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Political Science Perspectives on Poverty

Amanda J. Lehning

ABSTRACT. The social science discipline of political science focuses on the study of political systems and political behavior. While political science has not developed a comprehensive theory of poverty, this article reviews political science perspectives related to the causes of poverty (culture of poverty and neo-Marxist theories of class), the role of government in addressing poverty (theories of distributive justice and public support for antipoverty policies), and political participation. The article concludes with recommendations for future research and implications for Human Behavior and the Social Environment curriculum. doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_07 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a persistent and serious problem in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), approximately 12.7% of the population lived below the federal poverty line in 2004, the highest percentage since 1998. While poverty rates have generally declined since the 1950s, the absolute number of Americans who live in poverty has

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remained almost the same for the past five decades, and those with low levels of education, female-headed households, the elderly, and people of color share a particular risk of falling into this category (Glasmeier, 2006). Why do so many Americans live in poverty? Why do antipoverty measures continue to fail? The social science discipline of political science provides important perspectives for understanding the political systems and political behavior that relate to the causes and impacts of poverty.

This article represents a brief literature review of political science theories of poverty. While political science has not developed a comprehensive theory of poverty, a number of political science theories help to explain some aspects of this problem. This analysis begins with a discussion of political science theories related to the causes of poverty, which reflect either the culture of poverty hypothesis or the analysis of social class differences. The next section addresses theories that examine the role of government in the alleviation or exacerbation of poverty, followed by a consideration of theories of political participation. The literature review concludes with recommendations for future directions for future research and implications for understanding human behavior within the social environment of poverty.

METHODOLOGY

The literature review included the searching of the major political science electronic databases (PAIS International and PAIS Archive, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, and JSTOR) for literature containing the key words “political science” and “theory” combined with either “poverty,” “inequality,” “socioeconomic status,” or “class.” The search also included the website of the American Political Science Association and consultations with several expert political scientists.

There are several limitations to this literature review. The primary limitation is the limited amount of attention given to the theories of poverty by political scientists. This review therefore includes perspectives on poverty beyond the traditional focus of political science to include theories of justice, entitlement, and the welfare state. Second, while every effort was made to provide a representative sample of political science theories related to poverty, this is not intended to be an exhaustive review. The final limitation relates to the author’s limited experience with the theoretical literature within political science.

THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

Political Science and the Culture of Poverty

The work of Oscar Lewis (1975) and his theory of the culture of poverty had a tremendous impact on the social sciences in the mid-twentieth century, and political science was no exception. While the majority of political scientists have moved away from this mode of thinking about the poor, it holds historical importance for this discipline.

Around the same time that Lewis was studying poor families in Mexico, political scientist Edward Banfield (1958) traveled to a small rural village in southern Italy in an effort to explain the extreme poverty of its inhabitants. Banfield determined that the bulk of the blame for this poverty lay in a cultural trait he labeled “amoral familism,” which impeded the ability of individuals to engage in the political associations and create enterprises to promote economic development. Amoral familism is characterized by the incapacity of a cultural group to work towards any goal beyond the immediate material interest of the nuclear family. Rather than acting together for the common good, individuals possessing this ethos seek to “maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise” (Banfield, 1958, p. 83). According to Banfield, amoral familism also existed in pockets of the United States, but enlightened Americans who contribute to the political and economic development of their communities helped this country avoid this same fate. The Italian villagers, however, had no such leaders, particularly in the political arena, and according to Banfield (1958), their only hope for economic improvement depended on an outside group that could change their worldview. Banfield estimated that it could take up to four generations for individuals in poor communities to transform their family-centered approaches into a society bonded together economically, socially, and politically.

While Banfield offered a dismal view of the future for Italians living in poverty, which he characterized in terms of the moral basis of a backward society, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, political scientist and then Assistant Secretary of Labor, used the culture of poverty perspective in 1965 to inform federal intervention. In *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), more commonly known as the Moynihan Report, Moynihan proposed that the family structure presented the primary barrier to economic success among African Americans. Specifically, the matriarchal pattern of African American families, a remnant of slavery, placed them at odds with the patriarchal pattern favored by the middle

and upper classes. According to Moynihan, this matriarchal pattern “will be found to be the principal source of the most aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (1965, p. 30). While acknowledging the role that slavery and past discrimination played in creating this culture, the implication of this theory is that African Americans are destined to a life of poverty if they do not conform to the values of the dominant, white culture.

While the Moynihan Report did help focus public policy on poverty and the other disadvantages experienced by African Americans, critics accused him of taking a “blame the victim” approach, ignoring larger structural factors and other causes of poverty. Valentine (1968) believes the Moynihan Report and similar studies of the causes of poverty represent a “corruption of the culture concept” (p. 35), the purpose of which is to reinforce stereotypical beliefs rather than make true social science discoveries. While Moynihan promoted his theory as a solution to poverty, it helped reinforce the status quo in terms of discrimination based on race and social class (Valentine, 1968).

The War on Poverty in the 1960s and subsequent antipoverty policies based on the culture of poverty have failed to address the multiple causes of poverty, in part, due to a simplified version of the culture of poverty, which lacks any understanding or respect for other cultures (Valentine, 1968). A review of the literature reveals that political scientists have abandoned in recent years these cultural explanations of poverty, investigating other causal factors, such as social class and class struggle.

Class and Poverty

The classic concept of class structure (Marx & Engels, 1998) proposes that social classes are based on different modes of production, yet this idea does not adequately explain class structure in twenty-first century America (Wright, 2003). In an attempt to update Marxist ideas, Wright describes the current class structure as characterized by non-exploitative oppression, as opposed to the exploitation conceptualized by Marx. In exploitation, the exploiters need the exploited and depend upon them for their own success (Wright, 2003). In a capitalist, industrialized society the proletariat possesses potential power against their oppressors in their capacity to disrupt production. However, in the post-industrialized world, based on technological innovation and globalization, the underclass no longer has much capacity to organize the labor force. In essence, the exploiters no longer need the exploited, and the

underclass continues to be denied access to resources, such as education and housing. Their only source of power stems from their ability to interfere with consumption through crime and other forms of violence (Wright, 2003). As a result, class structure is still a product of economic oppression that creates “a situation in which the material benefits of one group are acquired at the expense of another and in which unjust coercion is an essential part of the process by which this occurs” (Wright, 2003, p. 376). In this context, the underclass now has very little recourse to combat oppression.

While there are a limited number of political science theories that help explain the causes of poverty, there are others that examine the role of government in the maintenance and reduction of poverty.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN ADDRESSING POVERTY

Theories of Distributive Justice

Several political science theorists have crafted theories of economic inequality and distributive justice, in which political arrangements and ideologies determine the allocation of a host of goods (e.g., food, shelter, and medical care; Walzer, 1983). As formulated by Rawls (1971), an ideal system of distributive justice is one in which rational individuals make decisions without taking into account their economic situation. This chosen system of distributive justice would then determine the structure of society, the distribution of rights and duties, and the disbursement of economic and social advantages (Rawls, 1971). Rawls defines two principles that any rational individual would choose: (1) “[E]ach person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others” (1971, p. 53); and (2) “[S]ocial and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (1971, p. 53). This ideal system, however, in which everyone has the same access to economic and social goods does not exist in reality. Each society develops their own system of distribution by placing different values on different goods that affect the level of economic inequality.

Walzer describes three principles of justice that can guide the system of distribution of a society. The first is “free exchange,” which “creates a market within which all goods are convertible into all other goods

through the neutral medium of money” (Walzer, 1983, p. 21). Money, however, is rarely a neutral medium because certain individuals have access to resources and the talent to exploit them, while others have little or no access to resources (jobs, education, support networks, etc.) and often call for redistribution. The second principle is “need” (Walzer, 1983), in which the distribution of goods is based solely on need. The third principle of distribution, “deservingness,” called “desert” by many distributive justice theorists, currently dominates discussions of distributive justice in the United States. Ideas of deservingness have two components: “[A] standard of conduct and a norm that determines to what extent any given individual is rightly held responsible for meeting or failing to meet the standard” (Arneson, 1997, p. 342).

In the United States, widely held beliefs about the equality of opportunity and the importance of an individual’s control over their own fate impede any significant redistribution of goods (Lane, 2001). This leads to separating the poor into categories of the deserving and the undeserving, or those who have made an effort to conform to moral requirements (including being a self-supporting, contributing member of society) and those who have not conformed (Arneson, 1997; Wax, 2005).

Arneson (1997) highlights several problems with this line of thinking. First, he claims that those who have limited skills or access to adequately compensated employment do not have a moral obligation to be economically self-supporting (Arneson, 1997). In addition, poor people generally have a smaller range of choices and skills needed to evaluate these choices (Arneson, 1997). In other words, it is inappropriate to judge those living in poverty by the same criteria as those with access to greater resources. Finally, it is very difficult to distinguish between the poor who deserve some form of redistribution and those who do not (Arneson, 1997). The ideal form of distributive justice is based on the principle of deservingness and requires a neutral party that can accurately assess or judge the deservingness of every individual, a task that is viewed by many as impossible (Walzer, 1983). The principle of deservingness is difficult to implement despite the fact that it still prevails in this country.

Why do Americans continue to view the poor in terms of their worthiness when it comes to receiving government aid? As Wax (2005) points out, “what the majority of [American] citizens accept as reasonable may not comport with any coherent conception of equality or justice” (p. 214). She believes that most Americans view distributive justice in terms of conditional reciprocity: Those who are able-bodied should work, and only those who are not able-bodied should receive public assistance. Ideas

about equality in this country are not derived from theories of justice, but rather from theories of fairness (Wax, 2005). Unconditional assistance to the poor is not seen as a way to correct inequality, but rather a way to promote inequality, where those who refuse to work are supported by the hard work of others (Wax, 2005). Wax sees this type of thinking reflected in the 1996 federal welfare reform, which requires all recipients to work.

White (2003), on the other hand, proposes an alternative philosophy of economic citizenship that builds on the ideas of Rawls and still resonates with the popular values of the American public. He terms the policies and institutions that emerge from this philosophy as the “civic minimum,” and views justice as fair reciprocity, but not in the ideal form as formulated by Rawls. White believes that income redistribution should not be based solely on a citizen’s willingness to work, as in conditional reciprocity, but also on the social rights possessed by every citizen (White, 2003). If the government has not insured that every citizen is endowed with the social rights necessary to make a productive contribution, then every citizen is not under the same obligation to make a productive contribution in return. White suggests that until the government guarantees a living wage to all workers and acknowledges the productive contribution made by those engaged in “care work,” such as women who are raising children or caring for the sick elderly, the government should not impose the strict work requirements that characterize the welfare system today. According to White (2003), this civic minimum is compatible with the dominant values in America. Wealth transfers, for example, can be viewed as insuring equal opportunity, since they eliminate the class-based obstacles that prevent everyone from competing in a “meritocracy” (White, 2003). Similarly, the civic minimum does not conflict with the values of freedom and independence, since “freedom and independence have a material basis, and if citizens have a right to freedom and independence, they must have, by right, meaningful access to a decent share of society’s resources” (White, 2003, p. 214). The challenge, therefore, according to White, is to show the American public that a fair distribution of justice requires more than simply relegating the poor into the categories of deserving and undeserving, because a citizen is not obligated to make a contribution to society until he or she possesses the same social rights as everyone else.

Another explanation for the dominance of the principle of deservingness lies in a cultural preference for independence over interdependence (Lane, 2001). The American culture is one in which individuals see

themselves as independent of their society, identifying with ethnic, religious, gender, or cultural groups, rather than with members of their economic class (Lane, 2001). This separateness is further enhanced by the geographic segregation of different groups into either gated communities or ghettos (Bickford, 2001). There is little contact between those living in urban poverty and those living in suburban affluence. This separation prevents the formation of cross-class and cross-racial political coalitions (Bickford, 2001) or the development of any empathy for members of different groups. This results in support for very limited redistribution policies and a belief in the principle of deservingness rather than need (Lane, 2001). Lane warns that "the priority given to self-interest over group interest has gone beyond the point where it is economically beneficial, and has now reached a threshold where societies seem to suffer socially more than they gain economically" (2001, p. 488). This reflects a growing awareness that poverty impacts everyone.

Nancy Fraser (2003) proposes that justice in twenty-first century America requires both "redistribution" and "recognition" because these ideas are ultimately intertwined. She refers to the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution as "bivalent collectivities," a result of the "political-economic structure and the cultural-variational structure of society" (Fraser, 2003, p. 383). The politics of recognition focus on cultural, ethnic, and gender identities, while the politics of redistribution focus on social class. Cultural norms about women or racial and ethnic minorities are embedded in the state and the economy, reinforcing the economic disadvantage of these groups (Fraser, 2003).

According to Fraser, there are at least two ways of addressing economic and cultural disadvantage: the politics of affirmation and the politics of transformation. Politics of affirmation seek to redress cultural and economic injustice by celebrating differences. The affirmative politics of distribution is represented by the welfare state in terms of economics, and multiculturalism, a celebration of different group identities, in terms of culture (Feldman, 2002). Fraser believes that the politics of affirmation fails to produce either redistribution or recognition. Instead, she advocates for socialism and deconstruction, the economic and cultural aspects of the transformative politics of distribution (Feldman, 2002). The politics of transformation involves a deeper engagement of the underlying structures of injustice that create artificial economic and cultural divisions between groups. Without deconstruction, the public will retain such stereotypes as the "welfare queen," and the poor will continue to struggle with internalized stereotypes and low self-esteem

that make it nearly impossible for the politics of redistribution to occur (Feldman, 2002).

Building on the ideas of Fraser, Feldman (2002) outlines a theory of justice that reflects “the fundamental role of the state in classifying populations along these lines of identity and difference” (2002, p. 420). From his perspective, any discussion of redistribution and recognition needs to involve the role of the welfare state in allocating political power with respect to who receives aid and who is denied aid. For example, the current situation of the homeless illustrates the inter-relationships of politics with economics and culture. Feldman argues that the homeless not only suffer from a low socioeconomic status but from a low recognition status that is perpetuated by political decisions. Anti-homeless laws, such as sleeping bans and panhandling restrictions, contribute to the stigmatization and invisibility of the homeless, reinforcing the negative self-conception of the homeless (Feldman, 2002). In addition, negative representations of the homeless in the media impact public opinion and public policies, perhaps leading to more restrictive redistribution policies (Feldman, 2002).

It is clear that the theories of distributive justice find their expression in public policy and that government plays an important role in promoting or alleviating poverty in the United States.

Public Policy and Poverty

The relationship between economic inequality and public policy has become a major area of study in political science. Spencer (2004) contends that policymakers often view approaches to poverty in terms of binary categories; antipoverty policies are formulated as either people-based or place-based and as either supply-side or demand-side. Supply-side and people-based policies include cash benefits to the poor, while tax credits to businesses that hire low-income workers reflect demand-side and people-based policies. Improvements in local schools reflect a supply-side and place-based policy, while business development incentives in poor neighborhoods is a demand-side and place-based policy (Spencer, 2004). As Spencer points out, “economic opportunity for an individual is a result of both individual and neighborhood attributes as well as the behavior of workers and those that employ them” (2004, p. 562) and concludes that antipoverty policies that focus on just one aspect of poverty are doomed to failure. While evidence of the positive impact of an antipoverty policy contributes to political support, Spencer

concludes that partisan politics play the primary role in determining which pieces of antipoverty legislation are passed into law.

Support for public welfare and poverty prevention policies fluctuate over time and across nations (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Piven and Cloward (1971), for example, collected data showing that government relief programs are often expanded during periods of civil disorder stemming from mass unemployment, but restricted once a society achieves times of prosperity. They argue that public welfare is actually a means of regulating the poor rather than an altruistic act. Piven and Cloward contend that “expansive relief policies are designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms” (Piven & Cloward, 1971, p. xiii).

In 2004, the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (created by the American Political Science Association) reported two major findings: (1) unequal political participation due, in part, to the prominence of lobbyists, and (2) unequal government responsiveness due to special access given to major campaign contributors (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Lawmakers tend to respond to the needs of those who provide the greatest financial support and ignore the needs of those with more limited resources. According to the report, “bias in U.S. governance toward inaction and selective responsiveness may well be compounded by the impact of big monetary contributions, which play an ever-greater role in electoral and policy campaigns” (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005, p. 221). A big contributor to successful election campaigns is often rewarded with access to lawmakers, where he or she can personally express his or her concerns (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). The recent lobbying scandals in both houses of Congress reinforce the idea that money has a disproportionate influence on American politics.

Those living in poverty seldom have the same opportunities as those who lobby and gain special access. As a result, the U.S. government often fails to enact adequate antipoverty policies in response to the rising economic inequality in this country (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). While the poor lack the financial means to influence policymakers through campaign contributions, they have potential power through their voting behavior and yet rarely see political participation as a way to address their concerns.

Political Participation

Political scientists have found that individuals living in poverty fail to participate in such political activities as voting, protesting, or contacting

elected officials (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). While the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which increased access to voter education and reduced administrative barriers to registration should have increased the number of voters who are poor, these developments do not appear to have significantly increased the participation of those living in poverty (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005).

There are some potential explanations for the low rates of political participation among the poor. Trade unions and voluntary associations, which traditionally extended membership to lower socioeconomic groups, have declined in recent decades while professional advocacy groups and business associations have come to dominate the political arena (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Another explanation posits that those living in poverty tend to be poorly organized. Another explanation relates to the impact of antipoverty policies. Policies that extend benefits to large segments of society and portray those benefits as “rights” make recipients feel as though they are deserving of such public support, and thereby encourage beneficiaries to participate in the political process (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Older adults, for example, tend to exhibit higher rates of political participation than other groups, a behavior attributed to their stake in the Social Security and Medicare programs (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). On the other hand, policies that require recipients to deal with demeaning eligibility procedures tend to discourage political participation (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Some policies foster a sense of empowerment among beneficiaries, while others lead to feelings of disempowerment.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE THEORIES OF POVERTY

While no comprehensive theory of poverty has emerged in political science, three domains of theory relate to: (1) the causes of poverty (culture of poverty and neo-Marxist theories of class structure), (2) the role of government in addressing poverty (theories of distributive justice and the evolution of antipoverty policies), and (3) political participation (both the behavior of individuals as well as the larger social environment).

Shapiro (2002) has called upon political science to balance what he terms “method-driven approaches,” which focus on prediction, to more “problem-driven approaches” that address current social problems like the persistence of poverty and growing inequality in the midst of wealth. While he notes that the most important problems are frequently the most

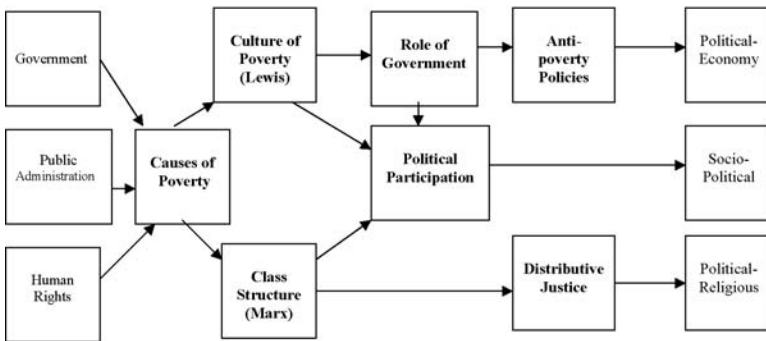
difficult to isolate, political scientists should not be discouraged from conducting research on and developing theories about these problems (Shapiro, 2002). Without theories of the causes of poverty, it is difficult to design policy interventions and assess their impact on social problems like poverty. For example, with their considerable investment in the study of voting behavior, political scientists could also look more closely at the behavior of poor people with respect to political participation. Why are the poor not involved in the political arena? What kinds of community organizing and policy advocacy activities are needed to address the causes of this political behavior? It is clear that the discipline of political science has the potential to make an important contribution to our theoretical understanding of poverty.

CONCLUSION

In an effort to summarize the evolution of political science perspectives on poverty, Figure 1 presents a map of theories of poverty from a political science perspective. This figure illustrates that the concepts introduced in this article emerged from some of the traditional foci of political science and relate to some promising new areas of political science theory and research.

Political scientists have long been interested in government, public administration, and human rights (Ranney, 1996), and political science perspectives on poverty reflect these interests. Political scientists who

FIGURE 1. Theories of Poverty from a Political Science Perspective



focus on government, for example, investigate different forms of government and the basic tasks and tools of government (Ranney, 1996), and this tradition continues in the concept of the role of government in addressing poverty. Political scientists also study public administration, particularly in terms of the discretion that administrators often exercise in terms of policymaking and policy implementation (Ranney, 1996). Administrators therefore have a potentially large amount of influence over antipoverty policies. Finally, political scientists define human rights as “the protections to which all human beings are entitled because of their humanity and not because of their social status or individual merit” (Ranney, 1996, p. 349). Ideas about human rights lie at the core of theories of distributive justice.

Growing out of the culture of poverty and the War on Poverty in the 1960s, poverty was viewed as a cultural defect, and this greatly influenced the ideas about the role of government in addressing this social problem. The role of government in the promotion and reduction of poverty continues to interest political scientists with respect to antipoverty policies and theories of distributive justice. Antipoverty policies often fail to achieve their stated goals, either because they are inadequate to address all the aspects of poverty or because of the unequal access granted to different members of American society.

The role of government in addressing poverty eradication is also reflected in theories of distributive justice. In the ideal system of distributive justice, everyone has the same access to economic and social goods. However, in the United States, ideas about distributive justice are based on the principle of deservingness. The majority of Americans appear to support the idea that those who receive governmental assistance must prove that they are deserving of such aid, either by being disabled in some way or by making an effort to become a contributing member of society (typically through work requirements).

In contrast to the culture of poverty perspective and related governmental policy development, the bottom half of the map in Figure 1 features the class structure perspective. The updated version of the classic Marxian theory of class struggle argues that class structure is a product of economic oppression. This relates to theories of distributive justice and theories about political participation. Despite the development of an underclass, people in twenty-first century America identify with ethnic, religious, gender, or cultural groups, rather than with members of their economic class. As a result, members of the underclass focus more on the politics of recognition, and less on the politics of redistribution. In addition, they practice the politics of affirmation, rather than the

politics of transformation, and therefore never address the underlying structures that keep them in their current economic position. The principle of deservingness continues to dominate the discourse of distributive justice. It appears as though members of the underclass find few prospects for success by engaging in political participation. To what extent could political participation, particularly voting, represent the one source of power available to members of the underclass? Political scientists have found, however, that individuals living in poverty have extremely low rates of political participation. Have years of economic oppression by the ruling class prevented the poor from going to the polls? To what extent have government unresponsiveness and ineffective antipoverty policies convinced the poor of the futility of trying to enact political change? To what extent has culture of poverty stereotyping convinced the poor that they are different from mainstream society and therefore do not deserve to participate?

Perhaps some of these questions can be answered by three emerging areas of political science theory and research: (1) theories within the area of political-economy, such as the work of Michael Porter in inner-cities, (2) theories within the area of the socio-political, such as the ideas of Robert Putnam regarding social capital, and (3) theories within the area of the political-religious, reflected in the work of E.J. Dionne and John DiIulio on faith-based organizations.

Following years of ineffective antipoverty policies, Porter (1997) has proposed a way to increase inner-city economic development that emphasizes the role of the private sector over the role of the government. Porter believes that the artificial inducements offered in the form of government subsidies to businesses for ongoing operations will never succeed in creating stable jobs and economic development in poor urban areas. Instead, he urges the private sector to recognize the many advantages for businesses that choose to establish themselves in the inner-city, such as the high levels of local unmet need and a large pool of potential employees who are willing to work (Porter, 1997). Government should focus on indirect intervention, providing basic public safety, creating job-training programs, crime prevention, and enforcing anti-discrimination laws. According to Porter, "we need to turn our attention to new, market-oriented strategies that will build on strengths and engage the private sector" (1997, p. 24).

Putnam (2000) takes a different approach, focusing on the role of community rather than the role of business in his theory of social capital. Social capital "refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them"

(Putnam, 2000, p. 19). The idea of social capital relates to political participation, and Putnam presents declining rates of political participation among all members of American society as evidence of the decline in social capital since its peak in the 1950s and 1960s. Putnam believes it is the responsibility of citizens, with some help from the government, to rebuild the bonds of community that have weakened over the past forty years. If poor communities work together to regain social capital, this could result in a substantial improvement in the lives of the poor.

Finally, some of the ideas of distributive justice can be seen in the work of faith-based organizations and the current debate regarding the relationship between politics and religion. Political scientists have recently recognized the pivotal role that religious organizations play in the alleviation of poverty (Dionne & DiIulio, 2000). Faith, similar to the principle of deservingness that dominates ideas about distributive justice in this country, emphasizes the role of personal responsibility, but it also stresses the importance of collective responsibility. In addition to providing material support, faith-based organizations often attempt to help those that they serve develop a conscience, which “may prompt individuals to change their own behavior and also prompt them to become agents of social change. The role of faith in either case is not to impose itself through the state but to move individual citizens to demand greater responsibility from themselves and from their institutions” (Dionne & DiIulio, 2000, p. 7). While government funding for faith-based organizations remains a controversial issue, their belief in collective responsibility could lead to a fairer form of distributive justice in this country.

While political science perspectives on poverty seem to raise more questions than they answer, they still have a number of implications for increasing our understanding of human behavior in the context of a political environment. First, political science perspectives on the causes of poverty include the role of culture and class from a political perspective. As it moved away from blaming the victim, political science increasingly recognized the diversity of poverty experiences along with a growing recognition of the interdisciplinary forces that contribute to the persistence of poverty. While it is relatively easy to see the evolution of theories related to culture of poverty and social class, it is more difficult to evaluate the social, cultural, and political impact of anti-poverty policies. Second, political perspectives on the development and implementation of antipoverty policies are guided by two powerful forces in this country: (1) A theory of distributive justice that draws upon the principle of deservingness; and (2) The government’s tendency to respond to the needs of those with the greatest financial resources.

This important contribution to our understanding of poverty complements the perspectives of other social science disciplines as they seek to explain the persistence of poverty. Finally, political science perspectives on the role of political participation among the poor provide opportunities for intervention. Voting and other forms of political participation represent a source of power that can impact the government's responsiveness to the needs of the poor. This could ultimately be the primary way in which the human behavior of the poor could directly affect their social environment.

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