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WHO IS THE UNDERCLASS?

Contrasting Approaches, a Grave Problem

We hate oppression but
we fear the oppressed.
—V.S. Naipaul

The possible arrival of a new social class evokes grand blasts of imagery. Across history's bookish stage roll bourgeois Christian soldiers, boxcars of workers (trailing haunting specters), limos carrying commissars of the *nomenklatura,* electricians in white coats (breathing soul into new computers). On they parade until, at what we thought must be the end of the social-class spectacle, there appears the latest entry: a ragged urban underclass.

For the class parade to be a full success it seems there must be one class that highlights in its evil all the virtues of the others. The proletariat no longer provokes fear and reaction? Then send up a fearsome underclass. What could be more frightening to the precariously comfortable than drug-crazed, poverty-incensed hordes, led by Willie Horton and Central Park Wilders, legions of dark people with strong backs and weak intellects, who, it is said, do not want to work in "available jobs." The underclass is also said to be breeding generations of feral children. If they reach adulthood, their underclass culture will make them unsuitable for whatever jobs will be available in these waning years of "The American Century."

George Orwell would have recognized this as old-fashioned "fear of the mob" and as weak excuses of the rich for their own excesses. In 1988, however—in our era of trickle down and gush up—George Bush hit on underclass imagery (with its implicit appeal to bigotry) for campaign paydirt. Attention is easily shifted to the moral qualities of the poor and away from those responsible for much of the neglect we see around us. Social scientists (myself included) and journalists write reams about the underclass while the psychology and sociology of savings and loan supercrook Charles Keating and other buccaneers go relatively unexamined.

But, real or not, the idea of the underclass cannot be wished away. There are too many issues in the underclass debate that have immediate bearing on the crisis of our cities. As with all stereotypes there are elements of truth in the imagery. The risks of criminal victimization by people who resemble underclass types are increasing for those who live in the big cities. The rise of homelessness and AIDS, the despair of crack and heroin, the proclaimed (but not factual) failure of public institutions (education, housing, criminal justice, public health): all these are demoralizing and cause people to wonder if the segregated poor have become redundant. Even worse is the claim that the very institutions of the welfare state have failed and in fact have helped to create this new underclass. A convenient charge, this one, for it serves to excuse the nation's ever greater neglect of its have-nots.

I write at a moment of despair over the fate of urban America and New York City in particular. Brutal violence and random slay-

ings, mayhem in public parks and commercial neighborhoods, roving "posses" of violent, alienated teenagers, all seem to be symptoms of an ever more dangerous underclass. But the facts revealed in the aftermath of the violence frequently contradict our assumptions. The murderers or rapists often turn out to come from relatively stable families and to have jobs and educational aspirations. I think the evidence of declining respect for human life and our failure as a society to inspire our young people are urgent problems. But they are not a unique feature of the poor or down-and-out.

To understand why the idea of the underclass is of limited value we need to separate the arguments over definition from those concerning facts. We need, above all, to locate discussions of the underclass within a broader understanding of continuities and discontinuities in poverty. It may be that permanent poverty is to be a lasting feature of the postindustrial society. As Katherine Newman points out in *Falling From Grace,* downward mobility is threatening to become as much a part of the late twentieth-century American experience as success and affluence. But the idea of the underclass inevitably, and I think wrongly, raises the question of whether the people most in need are redeemable or worthy of redemption. Who, then, are these so-called underclass people?

The Underclass and the Merely Impoverished

All writers on the underclass agree that no matter how defined, its numbers are smaller than those of the poor. The most often used "official" U.S. government definition of poverty nets about thirty-two million Americans (13.1 percent of the population) who live below the threshold annual income of about $12,500 for a family of four. But included among these 32 million (and among the millions of others whose incomes hover just above this low figure) are Native Americans on impoverished reservations; people in households where there is a full-time (low) wage earner, where the household is composed of graduate students, where the household is composed of elderly persons on fixed incomes; and many others. So mere poverty, no matter how calculated, may be a necessary qualification but is not a sufficient measure of what the underclass might be.

The leading cause of poverty in the United States is low wages. Throughout the entire decade of the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s (despite the rather paltry 1990 increase in the minimum wage), a family of four with one full-time wage worker earning at or slightly above the minimum wage did not come even close to bringing home enough to exceed the official poverty threshold. Among the fifty million two-parent families in which one or more parents works full time, there are about three million families below the official poverty threshold. Much is written about the dramatic rise in poverty among single-parent families, and the large majority of children in single-parent families are living in poverty; but there are still far more children growing up in two-parent families and many of these are quite poor. In his book *Poor Support,* an invaluable study of contemporary poverty, David Ellwood shows that at least half the children in poverty in the United States are living in two-parent homes suffering the hardships of low wages and lack of employment. And an additional heavy proportion of the children growing up in single-parent homes once lived in two-parent homes that disintegrated because of severe economic hardship.

Separate the working poor, the unemployed, and the handicapped from the underclass, and what remains are people whose behavior, rather than unemployment or low wages, seems to some observers to be the cause of their woes. In *Science* (April 27, 1990), the nation's most prestigious scientific journal, economists Ronald Mincy, Isabel Sawhill, and Douglas Wolf point out that if one subtracts only those among the impoverished in America who have been down for a long count—eight years or more—"then about one fifth of the poor or about 6 million people could be considered members of the underclass." And if one considers the underclass as only those who have been impoverished over their entire lifetimes, the total would be perhaps no more than one or two million (their "educated guess"). But these authors go further and

choose, as many who write on this subject do, to define the underclass in "behavioral terms." This "behavioral underclass" could be measured, they assert, by counting "the number of people who engage in bad behavior or a set of bad behaviors." Crime (especially in the drug industry), failure to work when not physically or mentally handicapped, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, and long-term welfare recipiency, are the actual bad behaviors they cite, arguing that these are typical of people who do not conform to norms of work, family, and morality. Using a methodology developed by Erol Ricketts and Isabel Sawhill, which counts the population in neighborhoods predominantly composed of people with such "bad behaviors," the authors come up with an estimate of a "behavioral underclass" composed of about 2.5 million people (based on the 1980 census) who live in 880 neighborhoods in American cities where there are high concentrations of other such ill-behaved people.

William J. Wilson's Postindustrial Chicago Underclass

These behavioral definitions of the underclass do not please University of Chicago sociologist William J. Wilson. The most influential writer on persistent poverty and the ghetto poor in the United States (and a dedicated social democrat), Wilson defines the underclass somewhat more broadly as "that heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system." Wilson's definition includes people who lack training and skills and are thus out of the labor force or at best experiencing long periods of unemployment, individuals engaged in "street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency." These are the populations Wilson refers to when he speaks of the underclass, a term he uses to "depict a reality not captured in the more standard designation, lower class." Although his conception of the underclass clearly has much in common with the behavioral measures of the economists, it encompasses a larger population of people who are excluded from the legitimate occupational world and whose behavior in response to that exclusion may further remove them from legitimate economic competition.

Wilson writes mainly about "the ghetto underclass," which he sees as a new phenomenon. His arguments are presented in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), but his more recent data and analysis of the underclass in Chicago appear in a special issue of the *Annals* (American Academy of Political and Social Science, January 1989). This issue contains a number of important empirical articles by Wilson and his students and colleagues that further develop the theme of social isolation in the "ghetto underclass," especially in Chicago, where their door-to-door research is conducted. This social-isolation thesis has also influenced the work of many other authors, including those who wrote the *Science* article.

Wilson and his coworkers in Chicago strive mightily to avoid the pitfalls of labeling (terms like "bad behaviors") and also seek to avoid having their research appear to blame the victims of poverty for evolving a self-fulfilling "culture of poverty." On the contrary, for Wilson and his student Loïc Wacquant (in the *Annals* article), the central theme

> is that the interrelated set of phenomena captured by the term "underclass" is primarily social-structural and that the ghetto is experiencing a "crisis": not because a "welfare ethos" has mysteriously taken over its residents but because joblessness and economic exclusion, having reached dramatic proportions, have triggered a process of hyperghettoization.

The terribly depressed Chicago ghetto is their primary example. The authors describe a racially segregated population on Chicago's South and West sides where between 1970 and 1980 the proportion of African Americans living in "extreme poverty areas" (neighborhoods where 40 percent or more live in "official poverty") increased from 24 percent to 47 percent and continued to rise during the 1980s. Over the same period in the ten largest U.S. cities, the proportion of poor blacks living in such highly concentrated poverty neighborhoods increased from 22 percent to 38 percent. Wilson could have extended this observation to

scores of smaller cities such as Newark, Gary, Camden, and Bessemer, Alabama (once a thriving and largely black industrial satellite of Birmingham, now a dusty slum).

In Chicago, as in other large cities, the exodus of jobs and stable families with steady work has amounted to a social hemorrhage. Today's ghetto residents, Wacquant and Wilson argue, "face a closed opportunity structure." They are increasingly closed off from the opportunities afforded others in the society by the "rapid deterioration of housing, schools, businesses, recreational facilities, and other community organizations"—a deterioration greatly aided by government policies of industrial and urban laissez-faire that have channeled a disproportionate share of federal, state, and municipal resources to the more affluent."

Jobs for people in Chicago's black metropolis were always more difficult to obtain than for others in the city, but Wilson and Wacquant show that deindustrialization of the city has hit ghetto residents particularly hard. From 1950 to 1980 the overall proportion of adults (including people over sixty-five) of all races not employed in the city remained rather steady, around 43 percent. For ghetto blacks entering Chicago smokestack industries in the 1950s, the proportions outside the labor force were only slightly higher than for the city overall. By 1970 rates of nonparticipation for ghetto residents were ten to fifteen percentage points higher, and by 1980 anywhere from two-thirds to three-quarters of ghetto adults were not in the labor force. As a further measure of how far the American Dream is slipping away from the inner-city black poor, Wilson's research shows that in the extreme poverty neighborhoods of Chicago's ghetto, over half (51 percent) of all residents live in households where the annual income is less than $7,500. Three-quarters had "none of six assets" (personal checking account, savings account, IRA, pension plan, money in stocks or bonds, prepaid burial), and 97 percent owned no home, no business, no land.

Some of Wilson's critics, especially conservatives like Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead, think blacks themselves are more to blame for their hardship than Wilson does. They counter his "structural" arguments by noting that despite years of economic growth in the 1980s, when millions of jobs were added to the economy, ghetto blacks, and especially males, did not seem to benefit proportionately. Blacks are too quick, the conservative argument essentially states, to accept opportunities in the illegal economy, or too lazy or proud to accept unskilled work, and prefer to sponge off others (for example, AFDC women from the government, black men from AFDC women). They are, from this vantage point, the ill-behaved bulwark of the ghetto underclass. Lest the onus fall on ghetto blacks alone, there are the equally important examples of the Puerto Ricans and Native Americans, whose fate is especially like African Americans. But it is just these examples that help give the lie to the conservatives' blame-the-black-victim arguments.

The Strategic Example of the Puerto Ricans

In the twenty-five years between 1959 and 1984 no minority group in the United States fared worse economically than the Puerto Ricans. Native Americans experienced dramatic declines in their high rates of poverty during the 1970s but still ended the eighties with the highest rates (about 41 percent) of any minority. But Puerto Rican mean family income (measured in constant dollars) decreased by 25 percent over the period, more than double the rate of decline among blacks. In their research on U.S. Hispanics and poverty, Marta Tienda and her colleagues at the University of Wisconsin show that rates of increase in female-headed families and drastic declines in Puerto Rican men's and women's access to decent jobs account for much of this loss. Single-parent (largely female-headed) families increased among Puerto Ricans from 10 percent in 1959 to 35 percent in 1984. The bulk of this decline came, Tienda shows, after 1979, when wealth and opportunity were supposedly beginning to "trickle down."

Declining fortunes in Puerto Rican and black ghettos lend particular support to Wilson's

"structural" arguments. The shared experience at the bottom of the American working class for Puerto Ricans and African Americans begins during the (relatively) booming 1950s, in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and other metropolitan centers and their industrial satellites (like Newark and Camden and more obscure places like Brightwaters in New York's Suffolk County). Blacks and Puerto Ricans have their own versions of colonial domination to surmount, but in their early experience with industrialization each group did rather well—not, of course, without great hardship. In the 1970s and more precipitously and cruelly in the 1980s, the industrial opportunity ladder for Puerto Ricans had its legs snapped. Call it deindustrialization, restructuring, the Great U Turn, or whatever you want, the result was disaster for brown people on the social-mobility queue in urban and industrial America. To make matters far worse, the Reagan years brought drastic cuts in public-sector employment, cuts in hospital work, cuts in the social safety net, cuts in the quality of education. Like the African Americans, many Puerto Rican ghetto men are demoralized and marked for early graves. Puerto Rican women are left with children and declining employment opportunities. The Puerto Rican experience helps to demonstrate once again that what matters is where you lived and where you had previously hoped to work, as well as the economic and social capital of your parents, not the culture or the particular colonial history of your people.

Demographer John D. Kasarda notes that from 1975 to 1985, "more than 2.1 million nonadministrative jobs were added in eating and drinking establishments, which exceeds the total number of production jobs that existed in 1985 in America's automobile, primary metals, and textile industries combined." And almost all the net gains in jobs with low educational entry requirements have been on the edges of the metropolitan areas, "far removed from large concentrations of poorly educated minorities." Puerto Ricans and African Americans in the rustbelt cities are particularly hard hit by these changes, but innumerable studies around the nation show that there has been a dramatic increase in temporary, part-time, and casual labor and even, in the farming states, a renewed increase in tenant farming as a means of escaping unionized farm labor. Runaway shops, tenant taxis (leased) in the cities, and sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the countryside are evidence of the real meaning of trickle-down economics and the vicious assault upon unions.

A Mirror for the Middle Class

Wilson, Tienda, Mincy, and others serve us well by documenting trends in American poverty, but there remains the problem of separating the poor from those who continue to be lumped in the underclass. In this we are helped by the clear-headed analysis of Christopher Jencks.

In recent articles Jencks traces the ambiguity surrounding the term "underclass" to Ken Auletta's 1982 book of that title. While surely not the first to describe an underclass, Auletta is "largely responsible for making it part of middle-class America's working vocabulary." Auletta included in that description chronically jobless men, long-term welfare mothers, alcoholics, drug dealers, street criminals, deinstitutionalized mental patients, "and all the other walking-wounded who crowded New York City's sidewalks in the later 1970's." The term was convenient for a journalist, Jencks believes, because it "focuses attention on the basement of the American social system (those who are 'under' the rest of us), without specifying what the inhabitants of this dark region have in common." But once the idea of the underclass took hold among journalists and policymakers, they in turn demanded of social scientists the usual studies of definition, size, and trends. In time-honored fashion we social scientists came up with at least twelve ways of defining the supposedly new class, including some of those described in this essay.

To clear things up somewhat, Jencks compares definitions of the underclass to those of the "middle class." The term "middle class," he notes, has a number of meanings in the United States, each of which "implies a mirror-image for the term underclass."

As Americans often define the middle class in terms of relatively stable white- and

blue-collar occupations, then there may be an "economic underclass" composed of "working-age men and women who cannot get or cannot keep a steady job." But we frequently think of the middle class as those whose behavior affirms such norms as respect for the law, marriage before parenthood, moderation, and so on. If one defines the middle class this way, then perhaps there is a "moral underclass" of those without economic means (to eliminate the Mick Jaggers, Charles Keatings and Ivan Boeskys) who regard these moral tenets "as impractical or irrelevant." Sometimes, however, we think of the middle class in cultural terms, as people who are educated and have social and cultural skills, people who "talk, think, and act like professional and managerial workers" regardless of whether they actually have such jobs. We may also think of the working class as "composed of people who talk, think and act like blue collar workers." Below both the cultural middle class and the blue-collar class there may be an "educational underclass" of people "who lack the information and skills they would need to pass as members" of either class.

Only a social scientist could claim to clarify a debate by replacing one term with three. Jencks points out that a problem with the underclass concept is that it always requires adjectival acrobatics, as we have already seen with Wilson's use of the term "ghetto underclass" and the Mincy-Sawhill notion of a "behavioral underclass." But to postulate the economic underclass, the moral underclass, and the educational underclass helps define whom we are talking about and permits some measurement of possible growth in recent decades.

It will be no surprise that the data Jencks reviews on work and idleness demonstrate real growth in the "economic underclass." The percentage of joblessness among men aged 25 to 54 between 1954 and 1988, for example has crept upward since the 1950s. Joblessness reached a peak about 1984 but still has not declined to levels that were usual in the previous decades. And as always in this century, black joblessness was twice that of whites. Part-time work, casual labor, and long stints of unemployment are routine for youthful workers and those with lower levels of education. Wages also have eroded significantly among hourly workers and those with lower levels of education. Census data that Jencks summarizes show that in constant dollars income between 1967 and 1988 declined by 29 percent for working men with eighth-grade educations or less, by 23 percent among men with some high school, by 10 percent among men with high school diplomas, and by about 4 percent among men with some college. Income rose over the period only for men with college educations.

It may surprise many, however, that Jencks finds no evidence of growth in a moral underclass or in an educational underclass. Ask a sample of taxi drivers or sociology students what has happened in the past decade to crime rates, Jencks suggests, and they will be almost unanimous in asserting that crime has skyrocketed. But they will be wrong. In comparison with the high rates sustained in the 1960s and early 1970s, murder rates are down, as are other victimization rates (although they have increased in some inner city areas—for instance, the New York City Police Department reports that murders and robberies, many associated with the vicious crack epidemic, in the city rose sharply, to near-record levels, during the first six months of 1990). Aggravated assault with injuries (often associated with muggings) declined among whites from 310 per every 10,000 Americans in 1960 to 270 in 1986. Among blacks the decline was from 550 in 1965 to 420 in 1986. These rates are unconscionably high, but offer little evidence for a growing criminal underclass among blacks or whites.

Middle-class Americans often cite the growth in teenage pregnancy and illegitimacy as indicators of the growth of a moral underclass, but here too Jencks finds little support in the data. Between 1960 and 1986 expected births to teenage females actually declined by 50 percent among whites and by almost that much among blacks. Illegitimacy, however, has increased dramatically in the same period, so that about 16 percent of white babies and about

60 percent of black babies will be born to unmarried women. Much of the precipitous increase in illegitimacy among blacks can be attributed to joblessness among men. There is even evidence among whites and blacks with jobs and income of an increase in male unwillingness to take on family responsibilities; but, as Jencks also notes, "as women earn more they become less willing to marry and more willing to divorce men who are hard to live with." In any event, because illegitimacy is increasing among middle-class people as well as among the poor, it is difficult to make the case that the increasing prevalence of illegitimacy is evidence of growth in a moral underclass.

In education, finally, trends in school achievement offer little support for the idea that there is a growing educational underclass, especially among African Americans. In 1960 almost 44 percent of whites and 76 percent of blacks between 25 and 27 years of age had not finished high school. By 1985 the proportions had declined to 13 percent for whites and 17 percent for blacks, and in fact white graduation rates have leveled off since the mid-1970s while black graduation rates continue to improve steadily. The same trends apply to college completion. In 1960 only 8.2 percent of whites and 2.8 percent of blacks (aged 25 to 29) had completed college. By 1985 the proportions were 23.2 percent for whites and 16.7 for blacks. Considering their extremely low "cultural capital" at the start of desegregation (as economists like to say), blacks made extraordinary gains in this period, and their rate of gain is now faster than that of whites.

These figures do not lend support to the idea of an educational underclass (especially not a black one), but neither are they cause for celebration. If rates of college completion have been increasing (only slowly, if at all, for whites), we still have far to go before we will be educating enough young people with the technical and cultural capabilities required in a rapidly altering economy.

So Jencks finds that only the economic underclass is growing and that "the term underclass, like the term middle class, " lumps together so many different populations that social scientists must use it with extreme care. "They should probably avoid the word altogether unless they are prepared to make clear which of its many meanings they have in mind." Still, he admits, the idea will continue to hold great appeal outside academic circles,

AIDS: COMMUNITY OF THE DAMNED

Victor Ayala directs the SEEK program in one of New York City's community colleges. A native New Yorker of Puerto Rican heritage, Victor himself "came up" through the City University system and knows hundreds of ways to help children of the inner city to a more solid educational footing. The work is exhausting. Budget cuts, tired staff, kids frustrated with school and expecting the worst from the bureaucracies; but Victor dwells on the successes, and this gives him energy to do his night work.

For the past two years Victor has worked four nights a week in the AIDS unit of a large public hospital in Brooklyn. He counsels homeless and indigent AIDS patients. His vast knowledge of the bureaucracies can help ease their anguish. In doing this work day after day Victor has become an expert on how this epidemic is experienced in the bottom depths of the city's poorest neighborhoods and in its embattled public hospital wards.

AIDS is rapidly becoming the scourge of the down and out. Its incidence is highest among intravenous drug users and their lovers and among the regulars in the crack dens, where young women, "crack bitches," often trade sexual favors for the drug. Many of the babies born into this community of the damned will also develop AIDS symptoms.

Victor does this work because he believes more people need to know what occurs inside the changing AIDS epidemic. Often the first, the last, and the most persistent hospital worker to speak with the AIDS patients, Victor writes copious notes on each case. Here is a sample, a

and "If the term underclass helps put the problems of America's have-nots back on the political agenda, it will have served an extraordinarily useful purpose." This is a sentiment almost everyone can share, but it still leaves some confusion. The underclass is either a political slogan that may be shaped to the advantage of the all-inclusive have-nots of society, or, more accurately from the Jencks analysis, it is a poor surrogate for the lowest, most insecure ranks of the working class.

Falling into the Underclass

Men who unload trucks for daily cash and other casual laborers and those who still seek to become part of the more stable working class (the Jencks "economic underclass") ought not be included, I believe, in a general definition of the underclass. If we must speak of an underclass I hope the term may be narrowed to include only people who barely survive below the legitimate class system of capitalist society and below the lowest ranks of the criminal-class system as well. Most writers agree that the term will be with us despite its difficulties, although Wilson has recently decided to abandon the term as a description of the isolated ghetto poor. He believes, as I and many others do, that the term risks the negative effects of "blaming the victims." If it must be used at all, I think the term underclass ought to refer to people who have fallen or been pushed into a world of suffering they can escape only *with help from others* in the larger society. We can reasonably use the concept of the underclass, for example, to understand such familiar scenes as this:

It is about midnight, on a wintry early spring night, quite near the beginning of the twenty-first century. A line of sedans and taxis, here and there a stretch limo, inches across Manhattan from the Midtown Tunnel toward the Lincoln Tunnel on the West Side. I am in the fitful procession on my way to a college lecture scheduled for early the next day. Once past Fifth Avenue and into the garment center, the cars stopped at red lights are approached by gaunt men holding cans of window spray. They do not wait to see if the drivers want their windshields cleaned but immediately begin their sullen work. Some drivers wave them away, others are more offended. Shouts and insults fly. I take either the more socially conscious or cowardly path (depending on your politics) and spend a few quarters to have my window washed over and over again.

typical vignette among the hundreds he has collected:

> "Dolores" is a 43-year-old black female diagnosed HIV positive, with PCP pneumonia, tuberculosis, and high fevers. She has been homeless for four years and has lived in women's shelters or on the streets, occasionally with friends. She has a twenty-year history of substance abuse, including alcohol, heroin, and crack.
>
> After a month of avoiding me, Dolores finally speaks about her family. She has four children ages eight, ten, fifteen, and eighteen. Two of them live with her aunt. The oldest is in prison for attempted murder. By her standards she has been a neglectful mother. Her past eighteen years are a blur of drug abuse, prostitution, petty robbery, and homelessness. Almost everyone in Dolores's immediate family circle is involved with drugs. An intravenous drug-addicted brother, who frequently shared needles with her sister, died from AIDS-related illnesses. Dolores used to share needles with her sister, too. She has learned recently that her former husband, absent for five years, has died from AIDS-related illnesses.

When Dolores feels some strength she likes to socialize with other AIDS patients and with the hospital staff. The patients share cigarettes and often find ways to secure drugs. Victor finds Dolores an SRO (single-room occupancy) room and she prepares to leave the hospital. Shortly before her discharge the fever returns. A spinal tap reveals that she has cyptococcis meningitis, often a terminal illness in the AIDS patient. Victor describes how Dolores seeks more street drugs in the last two weeks of her life while she denies her impending death. Victor concludes on this note:

> Although Dolores is surrounded by other AIDS patients in various stages of dying, she believes there is time to live before she goes through the same things. As the end approaches, people avoid her room. Her doors remain closed, lights turned off, less and less routine care is provided. □

Three times in three blocks I put coins in a man's hand. Each time I touch well-calloused fingers or a work-hardened palm.

The windshield washers are not the street urchins who ply this annoying trade uptown. They are adults who haunt the streets of midtown below the bus terminal. In cold weather they sleep in packing crates and cardboard boxes. By day they may seek casual labor, unloading trucks, moving merchandise, sweeping up, anything for immediate pay. At night many drink themselves to sleep. Some have crack or other dope habits to support. Most, but not all, are black or Puerto Rican.

If, then, we must have an underclass category, these men and others like them are good candidates for it. The bottom ranks of the working class always have men and women who are the most exploited and who, despite their hard work, cannot keep body and soul together. Sometimes such people are called wage slaves (Alec Wilkinson's book *Big Sugar* is a moving account of rural and migrant wage slavery). But homelessness and destitution in addition, as George Orwell showed in *Down and Out in Paris and London,* become a form of prison (with wage slavery) in the bosom of civil society. The homeless person can become locked into a round of daily survival behaviors, the search for food, for coins, for warmth, for an anodyne, for sleep. Increasingly most kinds of work except the most casual come to be out of reach for one reason or another, apart from how well the economy is doing. Life on the street soon destroys most people. Sleep deprivation, hunger, cold, sickness, and depression quickly take a toll. Men (and women) like these windshield wipers inhabit a despised street world intimately tied to the "regular economy," which that economy in fact produces in the backs of restaurants and in all the growing markets for casual labor and "lower overhead."

What about the children these men may have fathered along the way to their precarious adulthoods? Are they also to be thought of as part of the underclass? Suppose, as is often likely, the children are living with mothers who are on welfare. Some of their mothers may have had a few children by different fathers and been on welfare for years. Are "chronic" welfare mothers and their children also part of the underclass?

In most definitions of the term, welfare mothers who are on public assistance for more than three years and have additional children while on assistance are classified as "chronic welfare recipients" and are considered as part of the underclass. I reject this idea.

A mother of dependent children has real work to do and a mother with no regular male help has even more work. This should not be a controversial assertion. Middle-class mothers who choose to stay home in order to raise children often zealously defend their choice. They do not look kindly on suggestions that their lives are leisurely even if they also admit their good fortune in not "needing to go to work right away." Welfare mothers have even more obstacles to surmount since just existing on welfare is hard work itself. And few welfare mothers can actually exist on AFDC benefits, Medicaid, and food stamps. Almost all seek additional income, from off-the-books work, like caring for others' children along with their own, or in innumerable "hustles." And if receiving welfare payments was such a cushy way of life, welfare mothers would be expected to migrate from states with lower benefits to those with higher ones. But there is no evidence that such migration occurs. Instead, the women typically plan ways of improving their education or finding a decent job or forming a stable relationship, all the things any of us would try in order to "get on our feet." Now the welfare laws increasingly push women to get back into the labor market when their children are old enough to be in day care, but of course we have yet to develop anything like an adequate day-care system.

Yet to exclude all mothers on welfare from even my narrow and reluctant definition of an underclass would not well reflect the suffering and neglect we see around us in cities like New York and Chicago and in hundreds of other American communities large and small. Women without homes, mothers and children without homes, all run the risk that homelessness itself becomes an insurmountable and debilitating obstacle. Welfare mothers who become addicted or who become entrapped in a world of prostitution and unsuccessful petty

crime, or whose material and emotional lives have disintegrated to the point that they neglect and abuse their children, all can be thought to have fallen into the lowest ranks of poverty and misery. AIDS workers like Victor Ayala (see box) would agree that indigent AIDS patients, surely down and out, might also be counted among an underclass, but he believes the term serves little purpose except to excuse our ignorance of the AIDS epidemic.

There are also children who fall into extreme poverty and risk living out brutally shortened lives at the bottom. One of the best recent books about this subject is Terry Williams's *Cocaine Kids,* a detailed ethnography of the lives of teenagers in upper Manhattan who become involved in the world of crack dealing. Williams and others have shown that existing drug laws encourage adult dealers to recruit children into the underground drug industry. There are a few cases of teenagers who become wildly successful and even more cases of teenagers who make some money for a while before getting into trouble with the authorities or within the drug underworld. Williams shows that those who begin using drugs, other than marijuana, quickly decline and are cast out, often to drift into trouble or violence. Kids with records of arrest, failure in school, histories of drug abuse and depression, and with only limited training for employment and few contacts in labor markets are prime candidates for lives as windshield washers and street-corner junkies. But if they are not trapped into such lives because of homelessness or severe debilitation, they should not be counted among those who are down and out. Though at risk of falling, they have not yet dropped into the underclass. Whether they do so or not will depend a good deal on the opportunities our society makes available to them to help themselves. It will also depend on the kind of adult mentors it provides them.

In sum, as I use the term, the underclass includes those people who are trapped in a netherworld at the bottom of both the legal and illegal class systems. The major traps are addiction, homelessness, mental illness, destitution, and usually a combination of these conditions. Although their numbers are growing steadily, especially in central cities and segregated ghettos, the size of this population is far lower than the overall poverty population (which has also been growing). As a spur to social policy a narrow definition of the underclass does not detract from the argument by Wilson and others that we urgently need industrial policies targeted toward economically depressed communities. The idea that the underclass is relatively small and is composed of people who have fallen out of the working or criminal classes (or who never made it up before becoming trapped at the bottom) will help emphasize the special programs of emergency housing, supported work, drug rehabilitation, enhanced schooling in low-income communities, and other measures that could reduce destitution and homelessness. If the down-and-out make up no more than three million people (including the nation's present homeless population), we ought to be able to immediately reduce that number.

We ought to be able to help, that is, if we can ever overcome the consequences of all the theft of public funds and the vicious attacks on our social institutions that has marked the past decade. In fact, by my definition of the underclass there is not a major new social class to trumpet about or to blame on welfare institutions. There is instead a significant growth in old-style misery, due in some part to industrial restructuring and in another and more evil part to the cupidity of the nation's elite. History will show that for some time toward the end of our American Century the nation's upper class, or the part of it in power, embraced a philosophy of narrow self-interest first elaborated by Bernard Mandeville in his tract of 1705, *The Grumbling Hive* (later expanded into *The Fable of the Bees*). Mandeville coined the phrase, "Private vice makes public virtue." Someone might want to offer this profound insight to the corner windshield washers or to the homeless people huddled outside the gates of the White House.□