



[Previous page] Riots and Aftermath. Unrest spread across poor suburbs around Paris, and then to other cities in France, after the death of two youths chased by the police. Global press coverage quickly seized on a key concept from urban geography to interpret the events: the youths from low-income immigrant families were quickly labeled as the “urban underclass.” Image sources: top, Alain Bachellier (2005). “Scorched Car in Paris Suburb, November 2005”; bottom, Strogoloff (2005). “Voitre feu...” Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution licenses, via Wikimedia Commons.

Race, Class, and Space: The Urban Underclass

Geography 350, *Introduction to Urban Geography*

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Zyed, Bouna, and Muttin

Walking home from a soccer game shortly after 5:00 pm on October 27, 2005, Zyed Benna, Bouna Traore, and Muttin Altun saw a police patrol working its way through Clichy-sous-Bois, a suburb east of Paris populated mostly by first- and second-generation immigrants from Africa. The sight of the police squad, dispatched to investigate a possible break-in at a construction site, was certainly nothing unusual. Zyed, Bouna, and Muttin knew well what to expect if they were stopped for questioning: youths in the dilapidated housing projects of Clichy-sous-Bois routinely face lengthy interrogation from police on patrol, and “they are required to present identity papers and can be held as long as four hours at the police station, and sometimes their parents must come before the police will release them.”¹ Zyed, Bouna, and Muttin had been playing with a half-dozen other friends on a local soccer field, and when the group saw the police squad they scattered in different directions. Zyed, Bouna, and Muttin managed to elude capture, and by 5:50 pm the police had rounded up six other youths and brought them to the police station at Livry-Gargan to begin questioning. Twenty minutes into the interrogation, computer screens and lights flickered in the station. Zyed, Bouna, and Muttin had escaped by hiding in a transformer in an electrical substation. Zyed, 17, and Bouna, 15, were electrocuted and died; Muttin, 17, was hospitalized with serious injuries.²

The deaths of Zyed, a Tunisian, and Bouna, a Mauritanian, catalyzed youth frustration over police practices, racism, poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion in the housing projects on the outskirts of Paris and many other French cities. On Thursday, October 28, small riots broke out in Clichy-sous-Bois. Violence worsened the next night, with nearly four hundred youths throwing stones, bottles, and Molotov cocktails at police, who responded with rubber bullets. Twenty-three police officers were injured, thirteen youth were arrested, and 29 vehicles were set ablaze. Tensions eased only slightly over the next two days, with twenty vehicles set ablaze on Saturday night, and eight on Sunday night. But when a police tear gas grenade hit a local mosque³ on Sunday night, a second wave of anger spread through the area’s predominantly Muslim community. Hassen Farsadou, head of the Union of Muslim Associations in a nearby suburb, tried to calm youth, but lamented, “When I asked them why they would want to go out

¹ Thomas Crampton (2005). “Behind the Furor, the Last Moments of 2 Youths.” *New York Times*, November 7, A11.

² For a detailed chronology, see Crampton, “Behind the Furor.”

³ There is some ambiguity on precisely what happened at this point. Some press accounts imply the inadvertent firing of a tear-gas shell that only landed outside a local mosque. Others describe a tear-gas shell *detonating inside* a local prayer hall.

and make trouble, they talk about the incident of the tear gas at the mosque. ... They said that makes them enraged.” Whether the youths in the street were religious was irrelevant, Farsadou emphasized: “They saw it on TV, they got worked up about it and they stirred up other boys.”⁴ Violence worsened, and by Thursday, November 3, unrest spread to Dijon, Marseille, Toulouse, Strasbourg, and parts of central Paris. Ten police officers were wounded when rioters fired shotguns in a confrontation in Grigny, south of Paris, on Sunday, November 6. That day, France’s most influential Islamic group issued a *fatwa*, a religious edict condemning the

After two teenagers died after being chased by the police, riots spread across poor suburban communities around Paris, then other cities across France. The President declared a national state of emergency, and the Prime Minister said, “The Republic is at a moment of truth.”

violence: “It is formally forbidden for any Muslim seeking divine grace and satisfaction to participate in any action that blindly hits private or public property or could constitute an attack on someone’s life.”⁵ French President Jacques Chirac convened an emergency meeting of top security officials to deal with the spreading unrest, widely described in the international press as the worst challenge to governmental authority in nearly forty years. But targeted police action in response to localized incidents seemed utterly useless in response to the spreading unrest. Many politicians began to warn “that the unrest may be coalescing into an organized movement, citing Internet chatter that is urging other poor neighborhoods across

France to join in. But no one has emerged to take the lead like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, known as Danny the Red, did during the violent student protests that rocked the French capital in 1968.”⁶ Attempts to calm the violence exposed longstanding political tensions at the highest levels of the French government, shaped by the rivalry between the zero-tolerance policing principles favored by Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and the more diplomatic stance preferred by Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, both of whom wanted to succeed Chirac as President. (Sarkozy went on to succeed in May, 2007, building an electoral coalition of older voters, higher earners, farmers, and professionals; he also won a large majority of the votes cast by supporters of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s far-right National Front party⁷). On November 9, Chirac declared⁸ a state of emergency,

⁴ Quoted in Susan Sachs (2005). “The Fiery Rage of Immigrant Alienation.” *Globe and Mail*, November 7, A1, A12, quote from p. A12. Not surprisingly, communications technologies have been cited as a conditioning factor in the spread of unrest amongst different neighborhoods and different cities. Police officials said that youths coordinated arson attacks and other violence through cellphone messages, and also through online blogs on Skyblog, the enormously popular national online system maintained by the radio station Skyrock. Skyblog hosts at least three million blogs, with new ones added at a rate of 20,000 per day; one of these, at <http://bouna93.skyblog.com>, memorializes Bouna and Zyed. Hacking and Google-bombing have also been a predictable feature of the cyburbanization of the global attention span focused on the riots: “for a time over the weekend, the French version of Google returned the home page for President Jacques Chirac’s political party when users typed in a search for Paris and the words riot or suburb in French.” Thomas Crampton (2005). “French Police Fear that Blogs Have Helped Incite Rioting.” *New York Times*, November 10, p. A12.

⁵ Quoted in Craig S. Smith (2005). “10 Officers Shot as Riots Worsen in French Cities.” *New York Times*, November 7, A1, A11, quote from p. A11.

⁶ Smith, “10 Officers Shot,” p. A11.

⁷ Marjorie Connelly (2007). “Sarkozy’s Win, Group by Group.” *New York Times*, May 8, A8.

invoking only for the second time in half a century the provisions of an emergency law drafted in 1955 to suppress the Algerian independence movement, and de Villepin said, “We must be lucid: The Republic is at a moment of truth.”⁹ The historical resonance and symbolism of the act was not lost on anyone: the Human Rights League of Paris immediately attacked the use of a repressive colonial-era measure, and pointed out that such measures were never used in the student and worker revolts of 1968. *Le Monde* took the position that “The Prime Minister should recall that at that time the combination of misunderstanding, warlike posturing, and powerlessness brought the Republic to its worst ever moment.”¹⁰ Interior Ministry Sarkozy proposed further steps, citing figures that 120 foreigners, not all of them living in France legally,

The riots and rebellions across cities in France in the fall of 2005, like so many other urban problems in cities around the world, were explained and diagnosed with a powerful urban geography concept: the “urban underclass.”

had been found guilty of participating in the riots: “I have asked the prefects to deport them from our national territory without delay, including those who have residency visas,” Sarkozy said in a declaration that was enthusiastically applauded in Parliament.¹¹

Underclassing the Unrest

The urban violence across France was immediately woven into long-running debates over immigration policy, racial and ethnic difference, and the tensions between Islam and the secular policies of the French state. The

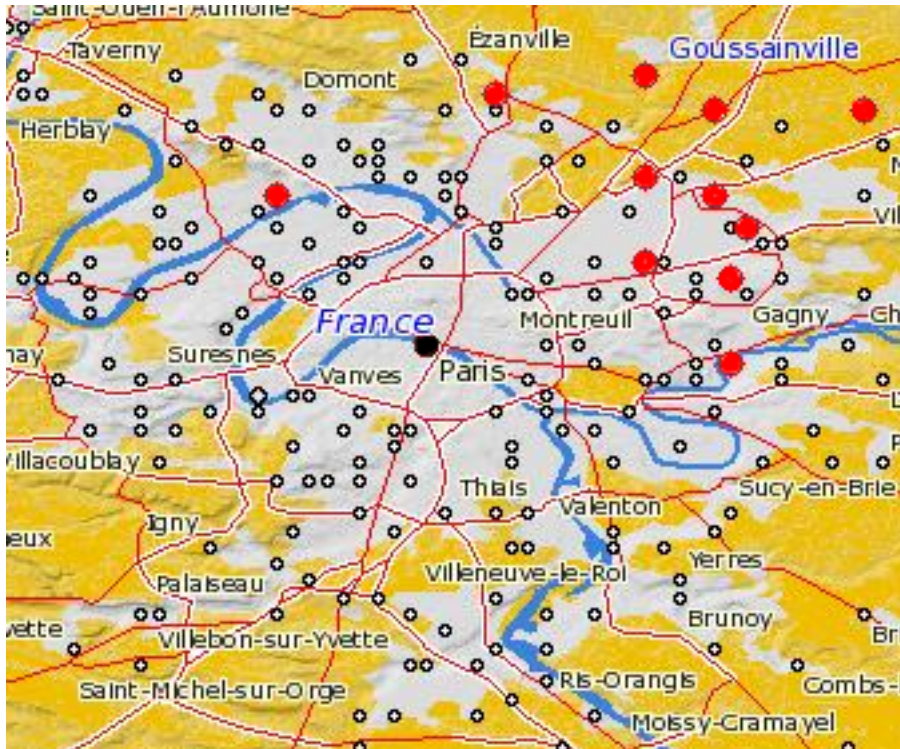
violence on the streets of poor suburbs outside dozens of French cities was mirrored in slightly more peaceful confrontations between politicians, journalists, and scholars from the left and right, in France, across Europe, in Canada, the United States, and Australia. Susan Sachs, writing in the *Globe and Mail* under the headline, “The fiery rage of immigrant alienation,” nicely summarized the hardening political divides of interpretation: “Right-wing commentators and politicians have blamed defiantly unassimilated immigrants from Arab and African countries for the violence. On the left, the accusations are equally virulent, pinning the explosion on

⁸ Yet to label the edict as a “declaration” is rather misleading. Chirac’s decision to invoke the state of emergency was read to journalist by a spokesman after a cabinet meeting, prompting widespread press discussion of the significance of how Chirac, a “lover of the spotlight,” has withdrawn in the face of this serious crisis to “become the invisible man.” Elaine Sciolino (2005). “Chirac, Lover of Spotlight, Avoids Glare of France’s Fires.” *New York Times*, November 10, p. A12. Speculation has focused on the role of internal divisions over how Chirac’s cabinet wishes to respond, on the possible role of a mild stroke the 72-year old leader is believed to have suffered in September, 2005, and the awkward position that a more prominent position might involve for a President in the last eighteen months of his decade-long presidency. “Mr. Chirac has spoken passionately over the years, most notably in his presidential campaigns in 1995 and 2002, about the need to fight crime, create jobs and bridge the growing gap between rich and poor. But he has never seemed comfortable in the suburban slums. He even said in Orléans in 1991 that it was ‘not racist to say’ that the immigrant workers of the suburbs were a financial burden to France, were disinclined to work and made ‘noise and smell.’ His words are still quoted there.” Sciolino, “Chirac, Lover of Spotlight,” p. A12.

⁹ Quoted in Graeme Smith (2005). “France’s ‘Moment of Truth.’” *Globe and Mail*, November 9, A1, A12, quote from p. A1.

¹⁰ Quoted in Estanislao Oziewicz (2005). “Law Revives Colonial Legacy, Critics Say.” *Globe and Mail*, November 9, A12.

¹¹ Mark Landler (2005). “France Prepares to Deport Foreigners Guilty of Rioting.” *New York Times*, November 10, A12.



Uprising across the Urban System. Riots in the suburbs of Paris as of November 4, 2005. Uprisings spread to more suburbs and more cities until French President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency on November 9. *Source:* Planiglobe (2005). “Paris Suburb Riots.” Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 license, via Wikimedia Commons.

cutbacks in social programs and persistent unemployment that have driven France’s have-nots into open rebellion.”¹² Sachs’ account went on to

review some of the prominent voices in a growing transnational conversation about the French model of immigrant integration and assimilation, which emphasizes a single, unified French identity that does not recognize racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious difference.¹³ And Sachs went on to describe a specifically urban facet to the violence, and the contrasting interpretations of its roots: “But in the *cités*, as the low-income apartment towers are known in French, residents offer another explanation: an ingrained intolerance for diversity that they say has created a permanent underclass.”¹⁴

Underclass. Almost immediately, the term became a central part of popular discourse on the roots of the unrest. The word became the shorthand not only for cultural, racial-ethnic, and religious difference, but also for deviance, extremism, rebellious youth behavior, poverty, exclusion, isolation, alienation, and also for the entire range of meanings and metaphors in the “urban” itself. The *Observer* observed that the political confusion over how to respond to events that “some French commentators have described as a ‘May 1968’ for France’s immigrant underclass, underlines a corrosive division in French society” that can be read directly from the urban landscape.¹⁵ The foreign editor for *The Australian* took the opportunity to blame the

¹² Sachs, “Fiery rage,” p. A1.

¹³ The French commitment to a model of adaptation to a single, coherent ideal of French identity goes so far as to preclude any formal collection of social data by race or ethnicity, which would allow measurement of inequality or discrimination. There is no French equivalent to equity laws or multicultural policies as in Canada, nor of affirmative action programs to rectify the legacy of racism and discrimination as in the United States.

¹⁴ Sachs, “Fiery rage,” p. A1.

¹⁵ *The Observer* (2005). “Integration has to be Voluntary: Good Societies Grow from Strong Roots.” *The Observer*, Editorial Page, November 6, p. 28. The corrosive division cited by the editors is most clear in Paris, “a city divided by a palpable racial barrier. Within its inner ring road, Paris is almost universally white and middle class. The city’s black and Arab population is confined to the housing projects beyond.”

French welfare state (and its refusal to embrace free-market flexibility that would create lots of low-wage entry-level jobs) for “The Underclass that Ate Paris.”¹⁶ The *Hamilton Spectator* eyed the unease across Western Europe, and took note that “Violence has now struck nearly 300 towns across France in a rampage being viewed by many as a plea for attention from a neglected and embittered ethnic underclass.”¹⁷ The *Toronto Star* declared that “The flames in its urban ghettos are France’s equivalent of New Orleans. They represent a wakeup call, a cry of anger and of pain from its underclass.”¹⁸ *The Economist* simply declared the riots “An Underclass Rebellion.”¹⁹ Near the peak of the violence on November 6, the *Boston Globe*’s Colin Nickerson offered a vivid urban image of Clichy-sous-Bois, under an incendiary subtitle on the paper’s front page as the “Islamic underclass vents frustration”:

The (sub)urban riots were called “an underclass rebellion,” and the youth of the “Islamic underclass” were compared with America’s “black urban underclass” blamed for “looting in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.”

“Mahmoud Khabou, 20, the jobless son of Algerian immigrants, knows little of the world beyond the concrete housing projects that rise in bleak rows barely an hour’s subway ride from the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, and other grand moments of Paris. But he knows who his heroes are. ‘Osama bin Laden and Rodney King,’ he said, referring to the Al Qaeda leader and the African American whose videotaped beating by Los Angeles police in 1991 spawned massive racial riots. ‘One because he gives pride back to the Muslims,’ the young man asserted as he and a trio of friends stood near the charred ruins of a carpet shop. ‘The other because

he was just a poor man, a ‘nobody man’ of color, but he caused a great city to burn.”²⁰

A few days later, the *Dallas Morning News* offered another sober diagnosis, warning that “France’s boiling point” is a symptom of European crisis that “will be felt around the globe”:

“When some members of the black urban underclass began looting in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, many French commentators sniffed that America was reaping its reward for failing to deal with chronic poverty. Well. It might be tempting to view the destruction wrought across France by thuggish young men --

¹⁶ Greg Sheridan (2005). “The Underclass that Ate Paris.” Opinion Page, distributed via Nationwide News Pty Limited. *The Australian*, November 10, p. 12.

¹⁷ Cox News Service (2005). “Europe Braces itself for Violence as Rioting in France Intensifies.” *Hamilton Spectator*, November 8, p. A10.

¹⁸ *Toronto Star* (2005). “France Battles with Questions of Identity.” Opinion page. *Toronto Star*, November 8, p. A19. The Star’s “underclass” line was soon picked up through syndication elsewhere, including in *The Australian* (2005). “France’s Toxic Shock.” *The Australian*, November 12, p. 32.

¹⁹ *The Economist* (2005). “An Underclass Rebellion: France’s Riots.” *Economist*, U.S. Edition. November 12.

²⁰ Colin Nickerson (2005). “Youths’ Poverty, Despair Fuel Violent Unrest in France; Islamic Underclass Vents Frustration.” *Boston Globe*, November 6, p. A1.

nearly all ethnic minorities, many from Arab and African immigrant backgrounds -- as comeuppance. That would be wrong. France's agony is not only pitiable on its face, but also a profound threat to American interests."²¹

The rhetorical linkage between Paris and New Orleans appeared in many other accounts, and it was by no means the only urban connection drawn by front-line journalists, newsroom editors, opinion columnists, and influential academics. Olivier Roy, a Professor at Paris' School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and the author of *Globalized Islam*,²² argued that

"The rioting in Paris and other French cities has led to a lot of interpretations and comments, most of them irrelevant. Many see the violence as religiously motivated, the inevitable result of unchecked immigration from Muslim countries; for others the rioters are simply acting out of vengeance at being denied their cultural heritage or a fair share in French society. But the reality is that there is nothing particularly Muslim, or even French, about the violence. Rather, we are witnessing the temporary rising up of one small part of a Western underclass culture that reaches from Paris to London to Los Angeles and beyond."²³

The New York Times syndicated columnist David Brooks suggested that "poor young Muslim men in places like France, Britain, and maybe even the world beyond" were finding "their self-respect by embracing the poses and worldview of American hip-hop and gangsta rap."

And in the most vivid and incendiary interpretation, the indefatigable conservative columnist David Brooks declared that the entire situation was really about "Gangsta, in French":

"After 9/11, everyone knew there was going to be a debate about the future of Islam. We just didn't know the debate would be between Osama bin Laden and Tupac Shakur. Yet those seem to be the lifestyle alternatives that are really on offer for poor young Muslim men in places like France, Britain, and maybe even the world beyond. A few highly alienated and fanatical young men commit themselves to

the radical Islam of bin Laden. But most find their self-respect by embracing the poses and worldview of American hip-hop and gangsta rap."²⁴

Brooks, writing for an American audience reading the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times*, went on to offer a racialized, pop-cultural behavioral linkage between the uprising in the poor suburban public housing projects of the suburbs of Paris and the pervasive American stereotype of the poor inner-city projects in many U.S. cities:

²¹ Dallas Morning News (2005). "France's Boiling Point: Crisis in Europe Will be Felt Around the Globe." *Dallas Morning News*, November 10.

²² Olivier Roy (2004). *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²³ Olivier Roy (2005). "Get French or Die Trying." *New York Times*, Opinion/Editorial Page, November 9, p. 27.

²⁴ David Brooks (2005). "Gangsta, in French." *New York Times*, Opinion/Editorial Page, November 10, p. A31.

“One of the striking things about the scenes from France is how thoroughly the rioters have assimilated hip-hop and rap culture. It’s not only that they use the same hand gestures as American rappers, wear the same clothes and necklaces, play the same video games and sit with the same sorts of car stereos at full blast. It’s that they seem to have adopted the same poses of exaggerated manhood, the same attitudes about women, money, and the police. They seem to have replicated the same sort of gang culture, the same romantic visions of gunslinging drug dealers. ... American ghetto life, at least as portrayed in rap videos, now defines for the poor, young, and disaffected what it means to be oppressed. Gangsta resistance is the most compelling model for how to rebel against that oppression. If you want to stand up and fight The Man, the Notorious B.I.G. shows the way. ... In other words, what we are seeing in France will be familiar to anyone who watched gangsta culture rise in this country. You take a population of young men who are oppressed by racism and who face limited opportunities, and you present them with a culture that encourages them to become exactly the sort of people the bigots think they are -- and you call this proud self-assertion and empowerment. You take men who are already suspected by the police because of their color, and you romanticize and encourage criminality so they will be really despised and mistreated. You tell them to defy oppression by embracing self-destruction.”²⁵

What is the ‘underclass’? What makes it urban? What are the origins and implications of the images, metaphors, and explanations that circulated so widely in media portrayals of the riots in France’s cities? This is a story of a word entering middle age and dragging a heavy load of theoretical, political, and ideological baggage that does not fit safely in the overhead compartment.

Here’s a brief summary. The term ‘underclass,’ introduced to describe surprising features of America’s post-World War II boom in the 1950s and 1960s, was soon popularized and woven into policy and theoretical debates over American urban problems and the legacy of racial and economic barriers in urban housing markets. Explanations rooted in a structural conception of urban poverty soon gave way to a well-orchestrated conservative political movement that advanced a behavioral, culture-of-poverty set of explanations. This conservative victory transformed American social policy in the 1990s, and by the end of the decade the term “underclass” and its theoretical assumptions had become a central feature of urban debates in Canada, Britain, Australia, and many other countries. Today, the word occupies a paradoxical position: journalists use it to signal a sophisticated understanding of the roots of a particular urban problem; but when stripped out of its theoretical, historical, and geographical context, the word is vulnerable to multiple and contradictory interpretations.

²⁵ Brooks, “Gangsta,” p. A31.

A Word is Born

Primary sources matter. As I type the first draft of this essay,²⁶ a Lexis-Nexis search identifies thirty-six uses of the term “underclass” in major news outlets in the last week alone, ranging from the *Bangor Daily News* (Maine) to *The Australian*, the *Toronto Star*, London’s suite of dailies (the *Financial Times*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Observer*), *The Nation* (Pakistan), the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.²⁷ But in late 1962 and early 1963, Gunnar Myrdal had no convenient Lexis-Nexis with which to search the ever-accelerating global flows of discourse in national and international news outlets for the use of such terms as “underclass.” Myrdal had practiced law after graduating from the Law School of Stockholm University in 1923; he was later elected and re-elected to the Swedish Senate, served on the

In early 1962, the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal was puzzled by the paradox of persistent poverty amidst the unprecedented growth and wealth of the United States. He used the Swedish term for lower class – “underclass” – to describe the problem of persistent unemployment and seemingly permanent poverty.

Board of the Bank of Sweden, chaired Sweden’s Post-War Planning Commission, and served as Sweden’s Minister of Commerce. He was also a brilliant scholar, completing a doctorate in economics at Stockholm in 1927 before studying for periods in Germany and Britain and then undertaking research and writing in the United States first as a Rockefeller fellow (1929-1930) and then on studies commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1938-1944) and the Twentieth Century Fund (1957-1960). By 1961 he was back in Sweden, appointed as a Professor of International Economics at Stockholm University.²⁸ Yet his rich expertise on international economics and distinctive features of America’s economy kept him in high demand on the left bank of the Atlantic River, and in 1962 and 1963 he delivered a series of

lectures to U.S. audiences: in January, 1962, to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York; in April, to the Council on Foreign Affairs in San Francisco; in June, at Howard University in Washington, DC; and finally, a series of three lectures in April, 1963 to audiences at the University of California, Berkeley. These lectures were subsequently assembled into a book published as *Challenge to Affluence*.²⁹

Myrdal was fascinated by the intersection of quite remarkable historical circumstances in America at the time: rapid productivity growth resulting from the efficiencies of automation in production, rapid transformations in the skills and educational levels of the workforce, and the dramatic pump-priming effects of billions of dollars of Cold War military expenditures. Yet all of this wealth and technological triumph had thus far failed to reduce the persistently high rates

²⁶ November 12, 2005.

²⁷ Update, November 13, 2007: thirty appearances of the term in major world newspapers in the last week.

²⁸ Assar Lindbeck, ed. (1992). “Biography of Gunnar Myrdal.” *Nobel Lectures, Economics 1969-1980*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company. Reprinted and revised, available at <http://nobelprize.org/economics/1974>. Myrdal was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in 1974, ironically sharing a joint prize with his ideological adversary, the conservative icon Friedrich August von Hayek.

²⁹ Gunnar Myrdal (1963). *Challenge to Affluence*. New York: Pantheon.

of unemployment and poverty in the nation. Myrdal was deeply troubled by the “problem of poverty in the midst of plenty and of the operation of a vicious circle tending to create in America an unprivileged class of unemployed, unemployables, and underemployed who are more and more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions, and its achievements.”³⁰ This was not simply a problem of unemployment *per se*; much was known about the statistical details of monthly and annual fluctuations in joblessness, he emphasized, but

“Less often observed and commented upon is the tendency of the changes underway to trap an ‘under-class’³¹ of unemployed and, gradually, unemployable and under-employed persons and families at the bottom of a society, while for the



majority of people above that layer the increasingly democratic structure of the educational system creates ever more real liberty and equality of opportunity....”³²

Gunnar Myrdal, (right), with his wife Alva, in 1934. *Source*: Unknown author, public domain image, via Wikimedia Commons.

³⁰ Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 10.

³¹ Myrdal’s first use of the term in his text merited an explanatory footnote, in which he explained: “The word ‘under-class’ does not seem to be used in English. In America where, as opinion polls over several decades show, the great majority reckon themselves as ‘middle-class,’ this is particularly understandable on ideological grounds. Nevertheless, the term will be used in this book as the only one adequate to the social reality discussed.” Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 34.

³² Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 34.

Myrdal, who began a preface to the book with a personal plea on behalf of the values “which I once defined as the ‘American Creed,’ the radical ideals of the Enlightenment to which America has conservatively adhered,”³³ nevertheless saw the longstanding American ideal of unlimited possibilities, of upward mobility that would allow any one to rise from the bottom to the top, as “always something of a myth”:

“...the opportunity to rise in society, or even to maintain a decent and respectable level of living and to participate in the nation’s general culture and the solution of its problems, was not always that open in the old days. Great masses of people had no possibility of sharing in the American image of liberty and opportunity of rising economically and socially. This applied to the cotton farming Negro tenants in the South, the white hillbillies not far south of Washington, D.C., and similar groups of poor whites elsewhere in the country, the migrant workers on the big California farms, ... the workers in the sweatshops in the cities, ...[and] the new immigrants in the city slums, handicapped in many ways, who often suffered miserable hardships before they came into their own.”³⁴

Myrdal identified the emergence of structural shifts in the economy – automation, and increasing competition amongst workers forced to obtain more and more formal educational credentials – that were displacing more and more workers. Unskilled workers, and even some highly skilled workers, were being rendered redundant. For many, unemployment was becoming chronic or even permanent.

For Myrdal, the common fate of all of these different “great masses” of people was bound up with structural shifts in the nature of production that were eliminating the need for workers: “...there is something threatening in the very recent changes” involving “the displacement of unskilled and even of much skilled labor.” The increasingly sophisticated organization and stratification of economic institutions, along with the intensified competitive increase in educational and credentialing systems and accelerated automation,

“has continued steadily downward, first to middle positions and then to ever lower strata of employees in industry and commerce, until it is now beginning to make unskilled and many skilled workers

redundant. This is a new threat. For when the process has proceeded that far, without a parallel change for educating and training the whole labor force to correspond to the new demands, there is no longer any vast space left beneath for economic advance and social mobility.... Those not needed are true ‘outcasts.’ They simply become unemployed, and indeed largely unemployable, or underemployed.”³⁵

³³ Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. v.

³⁴ Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 36.

³⁵ Myrdal, *Challenge*, pp. 37-38.

More than a generation before most others understood what was happening, Myrdal had glimpsed the underside of the postindustrial service economy, shaped by a polarized labor force of well-paid, highly-skilled professionals versus unskilled workers competing for a steadily shrinking share of available employment opportunities. Industrial transformations were

More than a generation before most others understood what was happening, Myrdal identified the dangerous underside of the postindustrial service economy.

Three features distinguish Myrdal's analysis of the underclass:

1. The problem is the result of structural economic change: individual behavioral problems are the result of poverty, not its cause.

2. The problem is geographically diverse – from the agricultural poverty of the rural South to the sweatshops of the cities.

3. The problem is racially and ethnically diverse.

“closing all good jobs and soon almost all jobs worth having in affluent America to those who happen to be born in regions, localities, or economic and social strata where education and training for life and work in this new America are not provided as a normal thing. For the larger part of America there is social and economic mobility through the educational system. Beneath that level a line is drawn to an ‘under-class.’ That class line becomes demarcated as a caste line, since the children in this class tend to become as poorly endowed as their parents.”³⁶

Myrdal warned of the social consequences of the transformation of America's industrial structure. “Crime, prostitution, and all sorts of shady ways of passing time will thrive”³⁷ when unemployment persists, and joblessness is especially damaging for the young, “and even more particularly when their educational and cultural level is low.”³⁸ Myrdal viewed proposals for greatly increased unemployment benefits as unwise: “apart from their lack of political realism, such proposals underestimate how unhealthy and destructive it is for anybody in the national culture to go idle and live more permanently on doles. ... Work .. is, if not always a pleasure, the basis for self-respect and a dignified life.”³⁹

³⁶ Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 38.

³⁷ Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 40.

³⁸ Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 40.

³⁹ Myrdal, *Challenge*, p. 41.

From Structural to Behavioral Explanations

Notice three important aspects of Myrdal's account. First, note how it emphasizes the structural roots of the problem: for him, underlying economic changes that have diminished the supply of suitable job opportunities are at fault. His analysis does identify some of the behavioral problems that can be expected among those who are victimized by structural economic change; *but individual behavioral problems are the result, not the cause, of poverty.* Second, the account

In the 1970s, many American scholars, journalists, and political operatives transformed the structural problem of the underclass into a behavioral term with explicit racial connotations: the underclass were redefined as poor, inner-city blacks "who behaved in criminal, deviant, or just non-middle class ways."

The influential idea of the "culture of poverty" had been explicitly racialized and linked to the problems of cities.

does not single out any particular kind of geography associated with the 'under-class'; the victims of structural unemployment and under-employment include African American sharecroppers in the piedmont South, white coal-miners in the highlands of Kentucky and West Virginia; and workers in the "sweatshops in the cities." Third, note that the underclass includes people from a variety of racial and ethnic identities. Ultimately, Myrdal's use of the term was inextricable with his sense that the American economy was leading to fundamental changes in its *class structure*; although he might have had some passing interest in describing unique aspects of who the underclass members were and what they were doing, *he was much more interested in the long-term economic shifts that were making it impossible for some people to survive in an increasingly competitive society.*

Myrdal's *under-class*, derived from a Swedish term for "lower class," was introduced in his lectures at Berkeley in 1963, and, of course, in the subsequent book collection. A few years later, others began to pick up the term, and thus its singular meaning began to evolve in multiple

directions.⁴⁰ At first, a few analysts on the left began to see Myrdal's term in explicitly racial terms, and after the long hot summer of urban riots in many U.S. cities in 1967, leftist portrayals evolved in ways that viewed African Americans as the source of a possible vanguard revolutionary role.⁴¹ Within a few years the term was adopted by analysts on the right; in 1973, a group of criminologists writing in the conservative outlet *The Public Interest* warned of the appearance of a new, "dangerous black underclass."⁴² As the distinguished urban sociologist Herbert Gans summarizes, this "began the intellectual and ideological transformation of

⁴⁰ This etymology is based on Herbert J. Gans (1993). "From 'Underclass' to 'Undercaste': Some Observations about the Future of the Postindustrial Economy and its Major Victims." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 17(3), 327-335.

⁴¹ T. Kahn (1964). *The Economies of Equality*. New York: League for Industrial Economy; J. Leggett (1968). *Class, Race, and Labor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴² W. Moore, C. Livermore, and G. Galland, Jr. (1973). "Woodlawn: The Zone of Destruction." *The Public Interest* 30, 41-59.

Myrdal's term, and by the end of the 1970s, thanks in part to Oscar Lewis's writings about the culture of poverty and Edward Banfield's about the 'lower class,' American journalists had turned 'underclass' into a behavioral term. In this new version, it referred to poor people, again mostly black, who behaved in criminal, deviant, or just non-middle-class ways."

Oscar Lewis was an anthropologist, whose 1961 book, *The Children of Sanchez*, drew widespread attention among scholars and policy elites. Based on fieldwork and ethnographies with poor families in Mexico, Lewis identified a wide range of practices that developed among communities, families, and individuals for whom poverty had become a permanent condition, with no clear opportunity for escape. Families and individuals begin to adopt views and social practices that help them to adapt, and to make sense of the poverty they face. For people living

The idea of a culture of poverty was quickly adopted by conservative scholars and politicians. It was distorted and abused so much that the man who coined the phrase, Oscar Lewis, wrote, "I... take exception to the trend in some studies to identify the lower class almost exclusively with vice, crime, and juvenile delinquency." But it was already too late: the culture of poverty had become the dominant explanation for poverty.

in severe poverty, for example, it's hard to have faith in the official messages promoted by the elite -- that one can get ahead by practicing self-restraint, obeying the law, thinking about the long-term, planning for savings, education, and the opportunities for the next generation. For communities facing severe, long-term poverty, these messages seem irrelevant or even deceptive and dangerous: education becomes harder to access, law-abiding residents are routinely victimized by criminals (including corrupt police or other government officials), and long-term savings are wiped out by financial crises or government edicts. In a world shaped by poverty, it makes much more sense to reject mainstream values, to live for today, and to adopt values that help to make sense of the realities of poverty in a family's daily existence.⁴³

Unfortunately, those values -- say, a preference for living for the present, an acceptance that some crime may be necessary for survival, and an emphasis on keeping a strong sense of community with other poor neighbors rather than trying to build connections with middle-class or

wealthy outsiders -- will then make it much harder for people to escape poverty. The culture of adapting to survive in a world of poverty begins to reinforce and reproduce poverty.

Lewis's ideas on the culture of poverty spread quickly among policy elites, especially in the United States. The idea was distorted in a brutal and incorrect shorthand that blamed the poor for their behaviors and decisions -- their 'culture of poverty.' Lewis tried to clarify that this was not what he meant:

⁴³ Oscar Lewis (1961). *The Children of Sanchez*. New York: Random House. See Also Oscar Lewis (1963). "The Culture of Poverty." *Society* 1(1), 17-19.

“I should ... like to take exception to the trend in some studies to identify the lower class almost exclusively with vice, crime, and juvenile delinquency, as if most poor people were thieves, beggars, ruffians, murderers or prostitutes. Certainly, in my own experience in Mexico, I found most of the poor decent, upright, courageous and lovable human beings.”⁴⁴

But it was already too late. The “culture of poverty” was well on its way to becoming one of the most powerful and influential concepts ever to come out of anthropology. Its power came from its ambiguity: while Lewis understood the concept as a subtle, multi-faceted social and historical phenomena, it could also be distorted and summarized easily for wealthy and middle-class people, who could then view the intractable problem of poverty as having nothing to do with their wealth, privilege, or opportunity. For wealthy and middle-class people, poverty became a simple problem: it’s the undeserving poor, the culture of poverty. Their behavior -- their culture -- needs to change.

The “underclass” term was added to the mix of this popular and policy discussion in the 1970s. In 1977, *Time Magazine* published a lengthy article titled “The American Underclass” that painted an extreme, vivid stereotype of the black inner city:

“Behind the [ghetto’s] crumbling walls lives a large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined. They are the unreachable: the American underclass....Their bleak environment nurtures values that are often at odds with those of the majority – even the majority of the poor. Thus the underclass produces a highly disproportionate number of the nation’s juvenile delinquents, school dropouts, drug addicts and welfare mothers, and much of the adult crime, family disruption, urban decay and demand for social expenditures.”⁴⁵

A few years later, the journalist Ken Auletta published an eminently readable and engaging – and yet deeply problematic – series of articles on the subject in, of all places, *The New Yorker*.⁴⁶ Auletta’s articles were published in 1982 as a book titled simply *The Underclass*. Auletta began with a simple question: “who are those people behind the bulging crime, welfare, and drug

⁴⁴ Lewis, “Culture of Poverty,” p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Time Magazine* (1977). “The Underclass.” August 28, 14-27, quote from p. 14, 15; cited in Michael B. Katz (1993). “The Urban ‘Underclass’ as a Metaphor of Social Transformation.” In Michael B. Katz, ed., *The ‘Underclass’ Debates: Views from History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 3-23, citation on p. 4.

⁴⁶ The irony lies in the sharp contrast between motivation and impact. Auletta wanted to understand the failure of what is universally understood as a center-left policy experiment, the “Great Society” and “War on Poverty” announced by Democratic President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 that lasted only four years; Auletta’s research was also helped by Mitchell Sviridoff, then a vice-president at the moderately liberal Ford Foundation. But Auletta’s influential book was part of the analytical and rhetorical transformation that allowed the conservative right to begin the task of dismantling key elements of Johnson’s Great Society. Auletta seemed to anticipate this possibility as his book went to press: the employment training program run by the Manhattan-based Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, which provided the “underclass” members that Auletta interviewed between December 1979 and June 1980, lost all its funding on December 31, 1981. “Many of the twenty-one sites around the nation have already shut down. ... There is grand irony in all of this, for the Reagan administration would be depriving itself of the kind of low-cost community-based, research-oriented programs their press releases extol.” Ken Auletta (1982). *The Underclass*. New York: Random House, p. xviii.

statistics – and the all-too-visible rise in antisocial behavior – that afflicts most American cities? I wondered what the effect the Great Society and other government initiatives had had, and why antisocial behavior grew as government efforts to relieve poverty also grew.” Auletta’s discussions with poverty experts and policymakers taught him that

“...among students of poverty there is little disagreement that a fairly distinct black and white underclass does exist; that this underclass generally feels excluded from society, rejects commonly accepted values, suffers from *behavioral* as well as income *deficiencies*. They don’t just tend to be poor; to most Americans their behavior seems aberrant.”⁴⁷

Auletta’s interviews with participants in a non-profit jobs-training program, and his review of the existing research on poverty, led him to believe that

“There are no precise numbers on this, but an estimated 9 million Americans do not assimilate. They are the underclass. Generally speaking, they can be grouped into four distinct categories: (a), the *passive poor*, usually long-term welfare recipients; (b) the *hostile* street criminals who terrorize most cities, and who are often school dropouts and drug addicts; (c) the *hustlers*, who, like street criminals, may not be poor and who earn their livelihood in an underground economy, but rarely commit violent crimes; (d) the *traumatized* drunks, drifters, homeless shopping-bag ladies and released mental patients who frequently roam or collapse on city streets.”⁴⁸

Auletta’s account offered a rich, street-level account based on the voices and experiences of dozens of individuals who shared intimate details of their lives. The contingencies of individual experiences led Auletta to regard the generalizations of social science with an appropriate level of caution:

“It does not take too long to learn that too many poverty experts ... generalize about people they barely know. I learned that there is often a political or ideological reason for this. Liberals have a stake in blaming society for creating an underclass, and therefore urge government intervention. Conservatives have a stake in blaming individuals for their poverty, and therefore strive to keep government small.”⁴⁹

Even as early as 1982 when Auletta’s book appeared, it was clear that “The subject of the underclass is like a political battle zone.”⁵⁰ Auletta could not have anticipated how violent and serious these battles would become. Over the next two decades, a theoretical and ideological war raged over the issue of the underclass; by this time, the problem was understood almost exclusively in terms of inner-city African Americans. Moreover, most of the structural elements of Myrdal’s original conception were lost amidst concerns over what came to be described as the

⁴⁷ Auletta, *Underclass*, xiv, emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Auletta, *Underclass*, xvi.

⁴⁹ Auletta, *Underclass*, p. xvi.

⁵⁰ Auletta, *Underclass*, p. xvii.

“tangle of pathology” evident from behavioral indicators on crime, drug use, high-school dropouts, births to unmarried teenage mothers, and long-term welfare dependency. There were two distinct fronts in this war: one in the realm of academic social science, the other in the arena of politics and public policy.



Urban Underclass, Disappeared. This is the South Side of Chicago, looking north to the downtown core (also called “the Loop”). The wide highway is the Dan Ryan Expressway, named after a former Congressional representative. Just east of the highway is a commuter rail line, which went through an old slum from the early twentieth century. One observer wrote in 1945, “when you see these Negro families huddled together like cattle in dilapidated wood sheds, garages, make-shift huts made of old lumber, old tin signs, cardboard, and whatever could be picked up and fastened together as a shelter, one cannot help but realize that, rotten and deplorable as all slum areas are, the ‘Black Belt’ of Chicago beats them all when it comes to Misery at its worst!” The Federal Street slum was demolished in the late 1950s, to make way for new subsidized housing, built in a long parade of sixteen-story towers in two large developments -- the Robert Taylor Homes and Stateway Gardens. The towers stretched for more than a mile -- on the land now covered with broad expanses of green grass. By the 1970s, the Taylor Homes and Stateway Gardens had become material and symbolic expressions of America’s “urban underclass,” and they were demolished beginning in 1998. (The 1945 quote comes from Louis Kurtz, quoted in Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade (1969). *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 378.). Photograph by Elvin Wyly, July 2010.

Social Science and The Truly Disadvantaged

The first battleground of understanding and interpretation involved social science debates over the origins of the underclass. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines had been studying persistent urban poverty for many years, of course, and scores of studies focused specifically on the disproportionate rates of poverty among African Americans living in segregated inner-city ghettos in the large industrial cities of the North and the Midwest.

The *context* for this social science literature is easy to summarize.⁵¹ In the decades after the First World War, millions of blacks migrated away from the depressed and exploitative agricultural economies of the Mississippi delta and rural piedmont counties across the South; they sought opportunities in the expanding industries of Northern cities, but faced severe discrimination and exclusion both in labor and housing markets. Job-market exclusion began to change significantly in the early 1940s, though, was the severe labor shortages of the Second World War led many northern industries to hire blacks for the first time. These new job opportunities encouraged more migration from the rural South to the urban North.⁵² And yet even with the limited opportunities available in the War years, blacks faced severe exclusion and discrimination (much of it quite violent) in the housing market. As the African American population grew in Northern and Midwestern cities in the 1940s, housing markets became deeply polarized by segregation, discrimination, and white flight to the expanding suburbs. Moreover, the opening provided by the wartime labor shortages proved temporary; most industries sought to exclude blacks from the best job opportunities once (white) soldiers returned to civilian life after 1945, and most of the larger labor unions (with their predominantly white constituencies) were complicit in this exclusion. Simultaneous with the postwar economic expansion, however, northern manufacturing underwent a rapid succession of shifts that restructured the technology and geography of production (and hence employment). Assembly-line automation reduced the demand for unskilled labor. More sophisticated equipment and production processes required fewer workers, and increasingly these positions were reserved for those who had been able to invest in longer periods of apprentice training or who had the protection of union seniority rules. These new production processes also required newer production facilities, and so in dozens of cities, old inner-city factories were shuttered as companies opened new high-tech factories in the suburbs. Sagging demand for entry-level manufacturing workers, and rapid suburbanization of employment, hit inner-city African American communities hard. Severe intergenerational inequalities by race made it difficult or impossible for blacks to compete with whites as the labor market required ever higher levels of formal educational attainment, a dilemma that worsened as a larger share of new job growth favored service industries over goods-producing sectors. Pervasive white discrimination made it extremely difficult for blacks to adjust to the new employment landscape. African Americans were increasingly isolated in crowded inner-city housing markets that had little functional connection to the nearby office jobs (typically requiring college degrees) that were proliferating in downtown skyscrapers; but these inner-city districts were also increasingly distant from the shrinking supply of entry-level manufacturing jobs that were going ever farther out into the suburbs. Key elements of this story can be

⁵¹ For the best overview of this context, and its relevance to contemporary policy debates in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, See Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debates*.

⁵² See Jacqueline Jones (1993). "Southern Diaspora: Origins of the Northern 'Underclass.'" In Michael B. Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debates*, 27-54.

glimpsed through some of the phrases used in Myrdal's *Challenge to Affluence*, of course, but his primary concerns dealt with national and international economic processes.



The Grandmothers' Garden. This is one of the last towers from the Robert Taylor Homes - Stateway Gardens public housing complexes, before they were all demolished. Photograph by Elvin Wyly, March 2006.

Dozens of sociologists, geographers, and even a few urban economists sought to understand various elements of this urban transformation. But in the 1970s and 1980s, one scholar's perspective came to play a central role in the emerging underclass debates. William Julius Wilson, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, authored a rich and provocative analysis in 1978 under the curious title, *The Declining Significance of Race*.⁵³ Wilson believed that the limited and small-scale legal and legislative victories achieved by the African American civil rights movement had created an unprecedented array of opportunities. The federal government's response to the discrimination challenged by the civil rights organizers of the 1960s included outlawing housing discrimination, and also (under certain limited circumstances) "affirmative

⁵³ William Julius Wilson (1978). *The Declining Significance of Race*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

action” policies designed to rectify past histories of discrimination by specifying measurable goals and timetables for minority representation in firms’ hiring and promotion practices. Wilson’s research in the 1970s led him to believe, therefore, that the coming years would bring a welcome expansion in the ranks of the black middle class, as more African Americans moved to the suburbs, gained access to prestigious universities, and worked their ways into better professional jobs; yet he was also troubled by the persistence of poverty among African Americans, and he believed that the benefits of the new legal climate were limited mostly to people in the middle class. For Wilson, then, the 1970s demanded a shift in focus: with the *declining significance of race*, he contended, analysts need to pay closer attention to the *rising significance of class*. *The Declining Significance of Race* attracted some attention in sociology, but nothing unusual by the standards of social science inquiry. But his next book was different. Reporting on several years of careful research involving analyses of census data and interviews with residents of Chicago’s inner-city African American neighborhoods, *The Truly Disadvantaged* was published in 1987 and “quickly became the most influential scholarly book on contemporary American poverty.”⁵⁴ Wilson diagnosed the problem of concentrated urban poverty as the product of structural changes that were magnified by the flight of a newly upwardly-mobile black middle class, all resulting in a cycle of joblessness that encouraged ‘pathological’ behaviors of those left behind:

“African American middle- and working-class families, he argued, had abandoned inner-city ghettos to ‘a heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system.’ They were the underclass: ‘individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labor force, individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency.’ For him, underclass signified ‘the groups ... left behind,’ who were ‘collectively different from those that lived in these neighborhoods in earlier years.’”⁵⁵



William Julius Wilson (left), accepting an award from the director of the National Institutes of Health. Source: *NIH Record* (2001), public domain image from the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

⁵⁴ Katz, “‘Underclass’ as Metaphor,” p. 17. William Julius Wilson (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵⁵ Katz, “‘Underclass’ as Metaphor,” p. 17. Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*, p. 41.

As with Myrdal before him, Wilson emphasized the structural roots of the problem: long-term joblessness and disconnection from the labor force severed the social and institutional connections so crucial, especially for young people; in response to the disappearance of mainstream opportunity, illicit and underground activities (as well as reliance on public assistance) became the only viable option. Moreover, joblessness was the root of the high rates of teenage births that had become a major public policy concern since the mid-1960s:

“High rates of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed families also troubled Wilson greatly. They too, he argued, resulted from structural conditions. Partly, along with crime, they reflected the age structure of the population, which was relatively young. Even more, they emerged from the lack of marriageable men. Wilson used the high proportion of young African American men out of work, in jail, in the armed forces, or murdered to develop a ‘male marriageable pool index’ that showed the scarcity of potential spouses for young African American women. He predicted that increased employment for African American men will decrease out-of-wedlock births and single-headed families.”⁵⁶

Wilson’s analysis was deeply influential: he was clear that structural economic changes were at the root of the problem; but he also devoted considerable efforts to responding to the growing conservative argument, first elaborated in the mid-1960s, that inner-city African Americans were suffering from a distinctive “culture of poverty” that maintained high rates of joblessness, crime, births to unmarried mothers, and reliance on public assistance. Wilson believed that social scientists on the left, who refused even to discuss or study problematic behaviors in inner-city African American neighborhoods, had thereby ceded ground to conservatives in the realm of public policy. *The Truly Disadvantaged* was an extraordinary attempt to synthesize the liberal and radical argument (emphasizing structural problems in the economy) with the mounting empirical evidence repeatedly cited by conservatives (documenting crime, violence, out-of-wedlock births, etc.). Wilson’s framework inspired literally hundreds of studies, many of them drawing inspiration from the econometric approaches of urban economics, the neighborhood ‘ecology’ approach of the Chicago School of Sociology, and the analytical urban geography methodology of mapping and modeling. Many of these studies were motivated by pure, basic research questions (that is, driven by the curiosity of the independent academic researcher, without questions and methods being dictated from above); but a growing number of think-tanks and foundations began to sponsor underclass research in an attempt to influence public policy debates. In 1987, the Rockefeller Foundation requested that the Social Science Research Council establish a Committee on the Urban Underclass, yielding among other things an influential book published by the centrist Brookings Institution.⁵⁷ The SSRC and the Urban Institute both undertook expensive and laborious projects to process the enormous volumes of data from the U.S. Census of Population and Housing to derive easily-compared measures of various neighborhood and individual characteristics that could be used to estimate the size and location of ‘underclass’ individuals and ‘underclass’ neighborhoods. Depending on the definitions used by various analysts, the total national estimate of the underclass population

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*, pp. 83-92; Summarized in Katz, “‘Underclass’ as Metaphor,” p. 18.

⁵⁷ See Katz, ‘Underclass’ as Metaphor,” pp. 18-19; Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, eds. (1991). *The Urban Underclass*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

ranged from about 500,000 to more than 4 million.⁵⁸ The resulting databases, widely distributed among urban researchers, generated an enormous wave of studies documenting the location, expansion, and timing of changes in the composition in the inner-city districts of dozens of U.S. metropolitan areas. Analysts examined the dynamics of poverty rates, unemployment, female-

William Julius Wilson's book, The Truly Disadvantaged, emphasized the structural changes in the economy that were creating permanent unemployment and poverty -- giving rise to a 'tangle of pathologies' of crime and other deviant behavior in the inner city.

But accepting Wilson's structural explanations would have required radical economic changes that would be deeply unpopular among the wealthy and the middle classes.

Wilson's analysis of the 'tangle of pathologies,' by contrast, was wildly popular. Political operatives seized on parts of Wilson's work to justify dramatic shifts in the treatment of poor individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

But among those working in think tanks and public policy institutes, behavioral theories *did* dominate the conversation. And think tanks and public policy institutes were crucial in political

headed households, and, of course, variations on Wilson's "male marriageable pool index." A persistent finding in many of these studies involved an "ecological" complex of indicators of deprivation, isolation, and behavioral problems: city neighborhoods that had high rates of poverty also tended to have the highest rates of high-school dropouts, single-mother households, unemployment, and reliance on public assistance.

But as this research flowered in the pages of high-quality (but sometimes obscure) academic journals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a remarkable shift had already taken place inside the halls of prominent think tanks working to influence public policy. In 1988, two of the researchers who worked on the Urban Institute project to measure the size of the underclass opened their article by describing their work as an effort to create "an operational definition of the underclass that is consistent with the emphasis of most of the underclass literature on behavior rather than poverty."⁵⁹

WTF?

It was more than a wild exaggeration to say that "most of the underclass literature" emphasized "behavior rather than poverty." The only way this statement became true was if "the underclass literature" was defined to exclude scholars who criticized the concept and its abuses. Many scholars questioned the emphasis on behavioral pathologies -- especially if these were separated from their underlying structural economic origins.

⁵⁸ Katz, "'Underclass' as Metaphor," p. 18. Urban Institute (1990). *Underclass Data Base*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. John D. Kasarda (1993). *Urban Under Class Database*. New York: Social Sciences Research Council.

⁵⁹ Erol R. Ricketts and Isabel V. Sawhill (1988). "Defining and Measuring the Underclass." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 7(2), 316-325.

decisions in Washington, DC. In the 1990s, underclass research shaped federal policy debates over how to reform various government programs to address poverty -- especially public housing and welfare.

Counting the Underclass

Selected estimates of the size of the U.S. underclass

Indicator	Date	Number	Percentage of U.S. population
Persistently poor, excluding the elderly and disabled	1985	8 million	3.5
People in poverty for at least 5 years between 1967 and 1973	1967-1973	10.6 million	5.3
Population living in extreme poverty neighborhoods (where poverty rates are 40% or more)	1980	5.57 million	3.1
Population living in neighborhoods classified as "underclass" tracts	1980	2.48 million	1.4

Source: Modified and adapted from Erol R. Ricketts and Isabel V. Sawhill (1988).

"Defining and Measuring the Underclass." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 7(2), 316-325.

From Myrdal and Wilson to "President Bubba and the Gravy-Train Scam."⁶⁰

This brings us to the second battlefield in the struggle over what to do about the "underclass." This is the nexus between research and public policy. As noted earlier, Ken Auletta's 1982 *The Underclass* attracted considerable attention, but it was by no means the first discussion of the overlapping and reinforcing problems of poverty, crime, welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock childbirth, and all the other behavioral indicators that had many years earlier been described as the "tangle of pathology" by an assistant secretary of labor. That assistant secretary, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, became a prolific scholar before gaining election to the U.S. Senate; but his 1965 confidential report to President Lyndon Johnson fused ideas on the "culture of poverty" with increasingly tense racial politics.⁶¹ Many academics remained suspicious of the culture of poverty thesis (an idea first introduced by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in 1961), but a growing number of journalists and policy makers found the explanation persuasive.⁶² By the early 1980s, when Ken Auletta's book appeared and inaugurated an unprecedented wave of popular titles on the subject, the policy climate was shifting dramatically to the right. During Ronald Reagan's successful 1980 campaign for the U.S. Presidency, he peppered his speeches with anecdotes about poor people who used their food stamps to buy vodka, and a woman who drove a large Cadillac to the welfare office to pick up her monthly check; Reagan never provided sufficient details that might allow journalists to verify the factual basis of such claims, and it later turned out that there *was* no factual basis. No matter. The 'Cadillac welfare queen' became enormously popular among conservatives seeking to cut spending on social assistance, and in

⁶⁰ The phrasing comes from Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph*, which reacted to Bill Clinton's signature on welfare reform legislation with a colorful but rather offensive editorial interpretation. Peter Ruehl (1996). "President Bubba Derails Welfare Reform's Gravy-Train Scam." *The Sunday Telegraph*, August 25, p. 167.

⁶¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965). "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Reprinted in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (1967). *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 39-125.

⁶² Oscar Lewis (1961). *The Children of Sanchez*. New York: Random House.

various speeches she was described as being overweight, living in Chicago, paying for big steaks with thick wads of food



Ronald Reagan, delivering his inaugural address on January 20, 1981. Reagan famously declared “Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem.” During his campaign for the Presidency, Reagan repeatedly told stories of poor people who used their food stamps to buy vodka, and a woman who drove a luxury car to the welfare office to pick up her monthly check. Reporters pressed for details on this anecdote, but never got any, because there was no factual basis. But the “Cadillac welfare queen” was described so frequently by Reagan and other conservatives that it eventually was accepted as a fact of policy and politics; in various speeches, this non-existent woman was described as being overweight, living in Chicago, paying for steaks with wads of food stamps, and occasionally as wearing designer jeans. *Image source:* Greg Mathison (1981). “President Ronald Reagan Delivers his First Inaugural Address.” Released by U.S. Armed Forces; public domain image, via Wikimedia Commons.

stamps, and even wearing designer jeans.⁶³ Reagan was not alone in raising questions about the costs of social assistance, but he quickly abandoned such anecdotes (which appealed to a populist sense that government money was being wasted on unpopular social programs) when the increased defense budgets of the 1980s exposed stories of the Pentagon paying \$10,000 apiece for things like wrenches and toilet seats (which involved government money being wasted on programs that were important to campaign contributors).⁶⁴ In any event, Reagan’s two terms gave him eight years to cut the budgets of the “War on Poverty” -- the name given to President Lyndon Johnson’s efforts between 1964 and 1967 to find enough money to address some of the systemic problems of urban inequality. Reagan’s efforts dovetailed nicely with another book

⁶³ Steven V. Roberts (1981). “Food Stamps Program: How it Grew and How Reagan Wants to Cut it Back.” *The New York Times*, April 4, p. A11.

⁶⁴ Russell Baker (1985). “The Queen Gambit.” *The New York Times*, June 19, p. A23.

that became a runaway best-seller amongst conservatives, Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*. Based on his experience observing social programs administered through bureaucracies in Washington, DC, his interviews with welfare administrators and case workers, and his analyses of government data over the years, Murray offered an interpretation that justified massive policy shifts:

“A government’s social policy helps set the rules of the game ... The more vulnerable a population and the fewer its independent resources, the more decisive the effect of the rules imposed from above. The most compelling explanation for the marked shift in the fortunes of the poor is that they continued to respond, as they always had, to the world as they found it, but that we – meaning the not-poor and un-disadvantaged – had changed the rules of their world. Not of the world, just theirs. The first effect of the new rules was to make it profitable for the poor to behave in the short term in ways that were destructive in the long term. Their second effect was to mask these long-term losses – to subsidize irretrievable mistakes. We tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poor instead. We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty, and inadvertently built a trap.”⁶⁵

By the 1980s, American conservatives had succeeded in reframing the issue: the problem with the underclass is not poverty; the problem is government programs intended to respond to poverty. Welfare and other assistance programs were compared to a narcotic that led to addiction and “dependency.” Cutting anti-poverty programs was promoted as a way of “liberating” poor people from dependency on the state.

In other words, the problem is not poverty; the problem is the government’s programs concerning poverty. Many on the left have always agreed with a certain part of this kind of sentiment; radical social scientists, for example, had been writing for years about welfare as nothing more than a response that a) pays so little that it serves as an effective way to keep overall wage rates low, and b) helps to minimize the militancy of the poor, who might otherwise organize to seize what might be regarded as a fair share of society’s wealth. Many of these analysts saw the segregated, poor African American ghetto as an example of internal colonialism, playing the same kinds of roles as African colonies exploited by Europe right up to the wave of colonial independence in the 1960s.⁶⁶ But for conservative policy-makers in the 1980s, Murray’s analysis was a compelling story line: government had failed to solve the problem; indeed, Reagan repeatedly said, *government is the problem*. Reagan’s

cabinet secretaries cut and restructured many entitlement programs, converted others to block grants, and Congress continued a longstanding pattern of passing incremental “welfare reform”

⁶⁵ Charles Murray (1984). *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*. New York: Basic Books, p. 9.

⁶⁶ For a valuable summary of these perspectives, see Michael B. Katz (1990). *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*. New York: Pantheon, pp. 52-62.

measures that represented complex and sometimes contradictory compromises among legislators on different parts of the political spectrum.



Coming Down. This is one of the towers of the Robert Taylor Homes, being demolished. The view is looking West from State Street. Federal Street and the Dan Ryan Expressway are behind the tower. In the 1960s, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was one of the most aggressive competitors for federal funding to build new public housing as part of slum-clearance efforts. Thirty years later, Chicago became the most aggressive in competing for federal money to demolish public housing. The CHA “has demolished its entire inventory of high-rise and mid-rise housing, and in some cases, low-rise housing.” Under pressure from lawyers and tenant organizers, the CHA agreed “to help displaced families move into neighborhoods more racially and economically integrated than those from which they were displaced. However, the CHA’s relocation process produced the opposite result.” Families wound up in “neighborhood that were just as racially segregated, and nearly as poor, as the communities from where they were forced to move.” Quotes from William P. Wilen (2008). *Testimony of William P. Wilen, Director of Housing Litigation, Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law*. Chicago: National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, July 15. Photograph by Elvin Wyly, July 1999.

By 1992, Bill Clinton’s strategy of running as a “New Democrat” – as someone who would not repeat the failed experiment of generous social programs tried by previous liberals – involved a

promise to ‘end welfare as we know it’ as part of a comprehensive set of policies to reduce the federal budget deficit. Clinton won the election by moving away from the traditional anti-poverty commitments of the Democratic Party, and in his first two years in office his administration sought to find ways to use market processes to achieve the goals traditionally pursued by government assistance programs. Clinton’s appointees also built on a series of changes in public housing programs that had begun under the presidency of George Bush, Sr., back in 1989s. These new housing policies were explicitly based on research on concentrated poverty and the underclass. The new policies promoted the demolition of traditional public housing as a means of breaking up areas of concentrated poverty. “Dispersal” was encouraged as a means of giving poor people access to better neighborhoods -- and thus safer schools, better neighborhood role models, and more chances for employment and upward mobility. Families displaced by the demolition of public housing were to be given vouchers allowing them to rent apartments from private landlords. These policies eventually led to the demolition of many thousands of public housing units nationwide, including Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes and Stateway Gardens.

Welfare reform debates also continued to show the influence of underclass research. When the Republican party re-took a majority of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years in November, 1994, Clinton was forced to deal with a series of aggressive legislative programs, including harsh welfare reform measures. Clinton vetoed two bills, but in the summer of 1996, facing a tough re-election campaign, he proclaimed the fulfillment of his 1992 campaign pledge by signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). “Today we are ending welfare as we know it,” Clinton said after signing the bill, “But I hope this day will be remembered not for what it ended, but for what it began – a new day that offers hope, honors responsibility, rewards work and changes the terms of the debate so that no one in America ever feels again the need to criticize people who are poor or on welfare.”⁶⁷ PRWORA eliminated the guarantee of cash assistance for poor people that had prevailed for more than sixty years; converted welfare from a federal entitlement to a block-grant system administered separately by each of the fifty states; renamed the program (from “Aid to Families with Dependent Children” AFDC to “Temporary Assistance to Needy Families” or TANF) and encouraged states to impose a “family cap” denying any increase in monthly assistance when a recipient had another child. The first versions of the law also cut nutrition programs, and eliminated most benefits for legal immigrants as well.

The wisdom of specific provisions of the 1996 welfare reform bill have become the subject of an extensive policy evaluation literature. What matters for our story here is that the legislation itself was based on almost no reliable social science evidence when it was passed; the main influence of scholarly research on the 1996 legislation involved partial and selective adaptation of ‘underclass’ interpretations: welfare is like a narcotic, the logic went, encouraging dependency that traps inner-city mothers and their children in a cycle and a culture of poverty from which they will never escape. Many congressmen (and it *was* mostly men) described their vote in support of welfare reform as an effort to help the poor by saving them from the dangerous addiction of public assistance. Among the more colorful reactions to the legislation, which

⁶⁷ Greg McDonald (1996). “President Signs ‘Historic’ Welfare Reform Measure.” *The Houston Chronicle*, August 23, p. A1.

accurately if offensively summarized the logic promoted by Charles Murray and many other conservative analysts, came from the pages of the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph*, in Australia:

“Bubba said he’d ‘end welfare as we know it. He has. Under the new system, it will be hard for single, inner-city (read black) mothers to continue to have kids by various fathers and thereby increase their welfare payments. On the other hand, what happens to them now? Granted, the U.S. has a low unemployment rate ... but you need skills for a job, and the one skill these women possess is what’s been causing all the trouble to begin with.”⁶⁸

Further restrictions on welfare were imposed during the administration of George W. Bush.

Today, “underclass” is a term used widely throughout the world’s English-language presses. The term is most often used to respond to periodic crises, in which protests or violence can be linked to a particular community with a clear history of entrenched poverty. But it has also become a fixture of the normal, day-to-day discussions of various aspects of social policy. Not long ago, I had the opportunity to spend a month in Singapore. Reading the local newspapers in our first week in the dynamic city-state Asian gateway, I was surprised to read the casual, taken-for-granted discourse on the urban underclass:

“As expected, Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim’s recent lament about the state of the Malay-Muslim underclass has attracted a lot of attention from the community. Just the other day, I had a conversation with a friend who was ‘surprised’ at such candidness. But it is timely, he added, as it was ‘about time society got worried.’ He is not alone: Many have repeatedly drawn attention to the community’s shortcomings, be it the high number of Malay-Muslims in drug rehabilitation centres and prisons, or rampant youth delinquency, promiscuity and teen pregnancies.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ruehl, “President Bubba,” p. 167.

⁶⁹ Zul Othman (2010). “A National Approach Needed: Underclass Issue Should be Handled Nationally as Strapped Malay Community Groups Struggle.” *Today* (Singapore), January 4, p. 8.

Could it happen here?



“Could it Happen Here?” On November 12, 2005, the front-page, above-the-fold headline of the *Globe and Mail* asked this question, set above an image of flames from the French urban uprising. *Image source:* Francois Schnell (2005). “Strasbourg Torched Car.” Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license, via Wikimedia Commons.

“Hold the Complacency, Eh?”

In response to the riots that spread through many of the “high-rise ghettos” on the outskirts of French cities in November, 2005, the *Globe and Mail* printed a vivid color photograph of a car engulfed in flames, under the headline, “Could it Happen Here?”⁷⁰ Michael Valpy took aim at “Canadians smug in their mythology of inhabiting the planet’s most successful multicultural society,” and he offered a suspicious summary of the consensus view that

“At least – maybe more by luck than by design – we’ve avoided the creation of racial underclasses: no endless ugly suburbs of brown and black people imprisoned in poverty from which scant hope of escape exists. At least we’ve embraced into our national culture the notion of post-ethnic identity, woven the

⁷⁰ Michael Valpy (2005). “Could it Happen Here? As Riots Rage Across France, Troubling Parallels Emerge Among Children of Canada’s Visible-Minority Immigrants.” *Globe and Mail*, November 12, A1.

values of anti-discrimination and equality into not only our laws but into our hearts and national idiom.

Well, hold the complacency, eh?

To be sure, a Canadian mirror held up to the car-BQs of France shows no violent mass unrest brewing in, say, Toronto's Jane-Finch or Jamestown neighbourhoods, Montreal's *quartier* St.-Michel or patches of Greater Vancouver's Surrey and the Downtown Eastside. But what recent research reveals is an alarming and disquieting analogue to the demographic portrait of the French suburban *cites*.⁷¹

Valpy cites sociological research by the prominent sociologist Jeffrey Reitz, who has conducted a number of analyses of Statistics Canada's recent *Ethnic Diversity Survey*. Reitz finds that second-generation visible minorities feel less of a sense of belonging to Canada compared with their parents; and that nearly two-fifths of all visible minorities report discrimination, while white Canadians tend to discount or dismiss claims of discrimination. These findings raise significant concerns. Nevertheless, three considerations must inform any discussion of a possible "urban underclass" in Canadian cities.

First, urban geographic research shows substantial contrasts with the U.S. urban contexts that incubated the underclass debate. In general, the correlations between poverty and other indicators of social deprivation are weaker and less tightly woven with racial-ethnic divides. Canadian immigration policy plays an important role in this regard, with changes after 1967 instituting a points system incorporating 'human-capital' criteria for admission. Still, recent changes have generated some concern among analysts. Heather Smith, a recent Ph.D. graduate from UBC, has noted that the increasing concentration of recent visible-minority immigrants in suburban social housing projects "can stall accessibility to employment, educational, and socio-cultural opportunities that lead to upward and outward mobility over time. In other words, diffusion to distant sprawling suburbs may lead to the kind of socio-spatial isolation characteristic of a so-called 'underclass'⁷² Smith's study of neighborhood social patterns between 1971 and 1991 found

Preparing for the Global Media Spotlight, in the 2010 Winter Olympic Games

"It's not hard to predict what the complimentary narrative from the global media will be in 2010, when the Winter Olympics come to the West Coast: Vancouver -- a young, beautiful and amazingly Asianized city that only 20 years ago feared the wave of Asian immigration transforming it. Canada -- a rich, underpopulated nation, still united despite serious separatist onslaughts and somehow managing to keep its identity existing next to the world's superpower.

Not bad.

It's also a pretty simple exercise to predict the negative storyline: Vancouver -- a prosperous city containing one of North America's poorest, drug-infested ghettos. Canada -- one of the world's richest countries that has yet to deal with its history of repression and racism toward aboriginals, who - based on the statistics of mortality, education and income -- form the country's **underclass**."

Miro Cernetig (2008). "Our Olympic Party Watched by Critical Eyes of the World." *The Vancouver Sun*, February 4, A3.

⁷¹ Valpy, "Could it Happen Here?", p. 1.

⁷² Heather A. Smith (2004). *The Evolving Relationship between Immigrant Settlement and Neighbourhood Disadvantage in Canadian Cities, 1991-2001*. Working Paper No. 04-20. Vancouver: Centre of Excellence, Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis, p. 4.

relatively weak correlations between immigrant settlement and various underclass indicators; but in a recent study analyzing changes up to 2001, she found that

“the research suggests a convergence between the trajectories of Canada’s three largest immigrant reception centres as they relate to the intersection between immigrant settlement, poverty levels and markers of traditional neighbourhood disadvantage. In all cities, concentrations of immigrants more commonly overlap with concentrations of poverty and traditional deprivation in 2001 than they did a decade earlier.”⁷³

Second, the ‘cycle’ of deprivation associated with severe poverty appears much less severe in Canada when compared to the United States (and many countries in Europe). Upward mobility, both in labor and housing markets, seems somewhat easier in the Canadian context, such that even the worst neighborhood concentrations of poverty are (for most) a temporary experience. There does not seem to be the same level of inter-generational, seemingly permanent poverty and exclusion. And yet even ‘temporary’ isolation and exclusion can last for years, and can impose significant costs for individuals, neighborhoods, cities, and for Canadian society as a whole. David Ley and Heather Smith conducted a wide-ranging analysis with in-depth focus groups of immigrants living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty in Vancouver and Toronto, and found substantial evidence of isolation produced by processes at multiple scales -- at the national scale where federal immigration policy collides with the labor-market realities that leave many skilled immigrants with professional credentials working in poorly-paid, menial jobs, and at the intra-urban scale, where living in areas of concentrated poverty (to gain access to affordable housing) leads to trade-offs between suburban isolation and inner-city stigma. Ley and Smith present many quotes from poor immigrants struggling to protect themselves and their children from troubling “neighborhood effects,” and ...

“...the daily frustration and humiliation of life embedded in a milieu of deep poverty, where the hazards of the local social environment raised barriers to normal everyday life and consolidated for some a fatalistic sense of entrapment. Pejorative neighborhood labeling by outsiders, including gatekeepers like teachers, the police, employers, and the media, restricted opportunities and could in turn become internalized in self-deprecation and limited ambition. Such stereotyping was most pernicious where districts were essentialized in the media and popular opinion as bearers of a poverty immigrant culture -- Jane Finch and Regent Park in Toronto and the Downtown Eastside-Chinatown in Vancouver.”⁷⁴

Third, the political context has yet to sustain the coalescence of an effective political movement to villainize the poor ‘underclass’ as the undeserving poor. Although provincial policies differ considerably, at the federal level the dominant parties -- first the Liberals, then the Conservatives -- have worked hard to build a sustained constituency among communities of recent immigrants. This undermines any systematic motivation for a discourse emphasizing an undeserving poor --

⁷³ Smith, *Evolving Relationship*, p. 27.

⁷⁴ Heather Smith and David Ley (2008). “Even in Canada? The Multiscalar Construction and Experience of Concentrated Immigrant Poverty in Gateway Cities.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98(3), 686-713, quote from p. 709.



[Previous page.] **It Did Happen Here.** It's just that we don't know exactly what "It" really was. Vancouver's Stanley Cup Riots, June 2011. Photographs by Elvin Wyly.

or at least an undeserving poor that can be specifically associated with a particular racial-ethnic group. Consistent federal budget surpluses also mute the interest in promoting a moral discourse over the costs of social assistance; although such views certainly appear at the federal and provincial levels, they remain marginal in the mainstream avenues of policy formulation and implementation. Ultimately, then, even if research were to uncover an emergent urban underclass in Canadian cities, political responses to the problem would by no means follow the trajectories evident in the United States or France. Indeed, the answer to the *Globe and Mail's* headline question in 2005 -- "Could it Happen Here?" was answered in a surreal way in Vancouver in June, 2011. Game 7 of the 2011 Stanley Cup Finals provided a maximum-likelihood estimation of a troubling equation: $p(\text{chaos})=f(\text{testosterone} + \text{alcohol} + \text{professional sports})$. Thomas was a brick wall, Luongo couldn't stop the pucks, and the Canucks lost quickly. Shortly after 8:00 pm a small cohort of the festive crowd downtown turned negative, aggressive, and irresponsible. Cars were burned. Shops were looted. Smoke rose over the city from the cars burning downtown. Vancouver's "Riot2011" moment made quick headlines worldwide.

In Detroit, a radio host proclaimed that "Vancouver is the Next Detroit."

But as far as I can tell, none of the global media discourse tried to interpret the Stanley Cup Riots from the theoretical framework of the urban underclass. It would have made no sense to try to blame the events on a particular community defined by geography, religion, or racial or ethnic identity. And in the days after the riots, the plywood sheets covering the broken windows of The Bay downtown became perhaps the largest community graffiti project ever seen in Vancouver. While some of the graffiti reflected anger and frustration, most of the sentiments were positive -- even aggressively, dramatically positive.

Conclusions

What lessons can we draw from this intellectual and policy history?

First, words matter. Discourse matters. Don't avoid controversial words out of fear of debate or disagreement; *but do be careful with histories, contexts, and implicit as well as explicit definitions.* 'Underclass' was introduced as a novel term to describe what seemed to be a new and troubling phenomenon, and even today it is widely used by many people as a shorthand summary in an attempt to signal their apparent grasp of a complex web of processes. Unfortunately, many analysts use the term in vague and inconsistent ways, ignoring the tortured history of the term and the associations it carries. The most influential scholarly attempts to provide "comprehensive" explanations of economic restructuring and socio-cultural changes were distorted in press accounts, public discourse, and in the political and policy arenas. As a result, a word that referred to structural inequality became redefined more simplistically as a label for behavioral deficiencies -- deficiencies that have, under many political circumstances, been used to justify harsh treatment of people who are defined as an undeserving poor who need "tough love" or who need to be taught "personal responsibility." The word "underclass" is often used as a way to blame the victim while staking claim to an apparently sophisticated theoretical analysis.

Conclusions:

1. Discourse matters. It is important to understand the histories of implicit meanings embedded in provocative words and phrases.

2. Definitions of the underclass are shaped by distinctive national conditions and urban geographies.

3. The global discourse on the underclass is an example of Edward Said's concept of "traveling theory" -- powerful, simplified ideas that can be used (and abused) in very different settings to shape thought and policy.

Second, the forces creating an 'underclass,' however it is defined, are shaped by cross-national variations not only in class structure and economic institutions, but also in contingent urban geographies produced by different societies in different times. Not surprisingly, then, the "underclass" debate focused on inner-city African Americans in the United States has been revised and adapted to account for the different circumstances of other settings -- the immiseration of recent immigrants from Turkey and North Africa in Britain, the African immigrant communities in deteriorating "high-rise ghettos" on the outskirts of French cities, the "Malay-Muslim underclass" of Singapore, and so on. Urban geography matters here: the "inner city" pathology of Chicago made no sense when applied to the outlying suburban social housing estates around Paris, and it made no sense to blame high-rise public housing for the "Malay-Muslim" underclass when such a large proportion of the population of Singapore lives in high-rise public housing.

But at what point does revising and adapting a concept to account for distinctive urban geographies turn it into an entirely new idea?

This brings us to a **third** conclusion. As the influential postcolonial theorist Edward Said taught us, "traveling theory" is powerful but dangerous. The word underclass was conceived for a particular historical and geographical circumstance; the historical and political climate in which Myrdal coined the term (1962 and 1963) changed quite rapidly, with a pronounced but short-lived "War on Poverty" between 1964 and 1968, followed by an almost-uninterrupted series of policy interventions focused on the presumed behavioral roots of welfare dependency rather than the structural problems associated with America's commitment to free-market principles and flexible job markets. This contextual shift accelerated in the 1990s, and in this environment, "underclass" was exported along with the menu of policies designed to deal with the problem. The use and interpretation of these concepts is, not surprisingly, shaped by political context; wherever policymakers are motivated to reduce support programs for the poorest of the poor, "underclass" is more likely to be imported as a term defined in terms of behavioral pathologies, personal (ir)responsibility, and a dangerous, undeserving poor. In such a setting, "traveling theory" is a powerful means of magnifying existing inequalities of power and geography. Indeed, the proliferation of "underclass" discussions around the world presents urgent questions that we must ask after each uprising, each riot. How are the images of looting or burning cars used to shape debate on social inequality in

different cities, regions, or countries? How is the phrase, and the concepts and ideas it evokes, used by different political actors to accomplish their goals? Why are some riots followed by repressive policy changes and hostility towards particular groups, while other events are seen as unpredictable events that cannot be blamed on particular groups?