File:
Personal Responsibility

The new politics of the new poverty

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THE POVERTY OF today's underclass differs appreciably from poverty in the past: underclass poverty stems less from the absence of opportunity than from the inability or reluctance to take advantage of opportunity. The plight of the underclass suggests that the competence of many of the poor—their capacity to look after and take care of themselves—can no longer be taken for granted as it could in the past.

The changing nature of poverty has also ushered in a fundamental change in our politics, which formerly focused on class but now emphasizes conduct. Prior to the 1960s, in what I call the era of progressive politics, the overriding issue was how to help ordinary working Americans advance economically. The solutions of liberals and conservatives differed greatly, but both groups agreed that available opportunities would be seized by the poor. They disagreed in locating the barrier to opportunity: liberals blamed the unregulated economy, and conservatives blamed the government.

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ties" before 1960 was largely a local affair. At the national level, the arena was always dominated by groups that were not dependent and were usually employed. Only in the recent era have dependent, mostly nonworking groups captured the nation's political attention.

The employment issue, like no other, marks the boundary between the old politics and the new. The movements of the progressive era had weight above all because their members worked, or at least had a job history. The aggrieved might have been destitute, but they could make claims on the basis of desert. The recent poor seldom can do this. They are controversial, above all, because they usually do not work. Only 40 percent of poor adults had any earnings at all in 1987, and only 9 percent worked full-time year-round. That initially was why most of them were poor. Work effort among the poor has also dropped sharply. Only 47 percent of the heads of poor families worked at all in 1987, down from 68 percent in 1959.

Of course, only about half the poverty population is working-aged, and only about half remains in poverty for more than two years. The underclass, consisting of the poor with the most severe behavioral problems, is quite small: it includes no more than eight million people by various estimates. Yet persistent poverty is highly visible in cities, and it is central to all major urban problems—not only welfare, crime, and homelessness, but troubled schools and a decaying economic base. So it gets more policy-making attention than the affairs of the vastly larger working and middle classes.

This new poverty created a new politics because the old politics found no answer to it. Neither of the traditional, competing progressive-era remedies—increasing or decreasing government intervention in the economy—seems an appropriate response to the passive poverty of the inner city. It is true that analysts wedded to progressive-era assumptions—whether liberal or conservative—continue to try to trace passive poverty to some social barrier that must be eliminated: liberals say that poor adults cannot earn enough to make work worthwhile, cannot find jobs or child care, or are barred from jobs by racial bias; conservatives claim that welfare "pays" dependents not to marry or work. But the hard evidence mostly undercuts these explanations. Liberal claims notwithstanding, jobs usually are available to the unskilled; taking these jobs would generally move families in which both parents worked above the poverty line. The flood of new immigrants entering the job market is one clear sign that opportunity still exists. Working mothers can usually arrange child care informally and cheaply, and discrimination in any overt form has disappeared. But conservative claims notwithstanding, welfare disincentives are also too weak to explain the collapse of the family or the very low work levels typically found in the inner city today.

I do not mean that barriers are totally absent. Differences of opportunity certainly exist in America. Better-educated people, for example, are more likely to succeed. In recent decades, the income disparity between low-skilled and high-skilled workers has increased. The progressive-era debate over whether and how to narrow these differences in wages remains alive.

Unequal opportunities, however, chiefly explain why some workers earn more than others. They usually do not explain the failure of nonworkers to work steadily *at all*, which is in turn the cause of most poverty and dependency among working-aged people. Most Americans have responded to stagnant wages by working *more*; only the poor have worked less. Most Americans refuse to believe that society's failure to expand opportunity causes the poverty of nonworkers who do not take and hold available jobs.

To explain most entrenched poverty, we must go back to what used to be called the "culture of poverty." Nonworking adults apparently want to work, but they seldom do so consistently—some because the pay offered is unacceptable, others because they feel overwhelmed by the practical difficulties of employment. These reactions run strongest in the inner city, because of its isolation from workaday society, and among racial minorities who have traditionally faced discrimination. The greatest cause of today's poverty may simply be that the attempts in recent decades to equalize opportunity have failed to persuade many blacks and Hispanics that it is worth working.

But if nonwork is rooted mostly in the demoralization of the poor, rather than impersonal impediments, then traditional reformism holds no answer for it. Passive poverty has defeated, in turn, the strategies of both larger and smaller government. The Great Society invented wave after wave of new antipoverty programs, only to see the poverty level stagnate and welfare rise. The Reagan administration cut or curbed the growth of these programs to reinvigorate the economy. But even the longest boom in American history could not reduce poverty below 13 percent, because the poor are now substantially detached from the economy. Each in its

own way, these strategies provided new chances to poor adults, but neither directly addressed the puzzling reluctance of the poor to do more to help themselves.

As a result, social policy has been driven away from structural reforms and toward paternalism. The drift is toward policies that address motivation by seeking to direct the lives of those dependent on government. Public institutions are taking over tutelary functions from weakened families. Social-service agencies are raising children, and schools are organizing the lives of students before and after class as well as during it. Homeless shelters and the criminal-justice system are managing the disordered lives of single men. Above all, recent welfare legislation requires rising numbers of employable recipients to participate in job placement or training on pain of cuts in their grants. Such measures violate the traditional prescriptions of liberals, who want benefits given without conditions, but also those of conservatives, who would prefer to see discipline applied by the private rather than the public sector. But they seem required by the changing nature of the social problem.

These trends are most advanced in the U.S., but they are appearing in Europe as well. An underclass, largely nonwhite, has grown up in British cities, while throughout Europe controversy rages over whether immigrants from the Third World are corrupting traditional mores. These racial and ethnic divisions now arouse more passion than the traditional conflicts of labor and business. The behavior of "outsiders" is far more controversial than economic claims. Crime, dependency, and a failure to learn the national language are at issue, not working-class demands for higher wages and benefits. The West as a whole seems destined for a politics of conduct rather than class.

The new agenda

Dependency politics and progressive-era politics differ substantially in content, even though there is much overlap in practice. I exaggerate the contrasts here for emphasis:

The old issues were economic; the new ones are social. Progressive-era politics debated the proper organization of society, especially the issue of government control of the economy. Liberals supported higher and more progressive taxation; public regulation of industries; union rights; the minimum wage and other protections for workers; pension, health, and unemployment benefits; and the anti-bias legislation of the 1960s. Conservatives strove to

weaken or undo all these steps in the belief that only a revivified free market could really generate "good jobs at good wages."

In dependency politics, in contrast, the question is how to deal with the problems of basic functioning among the seriously poor. The social, more than the economic, structure of society is at issue. The focus is on troubled individuals or ethnic groups rather than industry, agriculture, or the relations of labor and management. Social problems are no longer seen to stem directly from injustice, nor are they obviously reformable. So social policy must focus on motivation and order rather than opportunity or equality.

Affluence helped produce this shift. Before the 1960s, working-class incomes were still low enough that many people were poor, even though they worked normal hours. That is much less common today, because the poverty line is constant in real terms while real wages have risen. The poor, who used to work more than the better-off, now commonly work less. Inevitably, the focus of the social agenda has shifted from the low wages that used to impoverish workers to the dysfunctions that keep the nonworking poor out of the labor force.

In progressive-era politics the issue was government control of the economy; in dependency politics it is government supervision of behavior. Progressive-era politicians disputed how far government should regulate the free market in the collective interest, how much it should spend on benefit programs such as Social Security.

In dependency politics, however, the chief question is how far government should control the lives of dysfunctional people in their own interests. Do we require that people stay in school, obey the law, avoid drugs, and so on? Above all, do we require adults to work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving welfare? Proposals to do these things do not much change what government does for people. Rather, they demand that dependents do more for themselves in return.

Formerly it was local authorities who grappled with maintaining social order, while Washington managed the economy. But order issues have become federal, because national programs are involved in all the key areas—welfare, education, and criminal justice. It is now the main domestic challenge of presidents, as of mayors, to reduce crime and dependency and to raise standards in the schools. Presidents Nixon, Carter, and Reagan all tried to reform welfare, and George Bush aspires to be an "education president."

The old issues concerned adults; the new issues concern children and youth. Progressive-era political claims were on behalf of adults, especially workers. The question was how to reorganize government or the economy so that adults could have influence and opportunity. In the dependency era, however, these issues are less salient than people's problems on the road to adulthood—illegitimacy, educational failure, and crime. So dependency politics focuses heavily on the formative years. Reformism aims to improve family, neighborhood, and schools rather than the political or economic structure.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan says that social policy has entered a "post-industrial" age. The main challenge is no longer to expand economic opportunity but to overcome social weaknesses that stem from the "post-marital" family and the inability of many people to get through school. The inequalities that stem from the workplace are now trivial in comparison to those stemming from family structure. What matters for success is less whether your father was rich or poor than whether you knew your father at all.

A focus on youth is inevitable once the leading social problem changes from the poverty of workers to dysfunctional poverty. For if the source of poverty is behavior rather than lack of opportunity, remedies must focus on youth, the stage of life at which behavior is most malleable. Conversely, reform for adults must be structural because it must take personality largely as given.

The pressures in progressive-era politics arise from self-seeking behavior; in dependency politics, they arise from passivity. Progressive-era politics debates the freedom that America allows people to make money and get ahead on their own. To conservatives, this prerogative is a right that government may not limit. To the left, it is a license that government must restrain in the name of a broader social interest.

The poor and dependent, however, are not exploitative but inert. They are controversial mostly because they do so little to help themselves, not because they hurt others in the pursuit of advantage. Even when violent, they are unable to exert themselves effectively. They are not aggressive so much as *passive* aggressive. So in dependency politics, the issue is whether poor people should have to do more to help themselves. The question is how passive you can be and still be a citizen in full standing.

Formerly, the right defended property and the established order against public controls. Now it is the left that defends the status quo, by justifying passivity among the needy, while the right demands greater activity. Recent measures such as workfare or reformed schools are attempts to stimulate the poor, not to curb the rich. The point is to set a floor under self-advancement, not a ceiling above it. The hope is to make the poor more effectively self-seeking than they are.

Claims in progressive-era politics derived from strength; those in dependency politics arise from weakness. The chief players in the progressive era were unions, farmers, businesses, and other economic interests that demanded some benefit or protection from government on a basis of desert. They were economically disadvantaged, but their demands were also made from a position of strength, because they had economic and political resources of their own. They could use these resources to get attention from politicians, but they could also survive on their own if rebuffed.

In dependency politics, the claimants usually have no such strength, as they lack any regular position in the economy. They are simply needy. Their main claim is precisely their vulnerability. It is not their own power that gets attention, but politicians' fear of a backlash from the better-off if the needy are left unprotected. Economic groups state their claims by speaking of troubled finances. The very poor state theirs by a disassembly of the personality—by failing to function in embarrassing ways that force society to take responsibility for them.

In dependency politics, the poor claim a right to support based on the injuries of the past, not on anything that they contribute now. Wounds are an asset today, much as a pay check was in progressive-era politics. One claims to be a victim, not a worker. The nonwhite poor, particularly, appeal to historic injustices. Even some policies that aid better-functioning minorities, such as affirmative action, require their beneficiaries to adopt the identity of victimhood to some extent—to exploit an appeal, as Shelby Steele says, based on "suffering" rather than "achievements."

Poverty shifts the agenda from equality to citizenship. The question is no longer what the worst-off members of the community should receive. Now the question is who should be considered a bona fide member of the community in the first place. Who has the moral standing to make the demands for economic redress typically made in the progressive era? When dependency comes to dominate politics, class-oriented issues of equality for workers

inevitably move off the agenda, while issues of identity and belonging replace them.

In Europe as well as the U.S., dependency concerns replaced progressive ones as motives for the reconsideration of the welfare state that began in the 1970s and 1980s. At first, the issues were economic, the fear that excessive spending on income and health programs was overburdening the economy. Cuts were made to promote economic growth, the step conservatives always recommend in progressive-era politics. More recently, however, the greater concern has been declining social cohesion, as evidenced by rises in crime, single parenthood, and chronic unemployment. The response, in Britain and Sweden as in the U.S., has been new steps to enforce child support and work effort among the dependent. The shift from the older, redistributive agenda to these new, more behavioral issues ushers in a new political age.

Competence at issue

If there is a core issue in dependency politics, it concerns the competence of the poor to manage their own lives. Such competence was taken for granted—by conservatives and liberals—in progressive-era politics. It was assumed that the poor would act effectively to advance their own self-interest, if not society's, above all by working. The chief issue was how best to expand the benefits of employment. This accounts for the impersonal style of the era, its fixation on economics and social organization. The private lives of the poor were presumed to be orderly, so that they could seize whatever opportunities government or the market might offer.

The essence of dependency politics is that competence comes into question. Debate now centers on the personal lives of the poor much more than on impersonal forces. More than before, social problems arise, not just from the various pressures that people face, but from their inability to cope with them. The problems of the poor can always be ascribed to either the environment or personal factors. In today's social analysis, therefore, judgments of human nature play as great a role as any hard evidence.

One critical issue is personal responsibility. Should the poor be sanctioned for bad behavior? In the progressive era, the comparative merit of individual freedom and social equality was at issue, but responsibility in this personal sense usually was not. Politicians argued about how to balance governmental action to increase

equality against the freedom of the marketplace, but no one supposed that people need not observe conventional standards such as hard work and obedience to the law. In dependency politics, by contrast, the organization of society is less at issue than personal responsibility. Few people now argue for government ownership or even increased regulation, but many dispute whether the disadvantaged should have to observe behavioral norms that they themselves accept. The poor want to work and obey the law, but often they do not. Should they actually have to? Liberals tend to say no and conservatives yes. For example, most liberals are distinctly reluctant to enforce the criminal law severely in ghetto areas, to impose tougher graduation requirements on students in urban schools, and above all to require welfare recipients to work. They do not endorse the disorders of the ghetto, yet they feel that to "crack down" is somehow unfair to poor people struggling to cope with their lives. Conservatives, on the other hand, insist that the poor be held to the same behavioral standards as other people. In part, the left is simply more libertarian than the right, less willing to enforce values on anyone.

The differences, however, also rest on disagreements over the capacity of the poor to manage their affairs, particularly to work and raise a family. One can expect responsibility only of people able to take care of themselves. Liberals tend to be pessimistic about competence, viewing poor people as overwhelmed by their environment. So they ask special help for them and tend to be permissive about enforcing conventional mores. Conservatives are much more optimistic, hence more demanding and less permissive. This difference is muted among politicians, but very evident in debates among liberal and conservative experts.

Much of the debate over poverty is still conducted in terms of barriers, but appearances are deceiving. Liberals in the progressive era could appeal to impediments to supporting oneself, such as mass unemployment or racial segregation, that had little or nothing to do with the personal fortitude of the jobless. In consequence, liberals could ask for government intervention without reflecting on the competence of the beneficiaries. Today, such "hard" obstacles to self-reliance are much less evident. Objectively, problems like bad neighborhoods or low wages, which liberals like to cite to exculpate the poor, are seldom true barriers. They demoralize people without directly barring them from employment. To invoke them does reflect on the energy of those for whom the excuses are

made. Today's arguments about barriers are usually arguments about competence in disguise.

Liberals are not wrong to stress barriers, but the barriers are more psychological than social. Conservatives are largely right that society offers poor people opportunities of a sort; barriers are seldom prohibitive. But liberals are largely right about the poor themselves. Researchers may say that opportunity objectively exists, but the entrenched poor are not convinced. The liberal notion that society hems the poor in at every turn rings true among the poor themselves, even if it is not objectively true. The notion of some conservatives that poor adults are really middle-class maximizers in disguise is implausible. Would they really jump up and work if denied welfare? More likely, they would cadge, hustle, and drift from job to job much as they do now.

Often barriers are in the eyes of the beholders, who judge them according to their views of competence. Liberal analysts are quick to find impediments to employment, because they view the poor as helpless victims. Conservatives see fewer barriers, and call for less help, because they impute more ability to the poor. What the left calls barriers the right regards as the ordinary logistics of working, which the poor, like other people, can handle by themselves. One side will not obligate the poor to behave better no matter what is done for them, while the other demands better behavior before anything is done. The poor are either innocent supplicants of whom nothing can be expected, or they are lazy exploiters who can and should shape up. These are not disagreements that any hard evidence can resolve.

Political changes

The advent of dependency politics changes the style of politics as well as the substance. Again, I simplify the contrasts for emphasis:

Progressive-era politics was self-reliant; dependency politics is not. In contrast to the reforms that mass movements achieved in the progressive era, dependency claims have seldom been pressed directly by the poor themselves, who are passive and withdrawn. Instead, their case has been made for them by program staffs or politicians already within the government, or by experts closely linked to it. With the Great Society, social-policy making in the U.S. became much more elitist than it ever was before. The civil-rights and feminist movements were the last to press change on

government from outside. There is considerable public concern about poverty, but proposals for dealing with it still come mostly from antipoverty elites. This is why the findings about the causes of nonwork and poverty are so important: experts respond to them.

Urban riots, community-action programs, and the welfare-rights movement might be seen as instances in which the poor themselves exerted pressure in the 1960s for change. But all these movements were short-lived and of dubious value to the poor. The riots were undirected and destructive, while community action and welfare rights were created more by activists than by the poor. The movements advanced the careers of leaders, but they did not produce social change.

The underlying problem was that the supporters of these movements were too dependent on government to be truly radical. They lacked their own social position *outside* government from which to exert influence, above all because of their lack of employment. In contrast, the labor, civil-rights, and feminist movements did produce change, mainly because their participants were far more commonly employed. This gave them the income and the political capacity to build organizations able to stand apart from government, and thus bring pressure upon it.

Progressive-era politics distrusted the federal government, while dependency politics does not. In the last sixty years, conservatives have been the most distrustful of federal power, but earlier this was just as true of the left. Because business had dominated federal politics since the Gilded Age, the New Deal's architects found it hard to persuade local reformers to look to Washington for assistance. Local mayors and governors did not assume that federal programs could or would offer them much help in dealing with social problems. Washington did not lead localities in social policy but rather lagged behind them. Public welfare and unemployment benefits were initiated by states and only later were instituted at the federal level.

The claimants in dependency politics, however, trust government. Those speaking for the poor may disparage the authorities, but their actions belie their words, for their claims for redress are directed to the "oppressors" themselves. They generate little electoral pressure on leaders, yet demand that the leaders be "responsive." Of all American groups, the poor and blacks least fear centralized power. This reflects their traditional dependence on Washington for advancement. But there is a limit to what

appeals to the sympathy of the successful can achieve. Only a movement with support from outside the regime can produce truly radical change. A nonworking poor, in the nature of things, cannot achieve it.

Dependency politics cannot produce equality in the old sense because it is not a self-respecting politics. Claimants ask for acceptance, but government cannot confer it. A group can earn acceptance only on the basis of its own discipline and achievements. Only then can it make claims in politics as an equal. The progressive-era movements instinctively understood this. All the players then could claim some resources of their own. Those that could not did not come forward. In the 1960s, when claims were finally made on behalf of the passive poor, politics was fundamentally changed.

Progressive-era politics was threatening, while dependency politics is disturbing. The progressive movements directly challenged established interests. They generated their own power for change and attempted to force it on the regime. The goal was to reorganize government and then the economy to advance the less well-off at the expense of the establishment.

Dependency politics does not threaten the status quo in this direct way. The poor or dependent are not organized to extort redress, nor could they be, given the disorder of their lives. Inner-city crime does pose a threat, but the victims are mostly as disadvantaged as the perpetrators. The rich have only to worry about protecting their persons and property, and they have to pay taxes to cope with the disorders of the ghetto. But they face no organized threat to their interests.

Dependency politics is, however, distressing. Welfare mothers and panhandlers are less formidable than were the union organizers of the 1930s. At most, the dependent poor pose a psychic—not a political or economic—threat. Other Americans worry that they might share the helplessness of the dependent poor, who present a frightening image of what life might be like without jobs or marriage. The working and lower-middle classes, who often live alongside the dependent poor, are the most hostile to them—precisely because they feel the greatest danger of joining their ranks. At the same time, dependency can arouse envy as well as fear: the capacity of the poor to shift responsibility for themselves onto others can be tempting. Most people abandon the yearning for dependency in childhood, but never without regret.

Progressive-era politics was ideological, while dependency politics is moralistic. The progressive-era battle was about competing principles of social organization, government regulation versus *laissez faire*. Was capitalism the problem or the solution? The issues were impersonal, and so were the experts who led the debate—chiefly economists and lawyers, who offered contending theories of economic policy. For much of this century, liberal planners who favored controls dominated, until the Reagan era gave free-market economics a fresh hearing. That debate goes on, but it is peripheral to the social issues that now dominate domestic affairs. The more important argument today divides those who would enforce social values on the poor from those who would not. Good behavior is at issue, not the good society.

Leftists used to respond to poverty by demanding that reward be severed from performance in the marketplace. They claimed that people's economic needs ought to be satisfied, regardless of what they earned. The intellectual left still speaks for this collectivist goal. But practical politicians realize that tinkering with the market will not remedy the personal problems of today's poor.

The new emphasis on the dysfunctions of the poor has affected the sort of expert who interprets poverty. Economic thinking was critical to the old structural debates, but it is too impersonal to deal well with today's social problems. Of all poverty analysts, economists are the most wedded to the competence assumption and the readiest to believe that some new incentive or opportunity can raise work levels. As advisors to policymakers, they have lately had to make room for sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists, who are better able to fathom the complex psychology of poverty and the moral issues that it raises. There is less talk about poverty in the narrow economic sense, more about dependency, responsibility, and authority.

The Western tradition

Today's efforts to respond to dependency face serious challenges. They may well not allay our social problems as fully as progressive policies resolved yesterday's economic disputes. The newer, paternalistic social programs probably will do more to reduce poverty than the less demanding policies of the past: more authoritative schools are producing some results, and workfare programs have been able to increase work effort (though they have

not yet reduced dependency). But it is doubtful that even these programs can do more than contain the social problem.

Even if they are effective, paternalistic measures raise serious political objections. The new structures reduce disorder, but at a cost to the autonomy of clients. This is particularly true if, as is likely, the chronic poor require direction on an ongoing basis, not just temporarily. That is why, even now, government prefers to spend money on the dependent rather than try to tell them how to live. Benefits lack the power of public authority to change behavior, but they do not violate our notions of a free society.

A more serious problem stems from our political traditions. Antidependency policies—and disputes about them—find no basis in the Western political tradition, which assumes that the individuals who compose society are competent to advance their own interests, if not society's. The traditional Western assumption is that politics arises from conflicting interests, as individuals and groups seek economic advantage. Government's task is to resolve these disputes in the general interest. It does not animate society, but rather responds to energy coming from below.

Historically, Western politics has been class-oriented: aristocratic elites, then bourgeois elements, then workers without property have advanced their own conceptions of how government and the economy should be organized. The dominant principles have become more democratic, then more collectivist, as government came to represent the mass of the populace and then to serve its needs. The contending visions may seem radically opposed, but from today's perspective they were remarkably alike: all assumed a working population, competent to advance its own interests.

This tradition is inapplicable to the problems posed by today's dysfunctional poor. But policy makers in this country and Europe are prone to respond to these problems by replaying the old scenarios. Today's liberals see history as a grand progression in which the rights of ordinary people have been expanded: first civil liberties, then representative government, then protections against the insecurities of capitalism were attained. Faced with passive poverty, the left can imagine no response other than providing some further entitlement, for example government jobs. The idea that dependents should have to function better seems like an attempt to deny benefits, and is thus anathema.

Antigovernment conservatives, for their part, blame poverty on an excess of government, just as the left blames it on the lack of

government intervention. They insist that cuts in spending and taxes will somehow liberate the energy of the poor, as they do that of entrepreneurs. The idea that competence is a prior and different problem, requiring perhaps more government rather than less, is unthinkable.

These liberal and conservative responses are doomed to fail. If the seriously poor had the initiative to respond to new opportunities, they would not be poor for very long in the first place. The Great Society and the Reagan era both failed to solve poverty, because each in a different way offered new chances to the poor without confronting the motivation problem. Neither could seriously address competence, because that problem fell outside the Western assumptions underlying their ideas of social reform.

But despite these conceptual failures, government has begun to do something about poverty: a new, paternalistic regime for the poor is emerging. Ronald Reagan's greatest domestic legacy, despite his tax cuts, was not to reduce government; it was to start changing welfare into workfare. But the new regime is accepted grudgingly, if at all. Politicians argue heatedly about the issues of responsibility and competence that it raises, but they seldom do so honestly. They mention the "underclass" and the need for discipline, but they still talk as if they were offering the poor only "freedom" or "opportunity."

We need a new political language that considers more candidly the questions of human nature that now underlie politics. The political contestants need to defend their positions on a philosophic level, rather than hide behind outmoded theories. Liberals need to show why poor people are blameless, therefore still deserving; conservatives need to show how the poor are competent and why they need to be held accountable, in spite of dysfunction. From such premises they could then erect consistent doctrines of social policy, comparable to the competing theories of economic management that framed the leading issues in the progressive era.

If anyone is writing this theory, it is not philosophers like John Rawls and his critics (who assume a rational economic psychology and thus remain wedded to the competence assumption) but social-policy experts who grapple concretely with poverty. They know too much of the hard evidence about barriers to pretend that nothing has changed. To explain poverty and justify any policy toward it, experts need a psychological doctrine that explains how personal degradation occurs in an affluent and open society.

Differing visions of human nature are what really divide Charles Murray, William Julius Wilson, myself, and others. For Murray, poor adults are short-sighted calculators who are tempted into dysfunction by the disincentives of welfare. For Wilson, they are driven into disorder by a changing economy that denies them jobs that could support a family. My own view, articulated in *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, is that they are depressed but dutiful, willing to observe mainstream norms like work if only government will enforce them. But none of us has defended these premises in enough depth, or linked them clearly enough to our prescriptions.

Armed with theories like this, the political process might face more squarely the issues raised by dependency politics. It is more important that the positions be candid than that they agree. Progress requires that the fears of both sides be more fully aired, not that one side win. The debate might finally generate the consensus needed to support the new paternalistic social policy that is already emerging. There could be agreement on the basic civilities that everyone is prepared to enforce. On that basis, the nation could grapple with passive poverty more successfully.