impetus for the elaboration of a whole new set of specialized research institutions designed specifically to meet federal demands for policy research. Thus constituted, poverty research developed what by contemporary welfare criteria would have to be considered an unhealthy, long-term "dependence" on the state—certainly a tendency to follow, rather than to set, the parameters of policy debate. A second development, somewhat paradoxically, was the simultaneous tendency to embrace the values of the private market in the organization and production of knowledge—a competitive approach to procuring, and using, research in a federal social research "market" that was constructed to meet political as well as administrative needs. Nowhere was the competitive principle more operative than in the rise, expansion, and ultimate survival of the poverty research industry, due largely to its entrepreneurial capacity to win government contracts even after successive administrations began to dismantle the apparatus of the Great Society welfare state. Indeed, the dramatic devolution of federal welfare responsibility since the 1980s has actually sped the competitive pulse, as state and local think tanks proliferate and state agencies become increasingly important sources of funding once federally controlled.⁷ Contrary to stated expectations, however, the embrace of competitive principles has hardly been a guarantee of independent thought; if anything, it has tied poverty knowledge more closely than ever to a contract market defined by agency needs, and to a narrowly construed policy agenda that has given far higher priority to reforming welfare than to improving living standards for the working class. Thus, the most recent historical development is perhaps most paradoxical of all, and that is the rise of an alternative network of conservative and libertarian knowledge-producing institutions that have managed to exert far greater policy influence by eschewing government contracts, while embracing competitive market principles as the basis for policy as well as for aggressively publicizing their wares.

A fourth set of insights from historical analysis has to do with the nature of poverty knowledge as science: to some degree in the enlightenment sense of progressively accumulated knowledge, but more fundamentally as a product

and shaping force in culture—a source of language, interpretive frameworks, even of the stylized rituals of investigation that give expression to broader social understandings of the human condition and of social change. Judged according to the norms of rational enlightenment, poverty knowledge can indeed be credited with certain achievements, even if they have more to do with documenting unequal or substandard conditions than with explaining why they persist. With the help, for example, of longitudinal data, social experimentation, and a wide array of evaluation studies, social scientists have systematically challenged the stubborn mythology that poor people are lazy, nonworking, or for that matter that poor people are all alike. As welfare debates never cease to remind us, however, very little in this body of presumably established learning is uncontested—scientists arrive at very different conclusions even when they use the same data and methodologies—nor has it, as learning, extended much beyond an expert elite. In contrast, scientific poverty knowledge has had a far more lasting impact on the American cultural and social policy vocabulary, albeit with ambiguous, at times contradictory results.

On the one hand is the notion, put forward initially by nineteenth-century social investigators, that poverty is an objective, quantifiable condition—measurable against a scientifically calculated standard of need known as the *poverty line*. This measure of poverty has since been absorbed into bureaucratic, political, and to a more limited degree popular culture—a way of determining program eligibility as well as an indictment of society's neglect. Equally important, at least in the eyes of its original proponents, is the social conviction the measure implies: poverty is not a mystery of nature; it can be explained, reduced, or eliminated by rational means. On the other hand, and far more ubiquitous in political and popular culture, have been the many social scientific variations on precisely the opposite theme: the notion, variously expressed in concepts such as social “disorganization,” “deviance,” or “dysfunction”; in metaphors such as the “vicious circle” or the self-perpetuating “tangle of pathology”; and in totalizing theories of the “culture of poverty,” or, most recently, the “underclass,” that poverty is deeply ingrained in “intractable” psychological and cultural processes that may very well be beyond rehabilitation or reform. Despite its current association with conservative politics, the culture of poverty and its variants gained the imprimatur of scientific objectivity within a liberal research tradition. As can be seen in recent efforts to measure the underclass according to behavioral indicators, they have since achieved the status of quantifiable fact—a status that at least some poverty experts, unable to control the politics of “blaming the victim,” have subsequently come to regret. In this sense, at least, poverty experts have proved to be rather ineffective cultural brokers: even when offered in the name of social criticism or as a call to action, their formulations of cultural deviance have been used far more readily and regularly to stigmatize, isolate, and deny assistance to the poor.

Alongside the language that has been absorbed into popular and political culture, over the past three decades poverty knowledge has also cultivated an increasingly technical jargon as the common, if not exclusive, language of poverty expertise. More than simply a question of quantification—the “amateur” researchers of the social survey movement were every bit as quantitative as current-day econometricians—the technical jargon of recent decades has taken poverty knowledge to a level of abstraction and exclusivity that it had not known before. It is a language laced with acronyms that themselves speak of particular data sets, policies, and analytic techniques (PSID, NLSY, TRIM, FAP, PBL, EITC, and, albeit without a detectable sense of irony, Five Year Plans and a model known as the KGB). It also speaks of a self-contained system of reasoning that is largely devoid of political or historical context, in which individuals are the units of analysis and markets the principal arbiters of human exchange. The effect has been to put entire questions and categories of inquiry outside the boundaries of critical scientific discourse—capitalism, for example, like the institutionalized systems of race and gender relations, does not translate into variables that can be scrutinized within these models of cause and effect.

On the whole, though, poverty knowledge has been perhaps most effective as a form of cultural affirmation: a powerful reassurance that poverty occurs outside or in spite of core American values and practices, whether those are defined in terms of capitalist markets, political democracy, self-reliance, and/or a two-parent, white, middle-class family ideal. Although present in much of the social scientific literature before then, it was not until the 1960s that this theme became virtually institutionalized in research. That, after all, was when federal officials, designating “poverty” as a distinct social, policy, and analytic category, quite consciously detached it from the language of income distribution, class, and racial inequality. Poverty, to use the terminology of the day, occurs in some “other,” separate America; as an aberration, an exception, a “paradox” of plenty rather than as an integral or necessary condition of the affluent society.⁸ Built on this premise, poverty knowledge continues to hold out a certain promise: doing something about, even eliminating, poverty will not require radical change; whether through social engineering, wage subsidies, economic growth, or the new/old-fashioned strategy of pushing people into the market, the paradox can be resolved without resorting to a massive redistribution of power and wealth. It also offers a substitute language, of deviance and deprivation, for the language of inequality. Most important from a policy perspective, it conceptually disenfranchises poor people from the larger political community—experts refer to the “working poor,” not the “working class”—and in this way has helped to confine the reform conversation to the problem of welfare rather than the problems of political economy and work.

In addition to these insights about the nature of poverty knowledge, historical analysis provides the basis of a narrative that weaves the various dimen-

sions of poverty knowledge together—ideological, political, institutional, cultural—while paying attention to the ever-changing contingencies of politics, social movements, and critical events. This narrative, as laid out in the next several chapters, is a story of transformation: over the course of the twentieth century, the study of poverty has changed. What started out as a series of reform-minded, sometimes “amateur” investigations into the political, or “social” economy of industrial capitalism has become an ostensibly more detached, highly professionalized and technically proficient inquiry that takes postindustrial capitalism as a given and focuses primarily on evaluating welfare programs, as well as on measuring and modeling the demographic and behavioral characteristics of the poor. This transformation did not occur as a smooth, one-directional, or cumulative progression, but more as a series of “turns,” or paradigm shifts. Nor did it take place along a single, clear-cut political or ideological continuum so much as along liberalism’s complicated twists and turns. Moreover, within this narrative of transformation are several continuities, in particular an enduring tension that has only recently become polarized along liberal/conservative lines, between a discourse that associates poverty with some form of cultural pathology or difference and one that points to structural barriers in society and political economy. As we shall see, the tension between “culture” and “structure,” while long-standing, has not always been sharply drawn. For many, indeed, the existence of a poor, presumably pathological subculture has been both a product of and a reason for redressing structural inequities in the political economy. It is also the case that the tension has been bound up just as much in disciplinary rivalries as in prescriptions for policy. Nevertheless, as poverty knowledge became more and more about poor people and less and less about culture or political economy more broadly defined, the terms of the question became more oppositional: what differentiates poor people—money or culture—from everyone else? It is in this context that “culture” vs. “structure” has come to be regarded as an either/or choice.

Two other themes warrant special mention in this narrative of transformation, and indeed help to explain its twists and turns. One is just how deeply race has influenced the course of poverty knowledge, in the form of racial ideology and racial politics, as well as in the racialized nature of poverty and social policy. Thus, for example, it was at least in part the battle against pseudo-biological justifications for racism that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, helped to draw racially liberal social scientists to culture, both as a way of explaining racial differences and inequities and as a way of showing that they were neither natural nor inevitable. By the 1960s, though, culture was itself becoming a suspect category in poverty knowledge, largely in reaction to an unrelenting, heavily psychologized imagery of black cultural deviance and pathology that, many suspected, had come to replace biology as a basis for scientific racism. In other instances, race has exerted an equally powerful influence as an unacknowledged variable, in analyses that, for political and ideo-

logical as well as for scientific reasons, have diminished the importance of racially discriminatory institutions and social practices in explaining racialized patterns of poverty. In this context, poverty has been conceptualized as an alternative to rather than as a dimension of racial inequality—and itself a problem that can be addressed without explicit “race-targeted” policies. Nevertheless, the reality that poverty, and particularly welfare, have themselves become such racially charged political problems has consistently undermined the very possibility of “race-neutral” antipoverty policy.

A second theme running throughout the narrative is that poverty knowledge, especially in recent decades, has frequently assumed far different political meanings than what is envisioned by social scientists. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the transformation of the culture of poverty in the late 1960s and early 1970s from an argument for liberal intervention if not radical social revolution (as Oscar Lewis occasionally hinted) to an argument for conservative withdrawal from the welfare state—a transformation brought about as much by liberal and left critics who drew out the implications of the behavioristic cast of Lewis’s theory as by an outright conservative embrace of the culture of poverty theory. While themselves avoiding thorny issues of culture, economists affiliated with the War on Poverty similarly saw their research used for unintended political purposes, when conservative policy analysts effectively appropriated their methods, findings, and to some degree their style of discourse to undermine support for the welfare state in the 1980s. It is not only the culture of poverty, then, that has been absorbed into conservative policy thinking—Charles Murray, indeed, insisted that unmarried mothers grown dependent on welfare were simply responding as *any* rational actor would to the perverse incentives of the liberal welfare state. It is more a matter of a knowledge base that, however unintentionally, has opened itself to conservative interpretation by locating the crux of the poverty problem in the characteristics of the poor. But the use of poverty knowledge for overtly conservative purposes also reveals an aspect of the relationship between knowledge and policy that liberal or purportedly “neutral” social scientists have continually underestimated—no matter how many times the best-laid plans of empirically informed policy intellectuals have gone either unattended or misconstrued. What matters in determining whether and how knowledge connects to policy is not only the classical enlightenment properties of rationality and verifiability; nor is it only the way knowledge is mobilized, packaged, and circulated; nor even whether the knowledge corresponds with (or effectively shatters) popularly held values and conventional wisdom. All of these things have, indeed, proved important in affecting the course of poverty and welfare policy. Even more important in determining the political meaning and policy consequences of poverty knowledge, though, has been the power to establish the terms of debate—to contest, gain, and ultimately to exercise ideological hegemony over the boundaries of political discourse. It is within this broader

context, of ideological battle that for the past two decades has been dominated by the conservative right, that poverty knowledge has been used most effectively for politically conservative ends.

Part One of this book begins with a discussion of what was known during the Progressive Era as “social” economy and its efforts, most fully realized in the social survey movement, to recast public understanding of poverty by emphasizing its roots in unemployment, low wages, labor exploitation, political disfranchisement, and more generally in the social disruptions associated with large-scale urbanization and industrial capitalism. To be sure, Progressive social investigators wrote with conviction about what they considered to be the moral and cultural deficiencies of poor people. But they also used their investigations to frame a much different kind of critical discourse: in the case of the famed Hull House and Pittsburgh surveys, about the policies and institutional practices of corporate capital; about the history and political economy of racial discrimination in the case of W.E.B. DuBois; and even, in studies of women in industrial, agricultural, and household work, about the burdens created by the gendered division of labor. In this way, Progressive social investigators sought to extend the boundaries of antipoverty thinking to issues of industrial democracy, political reform, and trade union organizing as well as to the kind of community-based cultural uplift for which the settlement houses have become renowned.

In chapter 1 I trace the shift from this Progressive “social” economy to Chicago-school “social ecology” as the dominant paradigm in poverty research. With substantial funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, Chicago-school sociologists built a formidable research and training institution, with an emphasis on theory-based, “objectivist” research as the appropriate knowledge base for policy. Emulating the rigors and experimental techniques of the natural sciences, Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and their students treated local neighborhoods more as laboratories for research and experimentation than as sites for political organizing, social uplift, or industrial reform. Their naturalistic models of urbanization, assimilation, and social “disorganization” explained poverty as an inevitable by-product of modernization, and looked to more limited attempts to achieve neighborhood and family “reorganization” in response. By the late 1920s, this model of community study and action had largely displaced Progressive-era reform investigation as a source of expertise, while reinforcing a growing professional and gender divide between academic social science and feminized or “amateur” reform research. Equally important, the Chicago-school turn in social investigation marked a shift away from political economy as a framework for understanding poverty, and an embrace of the newer, social psychological and cultural approaches of sociology and anthropology. The implications of these developments were profound: social disorganization and cultural lag, not industrial capitalism, were at the root of the

poverty problem in the new social science, and cultural, not industrial, “reorganization” was the cure.

In chapter 2, I show how these themes and methods continued to frame social scientific understanding of poverty during the Great Depression, amidst renewed concern over unemployment, low wages, and class polarization. Shifting away from an initial, anti-statist emphasis in social ecology, however, sociologists and social anthropologists used the techniques of cultural analysis, social psychology, and laboratory-like community study to reintroduce and invigorate the case for progressive-style political and economic reform. In landmark community studies by Robert S. Lynd, W. Lloyd Warner, and E. Wight Bakke, poverty was indeed a problem of corporate restructuring, and unregulated capitalist markets, but it was also a sign of the cultural “lags” of a society unable to adjust to the need for a welfare state. At the same time, according to these scholars, poverty also led to deep-seated, potentially self-perpetuating cultural and psychological disorders that stood as powerful evidence of the need for enhanced social engineering to accompany the project of relief and reform. So, too, according to regionalist sociologists at the University of North Carolina, had poverty hardened into cultural affliction in the backward, “colonial” political economy that had earned the South recognition as the nation’s “number one economic problem.”

In chapter 3 I draw out the ambiguities of this turn to culture as manifest in the sociology of poverty and race, showing how racially liberal social scientists used the concept of culture as at once a challenge to the biological racism of earlier social science and as a powerfully stigmatizing way of explaining why such a large proportion of the African American population remained mired in poverty. Drawing alternately from Chicago-school social ecology and social anthropology, sociologists in the 1930s and 1940s arrived at competing explanations for the high rates of poverty among blacks. Those explanations came together, though, in treating poverty as a form of cultural deviance or pathology—whether a legacy of the cultural damage done by slavery, or an expression of the psychologically distorting influence of persistent white racism. It was this formulation of cultural pathology that would most heavily engage social scientific thinking about race and poverty for decades to come, and that, even when invoked as a rationale for greater social and economic inclusion, reinforced the imagery of a basically unassimilable black lower class.

The analytic emphasis on social psychology and culture redoubled in the postwar decades, fueled by a combination of widening prosperity, Cold War politics, and especially by the tremendous expansion in funding for research in the behavioral sciences by private foundations and federal government agencies. Turning away once again from political economy as the focus of investigation or intervention, postwar sociologists and anthropologists concentrated instead on the unique culture and psychology of what they regarded as an isolated class of poor people, sharply distinguished from the more respectable

working class, in an otherwise affluent society. As discussed in chapter 4, this notion of cultural isolation also rested on an increasingly psychological understanding of the family, and specifically of gender relations within low-income, and particularly within black families, that drew heightened attention to poor women's reproductive behavior while ignoring their economic role. These ideas about gender relations, expressed powerfully in studies of the impact of the "mother-centered" or "matriarchal" family, were central to the culture of poverty theory developed by Oscar Lewis, and widely accepted in liberal social science by the late 1950s and early 1960s. As discussed in chapter 5, this and other theories of cultural deprivation and social disorganization became the basis of a whole series of sociologically informed, community-based, primarily urban social interventions sponsored by foundations and government agencies, that served as testing grounds for the War on Poverty. Depicting the poor as socially isolated, and culturally deprived, these experiments proved inadequate as a response to the ongoing problems of racial discrimination, suburbanization, and industrial decline that were then reshaping the urban United States. At least in their earliest stages, they also embraced an essentially apolitical vision of deliberative, rational, "top-down" change that the actual experience of community action in the 1960s would quite literally explode.

Part Two of this book focuses on a set of developments that pulled poverty knowledge in a somewhat different direction. It begins, in chapter 6, with the emergence of a new political economy of poverty in the decades following World War II, ushered in by the Keynesian and human capital "revolutions" in economic thought and by the growing influence of economists in the expanding policy apparatus of the federal government. Grounded in market-centered, neo-classical economics, the new political economy returned to the older categories of income, wages, and employment in its definition of the poverty problem, but explained it as an indicator of inadequate economic growth, high unemployment, and individual human capital deficiencies rather than relating it to the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity. Like its predecessors, this formulation of the poverty problem reflected political and ideological concerns as much as new analytic approaches. Aware of the political hazards, administration economists made a conscious effort to avoid mention of redistribution or economic restructuring in their proposals, emphasizing instead the power of macroeconomic growth, high employment, and individual human capital investment to bring poverty to an end. They also presented their antipoverty initiative as essentially "race-neutral," confident once again that growth and tight labor markets would diminish the need for more overt, politically risky, antidiscrimination policies. In many ways, this approach shared more in common with the psychology and culture of modernist social science than with the political economy of Progressive reform: poverty stemmed not from the economic and institutional relationships of industrial capitalism, but from the individual—in this case skill—deficiencies of the poor. Thus, while uncomfort-

able with psychological renditions of a problem they sought to redress with economic measures, administration economists nevertheless incorporated the notion of a culture of poverty in their blueprint for the War on Poverty in 1964, and called for programs that would break the "vicious cycle" that had captured the poor.

The tensions within the Great Society idea of poverty soon started coming unraveled, however, when social scientists became embroiled in a series of disputes that left their tenuous "consensus" in disarray. In chapter 7 I discuss some of the less visible of these disputes, between economists and community action administrators in the Office of Economic Opportunity over the *kind* of social knowledge that was needed to fight poverty. This time, ironically, it was the new political economy, armed with "hard" quantitative data, econometric modeling techniques, and cost/benefit policy analysis, that laid claim to the mantle of objectivity and political neutrality—and that, with the swift political demise of community action, displaced sociology as the dominant framework for poverty knowledge in the OEO. Borrowing from the experience of postwar defense research, OEO economists led the way in creating the institutional infrastructure for a poverty research industry—an industry designed with the needs and interests of government policy makers in mind, principally reliant on federal agencies for funding, and thriving long after the War on Poverty had been abandoned. Chapter 8 then turns to the more public and visible of the poverty "wars" of the mid-to-late 1960s, tracing a series of highly polarized debates over the ideas about culture, race, and poverty underlying administration policy, most prominent among them the debate over the Moynihan Report on the Negro Family following the Watts riot in 1965.

Part Three of *Poverty Knowledge* follows the fortunes of the poverty research industry in the aftermath of the War on Poverty, when, in the face of growing inequality, wage deterioration, urban deindustrialization, and a profound ideological challenge to the liberal welfare state, the social scientific poverty discourse narrowed even further to focus principally on understanding the "dynamics" of welfare dependency, the skill deficits of the "working poor," and the size and characteristics of the urban "underclass." In chapter 9 I outline the political origins and institutional structure of the poverty research industry, in the form of an interlocking network of government agencies, private foundations, and nonprofit research institutes that operated together to define and contain the boundaries of scientific poverty research. Reflecting a research agenda that was substantially defined by the political obsession with welfare reform, poverty researchers acquiesced to the shrinking parameters of social policy by confining their sights to diagnoses and interventions targeting poor people and their behavior while avoiding the pressing issue of growing disparities in income and wealth. Nor could analysis offer anything more than limited, mostly descriptive explanations for why poverty was on the rise—explanations that, confined as they were to what was measurable in existing databases, in-

variably pointed to individual-level characteristics as the cause. In chapter 10 I show the poverty research industry faced with challenges that these individualized models could not explain—growing inequality, wage deterioration, deindustrialization, concentrated urban poverty—while grappling with an even more fundamental ideological challenge from the political right. Little wonder, then, that poverty analysts were overshadowed by the more explicitly ideological, heavily publicized explanations offered by Charles Murray and other conservative social scientists who, nominally using the same “neutral” analytic techniques perfected by economists at the OEO, blamed the rise of poverty on the liberal welfare state. In two ways, I conclude in chapter 11, liberal poverty knowledge contributed to the end of welfare in 1996—its acquiescence to a political agenda that had less to do with reducing poverty than with reducing the welfare rolls, and its failure to provide an explanatory knowledge base for an alternative agenda of political and economic reform.

It is with these failures in mind that I conclude by outlining what a reconstructed poverty knowledge might look like, a project that would draw upon the insights from historical analysis to take in the political, ideological, institutional, and cultural as well as the more immediate research agenda-setting dimensions of the task. I aim, with this outline, to start a conversation rather than to offer precise prescriptions for change. The first task is to redefine the conceptual basis for poverty knowledge, above all by shifting the analytic framework from its current narrow focus on explaining individual deprivation to a more systemic and structural focus on explaining—and addressing—in-equalities in the distribution of power, wealth, and opportunity. A second is to broaden the empirical basis for poverty knowledge—recognizing that studying poverty is not the same thing as studying the poor—by turning empirical attention to political, economic, institutional and historical conditions, to the policy decisions that shape the distribution of power and wealth, and to interventions that seek to change the conditions of structural inequality rather than narrowly focusing on changing the poor. A third task is to change the way poverty knowledge is produced and organized, shifting away from the state-centered “research industry” model created during the War on Poverty in order to generate more independence and diversity in setting research agendas. A fourth is to challenge the distinctions that associate narrowly construed, hypothesis-testing models of inquiry with “objectivity” while denigrating more theoretical, historical, and structural analyses as “advocacy” or ideology. Above all, a reconstructed poverty knowledge would challenge two fallacies that, despite having been subject to frequent criticism, continue to inform the quest for more or better knowledge about the poor: one, that good social science is a necessarily apolitical, ideology- or “value-free” endeavor; the other, that rational, scientific knowledge about poverty will yield a rational, scientific “cure.”

PART ONE

Origins: Poverty and Social Science in The Era of Progressive Reform

AT THE END of the nineteenth century social investigators in several of the world's most advanced industrial societies set out to bring new scientific understanding to the problem of poverty. In this they were very much caught up in the international wave of organizing, policy innovation, state building, and, above all, social learning that characterized the decades between 1880 and the beginning of World War I as an era of progressive reform.¹ They were also moved by the central paradox Henry George referred to in the title of his wildly popular *Progress and Poverty* (1879) and in subsequent lecture tours: that great wealth and unprecedented productive capacity brought increasing poverty. So, too, were they dedicated to challenging the precepts of "laissez-faire," a doctrine they associated with unbridled free market capitalism, the narrow pursuit of individual self-interest, and the rise of a social scientific justification for inequality and concentrated wealth.² Drawing on a combination of classical economics and Social Darwinism, Yale University sociologist William Graham Sumner had argued that inequality was a social expression of the natural laws of economic competition—the survival and dominance of the fittest—and that any attempt to intervene in the free market system would simply set progress back on its heels.³ Poverty was not only inevitable but, in Sumner's words, "the best policy": deprived by their own or by nature's doing, the poor had no special claim on society at large.

The new knowledge, in contrast, would distinguish itself from other types of "scientific" investigation in several ways, which together make the Progressive Era a foundational period for twentieth-century poverty research. In the first instance it would be rigorously empirical—for the most part, quantitative—distinguishing it from the more abstract discourse of classical economics that inscribed poverty, along with the operation of markets, with the aura of natural law. The new poverty knowledge would take its cue instead from the insurgent, German-influenced "new economics" expounded by Richard T. Ely, Henry Carter Adams, and other founders of the American Economic Association in 1885, which embraced a more historical and institutional, but above all, social and ethical understanding of how the capitalist economy had evolved.⁴ Second, the new poverty knowledge would be rigorously objective, as distinct from the morally judgmental inquiries of charity work, and would devote itself to devising more and ever-better scientific methods for gathering, categorizing,

and analyzing the facts of social, as opposed to merely individual, circumstance. Third, the new poverty knowledge would in no other sense be neutral; it would, without bias toward specifics, serve the interests of reform. Moreover, the new knowledge would be instrumental in other ways as well, serving the institution-building objectives of a burgeoning array of public and private organizations—social settlements, philanthropies, professional and civic groups, state and federal bureaus of research—that were beginning to look beyond the patchwork of local poor laws and private charities for ways of prevention rather than relief.⁵ The first order of business for the new poverty knowledge, then, was not only to denaturalize but to depauperize the “poverty problem,” by redirecting attention from individual dependency to social and, especially, to labor conditions as underlying cause.⁶

To be sure, the new poverty knowledge was not without moral judgment; it, too, deemed relief a corrupting influence and distinguished between deserving and undeserving poor. But Progressive investigators took some care to distinguish social research from individual casework, to make theirs a study of *poverty* rather than the poor. It was above all this shift in sensibility that set the stage for the future development of poverty knowledge as a social scientific research field, informing at once the extraordinary outpouring of investigation into social conditions and the wave of philanthropic institution-building that marked the Progressive Era. Ironically, it was in the name of this very same sensibility that succeeding generations of social scientists would seek to distinguish theirs from that early Progressive project, with an approach to knowledge that was at once more recognizably scientific and less immediately attached to reform. It was thus as a more naturalistic, behavioral science that the new poverty knowledge would seek to establish its cultural and political authority. By the 1920s, University of Chicago sociologists had taken a first step in that direction, with an “ecological” analysis of poverty that focused more on issues of identity and culture than on employment and wages, and that provided the conceptual underpinnings for programs of community action against poverty in the second half of the twentieth century.

POVERTY AND INDUSTRIAL REFORM: THE SOCIAL SURVEY MOVEMENT

Of all the methods of Progressive Era social investigation none better captures the blend of social science and reform sensibility—of advocacy *through* objectivity—than the social surveys conducted in the cities that were home to industrial capital and, in the U.S., to an increasingly immigrant and nonwhite working class. The earliest and most renowned of the surveys—in London, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh—have since been recognized as precursors to the emergence of the more sophisticated sample survey methodology familiar to

our own time. But the social surveys of the Progressive Era are relevant for reasons that go well beyond methodology, most importantly for establishing a framework within which poverty could be investigated as a problem of political or social economy—of low wages, un- and “under”-employment, long hours, hazardous work conditions—and of the policies and practices governing the distribution of income and wealth. It was a framework, moreover, within which investigators could, however sporadically, examine the political economy of racial and gender as well as class inequality—here again by scrutinizing the discriminatory policies and practices that shaped the labor market and even, tentatively, relationships within the working-class family. Equally important, the social survey aimed to be both comprehensive and contextual, an aim that drew attention beyond individuals and households to the community, the neighborhood, the workplace, and to the details of associational life.

The social survey was also notable as an effort to join research with reform in several ways: by devoting as much energy to displaying and publicizing as to amassing the data; by using it as the basis for local organizing and community action; and by making research a collective endeavor that engaged the energies of amateur as well as professional social scientists—although not, as later models of action research would, working-class community residents themselves. Finally, at its height the social survey joined forces with the new, more institutionalized private philanthropies to create a space outside either the state or the university to generate knowledge for Progressive reform. As a movement, more than in any single community study, the social survey quite literally began to map out the substantive and institutional terrain of poverty knowledge that would be explored by future generations of social scientists, some with much different models and concerns in mind.

In terms of sheer size and international attention, nothing in the social survey movement could approach Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London*, a seventeen-volume study published between 1889 and 1903, considered in its time and subsequently to be “the first great empirical study in the social survey tradition.”⁷ Booth himself may have appeared something of an unlikely poverty surveyor—a wealthy shipping merchant turned amateur social scientist, a member of the Royal Statistical Society who financed his own research and made it his personal avocation—but he was no stranger to reform circles. Active as a philanthropist since early in his career, he was consistently a voice for individual self-reliance and welfare capitalism, who nonetheless envisioned a substantial role for the state in providing for the elderly and certain categories among the poor: at one point he toyed with the not-uncommon idea of state-run labor colonies for the most “shiftless” of London’s poor. He was also known to engage in respectful, albeit oppositional, debate with British socialists, including his cousin by marriage and co-investigator, Beatrice Potter Webb.⁸

Booth's study was notable for its painstaking and detailed data, but what truly drew attention was his use of graphic and statistical display, best illustrated in his famous "Descriptive Map of London Poverty" (published in 1891), which soon became a kind of traveling centerpiece of social economy exhibits around the world. To be sure, there were many revelations in Booth's statistical findings, which American investigators were eager to reproduce. Not in the least of these was what Booth found about the extent and causes of poverty, reportedly a surprise even to him: 30 percent of Londoners lived below or just at his somewhat impressionistically defined "line of poverty," and problems with employment—lack of jobs, low wages, or intermittent work—were chiefly to blame. Contrary to popular opinion, "habit" and behavior could account for only a small proportion of London's poverty; the lowest, virtually self-reproducing class of "semi-criminals" measured less than 1 percent of the population at large. The other leading causes, besides employment, were illness and family size. Indeed, contemporary readers may be struck with a certain sense of *déjà vu*: Booth's findings touch on the contemporary contours of poverty, as well as on the myths contemporary poverty knowledge seeks continuously to dispel. Equally striking in this regard was Booth's emphasis on the heterogeneity of the poor, who made up the bottom half of an elaborate eight-part scheme of social classes—A for the "lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers, and semi-criminals," B for the marginally employed "very poor," C for seasonal laborers, D for the low-paid, regularly employed poor—on a scale that went from there to skilled laborers on through to the wealthy "upper middle class."⁹

But it was the maps, as much if not more than the voluminously reported findings, that offered a distinctive way to *look* at poverty—in a way, in contrast to the poignant but voyeuristic and individualized photographs published in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), that appealed to middle-class intellect rather than mere sentiment. For there, in color-coded relief, Booth and his assistants made poverty a part of the social and industrial fabric, of what would later be called its social ecology, and still later its "built environment," by locating each of his eight classes in residential neighborhoods to create a dramatic illustration of the social geography of poverty and wealth.¹⁰ The maps also made poverty concrete and compelling, as a social problem to be reckoned with, to an educated middle class. Indeed, Booth's study, which helped to launch the social survey movement in the United States, was entirely filtered through middle-class perceptions: For all the extraordinary detail of its data, there was no direct testimony—no actual household survey—to back it up. Booth's survey relied instead on the observations and estimates of amateur investigators and local school board home visitors for statistical and qualitative data on everything from occupations, income, expenditures, and housing conditions to the street life of the neighborhoods.

The maps were the most direct link to the first and most well-known of the U.S. settlement house surveys inspired by Booth's example, *Hull House Maps and Papers*, published in 1895. Acknowledging the "greater minuteness" of the territory—the study was confined to the third of a square mile immediately to the east of Hull House, in Chicago's 19th ward—its authors invoked the "great interest" generated by Booth's maps as a source of "warm encouragement" for their own work.¹¹ Their debt was most visible in the now-famous color-coded Hull House maps, which graphically displayed the wage levels, diversity, and the residential density in that working-class neighborhood. But *Hull House* differed from Booth's work in several important respects, indicating both the distinctive characteristics of urban poverty, and some of the more homegrown roots of the new poverty knowledge in the United States.¹²

First, the Hull House maps underscored the degree to which race and ethnicity were essential dimensions of social stratification, and a central preoccupation in American reform. The issues were particularly salient for Hull House residents, who had founded their settlement in 1889 amidst the vast "new immigration" that brought thousands of racially "other" Southern and Eastern Europeans to a city that was already home to large concentrations of British, Irish, and German immigrants. The results were in plain view in the most pronounced of the Hull House innovations: accompanying the color-coded Map of Wages was a color-coded Map of Nationalities, which had no counterpart in Booth's work. There, observers could see not only the intermingling of "eighteen nations . . . in this small section of Chicago," but also their segmentation into "little colonies" that reflected an internal hierarchy in the slums—blacks ("colored") were clustered on the least desirable blocks; Italians and Jews frequently relegated to the rear apartments in larger tenements.¹³ Here the "minuteness" of the study area was in fact its strength, capturing in miniature the multilayered patterns of wage inequality and residential segregation that would only later harden into a stark separation between black and white. In this regard, though, the great visual contribution of the maps did not extend to the analysis in the accompanying papers. Save for a largely descriptive and methodological opening comment by resident Agnes Holbrook, the neighborhood data plotted on the maps are nowhere discussed in the book. The Hull House *Papers*, instead, amount to an eclectic compilation of essays by various residents and associates based on their own independent research, featuring exposés of child labor and the infamous "sweating system" by Florence Kelley, a comparative study of cloakmakers in New York and Chicago by a young resident named Isabel Eaton, a series of separate essays on the Jews, the Bohemians, and the Italians of the 19th ward, and a contribution from Hull House founder Jane Addams on the role of settlements in the movement for industrial democracy. The purpose of the maps was to "present conditions rather than to advance theories," Holbrook noted.¹⁴ Connecting the patterns of workers'

earnings and racial segregation would await the more systematic and concentrated efforts of W.E.B. DuBois.

In fact, the absence of a visible editorial hand or even common database in the volume points to a second distinctive aspect of the Hull House survey, and, in the 1890s, social policy investigation in the U.S. more generally. Unlike *Life and Labours*, which originated as a personal act of investigation and philanthropy, *Hull House Maps and Papers* grew out of a much more scattered sequence of connections that linked the settlement house to both university-trained scholars and government research bureaus in what remained a decidedly ad hoc process of generating knowledge for the work of policy and reform. Indeed, Booth was quite consciously responding to a generalized but "evident demand for information" emanating from contemporary policy debates. He also, by virtue of his social standing and connections, had ready access to the relatively more enclosed, centralized London policy making elite.¹⁵ The Hull House residents, in contrast, drew from several different empirical investigations, conducted independently for a scattered array of agencies and designed to meet more immediate, specifically targeted policy needs. In at least one instance this made for an important improvement, due in part to the relatively advanced state of publicly gathered labor statistics in the U.S.: the statistical data for the Hull House maps was based on actual household surveys, supervised by then-resident Florence E. Kelley and commissioned as part of a study of urban slums by U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics director Carroll D. Wright. Kelley herself was an experienced social investigator, with graduate training at the University of Zurich that had introduced her to the philosophic underpinnings of the "new economics" as well as to the leading figures in European socialism. By the early 1890s, she was beginning to gain notice as an expert on female and child labor—an expertise, due to the bars of gender, she and other women social scientists had cultivated outside the formal academy. When Wright commissioned her for the BLS study she was already immersed in her duties as a special agent of the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics, charged with investigating child labor and the sweating system—the subjects of her contributions to the *Hull House* text. Still, in the hopes of having a policy impact beyond these bureau connections, Kelley turned to the academy: *Hull House Maps and Papers* was published under the auspices of Richard T. Ely's Library of Economics and Politics, and was subject to Ely's review.¹⁶

But if *Hull House Maps and Papers* exhibited a certain ad hoc-ness, it was at least in part because Addams and Kelley wanted it that way: social investigation, Addams believed, could best advance the multifaceted settlement mission by remaining independent of the state or the university. Like Toynbee Hall, their counterpart in London, settlement house members established residence in working-class neighborhoods to stem the threat of class polarization through programs of education and cultural uplift, but even more

so through actually "sharing," as Jane Addams put it, "the life of the poor." Also unlike the British movement, the American settlement aimed to channel the talents and energies of educated, middle-class Progressive women, for whom it offered an alternative pathway to reform leadership and professionalism in the face of restricted opportunities in more traditionally male-dominated venues.¹⁷ Social science was integral to both of these objectives: One of the first Hull House endeavors was the Working People's Social Science Club, a neighborhood forum on "social and economic topics" that drew speakers and participants from around the world.¹⁸ The settlement also proved an excellent venue for female residents to practice—and acquire—the skills of empirical investigation, and eventually to see their work in published form.¹⁹ For the Hull House investigators, fulfilling these aspects of the settlement house mission could be put to scientific advantage: as neighborhood residents, they actually lived with the dense tenement crowding, hidden sweatshops, lack of services, and constant changeover that might escape the otherwise untrained eye, as Agnes Holbrook noted in her opening essay. Their status as neighbors further helped, she believed, not only in smoothing the "insistent probing into the lives of the poor," but in matters of statistical measurement as well. So, too, did their status as women make a difference. The question of family income was a case in point. The Hull House residents were aware of the essential contributions of women and children to family income, Holbrook wrote: "In this neighborhood . . . a wife and children are sources of income as well as avenues of expense." Accordingly, they relinquished the practice of treating wives and adult children as dependents and instead counted them as separate wage-earning units contributing to household income. "The theory that 'every man supports his own family' is as idle in a district like this as the fiction that 'every man can get work if he wants it,'" Holbrook explained, drawing on her neighborhood familiarity as well as her gender as sources of authority that no university could provide.²⁰

Moreover, social science was also a way of fulfilling the settlement's ultimate mission: not "sociological investigation," as Jane Addams wrote in the preface to *Hull House Maps and Papers*, but "constructive work."²¹ On one level that meant using investigation as the basis of wide-reaching programs of community mobilization and action—to identify neighborhood problems, agitate for municipal response, and, especially, to form cooperative neighborhood ventures to serve local needs through child care, communal kitchens, recreational facilities, savings and loans and a host of neighborhood clubs. It also meant using investigation as the basis of publicity, for settlement work as well as for working-class needs. Indeed, the entire research project would be "unendurable and unpardonable," wrote Agnes Holbrook, without the "conviction that the public conscience when roused must demand better surroundings for the most inert and long-suffering citizens of the commonwealth."²² Moreover, social science was a way to put a distance between settlement work and

charity or individual casework, albeit without ever completely severing the tie. "It is, of course, a very easy thing to give a man who asks for a meal some food and send him on, but it is very bad for the man," wrote University of Chicago social scientist and longtime Hull House resident Sophonisba Breckinridge reflecting on the activities of the settlement's Relief Committee. For Breckinridge it was more important to "find out why he is tramping and after investigating put him in a way of getting work."²³ To the social scientist this was much more than a matter of individual casework; Breckinridge herself took part in several pioneering studies of local housing, workplace conditions, immigrant labor, juvenile delinquency, and, on a national level, female and child labor. Such investigations, of which *Hull House Maps and Papers* was an early example, gave the settlement a voice in numerous reform campaigns and a knowledge base, as Jane Addams urged in her closing chapter, for cooperation between the settlements and the labor movement in the project of "industrial organization."²⁴

Indeed, in *Hull House Maps and Papers*, as in so many other Progressive Era contributions to poverty knowledge, it was the "labor question," as opposed to the "poverty question," that took center stage. The volume appeared at the height of labor radicalism, less than a year after the bloody Pullman strike tore Chicago—and much of the country—apart. In this context, and more generally as part of the movement for industrial democracy, investigations could be a vehicle for organizing the fight for better wages and working conditions, Addams urged.²⁵ "Poverty," then, was not itself the central focus or conceptual underpinning for the Hull House inquiry, as it had been in Booth's *Life and Labour*, but merely one aspect of a complex of working-class problems that needed to be addressed through a combination of community organizing, uplift, public education, and labor reform. While roughly corresponding to Booth's income cutoffs, the class categorizations in *Hull House* kept the focus on the problem of inadequate wages rather than spending patterns or family size, and shied away from using Booth's qualitative typology for differentiating among different classes of the poor. Kelley and Holbrook produced a "wage-earning" rather than a "poverty" map, that graphically illustrated the large number of low-wage earners in the district, but made no attempt, aside from a statement that families earning \$5–\$10 per week represented "probably the largest class in the district," to calculate the numbers or percentages of people living below Booth's "line of poverty."²⁶ Here again settlement residents distinguished theirs from charity work, cutting through the symptoms to go directly to the cause: low wages, the sweating system, labor subdivision, and the lack of organization—political as well as social—in working-class neighborhoods.

This is not to say that American investigators rejected poverty as a category for analysis—in fact, on both sides of the ocean it was becoming recognizably more scientific as a measure, and more distinguishable from morally tinged

measures of "pauperism," or dependency. British businessman/philanthropist B. Seebohm Rowntree gave poverty a more precise and purposely narrow definition in his "town study" of York, published in 1902. Basing his calculations on what he repeatedly emphasized were the minimal costs of adequate nutrition ("physical efficiency"), rent, and household necessities, Rowntree developed a standard that allowed for families of various compositions and sizes and called it the "poverty line." Corroborating Booth, he found 27.9 percent of York's population living in poverty. More than half of the incidence of poverty, he determined, was due to low wages, and nearly 40 percent to the death of the chief wage earner or to family size. Unlike Booth, and in anticipation of American economists in the 1960s, he eschewed behavioral indicators in favor of income as a way to classify the poor—strongly suggesting, though not explicitly endorsing, better wages and income as the first line of defense. This did not mean that Rowntree eschewed moral judgment; he readily denounced drinking and gambling as "growing evils," which along with "ignorant or careless housekeeping, and other improvident expenditure," contributed to poverty rates. Even these, though, had to be understood in context, as "the outcome of adverse conditions under which too many of the working classes live."²⁷ Picking up on the rapid advances in measurement, American reformer and sometime settlement house resident Robert Hunter took an even bolder step toward distinguishing poverty from pauperism, in his ambitious effort to educate "blissfully ignorant" Americans about the nationwide extent of, as he titled his 1904 book, *Poverty*. Relying on official data and other published reports, Hunter counted a minimum of 10 million in poverty, taking care to distinguish between the vast majority, "who are poor as a result of social wrongs," and the most undeserving, "who are poor because of their own folly and vice."²⁸ "The pauper" had to be understood as the product of the massive failure of policy, in the first instance to prevent dependency with adequate jobs, wages, and social protections, in the second to reform the irreversibly debilitating provision of relief.²⁹ Pauperism and vice, however, were not the crux of the problem. It was the large but, as Hunter put it, "forgotten class" of people who were working for inadequate wages, in substandard conditions, at unsteady jobs, who, in the absence of some kind of mediating influence—whether from trade unions, the state, and/or the settlement house—were powerless against exploitation and social neglect. The Hull House survey underscored this distinction by shying away from the language of "poverty," in favor of the categories of wage-earning and ethnicity. In the process, it helped to open up a conversation about poverty that would turn on work, community, and ethnic relations, rather than on providing relief for the poor.

Work was also the central issue in what stands out as the most impressive of the Progressive-era social surveys, W.E.B. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). A comprehensive survey of economic, social, political, cultural, and

residential conditions in what was at that time the largest black community in the urban North, the study was based on original data collected from the "historic centre of the Negro population," the city's 7th ward, supplemented with official census statistics, a survey of black institutions and neighborhood conditions throughout the city, and the observations of the author himself.³⁰ It shared several of the characteristic features of the social survey—including a house-to-house survey of the ward's nine thousand black residents—and built on the literature's conceptual and methodological innovations.³¹ Like Booth, DuBois collected data on household expenditure as well as income, using what he learned to make qualitative distinctions among different categories of poor people, and also as an occasion to scold. "Probably few poor nations waste more money by thoughtless and unreasonable expenditures than the American Negro," he wrote, advising the community to learn from "the Jew and Italian as to living within his means."³² Like the Hull House residents, DuBois also cast his study within the broader context of immigration, albeit principally with an aim to understanding the condition of native-born blacks. The more direct link to the Hull House survey came in the person of Isabel Eaton, who worked as DuBois's lone assistant and published a pioneering study of domestic labor as an appendix to *The Philadelphia Negro*. DuBois also adopted what were fast becoming the standard income categories for determining class status, and plotted them, as his predecessors had, on block-by-block color-coded maps. But what stands out most about *The Philadelphia Negro* is how it departed from, stretched, and went beyond the existing survey tradition, revealing at once DuBois's deep commitment to systematic social research, and the racial stratification of social research and reform.

In contrast to the other major surveys, DuBois conducted his as a solitary rather than a collective endeavor—with no canvassers and one research assistant—leaving DuBois to administer his questionnaires personally in five thousand households. Much of this had to do with the shabby treatment he received from the University of Pennsylvania, which commissioned DuBois for the "pitiful stipend" of \$800 per year, and appointed him an "assistant" in sociology despite his Harvard Ph.D., his sociological training in Germany, and his previous academic appointment at Wilberforce College in Ohio. But DuBois's independence also reflected his own skepticism about the motivations of his philanthropic sponsors, who included some of the city's leading Progressive reformers. Susan P. Wharton, a Quaker humanitarian whose family was the chief benefactor of the University's Wharton College, had originally proposed the study in the aftermath of a frustrated good government reform campaign that had been unable to woo black Philadelphians away from the local Republican machine. Behind the study was a larger transformation, that the Hull House maps at the time could not anticipate: the "new immigration" that had so visibly changed the demography of Chicago had been accompanied in Philadelphia by a surge in post-Civil War black migration from the South—leaving

blacks still a small percentage of the growing population, but an ever-visible presence in the city, and in the neighborhoods of its cultural elite.³³ Anxiety among whites was expressed in the widely held "theory," DuBois later reflected, that black "crime and venality" were sending their city "to the dogs." The Whartons were one of several wealthy white families who lived in the 7th ward, just outside the ghetto, and were affiliated with the Philadelphia College Settlement Association, which maintained a residence there. DuBois rented an apartment above the Settlement-run cafeteria, but otherwise kept his distance. In his mind, the "stupidity" of the white reform network was part of the problem, an "evil" which only "knowledge based on scientific investigation" could "cure."³⁴ His response was to be as rigorous and complete as the circumstances would allow, and to be especially vigilant in his own efforts to keep the study free of error and bias. The researcher must "ever tremble," he wrote in his introductory comments, "lest some personal bias, some moral conviction or some unconscious trend of thought due to previous training, has to a degree distorted the picture in his view." Aware that "even the most cold-blooded scientific research" could never be free of moral conviction, he pledged himself to the "heart-quality of fairness, and an earnest desire for the truth despite its possible unpleasantness."³⁵

DuBois's quest for scientific detachment did not prevent him from denouncing the prejudices of white Philadelphians or from showing his personal disdain for recent black migrants from the South. But it did lead him into more thorough and conceptually sophisticated analysis than any previous survey had achieved. DuBois made extensive use of comparative analysis, for example, regularly checking his own findings for the 7th ward against statistics for blacks throughout the city, both to "correct the errors" and to "illustrate the meaning of the statistical material obtained in the house-to-house canvass."³⁶ More revealing, and conceptually original, were findings from systematic comparative analyses between blacks and whites. Black men and women worked more than their white counterparts, he showed, but were disproportionately concentrated in low-paying personal service and unskilled labor positions and vastly underrepresented in the professions. He illustrated these findings in graphic displays comparing black with overall occupational distribution for both men and women, displays that would later be replicated in such sociological classics as *Black Metropolis*.³⁷ Comparative analysis also helped to give meaning to black mortality statistics, which, although not abnormally high in absolute terms, were far higher than death rates among whites.³⁸ DuBois also used comparative analysis to put black gender and family dynamics—later to become a virtual obsession in poverty knowledge—in the broader context of the working-class family economy. "All of the forces that are impelling white women to become breadwinners, are emphasized in the case of Negro women," he wrote, referring to the low wages and limited job opportunities open to black men, and to an "excess" of females in the black urban population in

general. “[Y]et among Negro women, where the restriction in occupation reaches its greatest limit nevertheless 43% are breadwinners,” as compared to 16 percent and 24 percent among native-born white and immigrant women, respectively. Nor were black children contributing wages to the household, he explained, not due to wishes of their parents so much as to the restricted demands for black child labor.³⁹

In light of prevailing beliefs about racial inferiority, DuBois could hardly afford to let these data and graphs speak for themselves. Keeping his focus on the relative as well as the absolute status of blacks, DuBois offered a complex explanation that put his findings in the context of history, environment, and white racial beliefs and practices. The legacy of slavery was manifest, he believed, in the skill, education, and moral deficiencies he attributed to new migrants from the South. But three equally powerful historical forces had also combined to frustrate black progress, and they continued to operate in the Philadelphia of 1896. One was the periodic influx of white European immigrants, who repeatedly invaded the skilled trades where blacks had found a niche and did their best to keep blacks out of unskilled laboring jobs by controlling trade union practice. The second was industrialization and economic change, which created new skill demands that the continuing stream of untrained black migrants were unprepared to meet. And third was the “great fact of race prejudice,” that distinguished the black experience from that of all other low-status groups. These combined forces—competition from immigration, industrial change, and white racial discrimination—were nowhere more evident than in “the question of employment,” for Negroes the “most pressing of the day.” And they were expressed in the “contradictory economic policy” that first confined blacks to menial jobs and then displaced them with better-prepared white immigrant competitors.⁴⁰ DuBois was never entirely clear on how far he would take the policy implications of this analysis—whether he would include, for example, restrictions on immigration. But when it came to the critical tasks of training, education, and diversifying employment opportunities for blacks, he made it clear that the responsibility rested with whites. “[M]en have a right to object to a race so poor and ignorant and inefficient as the mass of the Negroes; but if their policy in the past is parent of much of this condition, and if to-day by shutting black boys and girls out of most avenues of decent employment they are increasing pauperism and vice, then they must hold themselves largely responsible for the deplorable results,” he wrote in his “final word” on “the duty of whites.” Whites were responsible for the “narrow opportunities afforded negroes for earning a decent living,” he continued. “Such discrimination is morally wrong, politically dangerous, industrially wasteful, and socially silly. It is the duty of whites to stop it, and to do so primarily for their own sakes.” Without a change the social cost, in the form of crime and pauperism, would only grow.⁴¹

The distinctive features of DuBois’s approach also came through in his treatment of poverty—where, in notable contrast to the Hull House investigators, he maintained Booth’s language and categorizations, only further to underscore the distinctiveness of the African American, as opposed to the white immigrant experience. Nearly 20 percent of 7th ward Negroes fell into the “very poor” or “poor” category in wage calculations—that is to say, they earned less than \$5.00 per week. This group included the criminals, paupers, and vagrants who hovered in the “submerged tenth” of the larger black population as well as the more honest, if “improvident” and “inefficient” who earned their living in irregular work. Another 47 percent earned between \$5 and \$10, classifying them as “fair” in DuBois’s earnings calculations. They represent the “great hard-working laboring class . . . which is, on the whole, most truly representative of the masses.” The rest of the 7th ward could be characterized as “comfortable” (25%) with \$10–15 in weekly earnings or in “good circumstances” (8%) at \$15 and above. Juxtaposing his charts against Booth’s, however, DuBois illustrated a larger point: when judged according to the measured standards of London’s white working class, a far higher percentage of 7th ward residents would be designated “poor.” More important, the “great mass” of London whites looked far better off than Philadelphia blacks in the overall distribution of income: two-thirds of Booth’s families could be rated “comfortable” or “middle class” as compared to the one-third who had achieved that status in DuBois’s sample.⁴² The “germ of a great middle class,” these highly successful black families carried the “responsibilities of an aristocracy,” but were prevented by discrimination, and their own ambivalence about being associated with the lower elements, from taking on the full burden of race leadership.

When explaining the high incidence of pauperism, DuBois once again emphasized the unique experience of blacks. Seventy percent of black poverty could be explained by sickness or lack of work, he calculated, echoing Booth’s central theme, and the rest by crime, laziness, improvidence, and intemperate drinking.⁴³ All of these problems had been greatly exaggerated by the economic depression of the 1890s, which explained recent rises in poverty and crime following a period of decline. So far there was little new or “exceptional” in these findings, he continued, to distinguish blacks from other low-status groups. Beyond these standard explanations there were deeper forces, however, “which can rightly be called Negro problems: they arise from the peculiar history of the American Negro.” Recounting the themes he had been emphasizing all along, DuBois pointed to three “peculiarities” that made blacks more vulnerable to poverty than whites: “slavery and emancipation, with their attendant phenomena of ignorance, lack of discipline and moral weakness; immigration with its increased competition and moral influence”; and, “possibly greater in its influence than the other two,” the “strange social environment” in which blacks found themselves in Philadelphia. That “environment,” char-

acterized by segregation, economic exclusion, and the family instability they encouraged, was the product of active white racial discrimination, founded in the "widespread feeling all over the land . . . that the Negro is something less than an American and ought not to be much more than he is."⁴⁴

In drawing attention to what was unique about black poverty, DuBois boldly departed from the Progressive practice of folding "coloreds" in with other immigrants or treating class as a common bond that could transcend ethnic differences. Neither class, ethnicity, nor the disadvantages of unskilled new migrants, that is, could alone explain the patterns of black/white inequality; those problems were infinitely compounded by white racism. He also directly challenged the view that the economy operated on color-blind competitive principles, noting how often "men" had ignored their "economic advantage" if it involved "association, even in a causal and business way, with Negroes."⁴⁵ Nor, again in contrast to the Hull House survey, did his analysis point to the trade unions or the settlements as solutions: the unions, because they had themselves become instruments of racial segmentation; the settlements, as his own experience suggested, because they were decidedly uncomfortable with their black neighbors, whether as residents or wards.⁴⁶ The answers, which DuBois left implicit in the analysis, hinged on bringing racial discrimination to an end—a solution that would itself require changes in existing economic policies—and in continuous efforts at Negro self-help and racial uplift. In all of these ways, he anticipated the central themes that would emerge decades later in social scientific debates over the nature of poverty and its connection to race. Equally important, DuBois demonstrated how the social survey could be used to sketch out a political economy of poverty and race that brought both concreteness and agency to the ongoing construction of the "color line"—here using the tools of measurement and objectivity to render it subject to change.

The problem was that the same color line that divided black from white Philadelphia also kept *The Philadelphia Negro* out of the contemporary mainstream of social science and reform. The *American Journal of Sociology* ignored it altogether, as if to suggest that the subject was not worthy of recognition. It was favorably received in other scholarly and popular journals, many of which, in what would become a familiar pattern, overlooked its contribution to political economy to commend DuBois for his honesty in dealing with the faults and social handicaps of his own race. DuBois himself did not entirely discourage this interpretation; in newspaper and journal articles around the time of publication, he listed as the "first" among the interrelated complex of "Negro problems" the vast ignorance and cultural deficiency, expressed in "sexual immorality, disease and crime," of the black lower class. That there was a "second," indeed inseparable dimension to the Negro problem was a message that even DuBois's Progressive sponsors were in a position to avoid—and, for the most part, did. DuBois's contribution to political economy never got much play in broader social work and philanthropic networks, which were

themselves heavily segregated, as well as segregationist in their treatment of blacks.⁴⁷ Nor did *The Philadelphia Negro* enter into the liberal social scientific canon, where the color line had only recently begun to allow African Americans entree to graduate training, and continued to deny access to professorships at elite white universities, as well as to the professional recognition and institutional resources that would have allowed DuBois to realize his ambitious plans to make a comprehensive sociological and historical study of the "Negro problem" in the United States.⁴⁸ For the next three decades, race remained submerged as a category separable from class or ethnicity in poverty knowledge. When it did reemerge, it was in a debate that would turn more on the nature and origins of black lower-class pathology than on the origins of poverty itself.

By the early twentieth century, the social survey had become thoroughly absorbed into the wider world of Progressive reform and social investigation, as any number of local tenement, public health, and child welfare studies can attest. The survey had also proved itself as a form of middle-class, especially female, activism; so much so that it was formally adopted by the consolidated network of charity and social work institutions that had grown out of an official 1905 merger between the settlements and the older charity organization movement.⁴⁹ The product of a time when certain boundaries—between public and private, and between policy domains—were not sharply drawn, this network extended its reach to embrace local neighborhood improvement, city planning, environmental cleanup, Americanization, child welfare, and labor protections among its causes, and made its presence felt on the municipal as well as the state and federal levels of government.⁵⁰ In 1909, the network's leading journal changed its name, from *Charities and the Commons* to *Survey*, in effect placing social investigation at the heart of a broader process of institutional transformation that aimed to link the disparate strands of charity and reform work through an emphasis on standardization, poverty prevention, and professional expertise. Through these means, and especially by advancing their own brand of social scientific knowledge, the emerging social work network would attempt to establish itself as an independent voice for a host of Progressive reforms, undertaken in the name of the public interest, in national and municipal policy.

Nothing was more important to this process of transformation than the arrival, in the first decade of the twentieth century, of large-scale, corporately organized private philanthropy.⁵¹ A small number of the new "general purpose" foundations dominated from the outset, as did the names of the country's wealthiest and most famous corporate industrialists, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. But no single foundation identified itself more completely with social welfare than the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF), established in 1907 by Margaret Olivia Sage, widow of the lumber, railroad, and banking tycoon for whom the foundation was named. From the beginning, the foundation identified its mission as principally one of social investigation, generally

for the "improvement of social and economic conditions," but more specifically for the nominally consolidated charity organization and settlement movements from which RSF drew its trustees and staff. Its first major research undertaking, the Pittsburgh Survey, heralded a new phase in social investigation; hitherto, poverty knowledge would be shaped by the shifting relationship between research and organized philanthropy.

The Pittsburgh Survey benefited immediately from RSF's financial support (totaling the then-substantial sum of \$27,000), growing from an initial plan for "quick journalistic diagnoses" to what was truly the first American counterpart to Booth's *Life and Labour*—in fact, had the seeds of a survey not already been planted in Pittsburgh, RSF just might have taken the suggestion of an early solicitor that it do for its home town, New York City, what Booth had done for his.⁵² Along with RSF sponsorship came a kind of instantaneous prestige: directed by *Survey* editor Paul Kellogg, the study drew on the expertise of such notables as Florence Kelley, settlement house leader Robert Woods, economist John R. Commons, and many others, all well aware of what RSF could do to put scientific social study on the map.⁵³ RSF support subsequently helped to keep the study in the limelight: serialized in the foundation-subsidized *Survey*, the study findings were extensively documented in a traveling exhibit of maps and photographs, and published by the foundation in six volumes released between 1909 and 1914. What's more, with a regular staff and a team of paid and volunteer researchers that by one count reached seventy-four, the study surpassed all previous inquiries in scope. Its subject, broadly speaking, was the impact of industrial capitalism on everything from the working-class family and household to Pittsburgh's politics and physical environment. Its investigations, focused heavily on the dominant steel industry, included detailed surveys of workplace accidents, company real estate holdings, corporate labor practices, workers' income and household conditions, female labor force participation, and the panoply of institutions organized—however inadequately—to protect and aid the working class. So, too, did its recommendations read like a roster of Progressive reform causes: protection against industrial accidents, workers' compensation, trade unionism, hours and wage regulation topped the list. Surveyors also pointed to the need for environmental cleanup, urban planning, better housing, immigrant education, and Americanization. All told, the Pittsburgh Survey was by far the most extensive expression of the "new view" of poverty produced in the United States to date, leaving little doubt that economic exploitation, embodied in the swelling ranks of underpaid, overworked laborers, was the underlying cause of social distress.⁵⁴

Like other surveys, Pittsburgh's also created a number of nonacademic research opportunities for women, opportunities extended, at RSF, into positions of influence in organized philanthropy. Three of the six volumes were written and based on independent research by women: *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* by Margaret Byington; *Women and the Trades* by Elizabeth

Beardsley Butler; and Crystal Eastman's *Work Accidents and the Law. The Steel Workers*, by John Fitch, was the only other monograph in the series; the other two volumes were compilations of articles edited by Paul Kellogg. Meanwhile, RSF was actually putting women in a position to influence the course of research. At Olivia Sage's insistence, women were well represented on the original board of trustees (4 out of 9), a gender balance that only began to shift in the 1930s, gradually yielding an all-male board by 1938.⁵⁵ Staff appointments proved more important, though, as the careers of longtime RSF department heads Mary Richmond and Mary van Kleeck suggest. Richmond, already a leading figure in social work when she came to head the foundation's Charity Organization Department in 1909, undertook an extraordinarily influential program to promote social work professionalization and standards during her almost twenty-year tenure, helping to establish several of the country's leading graduate schools of social work, and publishing her own textbook, *Social Diagnosis*, laying out the principles of charity investigation and casework.⁵⁶ Van Kleeck, in contrast, came to the foundation as a still relatively novice College Settlements Association fellow, a graduate of Smith College who had recently completed investigations of child labor and women's overtime work in New York. As head of the RSF Department of Women's Work (renamed Industrial Studies in 1916), she directed or commissioned numerous studies of women wage earners, channeling that expertise into temporary appointments running the Labor Department's Women in Industry Service during World War I, and its newly created Women's Bureau in 1919. Like the foundation, she continued to expand her portfolio to less gender-specific labor issues, which she used as a platform for promoting scientific management and economic planning until retiring from the foundation in 1948.⁵⁷

As suggested by the Pittsburgh Survey, there was a certain amount of unresolved tension to be found in RSF's strong emphasis on investigating "women's work" as a vehicle for raising broader questions about industrial change, labor market segmentation, and the need for a living wage. Elizabeth Beardsley Butler's study showed women at the low-skilled, low-wage end of an industrial labor market segmented by gender and race (significantly, though, her "racial analysis" of employment included white "Americans," Italians, "Slavs," and "Jewesses," but made no mention of African American women, who were concentrated in domestic employment). Commenting on the high turnover among single, marriage-age women, Butler explicitly rejected this and other traditional explanations for the gender gap. The problem was not, she insisted, that women were incapable, without breadwinning responsibilities, or not in the industrial labor force to stay, but that employers were able to exploit such "theories" to thwart organizing and training efforts and to keep wages low. Nevertheless, in her own proposals for "trade training," Butler was quick to reassure male unionists that women would not violate gender norms by competing for skilled industrial jobs. Nor would training undermine the female

commitment to “intelligent home making”; if anything, higher wages and productivity would enhance the working woman’s capacity to perform her duties at home.⁵⁸ In *Homestead*, Margaret Byington also showed women engaged in productive, in this case household, work, “due not primarily to any theory as to women’s sphere, but the simple fact that the one industry [steel] cannot use the work of women and children.” Women’s work, in this context, was to manage the household on her husband’s substandard wage, a task that inspired “elements of genius” in the intelligent and thrifty housewife, but that led to waste, neglect, poor nutrition, and, occasionally, immorality in the house of the “poor, unintelligent” woman. And yet, while emphasizing the housewife’s role as a worker in the household economy, for Byington the key lesson to draw was about substandard wages, long hours, dangerous working conditions—and the feelings of powerlessness and apathy they generated among working class *men*.⁵⁹ Investigating women’s work, then, could be used at once to challenge and to reinforce traditional gender norms.

From the perspective of past and future poverty knowledge, however, what was most significant was that women’s work was getting recognition at all. For as Florence Kelley, Carroll Wright, Edith Abbott, and a handful of pioneering social scientists had long since recognized, female participation in the industrial workforce was not likely to draw attention or reward in traditional academic venues. At RSF, and later under van Kleeck’s direction at the Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau, working-class women’s wages and work opportunities would gain recognition and institutional stability as legitimate questions for social scientific inquiry. So, too, would the structural limitations women faced in the labor force enter into the broader poverty discourse.

Ultimately it was here that the Russell Sage Foundation made its singular contribution to Progressive social investigation: in institutionalizing the space, outside government and outside the academy, where reform-minded women and men could engage in social scientific exploration and have it recognized as such. As with many institutionalizing projects, this one tended to domesticate the more radical aspects of Progressive research and reform. As the survey itself became more institutionalized, even centralized, it was easy to lose sight of the sense of community residence and collective action the Hull House investigators had written about, and to shift the balance toward the more distant kind of social engineering that also occupied an important place in Progressive social thought. RSF, like most organized philanthropy, showed little interest in the kind of “bottom-up” community initiative Jane Addams envisioned, far more in using its investigations to speak on behalf of rather than in concert with the impoverished working class. Nor would social investigators ever entirely distance themselves from the tinge of charity under RSF sponsorship—the foundation, with a board and staff heavily weighted toward the leading lights of charity organization, was popularly known as the “Charity Trust.”⁶⁰ And

while RSF provided a berth wide and comfortable enough for the broad spectrum of Progressive ideology, its own stance was resolutely neutral and moderate. As van Kleeck said with reference to her own program, “The Foundation is concerned with the labor movement from the viewpoint neither of employers nor workers, but as representing the public interest . . . its investigators have sought not to influence conclusions, but to help to establish the habit of making facts, rather than prejudice or self-interest, the basis for conclusions.”⁶¹

If institutionalization tipped the balance on some tensions within Progressive social investigation, it left many others unresolved, chief among them the failure of the unbiased investigators to leave their own class, cultural, and racial biases aside. The Pittsburgh surveyors were often contemptuous of Pittsburgh’s “Slavic” immigrants, routinely treating them as a separate caste of “dull” or “subservient” workers who, as cheap and exploitable labor, threatened to keep industrial wages low.⁶² DuBois, clearly identifying with the “better class of Negroes” he elsewhere labeled the “talented tenth,” did not hide his disapproval of the “submerged tenth” of criminals, “lewd women,” and their “aiders and abettors” who populated Philadelphia’s slums and set the stereotype by which whites judged all of black Philadelphia. Frustrated by public blindness to the hard-working “respectable” working and upper classes who constituted the majority of Philadelphia Negroes, DuBois was also disdainful when writing about “the poor and unfortunate and the casual laborers,” who had not been able to secure a place in the urban economy due to the “good-natured, but unreliable and shiftless” ways they brought with them from the South.⁶³ While Jane Addams often spoke of the need to appreciate immigrant culture, other Hull House investigators resorted to ethnic stereotypes in their characterizations of neighborhood residents, whether writing of the “drunken” Irish, the “incorrigible” Italians or the cutthroat “trading instinct” of the Jew. Whether or not they undermined the underlying structural analysis, these biases did undermine the surveyors’ capacity to understand either the culture or the political agency of the people they studied as a force that could be mobilized for change.

Moreover, important though they may have been in drawing public attention to industrial poverty and labor conditions, the social surveys had little discernible impact on policy, or at least not the direct, immediate impact their sponsors envisioned. The Pittsburgh survey was denounced as biased and sensational by the local business leaders it was aimed at, who then went on to commission a competing study that challenged its bleak depiction of local conditions and called on the business community to undertake modest, voluntaristic reforms.⁶⁴ Equally problematic was the Progressive tendency to assume that enlightened social investigation, properly publicized through mechanisms such as traveling exhibits and the *Survey*, would be sufficient to mobilize political support for change. But the more important problem with the survey movement’s vision

of policy influence was that it was rapidly being displaced by a different model of social scientific influence in policy making, actively promoted by foundations as well as by Herbert Hoover in his capacity first as U.S. Secretary of Commerce and later as president. Expertise, in this model, would continue to be organized around objective understanding of economic and social processes, but it would remain detached from particular reform causes or even proposals. It would also be targeted at a more select, enclosed audience of administrators, legislators, elite citizens, and, of course, professional social scientists who were in a position to influence policy decisions directly. The quintessential expression of this effort to introduce more objectivity and expertise into policy making, the survey of *Recent Social Trends* commissioned by Hoover in 1929, made no mention whatever of the social survey movement or its findings.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, as part of the broader tradition of Progressive political economy, the social survey made several lasting, albeit unacknowledged, contributions to later poverty expertise. Especially important, the surveys shifted the focus of inquiry, from pauperism to poverty, from the "dependent" poor to the conditions of the working class, and from individual behavior to industrial capitalism as the main source of economic deprivation. The survey movement also laid the groundwork for many of the research techniques that would later become essential to more self-consciously "scientific" poverty expertise. One of its chief innovations, the household budget-based poverty line, would be resurrected in the 1960s as the basis of official measurement of national poverty rates. More immediately, the movement's pioneering use of social mapping and graphic display provided the foundations for the Chicago-school social ecology that came to dominate sociology in the 1920s. Similarly, the movement's holistic approach to community surveys, combining quantitative data-gathering with case studies and personal observation, were precursors to the anthropological community studies of a later generation.

Equally important were the possibilities investigators developed within the survey framework that were either eclipsed by later developments or never fully realized in the survey movement itself: DuBois's documentation of racial discrimination as a structural component of political economy; the attention investigators brought to women as wage earners and to gender segmentation in the labor market; the importance the movement placed on making its findings accessible to a broad general audience; and the recognition that knowledge-gathering, never a perfectly "objective" endeavor in the first place, need not be "value-free" in order to be legitimate. In all of these ways, the social surveyors mapped out the terrain for a much broader approach to poverty knowledge than we have come to know today. To a remarkable degree, they also anticipated what would remain the central tensions—over issues of class, culture, objectivity, and, especially, the "significance" of gender and race—in liberal poverty knowledge for the rest of the twentieth century.

POVERTY, ASSIMILATION, AND SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION: THE CHICAGO SCHOOL

Ultimately, it was a significantly altered vision of community research and action that would be remembered as the first truly *social scientific* contribution to poverty knowledge. Grounded in the theories of sociology at the University of Chicago, it did not so much reject as shift the focus of Progressive Era poverty knowledge from political economy to "social ecology," from class to racial and ethnic identity, and from employment and wages to social disorganization and cultural lag. No doubt this shift in focus had a great deal to do with the tenor of the times. Enjoying their heyday in the 1920s, a decade that started out with race riots and a wave of restrictive anti-immigrant legislation, Chicago sociologists offered a reassuring framework for understanding ethnic conflict as an inevitable part of urban growth and modernization—a path that would eventually lead to assimilation. At a time, too, when national politicians were urging a return to "normalcy" and singing the praises of welfare capitalism, they looked to urban neighborhoods primarily as laboratories for research rather than proving grounds for labor organizing or other varieties of reform, while raising skepticism about Progressive schemes for taming the market and reserving a special, almost personal animosity for social casework. In the Chicago-school vision, community action was to be more strictly bottom-up, but it was also to smooth the process of assimilation rather than to challenge existing social arrangements. But what proved most important to assuring the longevity of the Chicago-school vision of community research and action was its attachment to a formidable research and training institution, which was itself a harbinger of a movement within organized philanthropy to build a more academic, theoretically grounded social science as the knowledge base for policy. Amply subsidized by the newly created Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, Chicago-school sociologists wielded tremendous influence in the discipline, and established the wide-ranging research and policy networks through which their ideas about poverty, social disorganization, and community-based intervention would find a way first into local practice and eventually into the War on Poverty, three decades after the department's heyday had come and gone.⁶⁶

The Chicago approach to sociology was really no single approach at all. Embracing a wide range of statistical, ethnographic, quantitative, and qualitative techniques, the department's real trademark was the tradition of theory-based urban ethnography inspired by Chicago's first truly pathbreaking study, W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant* (5 vols., 1918–20).⁶⁷ In that study, Thomas (working with research assistance from Znaniecki, a Polish philosophy student who emigrated to the U.S. during World War I) developed an anthropological approach to studying ethnic communities that

marked his as a research rather than as a "practical" reform or, as he saw it, morally judgmental enterprise. Equally important, he developed the cyclical concept of social organization-disorganization-reorganization that Chicago-trained sociologists would use to explain what happened to peasant communities in the throes of transition from rural village to a more modern, urbanized, and, for immigrants, culturally alien way of life. Poverty, as part of the broader symptomology of "social disorganization," could be attributed to temporary cultural breakdown as much if not more than to the wage structure of the industrial economy.⁶⁸

Thomas based his ideas about social disorganization among immigrants on a comparative study of "adjustment and maladjustment" among newly urbanized peasants in Poland and in Chicago's Polish neighborhoods.⁶⁹ In Poland, he traced the initial breakdown of traditional peasant customs and social controls under the atomizing influences of urbanization and industrial development. The result was social "disorganization," reflected in increased crime, loss of religious faith, sexual promiscuity, family breakup, and economic dependency. But Thomas also saw signs that the former villagers were emerging as a "reorganized" social group, for which he credited education, the press, and, especially, the new institutions and customs they had constructed from elements of the old. Most important among these were the large number of cooperative economic institutions—agricultural and commercial associations, cooperative shops, savings and loans—through which peasant groups were seeking to improve their collective welfare, and, more important, collectively absorbing the social learning that would help their adjustment to urban life.⁷⁰ In Chicago, though, Thomas found it harder to see past the signs of disorganization—even though, as historians have subsequently emphasized, Chicago Poles maintained a rich and extensive network of mutual aid, political, and church-based associations. In his eyes, filtered through data collected primarily by Znaniecki, Chicago's Polish-American "colonies" remained cultural backwaters, barriers to the process of adjustment that would allow "real Americanization" to begin. In at least part of this judgment, Thomas was not entirely wrong: there was strong resistance to Americanization among Polish immigrants, especially from the church. Significantly, though, in Thomas's framework of cultural adjustment, such resistance was a sign of social disorganization rather than political agency.⁷¹

The Polish Peasant marked a turning point in social investigation in methodological as well as conceptual terms. By no means the first to characterize the "new immigrant" as a cultural challenge, Thomas and Znaniecki turned the tables and asked their readers to view the challenge of "readjustment" from the inside. To do that, they discarded the quantifying conventions of the social survey and used personal documents such as letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, and life history interviews as the essential "facts" of their account. It was, after all, the "subjective" data that made poverty, delinquency, family

breakup, and other familiar indicators of disorganization comprehensible. Ultimately, the "subjective" held the key to solving the immigrant problem as well. Social work was on the wrong track, they argued, because its casework methods failed to recognize that assimilation was a group, not an individual, process. At the same time, American-run community centers, including settlements, came as artificial and unfamiliar impositions from the outside. Instead, in what would later become a cardinal principle in community action, Thomas hinted that the truly authentic leadership for neighborhood reorganization should come not from middle-class American neighbors, but from within the immigrant community, and envisioned a network of cooperative, deliberately cross-ethnic economic associations to serve the dual purpose of self-help and Americanization.⁷²

It is interesting that Thomas distanced himself not only from social work but, at least obliquely, from the settlement house as well. A friend and associate of Jane Addams, he received the generous sum of \$50,000 from Hull House benefactor Helen Culver to underwrite the research. Certainly Thomas was no stranger to Hull House research: in 1912, when he started work on *The Polish Peasant*, Hull House remained the linchpin of a social work community that frequently crossed academic and nonacademic lines to produce the vast majority of research about the city and its immigrant neighborhoods.⁷³ But Thomas, like his colleagues at the University of Chicago, was eager to distinguish his sociology from social work and reform, among other ways by locating themselves as detached, nonjudgmental observers rather than as helping neighbors or political allies. The distinctions grew sharper in the years following the release of *The Polish Peasant* in 1918. In 1920, the University formally separated social work from sociology by establishing the School of Social Service Administration. Under the leadership of Hull House alumnae and Chicago-trained social scientists Sophonisba P. Breckinridge and Edith Abbott (Breckinridge held Ph.D.s from the University in political science and law, Abbott in economics), SSA promoted a decidedly activist, policy-oriented approach to research, and, with a major grant from the Russell Sage Foundation, emphasized the importance of both research and casework in its graduate curriculum.⁷⁴ Sociology, under emerging new leadership, was taking the opposite direction. Thomas himself was forced out of the University, his academic career cut short by his highly publicized arrest in a Chicago hotel room with the wife of an American serviceman. But his ideas and methods formed the basis of an extensive program of fieldwork and theoretical training using Chicago, and especially its poor neighborhoods, as a laboratory for experimentation and empirical research. The leading figures in this expansion were Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, who together helped to make Chicago the most productive and influential sociology department of its day.

Park, a former journalist and press agent for Booker T. Washington, had been recruited to Chicago after first meeting Thomas at Tuskegee, and arrived

as a part-time lecturer in 1913.⁷⁵ A relative latecomer to the profession—he was forty-nine when he started teaching at Chicago—Park quickly rose to a position of eminence in the department after Thomas's departure, and was considered by many to be a major intellectual light. He was a vociferous advocate of detaching research from reform—Park showed disdain for “do-gooders” and planners, as he did for the survey as a research technique, calling it a “high form of journalism” designed to bring about “radical reform.”⁷⁶ Burgess, who got his degree from Chicago the year Park arrived, was more willing to recognize the legitimacy of nonacademic research and had been briefly affiliated with Hull House in his graduate student days. While teaching at the University of Kansas, he had worked on two local social surveys, and continued to regard the basic method as a valuable source of data.⁷⁷ By the time they took the lead in graduate training, however, both Park and Burgess were eager to distinguish the department as a training ground for a different kind of social science: theoretical, experimental, devoted to uncovering the natural laws of human and social development.

In this Park and Burgess were the immediate beneficiaries of a major new player in social scientific philanthropy, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, established in 1922. By far the biggest player in the field (its grant expenditures amounted to more than \$58 million through 1929, as compared to the Russell Sage Foundation's \$9 million between 1907 and 1946) the new Rockefeller fund was exclusively devoted to upgrading the stature and scientific credo of the social sciences. It also embraced a strict policy of neutrality—a not-so-subtle response to earlier charges that John D.'s parent foundation had tried to slant industrial relations studies in his favor following the infamous Ludlow Massacre, which brought a bloody end to a 1913–14 coal miners' strike against the Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. Though frequently an RSF partner and endowed with the same “practical knowledge” rhetoric, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial took a far more academic—more “basic” than “applied”—approach to the task. Under the direction of Chicago-trained psychologist Beardsley Rummler, the fund subsidized scores of empirical research and discipline-building efforts. Most effective, though, was its more open-ended support for institutions, including the Social Science Research Council, the National Bureau of Economic Research, and the social sciences at the University of Chicago, that were officially apolitical, disinterested purveyors of social science knowledge, organized less around specific social problems than around more generic categories of human activity and policy. For much of the 1920s, the Memorial was at the hub of a network that would parallel if not compete with the network linking settlement and social work intellectuals to the Russell Sage Foundation and the U.S. Children's and Women's Bureaus. When Herbert Hoover mobilized policy intellectuals to form the Committee on Social Trends, RSF had a seat at the table, but most of the funding and the heaviest representation came via Rockefeller, the Uni-

versity of Chicago, the National Bureau of Economic Research, and the SSRC.⁷⁸ With support from the Memorial, Park and Burgess were able to sustain a large number of graduate students in fieldwork positions, a sizeable research and support staff that was virtually unheard of in other sociology departments, and regular subventions for publications that kept the department visible in sociological and local policy circles. They also provided a model of the kind of detached social science that, although enormously political in its implications, allowed foundations to take a strong role in shaping policy knowledge, while remaining distant from partisan political controversy. In addition, Park and Burgess published several works on theory and method, including *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921) and *The City* (1925), which for years were considered the definitive texts in the field.⁷⁹

If Chicago sociology appeared apolitical, one reason may have been that its “ecological” model of social development explained such touchy subjects as ethnic relations and the rise of industrial capitalism as part of a natural evolutionary process. Like an organism, society was constantly evolving according to the laws of four interacting human instincts. The most fundamental was *competition*, leading inevitably to *conflict*, and from there to the control mechanisms, or *accommodations* through which societies established temporary equilibrium and maintained the social interactions that would eventually lead to *assimilation*. Social change occurred when the state of equilibrium was disrupted—and it frequently was—by some naturally occurring “invasion” such as large-scale migration or technological advance, which in turn started the cycle all over again. The entire process, which could be described as one of ecological “succession,” was continuous, evolutionary, and irreversible.⁸⁰ While not exactly survival of the fittest, it was also not especially amenable to intervention from the state or from social reform.

The city was an extraordinary laboratory for research from the ecological viewpoint, as Park and Burgess noted in their influential volume entitled *The City* (1925). There, the differences with Progressive political economy were laid bare. In that volume, which collected essays written over the previous ten years, they presented the rise of the industrial city as the most advanced stage of human evolution—the “outstanding fact of modern society,” that captured industrial growth, migration, and all of the “inevitable processes of human nature” within the boundaries of its geographic space.⁸¹ As a research project, urban ecology would focus not merely on concrete “factors” behind specific, isolated “events,” as the social survey had, but on the abstract “social forces” that shaped the whole of urban life.⁸² Similarly, it would use such familiar survey methods as mapping to explain social geography in abstracted, ecological—and wholly apolitical—terms.

Dividing the city into a series of concentric “zones,” what Burgess outlined as the ecological base map was meant to reflect not the constructed hierarchies of power, wealth, and poverty but the natural logic of urban growth and resi-

dential distribution. Industry, commerce, and population migration were the driving forces, and distributed themselves as if by nature from the innermost "loop," or central business district, through areas of "transition" and "deterioration," where the city's slums, ghettos, and criminal "underworlds" could be found, and eventually to the outermost "residential" and "commuter" zones where the comforts of single-family dwellings and suburban life beckoned as a "promised land."⁸³ Thus abstracted, the ecological map offered a contrast to the story of industrial exploitation depicted in the Hull House maps of wages and nationalities. The slum, the Jewish ghetto, and the black belt were all part of an organic sorting process, creating "natural areas" for immigrant groups when they first arrived in the city. Segregation was itself a natural process, "which sifts and sorts and relocates individuals and groups by residence and occupation."⁸⁴ So, too, was social disorganization, as a feature of certain characteristically unstable central city neighborhoods. Part of the "natural, if not normal, life of a city," these areas could breed deviance like a "contagion," if they remained too isolated from the mainstream moral code.⁸⁵ For most, however, they were temporary way stations, where disorganization was not "pathological," but "normal," a preliminary stage in the "reorganization of attitudes and conduct [that] is almost invariably the lot of the newcomer to the city."⁸⁶ Similarly, certain areas would be natural sites of interethnic conflict, as newcomers competed with more established residents for space, but again as a stage in a natural progression towards accommodation and ultimate assimilation into the ever-evolving urban culture. Given these natural progressions, there was a certain futility in efforts at planning or control. Urban reform was both ubiquitous and dangerous, Park wrote derisively, in its attempts to impose government regulation on processes over which it had little control. This was not to say that social ecology was without practical application; it was not simply a justification for laissez-faire. Reform, to be meaningful and effective, had to be in harmony with social ecology and, by implication, circumscribed enough to avoid interference with the natural progression of industrial growth and ethnic assimilation.⁸⁷

Indeed, under Park and Burgess, urban ecology was to become not only Chicago's preeminent sociological project, but a new, more "scientific basis" for community action, or "neighborhood work."⁸⁸ Its methods and implications would be spelled out in dozens of dissertations, whose titles and authors included the most renowned in urban sociology, including Frederic Thrasher's *The Gang* (1927), Louis Wirth's *The Ghetto* (1928), Harvey Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929), and E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1931). It would also find its way into several official reports commissioned through the department's local policy connections, most prominent among them Charles S. Johnson's *The Negro in Chicago* (1922) on the summer race riot of 1919, and *Social Factors in Juvenile Delinquency* (1931) by Clifford Shaw and Henry D. McKay.⁸⁹

It was in the field of juvenile delinquency that urban ecology would have its most concrete, transformative effect, and in which Chicago sociologists would lay out the vision of community action later adopted by federal officials in the War on Poverty. As a central target for urban Progressive reform and investigation since the turn of the century, juvenile delinquency was, in Park's mind, a field ripe for more "searching" scientific inquiry and experimentation, based on the principles of sociology rather than on moral concern. "Delinquency is not primarily a problem of the individual but of the group," he wrote, in criticism of prevailing treatments. One by-product of the vast, and inevitable, dislocations brought about by urban and industrial growth, the high rates of delinquency found in poor immigrant neighborhoods were a reflection of the breakdown of traditional social controls—family, church, rural village—under the pressures of modernization. "Delinquency is, in fact, in some sense a measure of the failure of our community organizations to function."⁹⁰ Although he was critical of such Progressive anti-delinquency proposals as playground-building, Park heralded the prospect of a "new social science" that their "frankly experimental" approach had helped to spawn. Based on these experiments, he hoped, academic social science would now examine, "redefine," and eventually come up with new approaches to the delinquency problem, approaches informed by the new learning about human nature and social processes more generally.

For the next decade, drawing on their own expanding connections in the local social service bureaucracy, Chicago-school sociologists followed through on Park's mandate, and by the late 1920s the department was providing both research and staff members for leading criminal justice agencies.⁹¹ Working, thanks to Burgess's connections, in tandem with the Illinois Institute of Juvenile Research, Chicago graduate students gained access to police records, social agency case files, and juvenile court proceedings. They supplemented these with life history interviews and neighborhood ethnographies and plotted extensive ecological maps linking delinquency with neighborhood traits. Although by no means the first to "map" the incidence of delinquency in Chicago—Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott had created a delinquency map published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1912—Chicago-trained sociologists noted that their own studies were based on more sophisticated statistical calculations, putting them in a better position to generalize about the links between delinquency and place.⁹² The findings from these studies were reported in a series of publications beginning with *Delinquency Areas* (1929) by Burgess student and IJR research director Clifford R. Shaw. Delinquency, Shaw concluded, was concentrated "in a characteristic type of area," where the combination of industrial "invasion" and the "influx of foreign nationals" had caused a "disintegration of the community as a unit of social control." In ecological terms, as Shaw demonstrated by plotting his data on the now-familiar Chicago-school maps, the delinquency area was the "zone in transi-

tion"; in more pedestrian terms, it was the immigrant slum. Delinquency, as Park had earlier hypothesized, could now be shown to be a community, not an individual, problem, a product of urban growth and neighborhood instability, and not of the pathological behavior of immigrant youth. Indeed, it was a normal response to the breakdown in traditional mechanisms of social control. The solution, then, was not to be found in the impersonal, individualized juvenile justice system that Progressive reformers had helped to create. Nor was it simply in efforts to improve external neighborhood living conditions, which would only aim at the symptoms of the underlying disorganization. Fighting delinquency called for more comprehensive community reorganization, a restoration of internal social controls, and to be effective it had to build from within the community.⁹³

At the time it was published, *Delinquency Areas* offered a new way of looking at youth criminal behavior, opening up a field once dominated by individualized, psychological perspectives to a "sociological, or cultural, approach." For the Chicago sociologists, it also represented applied social science at its best, as knowledge about human nature and social processes that could be used in redirecting ill-fated reforms. In 1932 Shaw and other Chicago-trained sociologists took that next step, creating the Chicago Area Project (CAP) as a community-based experiment in delinquency prevention. Targeting six "transitional" neighborhoods known for their high delinquency rates, Shaw and his staff joined forces with neighborhood residents, local churches, businesses, and labor and other groups to create what they called "a program of community action." Operating as a nonprofit corporation with a board made up of prominent Chicago citizens, CAP sponsored boys' clubs, summer camps, recreational and educational activities, and initiated a program known as "curbstone counseling" using neighborhood peers to work with members of youth gangs. These activities were planned and managed by neighborhood or community councils, which raised funds for new initiatives, recruited volunteers to supplement the paid staff, and, most importantly, were set up to put neighborhood residents in charge. The idea was to generate a sense of local autonomy and solidarity, to emphasize neighborhood rather than law enforcement or social work solutions, and eventually to reconstitute the community as a mechanism of social control.⁹⁴

In this emphasis CAP was quite consciously an application of Chicago-school theory, and also an affront to the more casework-oriented local social work establishment. Residents would be spared the "humiliations" of receiving outside philanthropy. "Indigenous workers" would replace trained professionals as program staff. "Individualized" treatment would give way to community methods, building on the resources at hand. "Outside" professionals would retain a role in these initiatives, Shaw insisted, but it would be under the guidance of local residents. Understandably, CAP came under fire from local social welfare officials, but its well-placed city connections helped to diffuse their

criticisms. More damaging to its credibility, especially as the Depression deepened, was what critics came to recognize as CAP's narrow focus on social services and the absence of a strategy for addressing the underlying conditions of neighborhood poverty. Such a strategy would require a more overtly political approach to neighborhood organizing, in the eyes of Chicago graduate student and onetime CAP organizer Saul Alinsky, and would of necessity look outside the neighborhood for the sources of distress and the targets for change. Frustrated by the limited aims of the anti-delinquency effort, Alinsky broke off to help establish the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in the working-class community adjacent to Chicago's stockyards, already famous as the setting for Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906). Alinsky spoke little of social "disorganization," assimilation, or the need to reestablish internal social control; instead, he sought to merge existing community institutions—especially the church and the unions—to create immediate pressure for better municipal services, while organizing to demand broader economic and political reform.⁹⁵

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Chicago-school ideas about community reorganization found expression in dozens of foundation and government-funded experiments to combat juvenile delinquency and poverty in urban neighborhoods, which in turn provided the models for Community Action in the War on Poverty.⁹⁶ But the Chicago-school impact on poverty knowledge was at once more immediate and more far-reaching than that. Working from a more secure institutional base and in the more conservative political climate of the 1920s, Chicago sociologists took social scientific community research in a direction not contemplated in Progressive social inquiry. In their hands, poverty knowledge became an academic rather than so exclusively a reform-minded endeavor, a contribution to theory-building, and a "scientific basis" for a more limited (though it would not remain that way) kind of community action. Their social ecology naturalized urban poverty and segregation as well as the underlying "forces" social surveyors had attributed to capitalist expansion and racial discrimination. It also established sociology as a science of human behavior and social psychology, leaving the "social" or political economy of previous investigators to less strictly "scientific" minds. As a program of research, social ecology neutralized the conceptual terrain mapped out in the social surveys; as a program for action, it redirected the aims of intervention, away from wages and work and living conditions, and toward the more circumscribed objectives of community "reorganization" and assimilation into the existing social mainstream.

And yet, for all its limitations, social ecology provided the tools for a more basically sympathetic understanding of immigrant and working-class culture than most Progressive inquiry to date, providing a framework for understanding the unfamiliar and presumably "pathological" as adaptive to the disruptions

of social change. Steeped though it was in the language of “disorganization,” social ecology started from a recognition of not only the importance but the legitimate variability of cultures within changing historical circumstances. And despite its own reaffirmation of the competitive impulse and the individualistic economic system *laissez-faire* had shaped, in practice social ecology took the community as its unit of analysis, and as a perspective from which to challenge the assumptions of individualized social casework. Finally, for all the talk about natural forces and assimilation, social ecology was not simply or always an affirmation of the evolutionary social order. Reworked and put into practice by a later generation of community activists, Chicago sociology lent theoretical grounding to the concept of community empowerment as a vehicle for broader social change.

Poverty Knowledge as Cultural Critique: The Great Depression

IT MAY SEEM odd that, amidst the vast unemployment and structural dislocations of the Great Depression, social scientific poverty knowledge should make culture an overriding theme. This, too, alongside the unprecedented demand for economic and more traditionally defined social welfare knowledge coming from the expanding apparatus of New Deal, state, and private agencies—all clamoring for knowledge, as Franklin D. Roosevelt himself might have put it, to get government *out* of the business of relief through programs of prevention, social insurance, and economic reform. Drawing insights from Progressive as well as a newer, Keynesian political economy, social work and economic policy intellectuals carved out plans for addressing the economic risks of unemployment, old age, maternal widowhood, agricultural crisis, and, more generally, *laissez-faire* capitalism.¹ And yet, for all the accumulated statistics on unemployment, income levels, housing conditions, relief rolls, and other indicators of economic decline, the more pronounced, and immediate legacy of the Great Depression for poverty knowledge was in the social scientific study of how poverty was at once a cause and a consequence of psychological depression, the distinctive values associated with lower-class culture, and the broader problem of a society unable to cope with the challenge of mass economic breakdown due to its own cultural “lag.” The most sustained and comprehensive study of unemployment from the 1930s, reported in E. Wight Bakke’s companion volumes *The Unemployed Worker* and *Citizens Without Work*, was as much concerned with its psychological and cultural as with its economic costs.²

But if there was some tension between economic and cultural understandings of poverty, the differentiation was not at all as sharp or politicized as it would later become. Indeed, for Chicago’s rival “schools” in the 1920s and 1930s, the turn to culture was not a break from Progressive political economy so much as a new way to illuminate its central themes: class polarization, the dangers of *laissez-faire* individualism, and the necessity of planned social reform. It was in this spirit that Robert and Helen Lynd came up with a new, more anthropological approach to community study and with it dissected the cultural contradictions that industrial capitalism had wrought. Others, including students of anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, uncovered the elements of a distinctive and coherent lower-class culture that helped poor people cope with