

Sarah Strassel  
Professor Beckley  
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**Analyzing the Underclass: American Values, Normative Functions, and Implications for Research and Policy**

**Introduction**

Values, norms, morals, and ideologies impact nearly every aspect of American life. Importantly, the established, hegemonic principles that actively shape our perceptions of the world around us also inform our actions and our judgments as they converge with or digress from these culturally determined standards. These traditional values and cultural concepts are crucial, then, in an examination of our society's treatment and understanding of poverty. Using these social norms as an evaluative framework, I am specifically interested in the use of "underclass terminology" to discuss the poor. Broadly defined, used, and criticized, the "underclass" concept has been the subject of sustained, often provocative discussion in contemporary poverty debates. A contrast of Mickey Kaus and Herbert Gans as two important theorists on the underclass raises important questions about American conceptualizations of poverty. Is the "underclass," as Kaus would maintain, a purely descriptive term with notions about the behavior and culture of a large segment of the poor that accurately depicts the underlying causes of poverty? Or, as Gans argues, does the use of "underclass" function as a pejorative and inaccurate label that masks the real causes of poverty thus discouraging effective anti-poverty policy? A discussion of their definitions and uses, causes, functions and consequences, and solutions not only illuminates essential issues in the underclass debate, it also generates wide-reaching implications for conceptions of poverty among the non-poor as they

may be influenced by underclass terminology. Indeed, the “urban underclass” represents the “latest effort to analyze, categorize, and react to poverty in America.”<sup>1</sup>

This focused, evaluative study of Kaus and Gans elucidates the discrepancies in both perspectives. Attempting to achieve a moderating position, I critique their broader arguments and limitations in terms of one another as well as other theorists including Wilson. Arriving eventually at considerations of ethnographic accounts of poverty and their potential to inform theoretical debates, I utilize Shipler to correct deficiencies in Kaus and Gans as they tend to be overly abstract and not in tune with individual realities of the poor. Finally I extrapolate from my findings to discuss what is currently at stake for poverty policy, especially in light of these cultural factors. In conclusion, I draw on Kaus, Gans, Wilson, and Shipler to offer a final discussion of what constitutes effective poverty policy, given both mainstream ideologies and perspectives as well as the realities, elucidated in ethnography, facing the poor today.

### **The Emergence of Underclass Rhetoric**

Underclass terminology gained much of the social implication it now carries in the early part of the 1980s. At a time of high economic growth, generous spending on social welfare, and at least structurally reduced racial segregation following the Civil Rights movement, many Americans began to question the formation of an “underclass” concentrated in urban areas with high rates of crime, welfare dependency, and out-of-wedlock births.<sup>2</sup> The term gained real authority with the publication of Ken Auletta’s book *The Underclass*, the first authoritative social scientist text on the “underclass.” Conservatives were quick to explain this rising faction of social pathology especially evident in inner-city minority populations. Some “conservatives

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<sup>1</sup> Carole Marks, “The Urban Underclass,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991) 445.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Katz, *Improving Poor People* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 73.

placed the blame on welfare and government social programs, which, they argued, had demoralized the poor by eroding incentives to work, undermining family stability, and nurturing a self-perpetuating culture of dependence.”<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead attributed causation to individual failings, asserting that “it is much tougher today than formerly to attribute poverty to forces outside the needy themselves.”<sup>4</sup> Both of these perspectives supported the idea of an urban underclass. With the manipulation of a term that previously had signified a problematic, though not ostensibly immoral, segment of inner city poverty, the “underclass” now exercised a value judgment, labeling the poor as a “demoralized” population.

These claims were met with strident criticisms from social scientists who refuted them as empirically unsubstantiated, but the conservative definition “had tapped the issues that troubled many Americans and had offered clear answers. Many remained predisposed to believe them, despite evidence to the contrary.”<sup>5</sup> Yet this rhetorical victory for conservatives set a precedent in poverty debate; while conservatives continued to supply the “intellectual mortar” for a “war on welfare,” liberal arguments failed to achieve the same level of saliency or offer succinct “answers” to the “basic questions posed by conservatives.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some argue that liberal politics still act as more of a respondent than a key player in poverty policy debates and, now, turning to a discussion of Kaus and Gans will further this criticism.

### **Comparing Kaus and Gans: A Discussion of the “Underclass” Concept**

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<sup>3</sup> Katz 73.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence M. Mead, Welfare in America: Christian Perspectives on a Policy Crisis, Ed. Stanley W. Carlson-Thies and James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996) 213.

<sup>5</sup> Katz 73.

<sup>6</sup> Katz 73.

In comparing and contrasting Kaus and Gans, I first consider the definitions and subsequent uses each theorist articulates. I then analyze the apparent causal factors each author associates with the formation of an “underclass.” Third, I articulate the resultant functions and consequences of these terms or labels that each researcher correlates with the “underclass.” Finally, I discuss the recommendations each author offers as an attempt to ameliorate persistent, urban poverty, especially as it is informed by cultural considerations. This comparison between Kaus and Gans, as they are both politically liberal, provides for a fascinating discussion of the “underclass.” While their analyses of the term’s meaning, causes, and effects take completely different avenues, these largely contradictory views reconvene in the realm of perceived solutions and policy recommendations. Yet aside from simply providing a comprehensive definition of the “underclass,” it is imperative to understand its broader place in our society as culturally mediated and historically dependent in its origins, intentions, variations, and functions. Indeed, as a descriptor, a label, and, as Kaus argues, a real social entity, conceptualizations of the “underclass” pervade recent literature on poverty and, Gans would proffer, contribute to an active cultural construction of the poor in America—one that arguably has significant implications for the direction and effectiveness of anti-poverty policy.

### **Defining the Underclass**

The most readily identifiable difference between Kaus and Gans lies in their definition and use of the term itself. Kaus definitively argues that a very real and threatening underclass exists, for “the problem we are talking about is the culture of our largely black (and largely urban) ghettos,” which generate not only “the most intractable part” of the poor, but also “the

part that poses the greatest threat to the public sphere and social equality.”<sup>7</sup> Thus when underclass values that are distinctly different from those of the “*non*-underclasses” combine with these concentrated social problems, they can inhibit the “natural ability of even a robust economy to pull people out of poverty.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, Kaus views the underclass as an incredibly effective socializing agent and its socialized community members as viable threats to the well-being and order of larger society.

Kaus believes urban ghettos harbor a “vicious cycle” of geographically concentrated social problems defined in a dysfunctional, oppositional culture coupled with sustained, persistent poverty and therefore welfare dependency.<sup>9</sup> To substantiate these claims, Kaus then cites empirical evidence from Sawhill and Ricketts identifying actual populations who meet his definitive criteria as members of “extreme poverty areas” as well as persons inhabiting neighborhoods plagued with “a high incidence of social problems (female headed families; welfare receipt; low male participation in the workforce; school dropouts).”<sup>10</sup>

Kaus uses the term predominantly as a behavioral label, claiming, for instance, “underclass areas are awful environments that produce a large subculture of criminality, often violent criminality.”<sup>11</sup> Yet in identifying the underclass as the primary obstacle to social equality, Kaus implies the simultaneous economic deprivation and social isolation of the behavioral underclass. Despite Kaus’ tendency to downplay the importance of money, his use of the term underclass *is* partially economic, a nuance that distinguishes Kaus from others who, on

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<sup>7</sup> Mickey Kaus, *The End of Equality* (New York: New Republic, 1992) 106.

<sup>8</sup> Kaus, *End* 105.

<sup>9</sup> Kaus, *End* 104.

<sup>10</sup> Kaus, *End* 105-6. Sawhill and Ricketts’ data defines an “extreme poverty area” as 40% or more of the population falls below the poverty line. When a “high incidence” of “social problems” is cited, it means they were found to occur at least at one standard deviation above the mean.

<sup>11</sup> Kaus, *End* 107.

strictly behavioral terms, would classify all persons whose “behavior is both individually and socially harmful” as underclass, regardless of income.<sup>12</sup>

Emerging from an entirely different theoretical standpoint, Gans’ interest in and treatment of underclass terminology in *The War Against the Poor* provide a stark but illuminating contrast to Kaus. Opposing himself to “most users of the behavioral underclass terminology” who, like Kaus, “believe in a real underclass,” Gans boldly contends, “there is no such class, and that it is merely today’s popular label to stereotype poor people.”<sup>13</sup> Personally he views the “underclass” notion as a culturally constructed and socially legitimated phenomenon. Interestingly, Gans’ own conceptualizations of “underclass” terminology differ from those his book investigates, and he adopts the opposing definition in an effort to deconstruct it. Accordingly, the definition Gans critically assesses closely resembles Kaus’ underclass as a behavioral term describing a poor population “accused, rightly or wrongly, of failing to behave in the ‘mainstream’ ways” of the middle class.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Kaus, however, Gans uses the underclass term with great skepticism because he recognizes that the “very flexibility of the behavioral definition is what lends itself to the term becoming a label that can be used to stigmatize poor people, whatever their actual behavior.”<sup>15</sup>

Gans argues the underclass label engenders a distorted interpretation of reality, enabling powerful stigmatization that can have a notable influence on poverty policy as well as the lives of the poor themselves. Analyzing this socially-constructed “war of words,” Gans investigates rhetorical usage and construction of words that, like the underclass, are used to talk negatively

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald B. Mincy, Isabel V. Sawhill, and Douglas A. Wolf, “The Underclass: Definition and Measurement,” *Science* 248.4954 (1990) 450.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *The War Against the Poor* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gans 2.

<sup>15</sup> Gans 2.

about the poor.<sup>16</sup> Rather than being tedious or petty, Gans' focused investigation highlights subtle but significant nuances, such as the distinction between "labels" and "*terms*, the latter aiming to describe and not to stigmatize," while the former, in stigmatizing, carries an implicit moral judgment.<sup>17</sup> Thus his own use of the term involves critical analysis, not active labeling; he seeks to evaluate "notions like 'the underclass' and the 'undeserving poor' [as] words that justify actions," especially those which subject the poor to "mistreatment" and "punishment."<sup>18</sup>

Kaus, in identifying this "real phenomenon" as a social problem that needs to be—and he believes can be—cured, shares Mead's perspective that poor persons exemplify pathological behavior, such as welfare dependency and rampant joblessness. Conversely, Gans would condemn Kaus' critical use of the term underclass, arguing that it implicitly entails a moral judgment of the poor, perpetuating a socially constructed underclass stereotype and obscuring the realities of poverty. Gans would consider Kaus' equally academic inquiry about the underclass as opposed to his own, for Kaus uses it as a behavioral – and thus pejorative – label. Though he admits "only a fraction" of the poor actually qualify as "underclass," Kaus continues to utilize this language to legitimate the "underclass" as a significant population and to emphasize the urgency with which we must combat this underclass threat.<sup>19</sup> Gans would argue that because it extrapolates "from small kernels of truth about some people to large imagined untruths that are applied to everyone in a group," Kaus' label of negatively misrepresents the poor.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, while Kaus would argue that his use of underclass is merely a descriptive "term," Gans explains "when the same word" is used as a term and a label, often "readers choose to see 'label,'" illustrating the power such rhetorical constructions have in influencing cultural

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<sup>16</sup> Gans 3.

<sup>17</sup> Gans 12.

<sup>18</sup> Gans 3.

<sup>19</sup> Kaus, *End* 11.

<sup>20</sup> Gans 12.

conceptions of the poor and other stigmatized groups.<sup>21</sup> Kaus echoes contemporary discussions of urban poverty, which “invoke an ‘underclass,’ defined primarily by bad behavior, not by poverty, and deemed to be more in need of improvement than cash.”<sup>22</sup> Yet this effort to improve the poor, “not only has misdiagnosed the issues; it also time and again has deflected attention from the structural origins and from the difficult and uncomfortable responses they require.”<sup>23</sup> While Kaus does present some indisputably negative depictions of the poor, scholars such as William Julius Wilson would simultaneously accuse Gans of simply glossing over negative cultural and behavioral realities, an omission that also obscures reality.<sup>24</sup> .

### **Causes and the “Making” of an Underclass**

Unlike many liberals whose cultural explanations envision the poor’s dysfunctional behaviors as distressed, desperate responses to abject poverty, Kaus critically assesses liberal politics and American social trends as he attempts to carve out a path toward social equality. As part of his overall discussion of social equality, Kaus’ interest in an actual “underclass” stems from his stringent criticisms of “money liberal” politics and the corresponding welfare policy. Given these factors, Kaus then discusses the emergence and sustenance of an isolated and culturally deviant faction of the poor in the underclass. However, it is first important to note what exactly Kaus means by “social equality.” Quite distinct from money equality, social equality involves a “substantive” evaluation of people’s “attitudes,” especially feelings of dignity, as they are united with others in society primarily through their common status as “equal

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<sup>21</sup> Gans 12.

<sup>22</sup> Katz 4.

<sup>23</sup> Katz 4.

<sup>24</sup> William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears* (New York: Knopf, 1996) xiii-xxiii.



members.”<sup>25</sup> This concept is closely related to and often discussed in terms of “social distance,” that is, the perceived space between the social experiences of two or more groups in society.

Kaus condemns “money liberalism” as a perversion of true liberal ideals. Through his “money liberal” term, Kaus indicts liberals in their tendency to over-value money and, at least historically, consider it as a cure-all solution to poverty. Kaus is most critical of the liberal focus on income equality, especially as it represents a relative impossibility in our capitalist society.<sup>26</sup> In a constant effort to equalize income, money liberal “welfare” policy has generated “a class whose values are so inimical to America’s potential universal culture that its negation, and transformation, will allow those universal values to flower,” thus engendering social equality.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, Kaus criticizes the money liberal agenda of “the American left,” who, “by promoting no-strings entitlements and denying the power of the work ethic” created an underclass: “a class of isolated, stigmatized, dependent poor.”<sup>28</sup> In discussing “welfare,” it is imperative to note that *The End of Equality* was published in 1992 and thus preceded the 1996 reforms that changed welfare from a means-tested entitlement program to work-tested aid with time limits. While distinguishing Kaus’ position in this crucial time of welfare reform is illustrative, I return to this consideration later. Kaus’ moderating comment in his critique of liberal policy asserts “the point is that money equality isn’t the only variable in the equation that determines social equality, and it may not be the crucial variable.”<sup>29</sup>

Correspondingly, it is this money-based “solution,” welfare, which he holds as responsible for persistent dependency and the development of a ghetto underclass culture. Kaus

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<sup>25</sup> Kaus, *End* 16.

<sup>26</sup> Kaus, *End* 11.

<sup>27</sup> Kaus, *End* 105.

<sup>28</sup> Mickey Kaus, “TANF and ‘Welfare:’ Further Steps toward the Work-Ethic State,” *The Brookings Review* 19.3 (2001) 47.

<sup>29</sup> Kaus, *End* 20.

criticizes our “handout” system that first *enabled* then maintained the underclass.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, he goes so far as to say “Welfare is what subsidized and sustained a demoralizing lower-class culture in the ghettos,” illustrating that such “benefit programs” act as the “mode of production” of urban ghettos and underclass culture.<sup>31</sup> Kaus indicts welfare as “the umbilical cord through which the mainstream society sustains the isolated ghetto society...It is an economic life support system.”<sup>32</sup> However, unlike Charles Murray who blames welfare and specifically the pre-reform program AFDC for the growth of the underclass, Kaus acknowledges welfare policy *alone* cannot be responsible for its existence.<sup>33</sup> However, Kaus neglects to explicitly articulate *how* welfare necessarily engenders an entire *culture* of negative behavior, relying solely on assumptions that welfare indeed *does* endorse and uphold out-of-wedlock births, joblessness, crime, and other dysfunctional behaviors.

In his discussion of causation, Gans once again depicts a dichotomy between his own perspective and the underclass label he deconstructs. Gans himself accepts a sympathetic view of the poor, identifying social-structural factors that limit opportunity as responsible for poverty. Gans argues that people are in poverty largely, if not entirely, because of factors beyond their control, such as the structurally limited opportunity schemes of urban ghetto environments. Informed by his structural perspective, Gans also criticizes others’ use of the underclass as a pejorative label, especially given the ways such labels can legitimate punitive treatments of the poor.

On the grounds of his social-structural perspective, Gans refutes the “mainstream” belief “that the poor people who behave in the ways included in the definition [of the underclass] do so

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<sup>30</sup> Kaus, *End* 116-7.

<sup>31</sup> Kaus, *End* 119, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Kaus, *End* 117.

<sup>33</sup> Kaus, *End* 110. Aid for Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) represents one of – if not the – most criticized welfare programs in American history, largely because of its solely means-tested benefits.

because of moral deficiencies or bad values.”<sup>34</sup> To correct this alleged misconception, he argues that such behaviors are far from the norm, though “when they do occur, [they] are in fact usually *poverty-related effects*.”<sup>35</sup> Beyond economic destitution and institutional constraint, Gans posits the poor as victims of unfairly assigned stigmas, as well as a disproportionate amount of discrimination. These factors all relate to two others that contribute to both conceptualized poverty and its reality. First, Gans asserts a socially constructed understanding of the urban poor. Herein identified as a social problem, this group is then pejoratively labeled as a culturally deficient “underclass.” The very premise of Gans’ book discusses real effects of culturally constructed ideas, a process which he exemplifies in his discussion of the labeling process. He asserts that nearly all labels originate from “a small core of truth” or accurately “apply ‘to a few bad apples.’”<sup>36</sup> However, they become deeply inaccurate and potentially harmful as the labels expand, because they then tend to punish “not only the bad apples but everybody in the population to whom the label is applied.”<sup>37</sup>

While this extrapolation certainly fosters misconceptions about the poor, Gans’ use of social-structural factors as perpetuating poverty helps to explain how such “labeling” is “a by-product of a larger structural process that cannot be ignored,” though labels sometimes function to obscure it.<sup>38</sup> This structural process results from economic and social structural deprivation that plagues inner-city ghetto neighborhoods, intensely limits opportunities, and thus engenders a culture of so-called “underclass” values that the poor “could not choose and did not want.”<sup>39</sup> More explicitly, Gans defends this process as a natural response to deficiencies. Essentially, in the absence of legal work, recreation, or other opportunities, undesirable or even illicit

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<sup>34</sup> Gans 2.

<sup>35</sup> Gans 2.

<sup>36</sup> Gans 69.

<sup>37</sup> Gans 69.

<sup>38</sup> Gans 69.

<sup>39</sup> Gans 26.

alternatives to the “mainstream” culture will inevitably act as a replacements for opportunities regularly made unavailable among the ghetto poor. When opportunity is so limited, the poor become effectively “entrapped,” sometimes to the extent that the poor are forced to act in direct opposition with their values. Indeed, labels “may sometimes force the labeled to behave in ways defined by and in the labels,” precisely because other actions have been closed to them.<sup>40</sup> One example of this occurs when institutions that serve the poor, based solely on the expectation that the “labeled” will act according to her pejorative characterization, may reduce the quality of service, or simply refuse to serve at all. Moreover, in labeling an “underclass” as culturally dysfunctional, for instance, labelers once again refract blame onto the poor themselves, especially as the label’s “focus on behavior” obscures and “hides the poverty causing it, and substitutes as its cause moral or cultural or genetic failures.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Gans would criticize Kaus’ in his use of underclass terminology as it “turns a definition into an actual set of people [and] hides the reality that the underclass is an imagined group that has been constructed in the minds of its definers.”<sup>42</sup> This “reification” is one of many dangerous results of labeling.

Gans argues that the underclass label, as used by Kaus, as well as Ricketts and Sawhill, bears “some resemblance to popular pejorative labels that condemn rather than understand behavior.”<sup>43</sup> Gans’ critique of these authors elucidates his own stance assigning causation to structural constraints. Because these authors neglect to “consider the possibility that failure of the mainstream economy is what prevents [poor] people from achieving the norms [the nonpoor] are setting for the poor,” they mask important sources of poverty that in turn, wrongly assigns blame to the poor themselves.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Gans 12.

<sup>41</sup> Gans 59.

<sup>42</sup> Gans 61.

<sup>43</sup> Gans 63.

<sup>44</sup> Gans 63.

Gans would criticize Kaus for perpetuating an inaccurate stereotype in his use of the underclass. I am also critical of his contradictory call for social equality coupled with the use of a stigmatizing, dehumanizing label. Unlike Kaus, Wilson would not assume the poor's joblessness as causing a dysfunctional culture. Moreover, I disagree with Kaus' direct correlation that welfare use means welfare dependency. Utilizing such a label to describe a poor population Kaus ostensibly seeks to help identifies the dangers of casual use of stigmatizing terms. Gans would concur with this, especially at the risk of dramatically exacerbating social inequality that Kaus so fears

### **Functions and Consequences of Underclass Conceptualizations**

Interestingly, in both Kaus and Gans' discussions of the functions and consequences of underclass conceptualizations, both emphatically stress the explicit "danger" of the underclass. For Kaus it represents an explicit "threat," both to the safety and well-being of society and to social equality. The breakdown of important public institutions has been motivated by a "fear of the 'ghetto poor' underclass" (103). For Gans, however, it represents the "human dangers" of labeling.

Kaus focuses on the consequences of the *phenomenon* and his biggest complaint is that a real underclass and its inimical values stand in the way of social equality. Indeed, "the very existence of an underclass, of course, represents a profound violation of social equality."<sup>45</sup> Kaus' concern with rising social inequality motivates his discussion of a "rising" population of "underclass" as "a group of people who do not behave in accordance with existing social norms" but rather engage a "high incidence of [...] dysfunctional behaviors."<sup>46</sup> Here, the very definition

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<sup>45</sup> Kaus, *End* 103.

<sup>46</sup> Mincy, et al 450.

of the term impugns the poor, especially as it is expanded with the assumption that “the behavioral underclass” represents “those whose upward mobility is constrained by their own behavior.”<sup>47</sup>

Kaus also prioritizes the breakdown of key social institutions as a simultaneous factor with the underclass presence. He argues that social inequality today derives from the “breakdown of public sphere institutions (like the draft and schools) that once discouraged the translation of those differences into inegalitarian attitudes.”<sup>48</sup> Because of increased cultural associations of money and self-worth, the rich have increasingly separated themselves from the poor, decreasing the class-mixing that public-sphere institutions used to provide. Restoring these institutions, Kaus posits, would not only rectify the underclass problem and re-assimilate its residents, but also would, over time, engender social equality, despite entrenched inequality over social or income boundaries. While many other theorists cite racial discrimination as part of the reason that African Americans and minorities comprise a disproportionately large segment of the poor, Kaus seems to believe it is rather the fear of the underclass that engenders “middle-class resentment” and “its attendant racial prejudice.”<sup>49</sup> What, then, is the function of Kaus’ underclass? Kaus argues that while scholars cannot decide on a “single, precise definition,” “that doesn’t mean ‘underclass’ fails to usefully describe something...The key point is that, when concentrated in ghetto neighborhoods, all these problems reinforce each other in a way that frustrates the power of even a robust economy to pull people out of poverty.”<sup>50</sup> Gans would identify this argument as problematic because it assumes a strong economy will just pull people out of poverty as long as they do not possess the pathological traits. Kaus also neglects to

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<sup>47</sup> Mincy, et al 450.

<sup>48</sup> Kaus, *End* 181.

<sup>49</sup> Kaus, *End* 149.

<sup>50</sup> Kaus, *End* 105.

consider, for example, the working poor who, as Shieler will show us, actively look for work or do hold jobs yet cannot bring themselves out of poverty.

As Gans attempts to illustrate the ways in which “underclass” and other “pejorative” labels “stereotype, stigmatize, and harass the poor by questioning their morality and their values,” he also explores the functions of such underclass terminology.<sup>51</sup> Implicitly or explicitly negative conceptualizations of the poor often result in obscuring the structural constraints and subjecting the poor to overt moral judgments. The “underclass” or “urban underclass” labels that have largely dominated the cultural discourse on poverty in the early 1990s represent one such negative conceptualization that Gans maintains “can have dangerous effects for the poor and for anti-poverty policy” (58). In another publication, Gans argues the “term has taken on so many connotations of...blameworthiness that it has become hopelessly polluted in meaning, ideological overtone and implications and should be dropped.”<sup>52</sup>

Gans sees the pejorative label as legitimating “punitive” behavior toward the poor as a response to their assumed personal moral and behavioral shortcomings, unfairly stigmatizing the poor, and becoming a euphemism for *all* poor despite the fact that it only applies to small or negligible percent of the population. The way underclass has been constructed is responsible for these misperceptions, and as Gans argues, underclass terminology, as a symbol for the undeserving, has become one of the largest barriers to effective policy enactment.

All labels carry some degree of both inadequacy and inaccuracy as they generalize a group so it may fit compactly in the space of a few words. Gans argues “underclass” terminology has become an umbrella label, lumping “into a single term a variety of diverse

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<sup>51</sup> Gans 1.

<sup>52</sup> Gans qtd in Marks, 460.

people with different problems.”<sup>53</sup> An umbrella label by definition signifies other faults through a single label, a process called “the interchangeability of defects.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the inaccuracy of this umbrella label influences cultural conceptions of the poor and obscures the reality of poverty in today’s inner cities. Gans furthers the idea that a label can “never” accurately depict the labeled because it “mainly describes their imagined behavioral and moral deviations from an assumed mainstream” and expresses the “the discontents of the mainstream and those speaking for it, not the characteristics and conditions of the labeled themselves.”<sup>55</sup> His explicit argument here states that “mainstream” culture—and, importantly, its *discontents*—perpetuate the inaccurate labeling of the socially isolated, less powerful poor. This implicit power imbalance reflects the role of labels in perpetuating myth, and by extension, stigmas, for “stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power.”<sup>56</sup> Aside from their role in stigmatizing the poor, labels reinforce broader cultural ideologies legitimating inequality and unfair treatment of the poor. Current cultural constructions of poverty in turn facilitate increased inequality while at the same time legitimating it, using pejorative stigmas and moral judgments on an already disproportionately underprivileged population.

Gans argues that, as a society, we have become complicit in engendering a dangerous and destructive process of labeling the poor. Thus, while the “better-off” may see the poor as “undeserving” because of the “threats” they impose or the public assistance they receive, impose on society at large, such “labeling...has some uses, or positive functions, or beneficial consequences, for more fortunate Americans.”<sup>57</sup> Though these functions represent “consequences” rather than “intent,” their beneficiaries nevertheless develop an interest in

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<sup>53</sup> Gans 65.

<sup>54</sup> Gans 117.

<sup>55</sup> Gans 73.

<sup>56</sup> Bruce Link and Jo Phelan, “Conceptualizing Stigma,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001) 363-85.

<sup>57</sup> Gans 91.



sustaining them. Correspondingly, identifying these factors in our own society is particularly enlightening for a critique of such labels, especially given our attention to stigma and power hierarchies. Gans believes our culture constructs such labels about the poor to serve three normative functions. The first “normative function” Gans identifies is that of “moral legitimation,” for when social groups and structures stigmatize and exclude the underclass, they emphasize the “moral and political legitimacy of the rest of the class system.”<sup>58</sup> Secondly, underclass labels bring about “value reinforcement,” as the underclass violations of “mainstream behavioral patterns and values” help to “reinforce and reaffirm the desirability of these patterns and values.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, the underclass can function as “cultural villains,” whose supposed criminalities reinforce the values celebrated by mainstream society. Villianizing the poor may fill “the normative need for misbehaving,” or illustrate “exaggerated and imagined behavioral threats.”<sup>60</sup> Yet the most offensive aspect of these culturally constructed ideas is the extent to which neither represent reality *or* have productive effects on antipoverty legislation. Until we realize that “labeling and blaming the poor only supply symptomatic temporary relief but solve nothing,” cultural constructions of poverty and their bearing on public policy will continue to suffer.<sup>61</sup>

Labels, umbrella terms, and stereotypes largely influence the way in which mainstream America understands (or, fails to understand) the poor. When labels unfairly stigmatize the poor, mainstream perceptions of the poor become increasingly inaccurate and misrepresentative. While much has been said about stigmas, such as their potential to become internalized beliefs inculcated by the stigmatized, I do not discuss them at length in this paper. However, one aspect of stigma research that merits noting suggests “when people are labeled, set apart, and linked to

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<sup>58</sup> Gans 95.

<sup>59</sup> Gans 96.

<sup>60</sup> Gans 97.

<sup>61</sup> Gans 102.

undesirable characteristics, a rationale is constructed for devaluing, rejecting, and excluding them.”<sup>62</sup> Moreover, “stigmatized groups are disadvantaged when it comes to a general profile of life chances like income, education, psychological well-being, housing status, medical treatment, and health.”<sup>63</sup> Though stigmatization can have negative impacts when internalized by the poor, the most important consequence of labels like the underclass is their role in generating punitive, paternalistic legislation that exacerbates the original problem by increasing deprivation.

All labels obscure the discrepancies between perceived and real because they generalize and stereotype, but labels on the poor have a direct bearing on the potential of these misperceptions to become incorporated in policy legislation. Moreover, the destructive potential of labeling only expands when we yet again consider the structural constraints in urban environments and the reality of poverty in these city centers. Indeed as I have shown, the inaccuracy of such umbrella labels influences cultural conceptions of the poor and obscures the reality of poverty in today’s inner cities. Gans would argue that today’s socially maintained isolation of the poor directly correlates not to their declining values or escalating “bad” behavior, but is increasingly enabled and perpetuated first, by gross income inequality and the self-exclusion of the upperclasses, a phenomenon that is substantiated, legitimated, and endlessly reinforced with the use of misleading pejorative labels. Though Kaus may criticize Gans as a money liberal for referencing income inequality, Gans identifies the most worrisome feature of labels such as the “underclass” as their potential to hide real structural causes. Thus, the use of terms such as the underclass exacerbate social isolation as the poor become increasingly stigmatized.

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<sup>62</sup> Link and Phelan 370-1.

<sup>63</sup> Link and Phelan 371.

The central problematic idea in Kaus' theory emerges in the contradiction between his emphatic pursuit of social equality and the pejorative labeling of the biggest obstacle to this equality, a culturally dysfunctional underclass. Kaus adamantly privileges social equality over money equality and, for example, laments the culturally-established connection between monetary gains and human- or self-worth explicitly because it robs the poor of human dignity. This poses a vivid contradiction to his seeming indifference to the stigmatization he casts through his use of underclass terminology. It is not the case, however, that he is unaware, for he fully admits that many of the poor, and "all blacks," endure the unfair stigma of an "underclass minority" which comprises "only a fraction" of the poor.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, this reference marks a rare occurrence where Kaus actively differentiates the poor in general from the alleged underclass. More frequently the boundary remains unarticulated. In neglecting to actively distinguish these groups, a generalized "underclass" becomes seemingly indistinguishable from the overall poor population and perpetuates the application of this "unfair stigma" to all poor. This perhaps unwitting extension epitomizes precisely the danger of labeling that Gans identifies. Most dangerously, the inaccuracy of extension influences cultural conceptions of the poor and obscures the reality of poverty in today's inner cities.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Society**

Kaus believes "changing welfare" is the only option available in combating poverty because it will make "ghetto culture economically unsustainable."<sup>65</sup> If there is one statement that captures nearly all the major concerns Mickey Kaus has with poverty policy, this is it:

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<sup>64</sup> Kaus, *End* 106.

<sup>65</sup> Kaus, *End* 124.

Specifically, if it's the underclass that destroys the possibility of a sufficiently capacious civic sphere, it's the solution to the underclass problem that offers the normative foundation for a culture of equality. We're looking for a value, shared by rich and poor alike, on which to build an egalitarian life. And there seems to me only one real candidate: work.<sup>66</sup>

Kaus' main policy recommendation, then, is a guaranteed public jobs program that he argues will "break the culture of poverty by providing jobs for ghetto men and women who may have little work history and few work habits—at the same time as we end the option of a life on welfare for single-mothers."<sup>67</sup> The scope of Kaus' program is significant: public jobs are available to anyone in society. Kaus believes "the state's basic obligation is to provide decent work for all who are able and a decent income for the disabled," and accordingly he limits cash benefits to workers' wages and the disabled.<sup>68</sup> By decent job, Kaus means one that, worked full-time, would ensure living "with dignity, out of poverty."<sup>69</sup> Controversially, no other benefits would be allocated to the able bodied-poor, excepting child care for working mothers, job training, and transportation when needed. He admits readily that "this aid will be stigmatizing" and "frankly paternalistic," but it is also "compassionate:" the government "could (and should) offer to subsidize all the counseling, therapy, and job training it could afford," thus rendering as much of the population as possible as "able-bodied" workers.<sup>70</sup> Kaus views this as the transformation of the welfare state into his ideal, the "Work Ethic State." Aside from guaranteed work, Kaus argues for a direct approach to increasing social equality, through common programs such as universal health care that benefit all members of society. These recommendations propose to

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<sup>66</sup> Kaus *End* 104.

<sup>67</sup> Kaus, *End* 127.

<sup>68</sup> Kaus, *End* 128.

<sup>69</sup> Kaus, *End* 125.

<sup>70</sup> Kaus, *End* 128.

end the indignity and “disgrace visited on the underclass by welfare itself” as the poor would be reintegrated into mainstream society.<sup>71</sup>

In some ways the 1996 welfare reforms were a step in this direction and took “a major, perhaps decisive step to dissolve this threat to equality.”<sup>72</sup> While work requirements present an unquestionable improvement from legitimated dependency, a crucial part of where the reforms fall short, Kaus believes, is in the discrepancy between work mandates and the availability of economically sustainable jobs in the private sector.<sup>73</sup> Thus the only true test for the success of the 1996 welfare reforms will be the degree to which:

in the long run the largely urban, largely minority, welfare reliant ghetto poor culture is absorbed into the mainstream American culture—whether the “underclass” neighborhoods improve, employment rises, the out-of-wedlock birth ratio declines, the streets become safer, and children do better in school.<sup>74</sup>

Thus Kaus believes a greater interest in social equality must predicate any effective policy aiding the poor. With this in mind, he argues, it is “no time to turn back.”<sup>75</sup>

Regarding policy, Gans criticizes the inadequacy of current welfare “*subsistence* policy,” which may “start deteriorating into a *survival* mode.”<sup>76</sup> As he calls for an increase in the aid given to the poor, he hopes to “revive the liberal approach to antipoverty policy, and with it the pursuit of effective programs to help the poor.”<sup>77</sup> Gans argues that helping the “labeled poor” first requires removing the pejorative labels that invariably stigmatize impoverished persons, especially as “underclass labels,” as a symbol for the undeserving, have become one of the

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<sup>71</sup> Kaus, *End* 137.

<sup>72</sup> Kaus, “TANF” 47.

<sup>73</sup> Kaus, “TANF” 45.

<sup>74</sup> Kaus, “TANF” 44.

<sup>75</sup> Kaus, “TANF” 47.

<sup>76</sup> Gans 103.

<sup>77</sup> Gans 109.

largest barriers to effective policy concerning the poor.<sup>78</sup> Gans seeks to remove the label of undeservingness, first by providing opportunities for the poor to be deserving and secondly, by correcting stereotypes that stigmatize the poor and identifying the displaced threats that the poor represents for the nonpoor.

Citing the structural limitations that inhibit the poor's effective involvement in the mainstream economy, he posits that the poor "need income grants in lieu of work and as a non-punitive entitlement" because of jobs unavailability as well as the number of workers whose jobs neglect to bring them out of poverty.<sup>79</sup> This is in direct conflict with Kaus. Thus, Gans maintains that "ending welfare before non-punitive 'welfare reform' can be achieved, or in the mere hope that it will be achieved, would be disastrous."<sup>80</sup> These realizations aside, Gans identifies that "one of the most effective ways of removing a label of undeservingness is to give the poor an opportunity to be deserving," as he visualizes in a "job-centered anti-poverty policy" available for all those who can work.<sup>81</sup> This job-centered policy "promises integration into the mainstream economy" because it offers "jobs that are decent and pay decently" in salaries and benefits, and that are "as secure as the jobs sought by everyone else" and provide the opportunity for advancement.<sup>82</sup> This program is remarkably similar to Kaus' recommendations. Kaus would criticize, however, Gans' willingness to provide aid to those who do not—or Kaus may argue will not—work.

Gans stresses the need for "*correcting*" stigmatizing stereotypes and imagined or displaced threats that the undeserving poor represent for the better-off population.<sup>83</sup> To end the pejorative conceptualizations of the poor that labels like "the underclass" engender, Gans argues

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<sup>78</sup> Gans 69.

<sup>79</sup> Gans 114.

<sup>80</sup> Gans 115.

<sup>81</sup> Gans 103.

<sup>82</sup> Gans 107.

<sup>83</sup> Gans 103.

we must seek actively to “debunk the stereotypes of the undeserving poor, to question the credibility and social desirability of such notions,” and investigate these issues with attention to the higher classes as well.<sup>84</sup> Gans suggests we go about this “debunking” by use of “popular ethnography.”<sup>85</sup> Concerning labels, one of the most urgently needed “debunking” stories might “report on various agencies that affect the lives of the poor, and that sometimes make their clients appear to be undeserving when they are trying hard to stay in the mainstream.”<sup>86</sup> In using this method, however, Gans makes clear the point that “to describe or explain is not to justify, but to point out that the world of the poor differs in many respects from that of the better-off, that the poor act on the basis of understandable reasons just like everyone else, and that knowing these is, at least in the long run, helpful to alleviating poverty.”<sup>87</sup>

In these specific ways, Gans argues for reduced “undeservingness,” but his recommendations encompass just part of a broader goal of ‘nudging’ “the structures of economic and political inequality, as well as traditional American individualism...in a more egalitarian direction.”<sup>88</sup> Kaus would criticize Gans’ focus on money and acceptance of welfare, arguing that these superficial concerns mask the social egalitarian concerns that underlay liberal thinking. Indeed, Gans’ admission of his “broader goal” seems to support this claim. As we shall see, however, neither Kaus nor Gans’ positions nor solutions adequately address the problem of the poor today in America.

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<sup>84</sup> Gans 118.

<sup>85</sup> Gans 119-20.

<sup>86</sup> Gans 120.

<sup>87</sup> Gans 120.

<sup>88</sup> Gans 147.

### **Critiquing Kaus and Gans: Developing a Moderating Perspective**

Kaus and Gans overlap in a common end goal: to improve and dignify the lives of the poor. However, their divergent perspectives seem to echo the culture versus structure debate that has informed much of the recent literature on poverty. Indeed, as illustrated between Kaus and Gans, “the definition, conceptualization, and measurement of the urban underclass appear to overlay deeply held interpretive frameworks that tend to look for explanation in either structures or persons.”<sup>89</sup> Such a polarized discussion of the urban poor inhibits research, and in turn, policy that is actually effective in ameliorating the problems they study.

Because both Kaus and Gans construct such narrow conceptualizations of the poor, they provide an effective foil for one another, revealing strengths, weaknesses, inconsistencies, and inadequacies. However, when applied to the reality of poverty, neither perspective would fully accommodate an accurate and informed understanding of the circumstances manipulating the poor’s lives. As an alternative, Wilson can offer an enlightening critique of our two theorists, though, more importantly, his perspective finds similarities in both Kaus and Gans thus enabling an informed, moderating position. Wilson asserts the need for a more comprehensive conceptualization of the poor than Kaus, Gans, or arguably, any other prominent poverty scholar today, and such a full and accurate picture of the poor elucidates structural constraints Kaus ignores and cultural problems Gans neglects. His perspective holds that “social psychological variables—a set of factors generally absent from the current debate—must be integrated with social structural and cultural variables.”<sup>90</sup> With such a broadened picture, theorists like Wilson can advance the direction of poverty research toward more accurate discussions of the impoverished, and in turn, to more effective policy initiatives and implementation.

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<sup>89</sup> Robert Pearson, “Social Statistics and an American Urban Underclass: Improving the Knowledge Base for Social Policy in the 1990s,” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 86.414 (1991) 506.

<sup>90</sup> Wilson xvi.



While Wilson would certainly discourage Kaus' overemphasized and, likely, overstated criticism of the poor's negative cultural behavior, he would also attempt to mediate Kaus' pejorative perspective of at least "some of these behaviors."<sup>91</sup> Wilson would redirect Kaus' attention to instances of destructive structural aspects that, embedded in ghetto environments, can legitimate or even necessitate pathological behaviors simply as "cultural responses to constraints and limited opportunities."<sup>92</sup> Kaus misrepresents Wilson's description of the "underclass" as possessing a "weak attachment to the labor force," because while Wilson acknowledges cultural and social psychological aspects of urban ghetto poor, he also acknowledges structural constraints.<sup>93</sup> Wilson's arguments about labor especially are implicitly structural, and the allegedly weak attachment to the labor force stems from structural constraints present in inner city ghettos. Similarly, "ghetto residents 'are surrounded by failure and come to expect the same'" because they "lose sight of and lose the capacity to pursue mainstream options,' as jobs in the inner-city disappear."<sup>94</sup> However, Kaus seems to acknowledge the structural factors at work against the poor when, in articulating recommendations for poverty policy, he guarantees jobs to account a structurally inadequate economic sphere.

In response to Gans' overt dismissal of behavior as a desperate response to structural constraints, on the other hand, Wilson would again encourage a broadened conceptualization of the poor and all of its multitudinous and inextricably related aspects. However, he would appreciate Gans' labeling critique, a discussion many recognize the need as the label "has rapidly taken on a meaning of its own in the public debate."<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Wilson would encourage the broadened perspective it would bring to his own position and especially that of Kaus, in forcing

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<sup>91</sup> Wilson xviii.

<sup>92</sup> Wilson xviii.

<sup>93</sup> Kaus, *End* 105.

<sup>94</sup> Ellwood, qtd. in M. Corcoran, "Rags to Riches: Poverty and Mobility in the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 21 (1995) 245.

<sup>95</sup> Marks 446.

us to consider the real effects that mainstream culture, in its words, values, or misconceptions, can have on the poor. This is especially significant when these effects extend to anti-poverty policy. However, Wilson would argue that Gans' under-consideration of the precarious day-to-day realities that poor individuals encounter, such as drug use and non-work, reflects "the tendency of some liberals to deny the very existence of culturally destructive behavior and attitudes in the inner city."<sup>96</sup> Wilson finds this almost as dangerous as Kaus' over-criticism. If Gans fails to consider or portray the bad realities along with the good, he potentially even risks romanticizing the poor. Wilson would encourage Gans to consider how negative realities, when ignored, have the potential to obscure reality as much as a pejorative but inaccurate label, instead presenting them as helpless victims.

Most importantly, in presenting a cursory or incomplete picture, Gans, like Kaus, could "once again...diminish the importance of the environment in determining the outcomes and life chances of individuals," regardless of whether these environmental features are structural or behavioral.<sup>97</sup> As this discussion notes, Wilson expresses the need for a position that does "not ignore or deny the existence of unflattering behaviors that emerge from blocked opportunities," but at the same time understand that "some of these behaviors, which often impede the social mobility of inner-city residents, represent cultural responses to constraints and limited opportunities that have evolved over time."<sup>98</sup> Wilson makes the enlightening observation that while "people in the inner-city ghetto do internalize the basic American idea that people can get ahead if they try," this belief is frequently at odds with "their perceptions and remarkably

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<sup>96</sup> Wilson xviii.

<sup>97</sup> Wilson xviii.

<sup>98</sup> Wilson xviii.

detailed descriptions of the social barriers that impede the social progress of inner-city ghetto residents.”<sup>99</sup>

### **A Turn to Ethnography**

As a practical answer to Wilson’s theoretical perspective, Marks articulates a call for ethnographic analysis, because this “emerging perspective both embraces and eschews different elements” of the structural and cultural perspectives, “attempting to ignore labels and understand instead ‘how people in real communities devise collective responses to their problems.’”<sup>100</sup>

David Shipler’s investigations of the working poor represent a new class of ethnographic research that has emerged in an attempt to challenge potentially crippling labels by elucidating the structural limitations that engender negative cultural or individual behaviors and providing a real picture of the poor. Small and Newman assert that with such research, “the rigid distinction between structural and cultural explanations has begun to loosen, and many sociologists now employ both types of explanations in their accounts of urban poverty” (35). This collaborative attempt to explain poverty presents a crucial advance toward realigning the public discourse on poverty issues in much the same way the initial “culture of poverty” theories appealed to both liberals and conservatives. However, while conservatives will undoubtedly retain their doctrine of individual responsibility and behavioral cultures, this new approach demands a simultaneous acknowledgement of real, empirical structural factors that limit opportunity as well as the negative cultural aspects of poverty. Acknowledging both sides encourages a greater balance of duty and responsibility, engendering more effective policy legislation.

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<sup>99</sup> Wilson 181.

<sup>100</sup> Marks 445.

In his ethnographic account *The Working Poor*, David Shipler articulates the necessity for this type of research on poverty where he argues “the first step is to see the problems, and the first problem is the failure to see the people.”<sup>101</sup> Couched within the framework of compelling personal narratives, Shipler’s informed criticisms of work and wages, immigrant labor, health care, sexual abuse, and education, give life to the “invisible, silent America” we otherwise fail to see.<sup>102</sup> Yet, in addressing the salient issues facing the poor in America, Shipler dodges Wilson’s accusation that ethnographers have been too relativistic, failing to articulate the pathologies that exist in ghetto communities and social structure even when they “represent cultural responses to constraints and limited opportunities that have evolved over time.”<sup>103</sup> Instead, Shipler’s text eschews romanticized notions of helpless victims, or pejorative generalizations of pathology, and demands instead that the “reality” is “somewhere on the spectrum between...personal and societal responsibility...the mixed product of bad choices and bad fortune.”<sup>104</sup>

It is broadly argued, as by Kaus and Gans, that poverty results from structural inadequacies *or* individual faults. Yet Shipler maintains that these factors are not mutually exclusive, but rather insists that poverty occupies the space between and is largely a function of the interplay between these two factions. Through participant interviews and qualitative analysis, Shipler concedes that while “it is difficult to find someone whose poverty is not somehow related to his or her unwise behavior,” it is equally “difficult to find behavior that is not somehow related to the inherited conditions of being poorly parented, poorly educated, poorly housed in neighborhoods from which no distant horizon of possibility can be seen.”<sup>105</sup> This position reflects Wilson’s “comprehensive” approach to studying poverty.

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<sup>101</sup> David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor* (New York: Vintage, 2004) 11.

<sup>102</sup> Shipler 11.

<sup>103</sup> Wilson xviii.

<sup>104</sup> Shipler 6.

<sup>105</sup> Shipler 6-7.

Shipler contextualizes his argument and his ethnographic research in a discussion of American cultural values as he clearly articulates as the “American Myth” and the “American Anti-Myth.” Drawing on our traditional cultural notion of the American Dream, “the American Myth still supposes that any individual from the humblest origins can climb to well-being.”<sup>106</sup> Shipler articulates the problematic assumption of this value, for while it could be useful in setting “a demanding standard, both for the nation and for every resident,” the Myth “also provides a mean of laying blame,” for “if a person’s diligent work leads to prosperity, if work is a moral virtue, and if anyone in the society can attain prosperity through work, then the failure to do so is a fall from righteousness.”<sup>107</sup> On the opposite extreme, the American Anti-Myth “holds the society largely responsible for the individual’s poverty” as “the individual is a victim of great forces beyond his control.”<sup>108</sup> However, Shipler argues, the reality is that most “people do not fit easily into myths or anti-myths” but rather “stand on various points along the spectrum between the polar opposites of personal and society responsibility.”<sup>109</sup>

This perspective informs theorists like Kaus who criticizes an underclass that directly opposes these central values of American culture, for “when concentrated in ghetto neighborhoods, all these problems reinforce each other in a way that frustrates the power of even a robust economy to pull people out of poverty.”<sup>110</sup> Here, Shipler would argue, the American myth legitimates blame, leading to the pejorative labels Gans cites. However, Kaus neglects to consider, for example, the working poor who as Shipler and others show us, actively look for work or do hold jobs yet cannot bring themselves out of poverty. Importantly, Shipler’s

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<sup>106</sup> Shipler 5.

<sup>107</sup> Shipler 5.

<sup>108</sup> Shipler 6.

<sup>109</sup> Shipler 6.

<sup>110</sup> Kaus, *End* 105.

relativism deconstructs the pristine reputation of Gans' poor as well, and he maintains that neither a structural nor a cultural causation of poverty is sufficient, for:

Opportunity and poverty in this country cannot be explained by either the American Myth that hard work is a panacea or by the Anti-Myth that the system imprisons the poor. Relief will come, if at all, in an amalgam that recognizes both the society's obligation through government and business, and the individual's obligation through labor and family – and the commitment of both society and individual through education. (299-300)

This argument is extremely elucidating for Wilson, refuting his skepticism of ethnographies, and illustrating how “respect for the resourcefulness of underprivileged minorities trying to keep their heads above water is not equivalent to ignoring hardships that bedevil the lives of the poor.”<sup>111</sup> Culturally relativistic ethnographies do not, as Wilson criticizes, ignore these behaviors, they rather attempt to understand and elucidate a logical reasoning process that mainstream Americans, unaccustomed to the incessant hardships of inner-city life and poverty, would not otherwise consider.

Shipler's work has much greater potential for application. The social inequality that motivates Kaus is incredibly real and deserving of much consideration. Shipler's subtitle, “Invisible in America,” implicitly addresses this social equality. However, as is explained through the book, it also testifies to the increasing social distance and isolation of the poor –*even when work is involved*. This reality means also that Kaus ignores some structural obstacles and demands that his perspective be broadened. For example, Shipler illustrates “When life at home got stressful, life at work got perilous. That meant marginal performance, no advancement, and

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<sup>111</sup> Katherine Newman, “Culture and Structure in *The Truly Disadvantaged*,” *City and Society* 6.1 (1992) 19.

a rolling career of short stays in jobs with no accumulation of seniority.”<sup>112</sup> The interconnectedness of factors that bedevil the poor necessitates a perspective like Shipler’s. These sorts of ethnographies can be especially compelling against arguments like Kaus’ because they present “portraits of a vulnerable poor who do not start out on drugs, in gangs, or in jail, but have little opportunity to offset the concomitant effects of low education and unemployment.”<sup>113</sup> And yet, poor are constrained by insufficient income, but they largely persist, despite the obstacles society presents to them. Informed by real lives and real hardship, Shipler articulates explicitly the potential of ethnography to inform theoretical perspectives and cultural conceptions alike in his discussion of family:

There is no more highly charged subject in the discussion of poverty, for impoverished families have long been stigmatized as dysfunctional. . . .The parents don’t read to their children, don’t value education, don’t teach of exhibit morality. *That is the image. Absent* from the image are the devoted grandmothers and parents who love zealously, the sensible adults who make smart choices within a limited means. . . . Depending on the ideology, destructive parenting is either *not* a cause or the *only* cause of poverty. *Neither stereotype is correct.* In my research along the edges of poverty, I didn’t find many adults without troubled childhoods, and I came to see those histories as *both cause and effect*, intertwined with the myriad other difficulties. . .<sup>114</sup>

This perspective illustrates Gans’ fear of inaccurate labels, but a deeper consideration of Shipler’s perspective would be equally enlightening. Shipler would force Gans to realize the good and the bad in the plight of the poor in America, as he argues “poverty is a constellation of

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<sup>112</sup> Shipler 57.

<sup>113</sup> Marks 463.

<sup>114</sup> Shipler 161-2.

difficulties that magnify one another...not just insufficient savings but also unwise spending, not just poor housing but also poor parenting, not just the lack of health insurance but also the lack of healthy households.”<sup>115</sup> In short, Shipler’s ethnography illustrates the multitudinous ways in which the “villains” of poverty are “not just the bureaucrats who cheat the poor but also the poor who cheat themselves.”<sup>116</sup> Forcing Gans to see also the ways in which the poor themselves exacerbate their poverty would moderate his position considerably.

Importantly, Shipler does not refute that there are partial truths in either Kaus or Gans. He also refuses to privilege either. Rather his largest criticism of our polarized poverty debate is the inaccuracy it fosters and supports. He argues “no dichotomy exists here between societal help and self-help.”<sup>117</sup> The effectiveness of this ethnographic, rooted-in-reality perspective is evident for both extremes. Like Marks, then, we must continue to encourage informing theory with accurate ethnographies, thus “debunking” stereotypes and generalizations on both sides of the debate, in an effort to facilitate better treatment and effective policy for the poor in America.

### **In Conclusion: What Is at Stake?**

Given these broad concerns and the many ways in which we can address them, there is much at stake for anti poverty policy, for derogatory images of the poor, for welfare-dependency, and for the state of the nation as a whole. However, our dealings with poverty are constrained and contextualized by a vastly individualistic social climate. Indeed, our current social values express a “prevailing ideology of moralistic individualism—looking for an explanation in personal defects” to explain individual instances of poverty.<sup>118</sup> Given all that we have said

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<sup>115</sup> Shipler 285.

<sup>116</sup> Shipler 285.

<sup>117</sup> Shipler 290.

<sup>118</sup> Pearson 506.



regarding poverty, in its representations and realities, this sentiment is patently untrue.

Furthermore it legitimizes and even encourages social inequality. Let us begin there.

If any succinct conclusions emerge from my discussion on underclass terminology, it is the need for truthful and accurate depictions of the poor. As we have seen in Shipler, ethnographic research provides this much needed service, and consequently, we must allow ethnography to inform conceptualizations of poverty. Indeed, only when a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the poor exists can policy be effective. Discussions of social equality occur within explicitly in the accounts of both Kaus and Wilson, though Gans' arguments are equally relevant, for inaccurate labeling both inhibits and increases social inequality. Wilson furthermore explains that in recent years Congress has eschewed policy initiatives that have their goal in increasing social equality, "effectively discouraged calls for bold new social programs," and given way to a new trend of "slicing or reducing social programs and the spending for such programs."<sup>119</sup> This neglect to identify social equality as a necessary goal in public policy has silenced the comprehensive, complex solutions needed to address these problems, instead issuing "simplistic and pious statements about the need for greater personal responsibility,"<sup>120</sup>

Therefore, our main concern must be to reverse this harmful trend in policy enactment and encourage instead policy that has at its root an interest in greater social equality. If political debates begin to emulate these broadened perspectives that are emerging in academic discussions of poverty, I believe the disparities between inaccurate, culturally-constructed misconceptions and realities of urban poverty will greatly lessen. Engendering a cultural shift in national conceptions of poverty will encourage revised rhetoric and public policies that can most effectively work with and empower the poor as integrated, functioning members of society.

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<sup>119</sup> Wilson 208.

<sup>120</sup> Wilson 209.

As Gans argues, we must also criticize and correct the usage of “underclass” terminology that holds the poor “under” or outside of mainstream society, even rhetorically. Eliminating this “us versus them” idea, we take the first step in psychologically eliminating barriers that alienate poor from broader society. The programs that most encourage social equality, as Kaus and Wilson concur, are those that offer benefits to the nation as a whole, not simply to the poor. The most commonly cited example is the provision of a universal health care system. Another necessary approach to anti-poverty policy is a comprehensive job program. Kaus articulates the multitudinous benefits we could realize with such policies, for “just as assimilating the underclass would remove the most acute threat to the public sphere, reestablishing the public sphere would, in turn, accelerate assimilation.”<sup>121</sup> Many similarities exist already in the programs offered by Kaus and Gans. These considerations are necessary for combating the current welfare-to-work state that neglects so many of these considerations. Most importantly, we must ensure our policies are informed by accurate representations—true understanding—of the poor and their place in our nation.

Another important consideration reflects the cultural values we hold. Realized in our American Dream rhetoric, these tenets of “Americanism” reflect an ideal that is unsubstantiated in reality. In response to this, Americans must accept the rhetoric as an goal we wish to uphold and correspondingly back up the perceived opportunity structure it requires. If, as a society we are unwilling to do this, then we can accept it as an “ideal,” thus invalidating individualist perspective and forcing us to re-evaluate our associations between economic status and morality.

As a nation, we have put ourselves in a situation that demands real answers to these tough questions, and only a consideration of the entire range of factors affecting the poor will be able to

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<sup>121</sup> Kaus, *End* 138.

achieve this formidable task. We must now realize, as Michael Katz offers, what is truly at stake:

The fundamental questions are not about the details of policy or the sources of revenue; they are, rather, about the basis of community, the conditions of citizenship, and the achievement of human dignity. They are, that is, about our definition of America and just how much we are willing to do to realize it.<sup>122</sup>

## Washington and Lee University

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<sup>122</sup> Katz qtd. in Marks 464.

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