Beyond An Underclass: An Essay on Up-Front Politics

Paula L. Dressel
Georgia State University

Jeff Porterfield
Georgia State University

Beyond An Underclass: An Essay on Up-Front Politics

PAULA L. DRESSEL
&
JEFF PORTERFIELD
Georgia State University
Department of Sociology

Debate about underclass conceptualization has once again forced sociologists to acknowledge the political context and implications of our work. This article extends the critical examination of underclass conceptualization to relatively undeveloped but politically important areas of concern. Initially we discuss the political economic context of conceptual controversies surrounding poverty. With a preference for structural analysis, we call for the return of class to economically marginalized people and suggest how that goal might be enhanced by a focus on relations of distribution as well as production. Valuing subjects' vantage points, we recommend how sociologists' work can return agency and diversity to economically marginalized people. Finally, acknowledging the agency of sociologists, we call for greater attention to the implications of our class positions for how we, too, make history, either by intention or default.

Periodically critics within and outside of sociology challenge the relevance, appropriateness, or accuracy of our conceptualizations. As a case in point, a growing number of analysts are reconsidering or discarding altogether the concept of an underclass. William Julius Wilson's recent decision (1990) to substitute "ghetto poor" for the term "underclass" in his ASA Presidential address is a significant step for the author with whom the concept was most readily identified in the 1980s. Wilson acknowledges the influence of Gans' (1990) award-winning critique in his choice of alternative terminology, hoping that the switch will " . . . move us away from the controversy over the concept underclass . . . " (Wilson, 1991:6). At the same time, Wilson's address reflects how his own ideas have benefitted from the scholarly and political critiques around underclass conceptualization.

27

For example, he more explicitly emphasizes structural factors in economic marginalization even as he attempts to link them systematically to issues of the social milieu of economically marginalized people. Furthermore, he highlights researchers' responsibility "...to ensure that their findings and theories are interpreted accurately by those in the public who use their ideas" (Wilson, 1991:12).

While we concur with Gans' (1990) call to abandon underclass altogether as a sociological concept, we nevertheless consider it premature to put aside the critical issues its usage has raised. In particular, debate about an underclass has forced sociologists once again to acknowledge the political implications of our work. The purpose of this article is to extend the critical examination of underclass conceptualization to relatively undeveloped but politically important areas of concern. The following critique is intended to contribute both to the sociology of knowledge and to the empowerment of economically marginalized people.

The more conscientiously we understand the political implications of our work, the more likely we will achieve the goal of accurate interpretation by those who use it. Morris (1989) contends that the ambiguity of underclass terminology has enabled it to mean all things to all people, scholars and policy-makers alike. Such ambiguity led to the work of a self-proclaimed social democrat like Wilson being quoted with favor by conservative thinkers. The latter promote policies significantly different from Wilson but use his claims to bolster their agendas. In order to avoid situations like Wilson has experienced, we maintain that sociologists must more carefully consider the social context of our work, how we think and talk about marginalized people, and where we choose to stand, by effort or default, in the political issues that surround our work.

This article addresses the foregoing political questions directly, by (1) highlighting the political economic context of the underclass controversy, (2) arguing the need to emphasize class issues of economically marginalized people, including the primacy of structural factors, and (4) suggesting that the class position of social scientists and welfare professionals is a central feature of the current controversies around an underclass.

Present ideas about an underclass present the most recent manifestation in a legacy of debate that goes back to the Elizabethan Poor Laws nearly four hundred years ago (e.g., Stoesz et. al., 1989; Morris, 1989; Gans, 1990). That legacy has fostered different terminology over the years (e.g., lumpenproletariat, dangerous classes, problem families, paupers, the disadvantaged, the disreputable poor, the underprivileged, the hard-to-reach). Yet each new conceptualization has served the purpose of setting some impoverished people apart from others, specifically with regard to their attitudes, values, and behaviors. The extent to which such distinctions have been empirically sound and theoretically meaningful is problematic, but these concerns have not deterred policy-makers from acting as if meaningful distinctions exist.

There is no denying the severity of hardship and marginalization experienced by a disturbingly large segment of the U. S. population. At issue is how scholars might best apprehend the contours of such a situation and, having done so, can most productively inform social movement for the eradication of extreme need and social alienation. In this article our purpose is to show how scholarship might proceed in ways that demonstrate both respect for the subjects of investigation and commitment to meaningful social change by making the connection between scholarly activity and its political influence explicit.

The Political Economic Context of Conceptual Controversies

Terminological shifts occur within specific political economic contexts and are occasioned as much by political forces as they are by empirical findings. Consequently, Morris (1989) argues, the term underclass found favor at precisely the juncture that culture of poverty language had become ideologically discredited due to how it stigmatized those it described. The ideas of an underclass and a culture of poverty hold in common a focus on individuals' marginalization as a result of their values, attitudes, and behaviors. At the same time, Morris notes, the shift in terms was accompanied by three significant shifts in emphasis, all of which added new elements to previous formulations: blaming welfare programs for dependency, emphasizing

racial-ethnic minority groups, and assuming that the situation would continue to worsen.

Gans (1990) points out that the original meaning of the term underclass was purely economic (Myrdal, 1962), with a focus on the need for economic reform to create employment. Auletta (1982) may have been the first to attach the idea of social pathology to the term underclass when he maintained that psychological and social disorganization separated the underclass from others who were poor (Stoesz et.al., 1989). After that, the emphasis shifted increasingly to peoples' behaviors as the cause of poverty, so that by 1988 Ricketts and Sawhill operationally defined the underclass by behavior *rather than* income, claiming that " . . . the continued reliance on measures of income or poverty to differentiate the underclass from other groups is inconsistent with discussions which characterize the underclass as a group engaging in socially dysfunctional behavior" (p.318).[1]

The changing emphases are not surprising in light of the different political winds of the 1960s culture of poverty era and the 1980s underclass era. Indeed, the latter decade has been witness to diminished federal commitment to welfare programs and racial equality. These political shifts have risen in conjunction with an increasingly vulnerable national economy within an increasingly competitive international marketplace. How politically convenient it is, then, to find embedded in the very conceptualization of social issues the messages that welfare hurts peoples' life chances, poor people—especially people of color—create their own disadvantages, and the public should not expect improvement in the lives of the very poor.

The manner in which underclass terminology frames political debate, therefore, is of major importance. Because political language (Edelman, 1977) is inevitable when discussing social issues, we contend that scholars must give greater attention to the words we use, even if it means declining to reproduce terminology currently in widespread usage among our colleagues. Linguistic framing determines, among other things, the perceived severity of a problem, the nature of needed interventions, appropriate interveners, and images of those involved in the issue. Among the issues Gans (1990) explored when deconstructing the term underclass is his concern that the so-called

underclass themselves will be reified as causal agents and then subjected to policies of social control. In the process, he fears, the fundamental issue of poverty will be sidestepped.

Two recent illustrations of actual policy proposals reinforce what for Gans appeared to be a hypothetical concern. First, in the city of Atlanta, whose economy is heavily dependent on tourist and convention trade, repeated suggestions have been offered by city officials and business organizations to establish a "hospitality zone" downtown. Within that zone police would have a stronger presence and would be encouraged to arrest people for loitering, public drunkenness, and panhandling. The effect would be to push homeless people into other areas of the city or city jails away from tourists and conventioneers. As yet none of these proposals has been implemented because advocates for the homeless have been able repeatedly to mobilize vocal opposition to the plans. The latter groups inevitably recommend that the city put funds into social services instead of social control. The implication of hospitality zone ideas, however, is that the city cannot solve the problem of homelessness; the best it can do, then, is to make homeless people less troublesome for city visitors and workers. Such an emphasis guarantees that the problem will not be resolved.

Even more alarming because of its unapologetic bluntness is Conforti's (1990) proposal to move homeless people to underutilized or unused military reservations. Conforti admits that he initially was repulsed by such an idea but has eventually come to embrace it due to the failure of homelessness to be alleviated during the 1980s. Again, such a drastic measure ensures that the fundamental causes of homelessness would be sidestepped. What Conforti fails to realize is that the problem was not resolved in the 1980s precisely because policy was inadequate, not, as he implies, because the problem is relatively intractable.

Conforti's (1990) assumption of intractability reflects Gans' (1990) key concern: that underclass terminology is a linguistic strategy to prepare the public for permanently economically marginalized groups—a caste. If such a scenario unfolds and some people are set off as essentially different, usual constraints around treatment or intervention could disappear (Newby, 1989b). Efforts toward change may be abandoned altogether (see

Herring, 1990), proposals for segregation or extinction are more likely to emerge (see Conforti, 1990), and mechanisms of social control would escalate (witness the present dramatic growth of prisons and jails).

While considerable energies have fueled debate about an underclass, it must be noted that few writers have seriously pursued the complementary notion of an overclass. (See Matza's passing reference comparing leisure strata at the bottom and the top of the class structure, both of which are "...given to predatory sentiments and behavior" (1966:291).) Yet Gans (1990) postulates that responsibility for the emergence of an economically obsolete caste would reside with (undefined) overclasses.

Presumably Gans is referring to individuals experiencing increasing concentrations of wealth and political leverage in the 1980s (e.g., Braun, 1991), or the current collection of power elite. Their power theoretically enables them to prevail in defining macro-level problems (such as dramatic economic changes) in micro-level terms (such as the values, attitudes, and behaviors of "underclass" individuals), thereby obscuring their own roles in the generation of social problems (Neubeck, 1991). Furthermore, sociologists' tendency to "study down" rather than to "study up" exacerbates the problem. Even when our scholarship highlights the broad social forces at work that produce economic dislocation, seldom is the human agency behind such social forces examined (i.e., the actual decision-making—interests, motives, and the like—that generates economic and social policies and actions). Insofar as the foregoing occur, there is reduced likelihood that an overclass will be identified, either as individuals or groups, as sources of social problems.

Instead, the 1980s produced an intriguing politics that effectively defined select members of the surplus population as overclass! We are referring to the vocal debate around the claim that the elderly are busting the federal budget with the variety of social security, health, and social service programs for which they are eligible and about which some see them as greedily demanding. Others (e.g., Minkler, 1991) have addressed the inaccuracies of such claims. The point here is that acrimonious debates about generational equity along with popular notions

of an underclass enable the overclass-underclass dualism to be confined to two groups within the surplus population. Each is claimed to be the cause of the nation's fiscal crisis because of their particular personal attributes. The capitalist overclass to which Gans refers remains untouched by, and stands to benefit from, these dynamics. While the notion of capitalist over-class(es) may be riddled with definitional pitfalls comparable to those surrounding an underclass, our point is not to insist on that specific conceptualization. Instead, our call is to challenge the dynamics that focus expansive scholarly and political atten-tion on a so-called underclass and yet offer sparse investigation of a so-called overclass, especially when the behaviors of the latter are likely to be linked to the conditions of the former.

The Return of Class to Economically Marginalized People

The term underclass nominally appears to signify one's lo-cation in the relations of production, even though it has more frequently been used to signify cultural difference. However, we concur with Gomes and Katz Fishman (1989) that class must be seen as a social relation of production rather than as a static description of income and lifestyle. Furthermore, they argue, and we agree, that those said to constitute an underclass are in actuality a segment of the working class marginalized through the logic of capital accumulation. This shift in conceptualiza-tion is critical for placing individuals within material history in dynamic relationship to the larger society. It also serves to reframe their situations in structural terms so that our key foci become issues such as the out-migration of capital and jobs from communities, the changing nature of available jobs, diminished purchasing power, and the like.

Additional theoretical utility can be gained by adopting Acker's (1988:497) position that "classes are structured through relations of distribution as well as relations of production". Relations of distribution, according to Acker, include the wage (which is also an aspect of production), personal relations (mar-riage and kin), and welfare state benefits. Although the wage is a contested phenomenon in the relations of production, it

confers considerable personal autonomy within the relations of distribution. Personal relationships of distribution are typically the vehicle wherein wages are distributed to the unwaged. Thus, the recipients within personal relations of distribution (e.g., children, retired elders, wives earning less than husbands) are dependent on the benevolence of waged individuals for their personal well-being. Welfare state benefits (e.g. AFDC, food stamps, Social Security retirement benefits, SSI) are a residual form of distribution that substitute for the inadequacy or unavailability of the other two forms. Ironically, as Acker (1988:490) points out, "the state helps to create the conditions it is then called on to remedy". That is, state complicity in organizing relations of production on behalf of capitalists at the expense of the working class fosters the need for welfare initiatives by the state (see also O'Connor, 1973).

By identifying various relations of distribution, Acker enables us to think in new ways about some of the controversies surrounding the so-called underclass. For example, some critics have bristled at the (unintended) implication of Wilson's marriageability index that supposes women need husbands for economic well-being, not so much jobs of their own (Billingsley, 1989). If Wilson had conceptualized relations of distribution, he would have been able to discuss, as Acker has, how wages are gendered phenomena, how sexist arrangements mean that women often must rely more so than men on personal relations of distribution, and how both forms of distribution have implications for women's economic survival. Furthermore, a focus on the various relations of distribution illuminates the small set of options available when one does not have access to a wage or the selected welfare state benefits based on wage labor (e.g., unemployment compensation). Recognizing this, one may view data about presumed pathological behaviors of economically marginalized people (e.g., welfare fraud, drug sales) as economically structured behaviors required for survival in severely constrained circumstances.
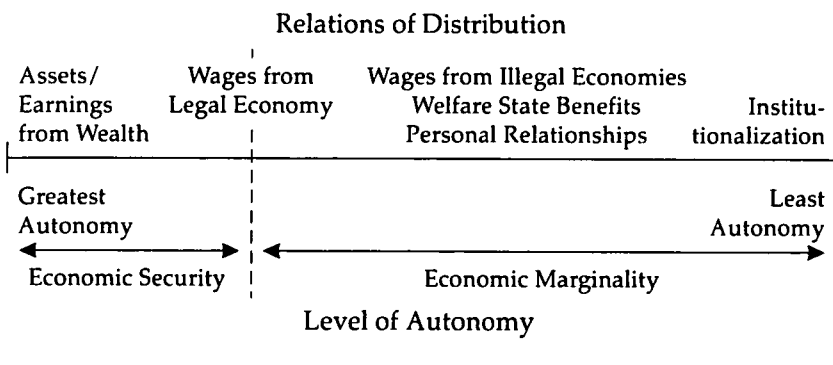
Acker's identification of three basic forms of distribution and their various possible combinations in individuals' lives offers an appropriately complex and dynamic approach to the configuration of class. It is useful to expand the forms to include assets/earnings from wealth (e.g., property, stocks, bonds),

which are most readily accessible to capitalists (the "overclass"), and institutionalization (most notably incarceration), which is disproportionately a relation of distribution imposed by the state on the working class. In addition, wages can be derived from either legal (formal waged labor) or illegal (informal underground) economies. These modifications and the original forms Acker identified are posited on a continuum of individual autonomy as shown in Figure 1.

Individuals experience movement along the continuum or varying combinations of distributional relations across their lives. Of particular note here is the diversity of ways in which economic marginalization gets played out within the relations of distribution. This scheme captures more fully the diverse experiences of economically marginalized people than does a focus on relations of production alone or the notion of a relatively homogeneous underclass. It also addresses certain concerns of scholars of the underclass such as welfare dependency and incarceration without having to abandon class based conceptualization or shift to notions of individual pathology or cultures of poverty. Conceptualizing class through production *and* distribution is an avenue that sociologists should pursue more fully as we move toward replacing the term underclass with more theoretically useful conceptualization.

Figure 1

Relations of Distribution and Levels of Autonomy

Relations of Distribution

Assets/ Wages from Wages from Illegal Economies
Earnings Legal Economy Welfare State Benefits Institu-
from Wealth Personal Relationships tionalization

Greatest Least
Autonomy Autonomy

Economic Security Economic Marginality

Level of Autonomy

The Return of Diversity and Agency
to Economically Marginalized People

Discussions regarding an underclass have been formulated
in ways that deny diversity and agency to economically margin-
alized people. The typical ways in which diversity has been
denied occur through the use of underclass as an omnibus
variable and through commission of the ecological fallacy.

Sociologists have repeatedly used the term underclass as
an omnibus variable. That is, a combination of factors are said
to comprise the group, such as: place of residence, occupa-
tional location or labor force status, educational experience or
training, level of poverty/welfare dependency, criminal activity,
and "other forms of aberrant behavior" (Wilson, 1987:8). The
1990–1991 Social Science Research Council's request for propos-
als for research about the underclass indicates that current con-
ceptualizations tend to focus on the convergence of three factors:
spatial concentration, persistent poverty, and "non-normative
behaviors (e.g., crime, drug abuse, out-of-wedlock birth, partic-
ipation in an 'unrecorded' or 'illicit' economy)" (Social Science
Research Council, n.d.). Stoesz et.al. (1989) note that the features
of this social category include being "predominantly urban,
poor, black, underemployed, and poorly educated" (p.3). Rick-
etts and Sawhill (1988) identify minority status, deviant behav-
iors, concentration in older industrial cities in the Northeast, and
social, cultural, and geographic isolation from the mainstream
as key features of scholars' portrayal of an underclass.

We seriously question the need to bring together so many
different *variables* under a single term, especially when research
clearly demonstrates that the selected features do indeed *vary*
among the people to which the term underclass has been
applied. (Illustrative research is discussed below.) Failure to
separate the several distinct variables embedded within under-
class conceptualization prevents their utilization alternatively
as independent, intervening, and dependent variables. Yet, the
sorting out of how one variable affects another (e.g., (How) does
spatial concentration impact the level of poverty? Is drug abuse
cause and/or effect of persistent poverty?) and the recognition
of possibly varying needs of marginalized people (Gans, 1990)

are critical for the formulation of meaningful social policies and the restoration of diversity to so-called underclass members.

Probably inadvertently, but nonetheless significantly, sociologists employing underclass terminology have produced a homogeneous picture of economically marginalized people that feeds the prejudices of the privileged. Through such formulations sociologists have perhaps unwittingly contributed to social control over marginalized groups via the linked images of need and deviance. With the term underclass we have taken one dimension of social "deviance"—economic need—and generalized the deviance to psychosocial properties of individuals ("aberrant behavior"). These are some of the concerns Herring (1990) had in mind when he questioned whether the concept of underclass was a category constructed more so for political than for social scientific purposes. As we look toward improved conceptualization, we must strive to utilize unidimensional concepts that vary rather than a sensitizing concept that may obscure important variations, even as it seeks to illuminate a serious social concern.

Even as a sensitizing concept, underclass is still seriously lacking. Billingsley (1989) has noted the highly diverse communities and highly diverse residents that Wilson's (1987) operationalization of underclass areas embraces. He is especially concerned that from such a broad sweep of neighborhoods, "Wilson proceeds to treat the whole neighborhood and all the people in it as though they are poor, or unemployed, or on welfare, or engaged in street crime" (Billingsley, 1989:24). The ecological fallacy inevitably results from the omnibus meaning of the underclass designation and the area-based manner in which it is operationalized.

A host of scholars looking more carefully at the people and communities that would be described as underclass offer evidence challenging the concept's definition and the generalizations forthcoming from it. For example, Dill (1989) highlights the community stability apparent even in neighborhoods undergoing dramatic economic transition. Hayes-Bautista (cited in Winkler, 1990) finds that Latinos in California have a high rate of nuclear family arrangements and working males—factors that presumably insulate them from "the underclass"—yet they are

still severely poor. In sharp contrast to expectations that those in "the underclass" possess different values and life orientations, Perilla-Parker (1990) finds that her sample of elderly homeless men in one urban area are not unlike their non-homeless peers on a series of psychological measures, including levels of depression, outlook on life (which was significantly *higher* than the rural elders on which the measures were normed), and self-esteem. Along similar lines, our own work (Aid to Imprisoned Mothers, Inc., 1990) has produced clinical data demonstrating that impoverished children of imprisoned mothers score within normal ranges on a host of behavioral and psychological measures, despite the unique challenges of their family and economic circumstances. Naples' (1991) interviews with women on AFDC enrolled in college reveal aspirations similar to their classmates, despite the contradictions they face between state welfare policies and academic operations. Nor are people who reside in impoverished neighborhoods necessarily isolated from the larger society. Gooley (1989), for example, observes the knowledgeability of men working (for meager wages) on one city's water lines. Their work gave them detailed knowledge about the city's physical infrastructure and local politics, issues that extend well beyond their residential settings in public housing. Together these citations illustrate but by no means exhaust data that document a more varied picture of the so-called underclass than its current definition allows.

All of the foregoing studies suggest that many people described as underclass tend to be everyday, normal people caught in stressful situations which they try to negotiate to the best of their abilities, options, and resources.[2] That some negotiate through activities like shoplifting (e.g., Ray and Briar, 1988), other property crimes (e.g., Snow et.al., 1989), drugs or "senseless brutality" (Duster, 1988:7) is often a reflection of how desperate or how obsolete people have come to view their lives.

Our caution here is that economically marginalized people are heterogeneous—in family arrangements, residential locations, labor force participation, utilization of social assistance, and personal habits, values, and aspirations. The scholar's task is to determine what factors inform particular stances and outcomes for various individuals.

In addition to the need to reclaim the diversity of economically marginalized people, scholars must ensure that our work enables their agency to be seen. We recommended earlier that we move from a static notion of class as lifestyle to class as a dynamic relationship to production and distribution. Reconsidering underclass as working class highlights the structural sources of their marginalization. Yet sociologists must be clear as we pursue the latter course that we not see economically marginalized people only as victims of monopoly capitalism, for example, or a core nation's hegemonic decline (e.g., Shannon, 1989). Reframing marginalized people within a materialist history enables them also to be seen as historical agents.

This is not to say that objective economic conditions do not frame peoples' lives. On the contrary, we are calling for greater articulation of those conditions so that observers will not be so tempted to fall back on ideas of individual pathology or cultures of poverty. At the same time, viewing the marginalized working class as historical agents is also necessary in order to avoid over-determination and dehumanization. Gismondi (1988:99) clarifies the matter as follows: "Recovering the human agency of dominated people requires consideration of how their social experiences inform the subjective initiatives they take in the face of objective determinants—i.e., the sense in which dominated classes make history, even if they do not always make history to their choosing."

This orientation enables us to consider the broadest range of individual and collective expressions of marginalized people without being reductionist or imposing middle class expectations upon subjects. We can recognize economically marginalized working class people as "making history", whether it be in constructive or auto-oppressive (Fanon, 1963) ways, in ways more or less to their choosing. Actions heretofore framed as "aberrant" can be reconsidered as ways to "articulate discontent, resist social exploitation, (and) maintain social identities. . . ." (Gismondi, 1988:99). At the same time, this stance does not romanticize self- or community-destructive (auto-oppressive or horizontally oppressive) behaviors, but it does locate them in a situated context of objectively oppressive conditions.

The proposed reorientation offers agency, responsibility, and hope to dominated people by moving them to center stage as potential change agents. This move contrasts sharply with Wilson's apparent orientation to change, which Herring (1990) describes as top-down. The shift enables us to see history as open-ended and problems as resolvable, thus, simultaneously challenging the assumption of intractability discussed earlier. Finally, it insists that those who write about marginalized people get close to them in some respects and come to know their vantage points and their worlds.

The Return of Class to Social Scientists and Welfare Professionals

The significance of returning class to social scientists and welfare professionals is captured literally and allegorically in the following event reported in the *Atlanta Constitution* (1990). Recently the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) announced that tenants wishing to live in newly renovated housing facilities would be required to attend housekeeping and maintenance classes. One of the housing project's activists pointed out that many of the women already earned their livelihood as domestic workers and that the requirement is insulting to them. A Legal Aid attorney called the program "paternalistic" and "presumptuous." Presumably the AHA planned to hire a professional to teach residents skills they already use to make a living.

This vignette symbolizes the tension between the actual lives of the so-called underclass and those who have control over their lives through the services they provide and the knowledge they produce. It highlights the absurd consequences that can occur when people who think they know about others have the power to impose their knowledge upon them. As sociologists who volunteer with community agencies working with people in severe need, we wish to improve the relationship between scholarship and social action. The following observations in effect call for sociologists to clean our own houses.

The development of "underclass" arguments by middle to upper class agents of knowledge production is riddled with contradictions at the core of the research enterprise. Such

contradictions primarily stem from the social distance between the producer of knowledge and the subject of investigation. Such an arrangement strongly recommends the need for grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in order to interpret and utilize macro-level statistical findings appropriately. The largely qualitative and inductive research findings mentioned in the previous section demonstrate the importance of apprehending an issue through the vantage point of the subjects under consideration.

We have concern that knowledge produced deductively from existing frameworks may perpetuate social distance and lack of understanding between producer and subject, especially when those frameworks have been generated by previous agents from similarly middle and upper class backgrounds. In addition, sociologists working with secondary data collected by other similarly situated colleagues, graduate students, and government agents are twice removed from the topic of their concern and presumed expertise. The consequences of such distanced knowledge production are played out in flesh-and-blood terms, nevertheless, in the lives of the subjects of social policies. Might sociologists who are strangers to the communities about which they make pronouncements be repeating the same presumptuous and paternalistic patterns as the Atlanta Housing Authority cited earlier? In order to minimize the possibility, we strongly endorse the need for sociologists to have personal interaction with the issues of their investigation. This suggestion is both empirically sound and ethically compelling.

Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979) enable us to see similarities between AHA's consultants and sociological knowledge-brokers through their conceptualization of a professional-managerial class (PMC) in monopoly capitalist societies. They define the PMC as "salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations" (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979:12). The nature of the AHA consultant's work would reproduce capitalist cultural stereotypes about the "underclass", and it would reinforce ruling class control over the working class, albeit through the former's PMC surrogates.

Scholars employing underclass conceptualization unwittingly reproduce cultural stereotypes. In addition, by allowing debate to shift repeatedly to social pathology, they set the stage for ruling class control over the working class, albeit via the work of other members of the PMC. Insofar as that analytical shift is realized, we also surrender opportunities to emphasize macrosociological questions containing the potential for fundamental social change.

Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979) further note that as buffers between the ruling class and the working class, the PMC find themselves in a class location that is objectively antagonistic to both. The PMC struggles with capitalists over control of the workplace, and it clashes with the working class over skills, knowledge, and culture. The creation of professions and professional associations became a platform from which both kinds of struggles could be waged.

Regardless of objective antagonisms, however, PMC workers may choose consciously to align themselves with one class or the other. Gilkes (1983) describes the conscientious ways in which community workers in her study utilize the opportunities of their professional stature to "go up for the oppressed." In doing so, they realize that they must abandon traditional trajectories of careerism. One's alignment with ruling classes is likely to be more subtle and perhaps not even recognized. When Wilson purposely chose to employ the language of conservative scholars (such as "reverse discrimination" and "social pathology") in order to counter their claims, the effect was quite the opposite. This situation suggests that "respectable pragmatism" (Newby, 1989b:131) serves to align scholars with ruling groups even when their expressed allegiance is to the working class.

A number of sociologists reject disciplinary discussions such as this. They argue for research, even policy studies, that are objective and non-political. We are continually amazed at how the boundaries of sociological analysis stop for some at our discipline's door. This article is not necessarily a call for sociologists to become political activists. Rather, it is a call for us to become more reflexive about our work, to realize that the academy is not set apart from the larger society and its politics,

and to understand that we, too, have "class", with all of its implications.

Conclusion

We have suggested a number of avenues for focusing explicit attention on the politics of sociological work, including careful attention to class issues. We have not explored the critical ways in which race and gender intersect with class to produce phenomena described variously as a "Black underclass" (see *The Black Scholar*, 1988) or the "feminization of poverty" (Pearce, 1978). These terms, too, would benefit from scrutiny and reconceptualization to bring racism, sexism and their articulation with class and with one another to the forefront of analysis. Burnham's (1985) work exemplifies the potential along these lines.

In addressing the foregoing issues, we are reminded of some central dilemmas W.E.B. Dubois experienced with sociology in its early years. Dubois fully embraced empirical investigation and the statistical method; at the same time he was an impassioned advocate for sociologists to exert moral force in the larger society. Throughout his life he searched for ways to merge empiricism and social action, but he eventually moved from a largely scholarly approach to social issues to an increasingly politically activist stance (Rampersad, 1990). Ultimately his concerns for social justice could not be accommodated by disciplinary requirements. Many of the issues we have raised seek ways to blend the features of scholarship and social justice that Dubois himself found irreconcilable.

Almost a century of disciplinary history separates Dubois' dilemmas and the problems we highlight here. Yet their similarities are so striking as to suggest some inherent contradictions within the profession. How each scholar or each generation chooses to resolve those dilemmas and contradictions varies with personality, politics, and circumstance. Social scientists must recognize that, purposefully or not, our work contributes to the making of history. That history can be more or less to our liking, depending upon the extent to which we acknowledge the inherently political nature of what we do. Our suggestions

admittedly flow from a particular set of political stances: respect for subjects' vantage points, a commitment to the importance of structural analysis, and a desire for a more egalitarian society. We have offered ways of doing social science that embrace those particular values up front.

References

Acker, Joan (1988). Class, gender, and the relations of distribution. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13,3:473–497.

Aid to Imprisoned Mothers, Inc. (1990). Children's Counseling Project: Final Report. Unpublished.

Atlanta Constitution (1990). A demeaning requirement? Screening by AHA angers some tenants. September 24:B1,B2.

Auletta, Ken (1982). *The Underclass.* New York: Random House.

Billingsley, Andrew (1989). The sociology of knowledge of William J. Wilson: placing *The Truly Disadvantaged* in its socio-historical context. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 16,4:7–40.

The Black Scholar (1988). Theory or fact? the Black underclass. Entire issue 19,3.

Braun, Denny (1991). *The Rich Get Richer.* Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Burnham, Linda Dean (1985). Has poverty been feminized in Black America? *The Black Scholar* 16:14–24.

Chafetz, Janet Saltzman (1978). *A Primer on the Construction and Testing of Theories in Sociology.* Itasca, Illinois: F. E. Peacock.

Conforti, Joseph (1990). The federal role in homeless assistance. Presented at annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, August.

Dill, Bonnie Thornton (1989). A limited proposal for social reform: a response to William J. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged. Journal of Sociology and Welfare* 16,4:69–76.

Duster, Troy (1988). Social implications of the "new" Black underclass. *The Black Scholar* 19,3:2–9.

Edelman, Murray (1977). *Political Language.* New York: Academic Press.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, & Ehrenreich, John (1979). The professional-managerial class. In *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker, 5–45. Boston: South End Press.

Fanon, Frantz (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth.* New York: Grove Press.

Gans, Herbert J. (1990). Deconstructing the underclass: the term's dangers as a planning concept. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 56:271–277.

Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend (1983). Going up for the oppressed. *Journal of Social Issues* 39:115–139.

Gismondi, Michael (1988). The idea of resistance: dependency as historical process. *Critical Sociology* 15:95–111.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory.* Chicago: Aldine.

Gomes, Ralph C., & Fishman, Walda Katz (1989). A critique of *The Truly Disadvantaged*: a historical materialist perspective. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 16,4:77–98.

Gooley, Ruby L. (1989). Personal Communication.

Herring, Cedric (1990). Deja vu all over again: a discussion of Wilson's analysis of the "underclass". *ABS Newsletter* 17, 4:4–5.

Minkler, Meredith (1991). "Generational equity" and the new victim blaming. Pp. 67–80 in Meredith Minkler and Carroll L. Estes (eds.), *Cricital Perspectives on Aging: The Political and Moral Economy of Growing Old*. Amityville, NY: Baywood.

Morris, Michael (1989). From the culture of poverty to the underclass: an analysis of a shift in public language. *The American Sociologist* 20:123–133.

Myrdal, Gunnar (1962). *The Challenge to Affluence*. New York: Pantheon.

Naples, Nancy A. (1991). Challenging the stereotypes: women on AFDC in college. Paper presented at annual meeting of Society for the Study of Social Problems, Cincinnati, August.

Neubeck, Kenneth J. (1991). *Social Problems: A Critical Approach*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Newby, Robert G. (1989). Problems of pragmatism in public policy: critique of William Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 16,4:123–132.

O'Connor, James (1973). *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Pearce, Deana (1978). The feminization of poverty: women, work, and welfare. *Urban and Social Change Review* 11:28–36.

Perilla-Parker, Julia (1990). Aging on the streets: elderly men in Atlanta shelters. Unpublished master's thesis, Georgia State University.

Rampersad, Arnold (1990). *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Dubois*. New York: Schocken.

Ray, Joann, & Hooper Briar, Katherine (1988). Economic motivators for shoplifting. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 15,4:177–189.

Ricketts, Erol R., & Sawhill, Isabel V. (1988). Defining and measuring the underclass. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 7:316–325.

Shannon, Thomas Richard (1989). *An Introduction to the World System Perspective*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Snow, David A., Baker, Susan G., & Anderson, Leon (1989). Criminality and homeless men: an empirical assessment. *Social Problems* 36:532–549.

Social Science Research Council (n.d.). Fellowships and grants for research on the urban underclass. New York:SSRC.

Stack, Carol B. (1970). *All Our Kin*. New York: Harper & Row.

Stoesz, David, Poole, John, & Joseph, Martha (1989). Maintaining the underclass. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 16,3:3–16.

Wilson, William Julius (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, William Julius (1991). Studying inner-city social dislocations. *American Sociological Review* 56:1–14.
Winkler, Karen J. (1990). Researcher's examination of California's poor Latino population prompts debate over the traditional definitions of the under-class. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 10:45.

Notes

1. See Aponte (1990) for more extensive coverage of this literature.
2. To be sure, there is considerable contradiction in the Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) study, since they use census tracts with high proportions of "prime age males not regularly attached to the labor force" and "welfare recipients" (along with two other variables) as their criteria for determining underclass areas. With no more than passing concern about the income-relatedness of these measures, they conclude that there is a high, but not a perfect, correlation between low income areas and areas evidencing "deviant social behavior."
3. Aponte (1990) notes that behavioral definitions of the underclass shift attention away from structural sources of poverty and imply that behavioral change alone can propel one from the realm of poverty. He argues that if this is the case, then perhaps the specialty of deviance is a more appropriate arena for inquiries into poverty.
4. This conclusion parallels some from the 1960s and 1970s that challenged culture of poverty theses. Stack's (1970) work is representative of that collection of usually ethnographic reports.