

Who Cares?

Poverty and the Dynamics of Responsibility: An Outsider's Contribution to the American Debate on Poverty and Welfare

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2008 Editor's Introduction.

This is a republication of the chapter of the same name from: Stanley W Carlson Thies & James W. Skillen eds, **Welfare in America, Christian Perspectives on a Policy in Crisis** Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1996 pp. 49-80. The book was the major publication from the 1994 Center for Public Justice Conference "Public Justice and Welfare Reform" held in Washington DC in May 1994. This contribution begins by acknowledging the author's "outsider" status from which he discerns where the problems and proposed resolutions, that have been identified within welfare states around the world diverge. The Introduction (pp. 50-53) notes that since the 1980s, the so-called "new poverty" has arisen within the context of European society as well, and it would seem that it is now like a patient who has undergone a series of treatments, only to discover that none of them have worked. Political Controversies (pp. 54-56) looks over the political controversy about poverty in the US. Goudzwaard notes that unlike the New Deal era, liberals and conservatives now tend to be economic conservatives. Tackling poverty is not really about remaking American society. Rather, the concern is to address the problem of a lack of sufficient resources in a society in which resources are freely available. Goudzwaard then observes that this tends to absolve anyone of blame. In Search for Biases (pp. 56-65), Goudzwaard makes his approach clear. It is not an espousal of "religious neutrality" but instead an illustration of how the scientific investigation of society has itself had an ongoing impact upon the way society has tended to view itself, how people have seen themselves in relation to the problems so described.

The pre-conference [abstract](#) of this paper, which was made available to all those attending the conference is also available .

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Prologue

I would like to begin with a personal note about the intent of this chapter.

It is a real honor to be invited as a European academician to join a team studying the roots of America's welfare crisis, and the honor is even greater because the team is composed of such outstanding members. But such an invitation can pose something of a problem: how to be, as a European, of real service to the readers and to the other members of the team?

I had to reject from the start the notion of framing my contribution in terms of the problem of poverty in Third-World countries, which usually occupies the center of my

attention. It is almost impossible, and even unfair, to try to find a common denominator between the poverty in southern countries and the situation of the “truly disadvantaged”¹ within our own rich northern societies. More useful would be a comparison of the current American situation with the Western European one, examining the present crisis of the European welfare state and the recent emergence of a so-called “new poverty” within the European Union. In the following pages I will indeed pay some attention to the latter phenomenon. Nevertheless, I de- [50] -cided not to adopt this as my main framework, because I believe the comparisons would not be very illuminating. The European nations differ so much from each other; more important, the American debate on welfare and poverty is so different from the European debate. Different choices have been made, different positions adopted, and different issues appear to be at stake.

So I decided it was best to follow another path. “Outsider” status becomes an asset instead of a liability if and where a perspective external to a situation is desirable. Such a perspective is useful, for instance, if in an ongoing debate the various positions are merely repeated over and over or if the participants begin to desire to see new options. Now, it so happens that some of the participants in the debate on American welfare have noted just such things.²

This gives me the freedom to offer this outsider’s view on the debate on America’s welfare policy. This essay can best be read as the view of a highly interested European economist and ex-politician who is puzzled about the many deep disagreements about America’s welfare policy, and who is not only looking for ways to understand these disagreements but also to help to overcome them.

1. Introduction

Observing the debate on American welfare, what strikes the outsider almost immediately is how often the word “crisis” is used in reference to the welfare system.

¹ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, 1987 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press paperback, 1990).

² See, e.g., Robert Haveman and Isabel Sawhill, “The Nature, Causes, and Cures of Poverty: Accomplishments from Three Decades of Poverty Research and Policy,” *Focus* (Institute for Research on Poverty), vol. 14, no. 3 (Winter 1992-1993), pp. 9-12.

Clearly a point has been reached in its history where a new kind of deadlock has presented itself and new choices have to be made. For this sense of a crisis *of* a system is, of course, far more serious than suggestions of a lack of effectiveness *within* a system. If the problem was merely the latter, then it could be solved by the introduction of better devices or techniques. But in the case of a real crisis, such measures do not help. The word “crisis” indicates situations or developments which are at least partly beyond our control, in which outcomes are becoming unpredictable and might even be paradoxical. And when it comes to alleviating poverty or [51] deprivation, it is just such phenomena of unpredictability and paradox which now seem to be prevalent, at least in the view of many participants in the present debate.

We can observe these elements of unpredictability and paradox in, for instance, the types of questions which are asked. An increasing number of questions today concern how it is possible that poverty persists despite so many well-meant measures to combat it. Consider the title of Isabel Sawhill’s well-known article: “Poverty in the U.S.: Why Is It So Persistent?”³ In such a title lies the suggestion that, at least to some degree, poverty seems now to have adopted its own course, as if it possesses an internal power to resist our efforts, just like insects which have become immune to most kinds of insecticides.⁴

3 Journal of Economic Literature, vol. 26 (1988), pp. 1073-1119.

4 Such immunity is suggested by Sawhill’s article. After stating that “poverty has declined over the past 20 to 25 years but . . . progress more or less came to a halt after 1970” (p. 1082), Sawhill deals mainly with the question of how this persistence was possible despite the many programs intended to increase the productivity and the earnings of the poor. In trying to answer this question, she is able to link the persistence of poverty to a number of possible causes, such as demographic changes, the growth of unemployment, the rise of an “underclass” in urban areas, growing earnings inequality, and other factors. But in all honesty she also points out the insufficient explanatory power of many of these “causes.” “The demographic trends are difficult to explain,” she admits (p. 1112); and writing of the growth of the “underclass,” she notes that “The reasons for these trends are not well understood and remain controversial” (p. 1109). Similarly, Sawhill does not include growing earnings inequality in her final list of explanatory variables, “even though it has been a prominent finding in some recent work,” because it is merely a “measure of our ignorance”: “to say that poverty has increased because inequality has increased simply substitutes one puzzle for another” (p. 1110). Thus one of her final conclusions is that the “rather modest progress [in the struggle against poverty] in the face of a large increase in real spending for income transfers and for human capital programs targeted on the poor is difficult to explain” (p. 1113). The mystery of persistent poverty may be somewhat reduced, but it is not really solved.

Other experts on American poverty and welfare have expressed similar views. Sheldon Danziger and Daniel Weinberg, surveying for a 1992 conference the facts on poverty since the federal government began its anti-poverty fight, expressed puzzlement about the trajectory of poverty after 1983. They even term this period “anomalous” because, while mean income increased rapidly, so did inequality. As a result, poverty, rather than declining as before, remained above the 1973 level.⁵

[52] It would be easy to attribute this “anomaly” or paradox to peculiarities of American society or to a possible American naiveté in thinking about poverty. But this would be a grave error. For a similar “anomalous” growth of poverty became evident also in Europe in the first half of the 1980s, where it came to be called the “new poverty.” The label “new” was used not to indicate that unprecedented types or forms of deprivation had appeared, but rather because the level of poverty itself had risen at an unexpected time and an unexpected rate, and despite the many efforts to fight it.

An excellent overview of this development is provided in the Council of Europe publication, based on a December 1991 colloquium, *Towards Greater Social Justice in Europe*, which places it in the context of a diminishing effect of all anti-poverty measures. According to this report, in the twelve member states of the European Union (then called the European Community) in 1985, no fewer than 44 million people (14 per cent of the total population) lived in poverty, and the projection was for even greater poverty in the future. “The optimistic expectation has been,” according to the report, “that poverty can be eliminated smoothly by applying more or less radical measures of redistribution under conditions of economic growth. However, reality seems to be different” (p. 6). “Poverty is no longer an accidental, or rather a contingent, phenomenon,” the report emphasizes (p. 82). And as new elements in the European context, it notes factors such as the rise of long-term unemployment (more than half of the unemployed in the European Union are now out of work longer than a year); the increase in the divorce rate; the growth of migratory movements; and the increase of consumption-oriented behavior. We can conclude, therefore, that for the European

5 Their findings are summarized in Sheldon H. Danziger, Gary D. Sandefur, and Daniel H. Weinberg, “Introduction,” in Danziger, Sandefur, and Weinberg, eds., *Confronting Poverty*:

Union, too, the hardness and growing immunity of poverty obviously came as a nasty surprise.

Such a situation of crisis, both in the United States and in Europe, necessitates reflection in depth. What obviously is required is a kind of reflection that considers not only possible mistakes and shortcomings in the goals which have been adopted and the particular tools employed. We should at least be ready to entertain the possibility of far more basic shortcomings in our approach and/or analysis. But what could be their character, and how can we go about trying to find such basic defects?

[53] Perhaps a metaphor is useful here. If a medical team is confronted with a patient whose illness seems to progress no matter what treatment is administered, then such a case of “persistence” can obviously have several causes. One possible reason is that the chosen treatments were incorrect, perhaps because of flawed diagnoses or because the members of the team could not reach consensus on the best therapy. But a second reason could be that the illness itself is not well-understood, because the general medical insight into this type of disease is not adequate. It may even be deficient because certain “blindness” hamper the profession or, in extreme cases, because it is simply impossible for the needed medical knowledge to be obtained.

A parallel with the persistence of contemporary poverty can easily be drawn. The first possibility noted corresponds with what can go wrong in the implementation of the various existing anti-poverty programs. Problems here can be due simply to practical mistakes, or they could be due to the ideological differences between the political parties. The second option concerns insight into poverty itself, and corresponds with the possibility of general elements of blindness or distortion.

It goes without saying that finding the real causes of the hardening of poverty in modern societies is of great importance, in part because poverty has begun to manifest paradoxical traits. Our attention will be drawn, therefore, first to the possible role of political differences and of the general political debate on poverty (section 2). Then we

will turn to the difficult matter of possible common basic biases or misunderstandings of poverty (section 3). The possibility that there might be impassable barriers to further progress in our knowledge will be touched on (section 4), but will be set aside as being too sweeping a contention, despite its recent academic popularity.⁶

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2. Political Controversies

The first possible explanation of the impasse, as indicated above, is that the concrete proposals designed to fight poverty have been faulty, or short-sighted, or have been derived from political premises that are superficial or too narrow. In this context we also have to discuss the possibility that political differences played an adverse role by doing unnecessary harm to the “patient”—the American poor.

In considering the possible reasons for the persistence of poverty, we have to accept from the start a sharp limitation of possible arguments. There is no reason to depart from the almost universally accepted view of the experts on American poverty that poverty has been hardening and becoming persistent for longer than just the past decade. Already in the 1960s and 1970s an increasing number of references were made to the rise of new or resistant types of poverty, usually in the context of the emergence of a so-called underclass in the urban setting, or of an emerging “culture of poverty.” Note, for instance, the opening sentence of William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged*: “In the mid-1960s, urban analysts began to speak of a new dimension to the urban crisis in the form of a large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasted sharply with the behavior of the general population.” But if

6 In the post-modernist camp, for instance, an author like Jean Baudrillard defends with great eloquence the position that in the present post-modern situation we should abandon the hope for accurate knowledge of the objective world itself, for the world has now developed its own fate-full laws and reasons, which as a type of black hole cannot be caught by the light of the human subjective mind. In his opinion the modern subjective mind even has lost completely the battle with the world of objects; the world proceeds autonomously to fulfill its own fated strategies. I resist this position because it is one without any ray of hope. However, I have noted it because Baudrillard makes an important point in relating our present society and its problems, including its problem of poverty, with the modern era itself and with the modernistic fashion in which our society was formed. I hope to return to this point later.

persistent poverty goes back that far, then it is impossible to blame it on the acts or omissions of any one political party. Neither policy making under the Democrats nor governance by the Republicans can be held exclusively accountable for persistent poverty. This contention is further strengthened by the recent experience in Europe, as noted above. Most West European countries have had their own distinctive set of social and welfare policies which are more “progressive” than even the American Democratic tradition. But in these countries, too, persistent poverty, the “new poverty,” has appeared.

That does not mean, of course, that social or welfare policies do not matter. They certainly do, especially for the very poor and with respect to the severity of unemployment. But up to now all of these policies have not been able to prevent the growth of hard-core poverty, which seems, in fact, to increase when the wealth of the society increases.

It may seem strange, but the unavoidable consequence of these considerations is that, when it comes to the significance of political views for the impasse about poverty, we should look primarily not to their differences, [55] but rather to their points of agreement. If possible causes for the growing persistence of poverty are to be found in this realm, then they will be found in this area of underlying political consensus. But can those common factors be isolated and delineated?

In fact, indications of such underlying points of consensus can be found here and there in the literature. Ken Auletta, for instance, has pointed out that both the conservative explanation and the liberal explanation for the limited achievements of the Great Society can be characterized as too narrowly economic. Both explain the current problems of the poor as merely a matter of an excess or a deficiency of (transferred) resources.⁷ Moreover, Lawrence Mead has pointed out that Great Society policy making was, by and large, “consensual” between conservatives and liberals. At the same time, both camps ignored behavioral problems among the poor. According to him, since the early 1960s the poor mainly have been understood to be conditioned by their

environment.⁸

These are important points. For there is no doubt a link between the two observations. Citizens who are seen as conditioned by external circumstances (whether these are good or bad, and whether they originate either from their own culture or have external sources, such as government programs) are in all such cases obviously primarily seen and treated as “objects,” in the same way that science studies objects. But when persons are treated as objects (whether of analysis or of assistance), they cease, we might say, to “act.” They can only be supposed to “react”—in response to some impulse such as the stimulus of a transfer of financial means. But is not this far too narrow an approach? In the next section we will try to unearth the root of this way of looking at reality. But we can already conclude here that it would be unwise to exclude the possibility that this peculiar view of human beings has contributed to the growth of hard-core poverty, particularly since it could give the poor the sense of having been “objectified” by both political streams.

There is, however, more to be said. Elsewhere in his book, Mead remarks that conservatives and liberals can both be labelled, as far as their welfare policies are concerned, as economic conservatives. “There was no desire to remake American society, even to the extent of democratic social- [56] -ism seen in Western Europe,” he says. “The Great Society was not economically radical, as the New Deal had been.”⁹ These remarks suggest this key question: might we find in the structure, unfolding, and direction of our modern societies a distinct cause for the rapid emergence of new types of poverty? Can we say for sure that neither the structure nor the orientation of modern society is culpable in the process of the hardening of poverty? Perhaps this factor went unnoticed by the main political traditions but was nevertheless quite important.

This possibility, too, will be examined more carefully later, in section 4. But I want to emphasize here that a critical examination of the specific structure and direction

7 See Lawrence M. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 47-8.

8 Mead, *Beyond Entitlement*, pp. 49, 55.

9 Mead, *Beyond Entitlement*, pp. 20, 33.

of modern society is not necessarily a leftist project nor should be presumed to be rooted in Marxism or communism. Far from it. In the heart of the Reformation tradition of Dutch Calvinism, in 1891, the Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper urged the necessity of an ongoing “architectonic critique” of the foundations of modern, western society, and linked these faulty foundations to the social crisis—increasing poverty—of his own day.¹⁰ Social illnesses, we should note, do not always have just a technical or economic character. They may be the fruit of very deep structural distortions or even of directional distortions, i.e., the fruit of a wrong spiritual orientation of the society as a whole.

3. In Search of Analytical Biases

What factors might possibly have contributed to some sort of general bias in the analysis of, and thus remedies for, contemporary poverty in the United States—biases which are possibly related to distorted analytical views or common blinding factors? This is not an easy question to answer, and any answers are themselves subject to heated dispute. The best way to approach the question seems to be, therefore, to propose a hypothesis which can be verified or falsified, at least to some extent.

My hypothesis is that, in the American context, economists and social scientists have had a disproportionate influence in the poverty debate and [57] have carried into that debate their overly narrow and restrictive way of looking at poverty. Their style of analysis consequently shaped public opinion in a lopsided manner.

Some initial evidence for the first part of this hypothesis can readily be found. Wilson, for instance, remarks, “In the final analysis, the policy agenda set by the architects of the Great Society, that is, the labor economists and sociologists who fashioned the War on Poverty in the 1960s, established the vision for the subsequent research and analysis of minority poverty.”¹¹ Similarly, Isabel Sawhill begins her article, “Poverty in the U.S.,” with the comment that, when in the mid-1960s the United States embarked on

10 See Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, edited and introduced by James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, and Washington, DC: The Center for Public Justice, 1991).

a war on poverty, the generals “enlisted economists and other social scientists to help them define and measure poverty, to plan programs, and later to evaluate them and to measure the progress achieved.”¹² Sawhill gives further support to the hypothesis when she and Robert Haveman suggest that one reason why poverty researchers have such a narrowed vision is because economists have largely framed the debate. Especially harmful, Sawhill and Haveman judge, is the economists’ inclination towards “marginal thinking,” to always be asking “What is the effect of adding a little bit more of a single input to a process in which all the other inputs are held constant?”¹³ Others have pointed to sociologists as exercising a deleterious influence. Lawrence Mead, for example, asking why the Great Society achieved so little, points to “the sociological approach,” shaped by Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton, C. Wright Mills, and others. In this approach, “the poor and disadvantaged were understood to be so conditioned by their environment that to expect better functioning from them, such as work, became almost inconceivable.”¹⁴

This initial evidence is valuable, because it makes it clear that, in addition to the specific influence of particular economists or other social scientists, a general style or framework for analysis may have become influential. But this, of course, is insufficient to validate a broader claim that the perspective of economists and other social scientists may have comprehensively distorted the analysis of poverty and the fight against poverty. So what more may be said?

Here I would like to make at least two fundamental observations. The [58] first (A) is related to the specificity of science itself. The second (B) is related to the influence of modernity especially on the social sciences.

(A) The way in which scientists as analysts observe and perceive reality is, of course, quite different from the way in which reality is perceived by all of us in our daily lives. This difference generally presents no problem because we are aware of it and deal

11 Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, p. 131.

12 Sawhill, p. 1073.

13 Haveman and Sawhill, p. 11.

14 Mead, *Beyond Entitlement*, p. 55.

with it in an intuitive way. But in the case of social phenomena like poverty, a distinct and important difficulty may develop because of this perceptual or analytical difference. We understand that, due to the different roles involved, a scientist observing poverty will perceive it differently than does the person who is poverty-stricken. But there is further and critical difference which cannot be explained away in terms of social-role distinctions. Living in a situation of poverty leads to experiences and forms of awareness which cannot fully be grasped by any scientific approach and which must not be discounted by the scientific observer.¹⁵

The scientific approach is inherently oriented towards generalization, even when the empirical material is highly specific. To generalize, scientists must take a modally-specific approach, focusing on a single dimension of the multi-dimensional reality. Poverty, for instance, is studied as a social phenomenon, or as an anthropological phenomenon, or as an economic phenomenon. In each case the unity and consistency of the approach is guaranteed by, and created only by, the very uni-dimensionality of the framework. For the economist, for instance, poverty is seen as a scarcity of means in relation to essential needs, which then dictates the necessity of some different (micro or macro) allocation of resources.

Such an aspect-oriented or uni-dimensional approach can lead to very valuable conclusions. But the conclusions are always constrained by the limitations of the aspect-oriented approach itself, which can never grasp the full, multi-dimensional, reality of poverty as it really exists and is experienced by the poor themselves. For the poor, poverty has simultaneously [59] and in an interconnected way a multitude of dimensions or manifestations: physical (hunger, sickness), psychological (fear, stress), social (isolation or acceptance), juridical (subjection to discrimination or crime), ethical (shifting mores or loyalties), and even spiritual (living between hope and despair,

15 The great Dutch Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, in his treatment of the differences between the so-called “naive” or direct experience and the scientific way of looking at reality, explicitly warned against an undervaluation of the former mode of perception. To deny that both of these have a legitimate place, he argued, is to adopt a rationalism which cannot be accepted from a Christian philosophical point of view. See Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, trans. David H. Freeman, William S. Young, and H. De Jongste, 4 volumes published as two books (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 83ff.

searching for meaning). Even if scientists believe that they have adopted a holistic approach, they must beware that a summation of results from different disciplines or the addition of various uni-dimensional accounts will never lead to the creation of the same vivid unity of perception as it is found and seen in the reality itself.

The concrete significance of this inner limitation of every social science is that the scientific approach will usually tend to underestimate those forms of human or social development which have an inter-modal or multi-dimensional character—those phenomena which cross the boundaries of the different disciplines. The economist, for instance, will tend to ignore those cases where a new economic need is created for a person or family by a social consequence of poverty, such as growing isolation.¹⁶ Such “circularity” is not studied by economists because in the neo-classical tradition they are accustomed to start with the principle of given human needs. But poverty, especially prolonged poverty, has just this confounding character which can lead social-scientific analyses astray. In inner cities, for example, people are not just poor. They may also be subjected to extreme threats and violence. A person acting responsibly in such circumstances cannot respond only in accordance with a narrow economic calculation. The single parent raising a child in this setting may rightly judge that her responsibility to assure the physical safety of her child must take precedence over accepting employment that would require her absence from the house and neighborhood. When need has this multi-dimensional character, then the normal disciplinary point of view can hardly comprehend it or make any valid predictions about it.

Poverty that becomes manifest in those multiple dimensions can indeed develop a persistence that, from the scientific, aspect-oriented per- [60] -spective, will seem largely a mystery. For its dynamic carries it across the barriers between the various sciences with their characteristic approaches. At the same time, the scientists’ solutions

16 An illuminating European treatment of the inter-modal aspect of poverty is given in the well-known but quite unorthodox report of Father Wresinski, “Extreme Poverty,” published in the *Journal officiel de la Republique Francaise* (28 February 1987). Here we find, for instance, the introduction of the term “hypermateral poverty” to refer to those states of poverty in which the material needs are accompanied by new needs of a non-material or relational nature. Extrication of a person from this kind of poverty requires measures that address all of the dimensions of need.

are likely to fail or to have little positive effect.

(B) If we are to think about the possibility of some general bias in our perceptions of poverty, we must be willing to go even beyond this inherent general limitation of the scientific approach. We should be open to the possibility that the development of particularly the social sciences has created specific “blind spots”—not only in the eyes of those social scientists but also to some extent in the vision of the politicians who were advised by them.

Here I would like to call attention especially to the consequences of the rise of the modern, mechanical world- and life-view for the social sciences. We will have to go back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when, according to Stephen Toulmin and other social philosophers, the first traces of Modernity can be detected. This takes us back a very long time, but the detour may be worthwhile.

These were times of great insecurity as former certainties crumbled. If Galileo was right, for instance, then apparently when people thought they were seeing a sunset their very eyes were misleading them. Confronted by such paradoxes, Hannah Arendt says, Western society was driven in that time to search for a firmer ground of certainty than was offered by past interpretations of the world, such as Christianity. A new, modern foundation for certainty had to be found, and was eventually found in a new Cosmo-polis (Toulmin), based on the autonomy of human reason (Descartes). For only human reason could function simultaneously as the expression of the full subjective freedom of humankind and as the path leading reliably to a controlling and unified knowledge of nature. (It was only somewhat later, at the time of the Enlightenment, that people began to see that these two motives or poles of modernity might conflict.)

What is critical for our topic is this: such a drive for a new, absolute, kind of security in all scientific efforts required more than just another way of understanding reality. For if only what can be grasped logically is trustworthy, because science can or should no longer accept any idea of a God-given structure of reality, then there is indeed no other way for the scientist than to pave his own path of logical security step by step in the midst of the chaos of perceptions (Kant’s so-called Copernican revolution). For then

you can trust only what can be derived from fixed [61] laws, which can be logically proven, and which have to be based on objective measurements.

It is no wonder, then, that from the early days of modernity the metaphor of a clock is so often used. For the clock, a man-made mechanism, runs in a predictable way, obeying natural laws which can be fully understood by reason. It measures time, but is simultaneously a wonderful example of precise human technical craftsmanship. So we see, from the start of modernity, early economists and other social scientists searching for a way of understanding society as if it was a complex clockwork: a mechanical world working on its own, and in continual motion. It might wobble or need to be repaired, but such repair could only be successful if guided by the laws inherent in its functioning. In later days the steam engine served as a similarly central metaphor.¹⁷ In this search for understanding, God is either absent or is reduced to the role of the great clock maker who went into retirement after his great creative act. For the universe has now become a universe of mechanical self-sufficiency.

But how is it possible for social scientists to arrive at universally acceptable statements about immutable laws, based on objective, measurable facts, if their domain of investigation is not the regularity of nature but rather the bewildering field of human society? For in social and economic life people again and again demonstrate very irregular types of behavior! This question leads us to the roots of those theoretical fallacies and shortcomings that have so handicapped the scientific observation, analysis, and treatment of poverty. For if the certainty of knowledge has to be maintained at all costs, but the scientist is studying a chaotic and whimsical reality, then only one strategy is available: social scientists must construct their own, orderly, image of social reality with predictable outcomes. If so, then social scientists must indeed organize what they observe in such a way that possible disturbing factors are excluded from the analysis

17 See, for example, David Hume's letter to his friend Adam Smith upon the publication in 1776 of *The Wealth of Nations*. Hume compliments his friend on the development of a great system of thought about human society and adds, "Systems in many respects resemble machines. A system is an imaginary machine, invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed." Quoted by Andrew Skinner in his introduction to the Pelican Classic edition of *The Wealth of Nations* (1970), p. 12.

before it even begins. And that is, in fact, the strategy which was adopted both by the young science of economics and [62] by the even younger science of sociology, albeit with different nuances in each case.

Economic science attempted to achieve the desired security by creating a kind of laboratory situation, called the “market mechanism.” In this artificial universe of prices and quantities, reality is represented in such a way that all irregularities are “externalized”: they are shifted to the so-called domain of “data,” or given factors, so that only regular and fully predictable phenomena remain. Human behavior, of course, is the most unpredictable and disturbing factor in the working of the market. Therefore it is “frozen” into given wants and given attitudes, leading to the stereotyped behavior of all individuals. Economic science has in this way developed into a kind of natural science, which studies only those phenomena which result from the (disturbed or undisturbed) working of the market *qua* mechanism, including the phenomenon of poverty. In its rationally constructed cosmos, of course, “disturbances” can take place—unemployment, say, or a rapid increase in poverty. But in this self-created world, no one will ever ask the question: Who or Which agency has caused that phenomenon? For the only accepted question is: What factor has caused this event?¹⁸ Within a mechanical universe, no person or agent can be responsible or accountable. Everyone’s behavior is presupposed to be stereotypical, to be always the same if other factors are constant (the so-called *ceteris paribus* clause). But then the question remains, and becomes even more pointed, whether such an approach can ever lead to a real understanding of what poverty is and how it can be cured.

The path of sociology has been different, but only relatively, only insofar as here greater attention is paid to human behavior itself. So we find that a wider set of hypotheses has been developed in this field to explain the behavior. But the explanations are still in terms of general rules, laws, or statements. Remarkable in this context is Mead’s assessment that the most striking characteristic of the “sociological approach” to

18 For a further elaboration of this difference, see John Hicks’ book, *Causality in Economics* (Oxford, 1979), where the distinction is made between the old concept of causality in which “causes are always thought of as actions by someone,” and a “new causality,” comprised of

poverty has been its determinism. And he goes on to say, “Any science must assume [63] that the phenomena under study are ‘caused’ in some sense by identifiable outside forces.” But “[q]uantified social science applied that assumption to human problems more literally than before Poor children’s learning problems in school, for example, were ‘caused’ by their parents’ own limited background, plus the deficiencies of public programs.”¹⁹ So here too we can see the striking absence of any sense of causality that would search for possible causes in the actions of accountable persons.

It is quite clear from this that we should not expect that when economists and sociologists cooperate in the search for explanations of poverty or for remedies either group would correct the one-sidedness of the other. More likely is a mutual reinforcement of biases. And their very cooperation made it more likely that their way of approaching issues like poverty did become the standard approach, inclusive of all their biases.

All of these are not just abstract, theoretical concerns. This becomes quite clear if we ask about the general consequences of such a mechanistic understanding of economic and political life, and try to relate these consequences to the analysis of the specific phenomenon of poverty. At least five consequences can then be noted

1) Looking to social reality as if it were just a physical mechanism implies, in the first place, the necessity of measurement. Science, in this mechanistic conception, consists of measurement, because without measuring no laws or tendencies can be formulated and verified. In this world-and-life view, therefore, social and economic phenomena can only be observed and studied as a quantifiable reality.

2) Moreover, the basic units or fundamental elements must be comparable in origins and in results. Therefore human behavior will at bottom be understood as the actions of distinct and disconnected persons, as the very term “individual behavior”

19 “the search for ‘laws’ or generalizations.” Economics, according to this Nobel-Prize winner, has been, since Adam Smith, committed to this new causality (p. 9).
Mead, *Beyond Entitlement*, p. 55.

indicates.²⁰

3) In a mechanistic world, laws are operative, but they have a specific character. They guide processes to equilibrium or disequilibrium. Equilibria are preferred if one wants to maintain the system and prevent chaos. In a mechanistic world-and-life view, therefore, social [64] and economic stability tend to be interpreted as equilibrium situations. Equilibria are desirable, in markets and in the very functioning of society itself (thus Talcott Parsons).

4) In a mechanistic worldview, “responsibility” or “accountability” are meaningless concepts. Mechanical consequences can be explained only in terms of mechanical causes. It is not human will or responsibility that sets processes in motion; processes are precisely and only ruled by objective factors, which in their turn determine human behavior. In other words, humans are not assumed to act in either responsible or irresponsible ways; they are assumed, rather, to react, like automatons, any of which in similar circumstances would provide the same “responses.” Such responses are presumed to be expressions of self-interest.²¹

5) In a mechanistic view of the world, it is also of no use to talk about deeper human causes if one is confronted with a concrete socio-economic problem. The problem has to be taken as it is, as it presents itself now, specifically as a disturbance in the working of the mechanism. It will either solve itself, if the (mechanical) laws of nature are permitted to operate, or it can be solved by taking the best and most efficient engineering approach to redress it (just as a car is repaired). The mechanistic world, therefore, is not only a world without moral good and evil. It is in fact also a world without a real history.

If we examine this list of five peculiarities of a fully mechanistic interpretation of

20 The word “individual” became widely used during the Enlightenment and the years of the French Revolution, employed to point to the smallest (i.e., in-divisible) element of society, the atoms out of which the whole structure is created.

21 Note the following statement of Amartya Sen in his *On Ethics and Economics*: “Perhaps the economist might be personally allowed a moderate dose of friendliness, provided in his economic models he keeps the motivations of human beings pure, simple and hard-headed,

human society, then indeed our suspicion must grow that they have already exercised a large influence on the public and conventional way of analyzing poverty and on our views of how to deal with it. Here we can trace without any doubt reasons why poverty now looks so “persistent” or intractable to us. For poverty is just the kind of phenomenon which confounds every mechanistic approach. Has not poverty many aspects which cannot be measured? And is it not primarily a social phenomenon, instead [65] of a fate descending on disconnected individuals? And what should be said or done if poverty seems to be the natural outcome of some kind of economic or social equilibrium? It leads immediately to the question whether breaking the current equilibrium—for instance breaking the equilibrium of a constant general increase in our standard of living—would not be too high a price, or too “unnatural” a step, to overcome the rise of poverty. And what should we say if the persistence of poverty seems to be in some way related to any sort of lack of responsible, nonselfish human behavior, either by the poor themselves or by others who have contributed to their condition? Science is then under the command to keep silent, and usually we with it. Further, if people would suggest that injustice might be involved in the origins or causes of poverty today, the mechanistic framework can offer no response. And finally, if there are any indications that poverty might have its own special history and its own type of dynamics, this would also seem utterly irrelevant from the mechanistic perspective.

Thus the narrowness of the mechanistic world-and-life view, which has come to us via the current intellectual framework of economists and sociologists, has to be seen as a prime cause of the present impasse in the debate about the persistence of poverty in the context of the American welfare system. It explains many forms of distortion in the diagnoses and the therapies. It makes clear, as well, why the “objectification” of the poor, which we noticed in the previous section as a common trait in the liberal and conservative approaches to poverty, could so easily creep in. We can even say that it would obscure any possible causes of the persistence of poverty which are due to the structure or direction of Western society itself. Especially this last point, raised earlier, seems to be of the utmost importance. But can it be sustained and demonstrated?

and not messed up by such things as goodwill or moral sentiments Economics . . . has characterized . . . human motivation in spectacularly narrow terms” (p. 1).

4. Questions of Societal Structure and Direction

The idea that the direction or structure of our modern, capitalistic society might itself play a central causative role in persistent poverty seems immediately to collide with a simple counter-argument: persistent poverty is a relatively new phenomenon, originating in the 1960s or so, while the order and dynamic of modern society are obviously older than that. As a mixed economy it took its main form not later than in the 1930s. It seems therefore fully inadequate to make the structure and direction of modern society in [66] one or another way “accountable” for the emergence of persistent types of “new” poverty in the United States and Europe.

But this reaction, however appealing at first glance, is too superficial. It would hold if, indeed, as is often presumed in the mechanical view of life and society, reality consists of nothing other than man-made goods and man-made systems which are impervious to any other influences or constraints and in which humans act just like atoms or gears. But that kind of autonomy or self-sufficiency is not given to mankind nor to our systems. Human societies are always bound to a created reality, which they must obey, and which imposes on them restrictions which cannot simply be overcome by self-generated dynamics.

It is therefore quite possible that an existing social and economic structure, by the power of its own internal dynamics, at a particular moment can run against the wall of persistent problems and insurmountable paradoxes. For dynamic evolution cannot be the rule of everything in creation. Some features of nature and of mankind tend to remain the same and they block the path of a kind of progress which has eternity and unlimited expansion as its only possible horizon.

Let us consider these suggestions further by treating poverty as a phenomenon shaped both by the structure of modern society and by its main cultural direction.

Since the time of the French revolution and the industrial revolution, we have been living in a society which is itself to a large extent a mechanical artifact. It is a society founded on two key mechanisms: the market mechanism and the mechanism of

democracy. But these two mechanisms do not just exist; they are, and were from the start, clear expressions of a new formative world-and-life view. For the new cosmopolis, the new mechanistic society, was not only devoutly intended as, but also constructed as, a project to bring more wealth and more power. It was created to guarantee, by its very structure, an ever-increasing “wealth of nations.” And not only this. In the utopian images of the early days, with their expectations of the eternal progress of mankind and of the civic right of each person to pursue his or her own happiness, there was also a deep trust that all forms of poverty and exploitation would automatically fade away, and that the human race would, without fail, improve morally. That was the faith of modernity, the faith in the coming of a new era, constructed on the powers of economic and technological progress, and guaranteed by the correct economic and political institutions or mechanisms of society.

[67] We now know that, despite that faith and despite well-constructed institutions, many and serious problems did appear. When these successively appeared—the “social question,” unemployment, the environmental problem—society attempted, and still attempts, to deal with them the best way. But it is remarkable that as soon as problems like these have appeared, they are almost always addressed either by attempting to improve the prevailing mechanisms or by trying to adapt people more closely to the imperatives of what was thought to be an always progressing society. But the most basic questions were not asked, much less answered: Are there creational limits on human efforts? Could it be that the fundamental societal drives for increased power and material goods would finally deprive us of the most basic and deepest values of human life?

It seems that exactly here one of the most fundamental causes can be found for the unexpected rise and persistence of modern poverty. And the reason for this is not difficult to formulate. A society which has set its heart and staked its fate on the promotion of the highest possible economic growth as the means towards wealth and happiness is for that precise reason a very vulnerable society. It must increase its market efficiency and productivity at all costs, even if that requires extruding from the production process many potential workers. It is a well-known fact that all over the world since the beginning of the 1970s the former “natural” correlation between

economic growth and expanding employment collapsed, at least partially. Forms of economic growth have appeared, especially in the industrial field, which can only be achieved if employment is cut (the growth of so-called structural or technological unemployment). Multinational concerns such as the Dutch Philips corporation achieved in the 1970s an increase in labor productivity of more than 10 per cent annually, which, despite a sales increase of about 8 per cent per year, was reached only with the dismissal of about 2 per cent of its workforce. But poverty often follows rising unemployment, especially in the absence of good unemployment insurance provisions.

But the relationship between the societal quest for wealth and the structural increase in poverty goes even deeper. Income increases made possible by productivity gains can easily increase poverty in a society. Say that productivity in the industrial sector increases 4 per cent annually on average. This gain will be translated into an increase in industrial-sector incomes, legitimately enough. However, if everywhere in our society hearts are [68] set on increasing incomes and abundance (for, as John Kenneth Galbraith observed in *The New Industrial Society*, “a rising standard of living is an article of faith in western society”), then employees in other sectors will expect and demand income gains which match those in industry. But no corresponding productivity gains are possible in the service sector. A nurse in the hospital cannot help 4 per cent more patients every year; a policeman cannot guarantee the safety of more citizens each year. If incomes are raised anyway, then service-sector costs will be driven continually upwards. Vital services like health care, public safety, and education will become more and more costly, while industrial products are priced the same or become cheaper. And here we see, indeed, irresistible consequences for poor people, which lead to a kind of paradoxical persistence of poverty.

In the first place, this is true because the increasing costs per unit in all service sectors, by driving prices higher, diminish the demand for those services. One consequence is a contraction of employment, with the elimination especially of the many forms of low-skilled labor which are performed in these sectors. People are becoming too “costly” to be kept in those tasks and offices. But growing unemployment is directly linked to increased poverty.

Second, there is the influence of the increased costs themselves. Vital services like education and medical care become too expensive for the poor. The higher prices of these services may place them beyond the reach of increasing numbers of people. Many people, for instance, will no longer be able to afford adequate health care or will be unable to assure for their children the necessary schooling. A subculture of unhealthy and insufficiently educated people can in this way gradually be generated.

Finally, the government itself, which performs mainly services and has no direct part in industrial activities, is, in effect, “driven out of the market.” Its yearly productivity increase is low, lower than the yearly increase of the salaries it must pay. And because society is usually not willing to pay ever higher taxes, the government has no other choice than to cut its expenditures. And among those expenditures are, no doubt, programs meant to uphold the poor.

This threefold process of less demand for low-skilled labor, higher costs for education and medical care, and the ongoing process of cutting social expenditures has now become visible in all countries of the north, in America just as in Europe. And in its tri-unity it clearly contributes to the growth of persistent poverty in the midst of plenty. More people are [69] becoming poor, or becoming vulnerable to poverty, or becoming mired in poverty. In the midst of our modern industrial societies, a devastating economic and social dynamic favoring poverty has been started.²²

Given all of this, the conclusion seems indeed inescapable: poverty-increasing tendencies are built into the structure of modern society, but even more into the direction, the orientation, of our society. And these tendencies can no longer be overcome or neutralized by any of the technical devices which are in the tool boxes of either the liberals or the conservatives.

The basic problem is far more than a mechanical problem. At root it is a cultural and even spiritual problem.

22 See the further discussion in Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care*, Mark R. Vander Vennen, trans. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, and Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), pp. .

5. An Alternative Approach

Let us try to summarize what we have discovered so far. With the help of a medical analogy—the treatment of a persistent disease—we began with a search for possible explanations of the deadlock in the American debate on poverty, in particular the puzzle of persistent poverty. In this search we looked especially at two promising candidates: the possibility of superficiality and/or narrowed vision in measures to deal practically with poverty, and the possibility of biases in the theoretical understanding of poverty. Our initial investigation of these two possibilities has already led us to some partial conclusions, which can be summarized as follows:

- Our deep faith in the judgment of scientists, including economists and other social scientists, has no doubt led us to undervalue essential insights into poverty and its alleviation which the poor themselves possess.
- The analytical framework used in economics and the other social sciences could easily, because of its mechanistic character, produce blind spots in the view of poverty held by the public and by government. An especially distorting influence we have noted is the objectification of people: regarding them to be conditioned by their culture or by external circumstances.

[70]

- The public discussion about poverty and welfare, moreover, has largely fallen into the trap of mutually exclusive, yet also superficial, conservative and liberal views. This has turned attention away from possible deeper reasons for the growth and persistence of poverty.
- An important candidate for the explanation of the growth of hard-core poverty in modern society is society's obsession with rapid economic growth and an ever-increasing standard of living.

These conclusions are partial and even preliminary. But they seem nevertheless

valuable, especially if they can point the way to another approach: to another diagnosis and a different way of addressing poverty.²³ That potential seems indeed to be present, at least to some degree. For these conclusions imply at least two possible paths forward.

The first path is related to the deep impact of the modernistic or mechanistic world-and-life view on the social sciences, which has contributed so much to blind spots or biases in the anti-poverty fight. Perhaps these blind spots and biases can be attacked or removed by a reorientation of our outlook on poverty in accordance with a broader world-and-life view. If so, we will be able to find new options, also for political practice (I).

In the second place, we saw that the structure and direction of society as a whole might be deeply involved in the process of deepening and hardening American poverty. But this implies, at least, that a partial reorientation or reconstruction of society could contribute to the alleviation of poverty or at least to ending its growing persistency (II).

Two paths, two possible ways of renewal. But can they really be effective?

[71]

I. A New Understanding of Poverty

The first path has to do with changing our analytical approaches and it immediately raises the question whether it really can make a difference in our way of dealing with welfare and poverty. What could be the real benefit if the dominant mechanical view of society, with its tendency to objectify people and to see them as determined by circumstances, was replaced by a more “organic,” living, view of human society, in which each member of society has to fulfill his or her own roles of

23 It must be emphasized here that we may never minimize or legitimize the sufferings of so many people in our society on the grounds that we are unable to conceive of any means to diminish those sufferings. This holds even more when the problem of impoverishment is accompanied by the problem of enrichment—which is a problem especially when it is not thought to be one. Mary Norman Tillman and James Tillman, Jr., two black sociologists, wrote in the late 1960s an impressive study of poverty which they entitled *Why American Needs Racism and Poverty* (1972). One could certainly say that such a provocative statement is not the best way to start a public discussion on the topic. But the serious charge

responsibility? Can this really lead to a different approach? For example, economics and the other social sciences currently employ mainly a “what-has-caused-this” type of causality. Would it really make a significant difference to broaden this into a “who-has-caused-this” idea of causality? Such a change seems so divorced from the world of political practice. Nevertheless, there are indeed indications that such a change could help. Consider somewhat more precisely, for instance, the character of the present debate between liberals and conservatives on how to fight poverty.

Even a first look reveals that in this debate only two options are in reality entertained, albeit in endless variations. To find good solutions, it is suggested, either something has to be changed in the external—i.e., the objectively determined—surroundings of poor people (this is usually termed their “opportunity structure”), or else something has to change in the behavior and attitudes of the poor themselves (i.e., the poor need to adapt themselves better to the present societal system). In the first case (the liberal option which stresses the lack of sufficient opportunities), the various solutions can range between the extremes of a reconstruction of society on the macro level to the (re)equipping of the poor on the micro level (work training, remedial education, employment support services like child care). In the second case (the conservatives’ contention that the poor lack initiative or engage in inappropriate behavior), the solutions can range from the option of enforcement (workfare), at one end, to the opposite extreme of simply exposing the poor to the incentives and punishments of the market. In this dialog, however, we can hear the far echoes of a commonly shared mechanical view of society. According to this consensus, if the outcome of the mechanism is to be improved (in this case, by “producing” less poverty), then the quarrel indeed must be about whether the structures need to be improved or whether the separate parts need change so they will be better adapted to the functioning of the existing whole. But is not such a discussion [72] far too meager and even insulting when we are dealing with responsible beings within an organic society?

Let us therefore start with the concept of living subjects within a society of

of the title should give us food for thought. Has perhaps the struggle for enrichment become a part of our national character?

differentiated responsibilities. In this conception, people who have become poor can never be seen as entirely “determined” in their actions either by external situations or by inner behavioral necessities. In one or another way they themselves, as conscious subjects, react either responsibly or irresponsibly to the impulses from outside. But in making their own subjective decisions, for them as living subjects there is of course far more to consider and far more at stake than, for instance, just the objective opportunities which do exist (the quality of the *opportunity structure*). At least as important for responsible subjects is what we could call the actual *motivational structure*, which has both an *internal* and an *external* side.²⁴

A de-motivating *external* context exists if the option of pursuing some specific opportunity is substantially hampered by strongly negative social (public or private) realities or circumstances. In the case of pursuing work, for instance, there may be no one to whom one may safely entrust the children. Public services like garbage collection or health care can be wholly inadequate or the neighborhood may be crime-ridden. Next to these external factors, there may also be a de-motivating *internal* structure. This is related to a person’s possible lack of the attitudes and/or motivation needed to escape from poverty. (This could be due to simple laziness, but also to strong influences from a broken past, which simply cannot be overcome on one’s own. The idea of a de-motivational internal structure therefore carries no intention of blaming or stigmatizing people.)

These simple distinctions, which are derived from a view of causality which is subject-oriented and therefore somewhat broader than the mechanical one, is already helpful in distinguishing between several entirely different situations. There are situations in which either the liberal or the conservative option would be useful. But there are also situations in which neither would work. In fact, at least four different cases

24 An analysis which comes quite close to what I mean here is Reginald Clark’s beautiful book, *Family Life and School Achievement: Why Poor Black Children Succeed or Fail*, 1983 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press paperback, 1984). Here the central role of parents and their responsibility is studied in this nuanced fashion. Similarly, in Wilson’s analysis of the problems of the “truly disadvantaged,” we find concepts like “social buffer” and “concentration effects,” which can be understood as ways of dealing with conscious human reactions to impulses from the outside.

have to be distinguished.

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1. In the first case there are no hindrances in the internal and external motivational structures, but the opportunity structure is deficient. For instance, people desire to work and are able to work, but cannot find employment. In such a clearly distinguishable situation, obviously the creation of better opportunities, such as the creation of more jobs, should form the heart of the fight against poverty. The “liberal” program is suitable here, and its measures will naturally correspond with the real needs and the responsible insights of those who are poor.

2. It can be that the opportunity side is not distorted (jobs are available) and the external motivational structure is not negative (people are equipped for work), and yet poverty exists and even grows. In this case, the real problem obviously is a negative internal motivational structure. Here a combination of social support services and a emphatic work obligation may indeed be the most responsible measure. And we may expect, in this case, too, that responsible poor people will understand and support such measures, with the proviso that such measures should never be implemented without seeking their insight and advice.

3. A very different situation and challenge exists when there is some combination of two negative elements. This third case combines a lack of opportunities with either a de-motivating external context (when, for instance, no work is available and the neighborhood is socially disintegrating) or with a clear lack of internal motivation (e.g., there is no job and no motivation to find employment). In such cases it will be clear that neither the standard conservative nor the standard liberal solutions will work. Even worse, in such cases we must expect that conventional liberal or conservative remedies will make the problem even more intense than it was. In the case of a lack of internal motivation, for instance, a simple transfer of money will certainly not diminish the negative motivation, but may even strengthen it. On the other hand, in the case of a strong external demotivating circumstance, a policy of obligatory workfare will likely make people bitter, because it seems to force them into patterns of irresponsible

behavior. In those circumstances, workfare may well be interpreted by poor people as an attack on their personal dignity.

4. The final case is where both the internal and external motivational structures are negative. In this case, we can indeed speak of a cultural [74] (or perhaps urban) crisis. Precisely because of its cultural character, neither the standard liberal nor the standard conservative approaches will be helpful.

Now, it may be said that the mere existence today of various forms of persistent poverty, both within and outside inner cities, makes it almost impossible for anyone in the poverty debate to deny that what may be at work is more than the simple cases 1 and 2. At least some combination of negative elements in both the opportunity and the motivational structures is present (cases 3 and 4). In most of the material about present hardcore poverty, in Europe, but even more in the United States, we find clear indications of either a lack of jobs, combined with unfavorable external circumstances, or of a mutual reinforcement of negative internal and external motivational forces, and sometimes of a combination of both.

But this implies that only measures which have more than one track can be successful. The good policies are those which try to deal both with the possible lack of labor opportunities and with the internal and external factors which tend to demotivate people.

In summary, therefore, three things can be said about what is needed. First, in contrast with the usual liberal and conservative approaches, programs to fight hard-core poverty should be multiple-purpose programs from the outset, combining elements of job-creation and/or better public services with the building-up of a better community life. Second, it must be stressed that it is impossible to improve particularly problems in the motivational structure without the active input of the poor themselves. Third, all relevant groups and institutions—including schools, churches, labor unions, government agencies, and corporations—should be involved and addressed in their respective differentiated responsibilities to prevent and to overcome poverty. For living up to the measure of each one's personal and institutional responsibility is the foundational layer of society, not

only for the creation of adequate opportunities, but also for the healing of a deficient human motivation.²⁵

[75]

II. Renewing Society

With this last remark we are already approaching a discussion of the last possible—and necessary—way to fight against persistent poverty: changing the structure and direction of society itself. The connection of this with the issue of responsibility is direct and unavoidable.

This is not difficult to explain. I have noted already a number of critical issues of responsibility for poverty and its alleviation: a responsibility of the poor themselves to react fruitfully to impulses; a responsibility, also of others, to create and maintain an external context that motivates rather than demobilizes; and a responsibility to prevent a shifting of burdens from the rich and powerful to the poor and weak. But all of these charges to engage in responsible action are doomed to remain unanswered—to be mere moralistic hot air—if they are not in one way or another bound to specific human agents and to various social institutions, both public and non-governmental. Further, even if this linkage with the institutional side of society is made, there still is no guarantee of a good outcome—people escaping poverty—unless there is what we might call a common “willingness of direction”: a general intention in society as a whole to eliminate this fundamental social disease, which represents at the same time a fundamental waste of human economic resources.

In the previous section, however, it became already clear that the present direction of our modern society—its yearning for an always higher material standard of

25 Here, too, Clark’s important study, *Family Life and School Achievement*, should be noted, because it displays real insight into the possible influences of both the opportunity structure and the motivational structures. This insight leads Clark to the conclusion that “[a]t some point, an escalating societal disenchantment with the overall quality of life in our communities will move us to address ourselves to the inattention of our public institutions to (1) the hideous degree of stress many parents undergo in their daily psychological and emotional routines, (2) the massive social and economic decline in low-income American families, [and] (3) state-sanctioned stereotypes and assumptions about family cultural patterns and needs . . .” (p. 209).

living—acts as an enormous stumbling block. For this acquisitive mood aggravates especially the persistent types of poverty—taking away jobs in the sector of services and low-skilled labor, increasing the costs and prices of particularly medical care and education, and leading every government to the necessity of a continual process of cutting social expenditures. So indeed not only the institutional structure of modern society requires discussion, but also its greedy direction. And we must remind ourselves that this is our own society, the one for which we are co-responsible.

To explore these two dimensions of modern society, structure and [76] direction, more carefully in their relation to poverty, we take a short and final look at the ideals and blueprints of Modernity, where, of course, the sources of our modern society are found.

In the classical ideals of modernity, the problem of the best structure for society has always been framed as the question of what kind of social, economic, and political mechanisms (the mechanisms of the market, planning, and democracy) would best benefit a society consisting of individuals. Further, this strategy of deciding on a societal structure by working with these two poles—the mechanisms, on one side, and the individual “gears,” on the other—was at the same time determinative for the development and direction of society. For in this modern societal project, the individuals themselves have, by definition, nothing to do other than to look after their own self-interest. Their autonomy consists of seeking individual pleasure and avoiding individual pain. For it was precisely the idea of a full and free interplay between the autonomous feedback mechanisms of society, on the one side, and the autonomously self-interested individuals, on the other, that fascinated Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith and Rousseau. The former was concerned about the mechanism of the market, the latter with the mechanism of democracy in the state, but both predicted a beautiful outcome of that interplay. But more: these ideas also became the basic formula for the rational construction of modern society itself. The formula is thus still present with us in many respects.

But this formula lacked two elements essential for the good and harmonious development of human society. First, it lacks the element of the responsibility and

accountability of persons. In this model, the individuals are not supposed to take any specific care for their neighbors; well-functioning mechanisms themselves provide such care. The only thing required of the individuals is to stick to the rules of the mechanisms. Second, the element of the diversity of social institutions is missing. Families, schools, churches: these were for the great thinkers of modernity never necessary and valuable building blocks, but were rather usually seen merely as remnants from an earlier, a pre-modern, era. Strong social ties between persons were even thought likely to decrease the chances of good outcomes—either to distort the free interplay between the individual citizen and the mechanism of the state, or to hamper the free interplay between individual producers and consumers within the market mechanism.

Such a permissive, pleasure-oriented society, lacking any call to persons to take care for others and with a total neglect of the possible con- [77] -tribution of social groups, communities, or institutions: is that not just asking for the growing isolation and deprivation of those persons who have no helper and who are too weak to become a full participant in the economic or political mechanisms? The question answers itself. But this answer also makes it clear that in these two missing elements the point of entry has to be found for structural ways of dealing with poverty, other than the conventional ones. Then neither the (conservative) strategy of fitting individual behavior more closely to the existing mechanisms of state and market, nor the (liberal) prescription of a better adaptation of these mechanisms to the needs of the individual will be adequate. To the contrary, the strengthening and building up of a common public consciousness then becomes essential, with “habits of the heart” that go deeper than any form of “ontological individualism.”²⁶ And they have to be combined with the strengthening and building up of institutions and communities (especially in poor areas) which can fill the vacuum of the many almost forgotten responsibilities.²⁷

But what does this view imply for institutions like the state and the market? Should they be abolished or be tightly constrained because they are in themselves simply inadequate mechanisms? Of course not. These worthwhile social institutions have been

26 Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985).

27 Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, p. 143.

reduced to mere mechanisms by modern thinkers and modern society. But that is not their necessary and essential character. No culture on earth exists without the presence of at least some kind of market and some kind of state. For humans need exchange, they need each other's economic (productive) services to keep alive, just as they need a system of governance to deal with conflicts. The problem, therefore, does not lie in the institutions of the market and state as such. It lies in the fact that both of them have been cut loose from their original and intrinsic meanings and characteristics. The market and its participants have been cut loose from their task of carefully administering society's resources, and the state from its task of administering a society's public justice. And at the same time, these institutions, because of their "mechanization," have been removed from, or lifted out of, the broad domain of equal but differentiated social institutions and responsibilities. For it is here that both the state and the institutions of the market belong: within the panoply of all other social institutions, like families, farms, corporations, schools, churches, and voluntary groups, each with its own calling.

[78] The implications of this insight for the struggle against poverty are two-fold. The first implication is that we together, as citizens of a rich and increasingly rich society, must understand that the necessary expansion of efforts to fight poverty will not be possible if we maintain our incessant quest for higher and higher income- and consumption-levels. For how can our economic institutions—corporations, other enterprises, and labor unions—fight poverty more directly, for example by maintaining and creating meaningful work, if all economic margins and degrees of freedom are absorbed in advance in the name of promoting greater incomes and consumption? Our society will be able to fulfill its economic duties to the poor and to nature only if it becomes willing to save a part of its productive efforts explicitly for the purpose of caring for the needy. For this, it must change its economic horizon from the unlimited expansion of income and consumption to an "economy of enough."

The second implication is directly related to the institution of the state. It is far more than just a democratic mechanism. It is, as a human institution, tied to the service of public justice in society. That means that it must deal with poverty along the path of justice. Three or four dimensions of responsibility can be distinguished in this role or

mandate of the state.

1) The first dimension is the responsibility of *public arbitration*, of intervening between groups or institutions in society. This task is especially important when there is not merely a collision of interests but when a misuse of power takes place which threatens the life-possibilities of a weaker group. In the case of poverty, we can point here not only to the problem of racial discrimination but also to the efforts of some social and economic interest groups to shift publicly the burdens to the weak, for instance, by regressive tax changes or by excessive wage- and price-demands.

2) The second dimension is the responsibility of *public provision*. I have stressed above the great importance for the poor as well as others of healthy opportunity and motivational structures. Their formation is not the sole responsibility of government. But government does have a responsibility, in the name of public justice, if there is a lack of something crucial to the public welfare, for instance elementary schooling, the maintenance of peace in the streets, the removal of garbage, the availability of primary health care. If such things are not supplied privately and/or they are not accessible to the poor, then the [79] government is obligated to step in, just to be a shield for the poor in the name of justice. Public provision also means that the government is entitled to obligate all citizens to contribute proportionately to social insurance so that all citizens have access to the necessary financial means to cope with personal and family emergencies.

3) The third dimension is the responsibility of *public regard*. Governments cannot solve all the problems of society. Most activities of life are not, certainly not in the first place, the responsibility of government nor the product of its motion. They are rather the domain of families, friends, farmers, artists, educators, entrepreneurs, employees, and more. But it can happen that some essential tasks are not institutionalized, or that society has so degenerated that persons and various institutions are unable or unwilling to fulfill their respective and diverse responsibilities.

Here again we meet the issue of the direction of society as a whole. That direction can be so much restricted by, and closed in to, the pursuit of private material

interests that there is a concrete and explicit denial of original human callings and mandates. People who can work may refuse all kinds of work; companies which are bound, just because of the nature of normative economic activity, to take good care of all human and natural resources, can spoil and misuse those resources; schools can carry out their educative task so poorly that students are not prepared for adult responsibilities. In such cases, government must act to ensure, as far as that is in its power, the fulfillment of responsibilities. However, the government is never entitled to full control of private lives or organizations. This does not mean that it must remain silent, because gross dereliction of responsibilities damages the entire commonwealth, and government may never idly stand by when this happens. It must act to defend and preserve the commonwealth.

4) In acting to bolster the fulfillment of responsibilities, government may take several paths. It may need in some instances only to educate people and institutions about their responsibilities. But in other cases it may need to stimulate positive alternatives. In extreme cases, government may even need to engage in *public enforcement*. Such action may, for instance, be necessary when irresponsibility causes violation of the norms of public justice themselves. This is the case, for example, if a person rejects employment in order to receive welfare [80] benefits, while also earning money off the books, or if a corporation does damage to the health of its employees or of the community surrounding its plants. In such cases government must use its legal power to enforce responsible action.

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With this short overview of the possible positive tasks of government I have completed the sketch I had in mind in writing this essay. This does not mean that I have supplied a complete picture. But I hope that the scene which has now become visible shows that poverty, even if it grows paradoxically and persistently in the midst of societies of material abundance, is neither a fated outcome nor an unexplainable mystery. It is, rather, a challenge to think and to act responsibly.