



Chapter 1

A Collectivity of Economic Others

A collectivity of economic others in the late 20th and early 21st century has recent historical roots in a phenomenon initially described by economist Gunnar Myrdal (1963) as “the underclass.” From Myrdal’s definition, an economic one describing victims of a postindustrial economy, to the negative meanings added by later social scientists, theorists, and especially journalists, the underclass was soon to become a popular label with evolving pejorative meanings inclusive of ideas of behavior. It came to include descriptors such as “welfare dependency,” “intergenerational welfare,” and “hardcore American poor,” later joined by labels such as deviant, mentally ill or deficient, homeless, homeless mentally ill, and panhandlers. Even Michael Harrington’s (1962) widely acclaimed *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* uses a concept of otherness to describe those who are poor in an affluent nation. For Harrington, the poor are unseen and are “other.”

In the late 1970s, William Julius Wilson (1980) wrote *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, reframing Myrdal’s work, returning to structural economics of deindustrialization and citing its impact on urban ghettos, which led to a class of permanently unemployable blacks, adding the dimension of race to ideas of underclass. The discourse came to embrace Oscar Lewis’s (1959) conceptualization of a “culture of poverty” or “enduring poverty,” the transmission of poverty from generation to generation in families. Daniel Moynihan (1965) contributed another dynamic to the debate on

the underclass in his work *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, joining the ills of permanent unemployment to behaviors or styles of family formation that resulted in female-headed households, mostly in the “negro family.”

By the 1980s, journalist Ken Auletta (1982) had popularized the term *underclass* for the mainstream press, giving it a pejorative meaning that became code for describing those who are poor and supposedly responsible for their poverty, solely due to their own behaviors, not society’s economic ills. As noted sociologist Herbert Gans (1990) writes,

Auletta’s writing established the “underclass” as a behavioral term that lent itself to being used as a label beginning with weekly journals of opinion and monthly magazines . . . until it diffused into general use in the media over the next ten years. (p. 328)

Adding a behavioral dynamic to what had initially been an economic term and using it as a label to stigmatize and marginalize poor people became an irresistible match for the emerging theories of supply-side economics, growth/market ideologies, and antigovernment sentiments that heralded the policies of the Reagan administrations and conservative legislatures at both state and federal levels. Conservative economist George Gilder (1981) and others of the New Right to follow provided the Reagan administration with theories for domestic and social policies built on connections between poverty and behavior. In an astonishing account of marginalization in the area of housing, Gilder (1981) writes,

As any real estate agent will tell you the three decisive factors in housing values are “location, location, location.” The chief criterion of a good location, sad to say, is distance from the poor, most particularly from the broken welfare families that produce the bulk of America’s violent criminals. . . . The worth of housing derives from the social values and disciplines of a familiar community and access to schools that are not dominated by the lower class. (p. 92)

In one brief paragraph, Gilder finds broken welfare families (presumably “broken” relates to marital status of parents) responsible for low property values (not good location), breeding of criminals (of the violent kind), and diminished social values (seemingly of the entire community), as they are dominated by the lower class. His theories continue to describe an economy devoid of distributive justice, postulating that the best way to reduce poverty is to stimulate the growth/market economy, “the expansion of demand and income.”

Although discourse on the underclass and conservative supply-side economic theories paved the way for politicians to advance policy ideas of welfare reform and transformation of public housing, public discourse pertaining to economic others focused mainly on public assistance provided in federal programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and public housing programs.

Legislation was enacted with companion acts to facilitate “reforms” in public assistance and housing assistance: the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), generally known as “welfare reform,” and the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 (QHWRA), which came to be popularly called by one of its programmatic names, “Hope VI.” Particularized to urban ghettos with black residents, unwed mothers, teenage pregnancies, and deteriorating housing projects, the a racial component of these acts stereotyped welfare and housing assistance as a black problem, even though the numbers of black and white families receiving assistance historically have been about the same (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). More specifically, the “underclass” label became synonymous with “welfare queens” and ghetto pathologies of single, unemployed men—mostly black—and drug-infested public housing projects.

At the same time, most American cities were still confounded by the arrival of mentally ill individuals, often destined to become homeless, who had been released from state mental hospitals to life in the community. The Community Mental Health Act of 1964 initiated a decade of deinstitutionalization that was accelerated by the enactment of Title XVI of the Social Security Act of 1935, which provided SSI to disabled individuals. This program—administered by the Social Security Administration, not state welfare departments—provided subsistence income to thousands of mentally disabled individuals who had been “returned to the community.” Unlike means-tested eligibility for families receiving AFDC, SSI eligibility was based on documented physical or mental disorders. Many recipients had lived their entire adult lives in institutions and were bewildered by sudden independence. Those who had no family or welcoming community to return to gravitated to urban areas and were disoriented by the ways of big cities. Their vulnerabilities to exploitation, their perceived peculiar behaviors, and their poverty guaranteed them places in the underclass.

For many who returned to the community, even if they had had the capacity to suddenly live outside the institutional setting of the state hospital, SSI was insufficient to cover housing at market rates, food, and ordinary living expenses. Some filled shelters for those who are homeless, others sought cheap housing in SROs. Some resorted to panhandling on the streets of urban areas and the

central business districts of major cities for money, cigarettes, or food. Their appearance and behaviors antagonized communities, especially merchants and business owners who did not tolerate panhandling on public sidewalks in front of their establishments.

Several major cities enacted antipanhandling legislation, such as the Seattle, Washington, "Pedestrian Interference Ordinance," which found a person guilty if he or she obstructed pedestrian or vehicular traffic or aggressively begged with the intent to intimidate another person into giving money or goods. (This ordinance was later overturned by *Roulette v. City of Seattle* [1994].) Berkeley, California, amended an existing ordinance titled "Public Peace, Morals, and Welfare" (City of Berkeley, 1994) to include Chapter 13.37, "Limitation of the time, place and manner of solicitation," which forbade behavior that would "cause a reasonable person who was solicited to fear for his or her own safety" and prohibited panhandling after dark. Another, in Cincinnati, titled "Improper Solicitation" (City of Cincinnati, 2010), was enacted to restrict solicitation after dark and in certain locations, such as proximity to automatic teller machines, bus stops, or taxi stands; within six feet of building rights of way or crosswalks; and all public thoroughfares, including sidewalks and streets. This ordinance and companion legislation titled "Improper Solicitation and Sitting and Lying on Public Sidewalks Prohibition" (Cincinnati City Council, 1995b) found popular support, with newspaper headlines screaming "Proposal Gives Boot to Beggars" (Green, 1995) and "Pushing out Panhandlers: Street Beggars Are Driving Away Shoppers and Businesses" (1995).

By the 1980s, the alarmist language and theories of Daniel Moynihan were hailed as prophetic regarding changing dynamics in American "ghettos" (O'Connor, 2001). The right wing of the Republican party began to move national conversation toward welfare reform, severe reduction of government-assisted social services, and profound changes in housing policies that would come to affect economic others in ways unfathomable at the time. Myrdal's term *underclass* no longer had meaning in reference to economic theory but became shorthand for those without economic status, who were marginalized by their poverty, castigated for their behaviors, and rebuked as members of a growing collectivity of economic others.

No more impassioned rebuke of poor people was found than in the Republican party's Representative Newt Gingrich (R-GA), who published and widely marketed his *Contract with America: The Bold Plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Armey, and the House Republicans to Change the Nation* (Gillespie & Shellhas, 1994). With missionary zeal, using his powerful role as Speaker of the House,

Gingrich railed at those poor families who received AFDC for their “dependency,” at criminals for making children afraid to go to school on unsafe streets, at the programs of the New Deal, and especially at the War on Poverty. He was particularly harsh toward minor mothers who needed AFDC and those he accused of perpetuating illegitimacy. “Illegitimacy” was never specifically defined in terms of who or what was illegitimate, but the rhetoric included condemnation of teenage pregnancies and births to unwed mothers attributed to the “welfare trap”:

The Great Society has had the unintended consequence of snaring millions of Americans into the welfare trap. Government programs designed to give a helping hand to the neediest of Americans have instead bred illegitimacy, crime, illiteracy, and more poverty. Our *Contract with America* will change this destructive social behavior by requiring welfare recipients to take personal responsibility for the decisions they made. Our *Contract* will achieve what some thirty years of massive welfare spending has not been able to accomplish: reduce illegitimacy, require work, and save taxpayers money. (Gillespie & Shellhas, 1994, p. 65)

A major part of federal legislation that followed the *Contract* was codified narrowly, targeted to reform welfare, particularly PRWORA, ostensibly formulated to change the behaviors of poor people. Unlike the major elements of AFDC, PRWORA sought to improve the economic status of poor families by adding work requirements, time limits on assistance, and admission and/or verification of paternity to establish child support to be paid by parents (mostly fathers) absent from the home, with payments collected by state welfare departments. In addition, the legislation was intended to save taxpayers money, a close cousin to reducing the size of government.

The movement to reform welfare, solidified by the *Contract with America*, included an anticrime component fueled by an emerging “law-and-order” point of view and a spurious, nearly hysterical fear of criminals, especially those committing violent crimes. Gingrich’s plan called on government to meet its responsibility to protect streets, schools, and neighborhoods by building more prisons, tightening loopholes that (he claimed) favored criminals, and changing the behaviors of criminals:

We will cut the “pork” in the recently passed crime bill in order to build real prisons, and we will require criminals to serve their sentences, not have them back on the street to terrorize again and again. And to make criminals more accountable, we will force them to pay full restitution to their victims

or the victims' families. And to those who commit felonies with guns, let us be particularly clear: we will require ten years in jail, minimum, and no exceptions. (Gillespie & Shellhas, 1994, p. 37)

These ideas were introduced in the Taking Back Our Streets Act of 1995, which was never enacted by Congress. However, the threats from criminals—real, perceived, or symbolic—added another group of people to the collectivity of economic others, those returning from prison, who were routinely deemed unemployable and often denied housing, regardless of the severity of their crimes and/or their having completed their sentences.

Throughout these decades of marginalization of families and individuals for their poverty, economic others of all ages, races, and social or family circumstances struggled to find and pay for housing. Households that benefited from the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and those who economically qualified for public housing faced discrimination, housing shortages, and market-rate housing prices that were beyond their means. Jill Quadagno (1994) describes the legacy of housing policies as steeped in racism and government retreat from commitment to affordable housing:

Between 1974 and 1983 the supply of affordable housing contracted sharply, while the ratio of rent to income increased significantly. The decline in affordable housing is neither solely nor even primarily a product of random market forces. Rather, it reflects the government's retreat from its commitment to housing the poor . . . for what has made housing support unpopular is its association with efforts to achieve racial integration. This, coupled with the image of public housing as a repository of all the social ills that have triggered white flight to the suburbs, has made subsidized housing the pariah of federal social programs. (pp. 114–115)

Although Quadagno makes a compelling case for the connections between racism and housing discrimination, she writes of those who *have* enough income to qualify for housing assistance, whatever the shortages of units or the peculiarities of housing policy.

Economic others experience the same dynamics of discrimination and housing shortages as those who have a chance at securing housing. Those whose economic poverty makes them eligible for publicly assisted housing are often held in contempt in public discussion. When the waiting list opens for new applications for housing assistance, or when a public project proposes some number of units to be made "affordable" through the program formerly known as Section 8 (from

Section 8 of the United States Housing Act of 1937, also known as the Wagner–Steagall Housing Act), now called Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs), rhetoric of contempt for the poor escalates. Daytime talk radio excels at inflaming the rhetoric, as it did recently when a proposal was raised that new housing and business development on Cincinnati’s riverfront include some affordable rental units, perhaps “Section 8.” Radio personality Bill Cunningham regularly broadcasts on WLW 700 AM, inviting his call-in listeners to join him in voicing strong sentiments of contempt on his midday talk show. Said Cunningham (Cunningham, 2008) on the air,

Section 8 housing dwellers do not live the American dream, they’re fat and lazy . . . trashy, living off the tax payers’ dole . . . they’re fat and flatulent, morbidly obese because they don’t have to get up and go to work. . . . If Section 8 moved next to me [melodramatic, sarcastic tone] it’s *not goood* . . . [cut to recording of Cincinnati Reds radio announcer Marty Brennaman in a play-by-play account of a baseball game] . . . “*it’s not good.*” Everyone knows they’re fat and flatulent.

Cunningham is not a journalist but an entertainer, so these words provide no information or news, but they do provide a flashpoint for outrage in some sectors of the community for whom he provides public voice. The cruel irony of these contemptible comments, in the instance noted above, is that those who supported HCVs for the riverfront development were those who wanted to prevent or remove HCV recipients from their own communities.

Several recent incidents prompting contempt for HCV recipients took place in open meetings initiated by township trustees to publicly grill officials from the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) regarding perceived excessive placement of HCV recipients in their townships. The newspaper headline reporting a contentious meeting in suburban Springfield Township, in which Housing Authority representatives were accused of placing Section 8 in the township, read “Leaders Chart Way to Oppose Section 8.” The news story begins by saying that “township officials are redoubling their efforts to combat what some residents call the ‘gravy train’” and continues with a quote from a township resident: “This program is well intended but it’s having consequences that is [sic] lowering property values, affecting school standards and has a very negative crime perception” (“Leaders Chart Way to Oppose Section 8,” 2009, p. B1).

In a similar meeting, Colerain Township trustees appeared before the Housing Authority Board, publicly decrying the fact that “the increase in Section 8 housing has contributed to increased crime, more blight and lowered property

values in neighborhoods already battered by the foreclosure crisis." The headline for the coverage of that meeting, in 70-point type, reads "Residents Fed Up with Section 8" (2009). That the Housing Authority does not locate landlords for their eligible voucher holders or "place" tenants, with or without the intent of raising crime and lowering property values, seems to be ignored by the trustees and their constituents.

Economic others are excluded as they struggle to acquire enough income stability, eligible family formation, or noncriminal status to qualify for the Public Housing Authority's units or subsidized units with private landlords. Their situation is even more dire in respect to the only other option, market-rate housing, as there is no housing stock in the market at rates they can manage. The situation is especially grave for single people with felony records, who join deinstitutionalized poor mentally ill people in competition for the limited SRO housing found in some poor neighborhoods. Others resort to beds in shelters, and others wander the streets, largely ignored by the market and beyond qualification for any categorical assistance from public resources.

An enduring image understood by most Americans and widely portrayed in the media is that of "the homeless." This label has come to be a pejorative term for those who frequent urban areas, often in retail districts, whose behaviors and appearances are deemed frightening, scary, or abhorrent, stereotyped with the assumption that they do not have a home. Homelessness is a condition sufficiently understood to be described and codified in a federal legislative definition (the Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987):

The term "homeless" or "homeless individual or homeless person" includes—

1. an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
2. an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—
 - A. a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
 - B. an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
 - C. a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

This policy definition pertains to people who regularly or occasionally use temporary shelters as well as to some who eschew shelters at all costs, to the detriment of their health and well-being. This includes those who may frequent parks and

public spaces, who sleep in doorways or dumpsters—those places “not designed for or ordinarily used as sleeping accommodation.” Less seen in urban areas are those whose transiency and homelessness make them nearly invisible as they frequent one 24-hour retail establishment after another (all-night restaurants, bus terminals, self-serve Laundromats, and so on), sometimes with the approval of attendants or staff, usually not staying long enough to be apprehended for loitering or trespassing.

Along with economic poverty, imputation or ascription of characteristics like deviancy, dependency, or transiency may be a sufficient condition for becoming an economic other; however, policy-driven removal from society’s sphere of obligation is a necessary condition. For example, removal of destitute and impoverished people from society’s sphere of obligation by elimination of general assistance for singles and “time limitation” of AFDC propels poor adults and families into the collectivity of economic others by means of policy decision.

Provision of a precise definition of economic others is complicated by the amorphous and extraordinary diversity of those who experience poverty, exclusion, and social disposability. Economic others may be single individuals (such as Sophie) or youthful or aging family groups (such as the maligned tenants eligible for HCVs). Like the rest of society, they may be able bodied or disabled; permanently or temporarily housed; male or female; mentally sound or ill; of divergent races, ethnicities, and gender identities; religious believers or nonbelievers; and educated or illiterate. They are as vulnerable to downturns in employment as they are to capricious loss of publicly funded assistance or services to stabilize their economic resources, especially at times of dramatic political shifts in social policies.

As a collectivity, economic others are not a monolithic group easily studied by sociologists or researchers, for they fall into no convenient or simple classifications, nor are they necessarily permanently economic others. The walls of the collectivity are permeable, membership may be transitory or enduring, with people disappearing into the collectivity as they have been removed from the sphere of obligation of the growth/market economy and the government policies attendant to it.

Removal from public spheres of obligation in effect removes economic others from the datasets of public agencies, rendering them “off the information screen” for social researchers and sociologists and invisible to policymakers. They have exhausted public assistance benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and they receive no Food Stamps or Medicaid; they do not receive public housing assistance, so they are not in welfare or public housing

information systems. Although some do appear in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) (Cincinnati/Hamilton County Continuum of Care, Inc., 2006), now used by cooperating Continuum of Care shelters and services, the economic others in that system become known only when they enter a shelter or use Continuum of Care services and meet the federal definition of homeless person, as noted earlier.

Because some economic others find employment irregularly or work day labor or seasonal jobs, they and their employers pay withholding and payroll taxes, so they appear in the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA) dataset, where their "otherness" disappears into a broader, usually temporary category of low wage earners. Unless or until they come to the attention of child protective authorities and their children become subject to removal for neglect or abuse, economic other families disappear from welfare datasets. Singles who are economic others usually are unknown to public agents, as most states have had no general relief or general assistance for four decades. Unless or until they come to the attention of the criminal justice system or HMIS on shelter entry, singles, like FICA payers, disappear into the statistics of the larger population.

The disappearance of economic others from datasets and their invisibility to the general public render them not countable or quantifiable and raise question as to where they are. They are often stranded in shelters for the homeless or doubled- or tripled-up with family or friends, as is the case for TANF-exhausted families and families with intermittent qualification for TANF. Single economic others similarly are stranded in shelters, having worn out welcome with friends or family. More frequently, they become transients in urban areas, living on the street or in homeless camps along riverbanks, sheltered by highway overpasses or vacant buildings, or disappearing into public spaces.

Many economic others are unseen, or unseeable, by the general public as their appearance is often indistinguishable from that of everyone else. Unless they are prompted to panhandle for money, hitchhike on public streets or highways, or spend endless daytime hours in public buildings like libraries, bus or train stations, retail stores, parks, or convention centers, they are generally unseen, ignored, and met with indifference or anxious apprehension if encountered "up close." Seen, unseen, or unseeable, economic others are frequently in jeopardy of removal and exclusion.

For the purposes of this study, *economic others* are defined as those men, women, and children who experience intermittent or intractable ravages of economic poverty and rejection—repulsion by mainstream society, placing them in jeopardy of

social disposability, especially by removal from spheres of public responsibility. Their disappearance from the public datasets used in policy information systems and research precludes their visibility in public policy decisions. Vulnerable to policy-driven initiatives and maneuvers similar to policies heralding genocide of undesirable populations, economic others face removal from contemporary society by econocide.