THE CONSTRUCTION OF POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS IN US CITIES

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ABSTRACT
The review focuses on analyses of the creation of culture among poor populations in the United States whose lives have been structured by residing at the center of the global economy. Literature is examined concerning the changing construction of labor, space, time, and identity in the new poverty. Throughout, the review examines the generation of poverty and questions of gender, race, political mobilization, and resistance. This outline of current research provides a framework for an analysis of the violence and conflict generated by the lowering of wages and the reduction of leisure time.

Introduction
As poverty increases worldwide and the gap between rich and poor grows ever greater, the poor have become invisible, marginalized, or excluded from public view. This change has been little considered in the anthropological literature (156, 245). While there has been some significant research in the field (see below), the level of interest has yet to reflect the increasing inequality and poverty generated within the global economy of advanced capitalism.

While the immiseration of the American worker, deindustrialization, and the shift to service industries are everywhere reported, theory about growing poor populations in the midst of corporate wealth is less common. As large populations in Africa, Latin America, and other areas are consigned to sweatshop conditions; below-subsistence wages; and a decline in already inadequate health, sanitation, and social services, theories of advanced capitalism have focused on the growth of cyberspace, tourism and shifting worlds, iden-
tities, and perceptions. While identifying these issues as theoretical challenges, anthropologists have rarely viewed the increasing poverty among both urban and rural populations as requiring the same level of analysis.

Homeless populations in the United States are not large, according to the general census (26, 87, 89–91, 96, 123). However, they are one of the few highly visible and public signs of the increasing poverty of millions of Americans. They have emerged as a symbol of the new poverty in the United States (84–86, 141, 201, 247). Political concern for housing the homeless, or at least removing them from the streets and subways, stems from the need to make the increasing inequality to which the majority of the residents are subject invisible, individual, and private (141, 142, 201). Consequently, studies of the homeless in the United States address how poverty is represented as well as how the poor are treated and the way they live their lives.

Recent concerns about the so-called underclass must be viewed in the same context. While the underclass constitutes only about 11% of the poor population of the United States (33), literature about the underclass by sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, educators, social workers, and health providers constitutes by far the largest proportion of research about poverty in this country in the past decade (4, 33, 41, 44, 97–99, 101, 103, 105, 106, 134, 156, 172, 219, 234–237, 245, 246, 249, 253). Once again, this group may be more visible and more subject to public scrutiny. Almost by definition members of the underclass are in direct conflict with public institutions, either through substance abuse, the criminal justice system, mental institutions, foster care, vagrancy and homelessness, or at the very least in their need for public assistance (4, 33, 219). Other poor people who manage to avoid interaction with public institutions are labeled the “deserving” poor and are left out of discussions of the underclass. This distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor is an old one and can be traced back several hundred years (175, 234). In social science its roots may be found in familiar categories such as the “hardliving” poor, whose lives contrast with those apparently able to maintain middle-class norms more successfully (95, 179). Such disparaging contrasts were criticized in ethnographies of the late 1960s and early 1970s that demonstrated the situational basis for “hustling” and many of the other characteristics described as “hardliving” norms (121, 203, 231).

Concerning poverty in the global economy and its place in current theories of advanced capitalism, we can identify two opposing conceptualizations of the poor in the postmodern world, or the new world “disorder” (30). First, there is the view that the poor are irrelevant to the global economy. Not only are the poor invisible, but their labor is no longer viewed as necessary. Deindustrialization in the core countries is a reflection of a decreasing need for manual workers worldwide, which presages a reduction in the needed work force to fewer, more highly educated people who will be involved in the new
informational technology. Low-skilled service workers will still be necessary but not in the numbers of the previously industrialized work force. The export of industry to poorer countries represents not only a search for cheaper labor but also an overall reduction in the central importance of that labor within world capitalism. Thus, from this theoretical perspective, the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and similar policies pursued in the United States and Europe result from an abandonment of populations whose labor and health is no longer necessary to production in the global economy (29, 30, 186, 221).

The opposing view is that labor in industrial production is still crucial and central to the global economy. However, the export of production from the center to the less media-visible periphery, and the development of the informational service economy, is an outright assault on working-class populations. The departure of industry from the strongly unionized welfare states that constituted the core of modern capitalism represents the ongoing search for cheaper, weaker, unorganized labor associated with less regulated state intervention. This is one more step in the battle for control of production and the extraction of profit (16, 68, 69). In addition, the shift to hiring more women, as well as the creation of an uneven post-Fordist work force in the United States and parts of Europe, can be incorporated into this argument (13, 82, 153, 178).

While the first view implies that many workers are no longer needed and that massive populations of poverty are a drain on and a threat to nation-states and the world economy, the second view suggests a massive reserve army of labor—the poor—that depresses all workers’ wages. This reserve army is available to be integrated into the work force and then to be discarded in relation to the needs of the global economy (234).

To assess the adequacy of these two views, we need to consider what in fact constitutes an effective reserve work force at different historical periods with different effects on inequality, poverty, and social welfare (15, 195, 225). Nation-states, employers, and working-class movements define differently over time the categories of people available to work. As social programs and regulations shift, so too do the people who can be viewed as reserve labor. For certain historical periods in the United States, women, children, and the elderly have been legislated out of the work force. At other times they have been recruited to fill employment needs. Such changes can be perceived in the history of laws about child labor, in protective legislation for women, and in the conflicting and historically fluid approaches of feminists, unions, and the state to such regulation (107, 140, 182). Massive social upheaval by people demanding work and security for the aged during the Great Depression led to the introduction of mandatory retirement through the Social Security Act of 1935 (157). The abolition of mandatory retirement in the 1990s and current incen-
tives for early retirement in the face of downsizing of corporations and other institutions such as hospitals and universities illuminate how broader political issues interact with the characterization of a work force.

Changing patterns of prisons, military recruitment strategies, the enforcement of immigration laws, and societal handling of the mentally ill and definitions of mental illness, institutional labor, slavery, indentured servitude, and racial discrimination are other areas where the availability of labor and its cost are periodically redefined (38, 46, 69, 84–86, 103, 165, 170, 171, 244, 245). Thus, cultural definitions of available labor are historically produced by nation-states, class conflict, and social movements. Such constructions of legitimate dependency and community responsibility, institutionalized in state regulation and cultural expectations of age, gender, and other social identities, constrain the ability of industries to lower wages by hiring indiscriminately the least-protected workers.

Consequently, we can view the departure of industries from core industrialized countries not according to problematic ethnocentric notions of deindustrialization but as an expansion of the industrial work force. Workers in areas previously restricted to agriculture and the extraction of raw materials have been recategorized as candidates for industrial employment. In particular, these new developments target women as industrial workers. These women are some of the least-protected workers in international labor. They are frequently subordinated, sometimes assaulted in their own households, historically excluded from most forms of paid employment and education, and situated in the poorest regions of the world (13, 47, 50, 154, 158, 178, 208). This massive expansion in the incorporation of global labor, the breakdown of household definitions of gendered labor (75, 117, 157, 205, 217), and the increasing gender-specific patterns of immigration from poorer countries to the core (54, 58, 226) must be carefully considered before theorists accept arguments based on a reduction in the need for labor as a result of the informational technology of advanced capitalism.

Since the early twentieth century, the routines of Fordism included the concept of a “fair day’s wage.” Fordism was predicated on the maintenance of a presumed nuclear household, the reinforcement of specific gendered interactions, and enforcement of segmented hiring patterns that traced and retraced ethnic and racial hierarchies (1, 60, 70, 71, 82, 114, 144, 145, 165, 171). Class conflict under Fordism produced unions that fought successfully for an expanded social wage, job security, occupational safety, health benefits, and seniority policies. Nevertheless, industrial unions were themselves threaded with the racial and sexual presuppositions of corporate hegemony, as well as refutations of such ideology (7, 31, 37, 78, 176, 177, 182). Today we find flexible accumulation accompanied by a growing informal economy, enfeebled unions, less security for most workers [including middle-income profes-
sionals (155), the shrinking of the welfare state, and escalating poverty (82, 101, 120, 128, 166, 187, 236). Under these conditions the hegemonic construction of the white male worker that was encoded as part of the charter of industrial unions has collapsed. Unions were weakened by their own failure to incorporate different visions of race, gender, and the poor of the developed and underdeveloped worlds into the voices of class conflict (6, 31, 60, 82, 83, 182). The definition of who could work was changed by the export of industry, and the work force was expanded to include women and members of poor third-world nations. As a result, unions centered in the urban heartland of capitalism and based on the gendering and racial discrimination of Fordism were unequipped to fight the destruction of their standard of living. This is the context in which poverty becomes central to workers in core countries and the periphery in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Approaches to Reinvention of the Social Order

What concepts have social researchers and more specifically, anthropologists offered in understanding the new social order and poverty and homelessness? Within the metropoles there are ethnographic studies of the effects of deindustrialization and the shift to a service economy (151, 159, 202, 211). Some of the most graphic and penetrating studies of the new poverty concern health and disease in the United States (10, 108, 118, 160, 196, 198, 210). Among third-world workers there are studies of the new industries, which are often situated in marginal environments—borderlands—outside the regulatory control of specific nation-states and which are thus able to avoid established patterns of class conflict and state compromise (13, 50, 153, 154, 158, 178, 212, 218, 233). Studies of transnationalism and migration both locally and transcontinentally, as well as the postmodern emphasis on shifting populations and travel, connect these two parallel examinations of poverty (106a, 116, 188, 205).

Recent research has promoted and stimulated a reexamination of the role of the ethnographer and his/her differentiation from those studied under currently shifting postmodern conditions both within anthropology and within the global economy, which are as many have noted, directly related (152). Finally, ethnographers have endeavored to represent the voices of the poor in the contemporary context.

Labor Shifts in the New Global Economy

The significance of low-paid employment and US deindustrialization in the creation of poverty and homelessness is well established (16, 45, 94, 102, 163, 237, 245). This perspective is frequently stated at the beginning and end of ethnographies about homelessness and urban poverty. However, because participant observation conducted over one to several years captures only imme-
Diately processes, it tends also to contribute to the reification of the instant in terms of identities and categories that occupy the space and time of the fieldwork. Poor people appear poor rather than unemployed or underemployed. Homeless people appear homeless rather than displaced. Even when the departure of industry can be documented and the rise in real estate costs traced, ethnographers seldom capture the before and after effects.

Several ethnographies document what might be termed the making of poverty in the United States: From Tank Town to High Tech (151), Norman Street (211), and The Magic City (159). These monographs describe the reduction of “stable” working-class households to poverty through the departure of industry and capture the impact of such changes on local politics, health, and general living conditions.

Poor communities are also forming among migrants without access to capital. New Asian immigrants, similar to Haitians, Mexicans, and others, are being recruited to fill the low-paid employment created by the new global economy (50, 67, 111, 115, 116, 168, 239, 250, 252, 253).

The shift toward hiring women service workers is also addressed in recent ethnographic research. Caring by the Hour documents the experiences of poor black women workers in a North Carolina city (181). Sacks documented the breadth of the women’s work requirements, the limited options for promotion, and the participation of such previously excluded groups in political mobilization. Other ethnographies of the new low-paid service workers (162, 183, 202) portray a work force with reduced control, fewer benefits, and less security than is found in ethnographies of US labor from the 1950s through the 1970s (25). However, they belie earlier theories that women, because of the dual work day and their household responsibilities, would be unable or unwilling to mobilize around work concerns (7, 17, 215).

The core of the new US work force has become the low-paid worker outside the unions who lives either in the “postmodern” family or alone and also subordinated by gender, minority, and immigrant status (182). The potential of these groups for unionization or political mobilization constitutes one of the central questions in determining the directions of the new global economy.

Poverty and the Construction of Space in the New Global Economy

Global changes have not only affected the work place but the construction of space in the global economy as well. Class conflict in the United States since the 1950s has taken place in battles over the boundaries, services, and maintenance of working-class communities. Real estate decisions, housing discrimination, gentrification, and urban development policies structure the visibility of poverty and the experiences of the poor (130, 199, 200). As has been extensively demonstrated, poor neighborhoods reflect mortgage restrictions and a
losing battle for scarce public services such as schools, road repair, and health care (27, 28, 150). The spatial construction of poverty is manifest in the division of communities. The destruction of housing for the building of expressways, the bypassing of public transportation, and the creation of suburban loans, enclosed shopping malls, and recreational centers epitomized by the much analyzed Disneyland/World phenomena separate middle-income purchasers from the poor (34, 193, 194, 256; see S Low, this volume). All of these semipublic environments marginalize the poor and represent areas of contestation over the resegregation of social interaction by class and income (2, 49, 184, 193, 194, 199, 241, 256).

Urban renewal policies followed by gentrification in the 1970s and 1980s have isolated the urban poor in enclosed and practically invisible communities (130, 200). Such invisible and relatively powerless communities concomitantly become sites of last resort for methadone clinics, housing for the mentally ill, and—partially as a consequence of the well-known phenomenon of Not In My Backyard (NIMBY)—industrial waste disposal plants (200). The separation of the poor has occurred more slowly in minority communities but may be increasing as minority members of the middle class find ways to enter better-off suburbs and city neighborhoods (235–237, 245).

Homeless people in the United States are significant not for their numbers but because they represent the incursions of increasing impoverishment into public space—particularly space occupied or desired by middle-income and even wealthy people (11, 12, 124, 125, 141, 142, 201). Homeless people frequent railroad stations, public parks, and public transportation. In New York City, they have set up covered shelters outside the United Nations. In Los Angeles, they congregate on the beaches of Venice (247). Unlike in Martin Luther King Jr’s time, when the Poor People’s March built a shantytown outside the White House, the homeless people in central tourist spots in Washington, DC; New York City; and San Francisco are not constructing their shelters to make a political point. The political point emerges from their visible need.

The poor have been generally excluded from cyberspace (29, 30, 79, 201, 222). As informational technology enwebs the household into the wider net of the corporation (29), the poor and homeless drop below the threshold of societal communications. However, the overall impact of these changes remains to be evaluated; some poor people have adapted new technologies to their own purposes (30, 79). Artists address the irony of homeless people in cyberspace in the creation of Poliscar, a vehicle for a homeless person to park on the street and live in that is equipped with information technology (201).
Time Out and Out of Time in the New Global Economy of Poverty

People’s experience of time has changed in the new global economy. The categorization of time under capitalism was first raised by EP Thompson in his classic paper on nineteenth-century England (227). Since Thompson and others relate the defining of time precisely to emerging industrial employment, the changing forms of employment under post-Fordism might be expected to change the concepts and usage of time for the 1990s (48, 61, 82, 180).

Concepts and uses of time have become social markers in a class-stratified society. Oscar Lewis, in his culture of poverty description, discussed present orientation (119, 230), and others have used similar markers to define the underclass (4, 245). Such discussions also appear in the AIDS prevention literature: Homeless people’s evaluation of their lifespan may be shorter and may reduce their commitment to efforts at HIV prevention through safer sex and clean needles (32, 196, 198, 223). Similarly, time is the ultimate issue in debates about teenage pregnancy and class-based fertility patterns (59, 207, 214).

Researchers argue that time created for and by homeless people takes on different meanings for the homeless than for the rest of the population. Poor people must keep institutional time requirements, yet when they arrive they must wait. This embodies the unequal power relationship between the poor and service providers (118, 211, 224, 230). Because poor women are the mediators between their households and institutional services, their experience of waiting and unequal control over time may be much greater than men’s. In addition, since women are frequently responsible for the transport and needs of children and the organization of reciprocal kin networks based on the needs of many people with conflicting time requirements, they become less able to meet the time schedules of institutions whether they be employers, schools, or the welfare office (118, 211, 224, 230).

For the homeless, time is not usually determined by a regular work schedule, yet it is clearly constricted and defined by institutional events (72, 74, 124, 248). A reversal of time occurs among homeless people dependent on institutionalized work schedules for food and shelter. Many services for homeless people are staffed by employees who only work weekdays. On weekends, finding food and shelter is much more problematic, and homeless people are frequently alone, cold, and hungry, waiting for weekdays to restart their social life (72). A similar reversal occurs between night and day. Public places, lobbies, and hallways are used in the daytime by those with homes as they go to work or enter various commercial establishments. At night, homeless people repopulate coveted niches in the deserted central city (124). In another rever-
sal, “seizing the moment” becomes more important for homeless people than maintaining reliable routines (124). Without routine employment and a paycheck, people must continually be ready to react to each random or unscheduled opportunity as it arises. As a result, institutional routines are flaunted, and homeless people are categorized by service-agency providers as unreliable and without concepts of time. As is so often the case, the social creation of behavior among the poor is treated as evidence of individual unworthiness. People who are homeless reconfigure both time and space as they negotiate survival (180, 238). Thus the new urban poverty carries with it time hierarchies, time resistance, and time restatement as part of the re-creation of class and inequality under global capitalism.

Re-Creating Gender in the Context of the Poverty and Homelessness of the New Global Economy

Poverty and homelessness are clearly gendered (71, 161, 192, 213, 215–219, 221–223). However, it is once again important to remain cautious of static and reified conceptions. Gender among US poor people in the 1990s is an area of open battle sometimes resulting in fatalities. Both men and women have restated, re-created, and resisted the stereotypical portraits of earlier periods.

Because employment, public assistance, social security, and credit differentiate experiences by gender, poverty and homelessness have always differed between men and women (1, 3, 71, 107, 140, 203, 205). However, entitlements, employment, and institutional constraints have also altered dramatically since the 1970s. The past two decades have witnessed crucial change and struggle in the definitions of gendered responsibilities by the state, in the expectations between men and women, and in the structuring of households.

Poor men and women share poverty and the responsibilities for households and children. While they may find common ground and common interest in relation to employment and state policies, even in these areas their opportunities and losses differ: Women may benefit from housing programs, while men may have more access to job training. In addition, men and women battle and are battered in struggles over household structure and control of children and resources. Relations between men and women are important determinants of the experiences of poverty and homelessness and need to be examined. We have to analyze the conflicts that run from the state through the household and the intensifying of those conflicts in the 1990s.

It is no longer sufficient to talk of male or female domination or subordination among poor people in the United States. Arenas of power for men are contradicted by other arenas of power or access to resources for women. The complexity of the interactions, rather than equalizing relations between men and women, often leads to escalating conflict.
Decades of Change: The Feminization of Poverty or the Disappearance of Men?

In the mid-1980s problems began to be formulated in terms of the “feminization of poverty” (192). As single-headed households became more common, the fact that working women earned less than men who might previously have supported the household, combined with the failure of many men to actually pay child support, resulted in a majority of households headed by women below the poverty line (44, 96, 245, 255). Concomitantly, there was an increase in the proportion of children being reared in poverty.

Along with the recognition of the feminization of poverty arose a focus on violence against women. A leading and rising cause of injury and death for women 15 years and older was violence from their male partners (77a). Ethnographies of the 1980s and 1990s document violence and fear, both of which need to be analyzed more systematically according to the changing experiences of men and women and changing expectations of gender (22, 136–138, 171, 189, 190, 205).

By the 1990s, concern began to center around the exclusion and disappearance of poor men (38, 161, 219). Rapidly increasing incarceration rates for poor and minority men, as well as growing disease and homicide rates, contributed to this formulation. Figures suggested that while men battered and brutalized women, men were more likely to kill one another. In addition, it became clear that poor men were excluded from public assistance funds, less likely to find employment, and less likely than poor and minority women to finish school.

Although the gendering of poverty was evident, the lives of poor men and women were so interconnected that the experience of each bore directly on the other. From the 1980s, as more men were excluded from employment and public assistance or disappeared through incarceration or death, more women became responsible for poor households (38, 96, 148, 245). In the light of these points of strain, domestic violence between men and women became a growing issue.

As noted above, it is not enough in the context of the new poverty to speak of one gender hierarchy. Eligibility for public assistance, housing subsidies, and low-paid service employment often favors women over men (161, 203, 211, 224). While men have lost some of the advantages that used to accrue from access to better paid industrial employment, they may still have access to more forms of income in manufacturing, the informal economy, and the illegal drug world, as well as more freedom from the costs, responsibilities, and possible entrapment of child care (22, 51, 117, 250). Just as with concepts of time and space, concepts of gender have to be reworked to fit the circumstances of the new poverty within different sectors of the global economy.
Homelessness is also experienced differently according to gender (35–40, 66, 161, 217, 219). Women lucky enough to keep their children from foster care are more likely to be assigned private rooms and services available in a rundown hotel (109, 219). Men and women without children or separated from them find themselves assigned to large sex-segregated shelters (217, 219, 223). As a result, homeless women without children excluded from services for women with children are likely to be the most brutalized group of all. They are subject to the miseries, deprivations, and dangers of homelessness and, above and beyond this, to assault by men if they spend time alone on the streets (66, 122).

Even children experience poverty differently by gender. Jagna Sharff in her research on the Lower East Side of Manhattan developed an early analysis of gendered poverty in discussing the experience of poor Latino children. She suggested that poor boys find themselves recruited into the illegal and frequently fatally attractive world of the drug trade because it is the only viable occupation for providing income for an extremely needy household. That is, early on, boys in poor households are expected to and try to live up to the male role of provider. Poor girls, Sharff argued, are more likely to be kept home to do domestic tasks and are channeled into schooling. They are less likely to be drawn into the competitive and dangerous territory of drug dealing (189). Women may use the drugs, but they do not as readily profit from them and are therefore less likely to be killed in battles over control of trade (189, 240, 243).

Sharff’s formulations were originally stated according to child-rearing patterns and reinforcements for gender differentiation within poor households, which reflected limited options available in the wider society. She also argued that some young boys might be allowed to adopt less aggressive strategies to avoid high-risk assigned roles. She did not address behavior of girls wishing to broaden their options in this constrained environment, but it might be fair to view early pregnancy as one method available to girls in this situation. The originality and challenge of Sharff’s analysis was marred by a possible interpretation that perhaps families chose these routes for their children and encouraged the criminality of boys, or that poor families did not desire the same professional routes of advancement for their children as middle-class families (for a different view, see 98, 100). In contrast, when Sharff’s research is viewed as a description of systematic channeling through both pressures on poor families and societal expectations and opportunities for boys and girls, her analysis is supported by work concerning the gendering of childhood experience in homeless shelters (219) and opens important avenues for further study.

A more textured analysis of variations in opportunities by gender and their impact on the construction of households and child rearing would appear to be
the next challenge confronting research on poverty in the United States. As Castells noted, the restructuring of gender in the global economy is one of the central features of the informational society (30). However, gender is being rewritten differently according to class within this new society, which we need to rethink (30, 217, 219, 222).

Identity, Race, Class, and Gender

The political economy of poverty of the 1980s focused on “class, race, and gender.” Similarly, within cultural studies race and gender were characterized as significant identities. However, in an examination of the literature of urban poverty and homelessness, we find somewhat separate traditions of analysis for gender and for race. We find parallel historical analyses of employment segregation, as in views of the segmented work force of Fordism. Both women and minorities were excluded from the higher paying, unionized jobs that carried seniority, security, and benefits (44, 70, 78, 80, 114, 140, 250).

However, the impact of such exclusions on households and class experience was very different by gender and by race. Women were not excluded from housing or from providing a future for their children until the proliferation of single-headed families and the so-called feminization of poverty. Only an analysis that ignores identity, community, household, and social movements beyond the work place and in fact ignores the gendering of social life can view race and gender as parallel identity processes operating in similar ways within a class-based society. As Anna Tsing noted in an entirely different context, “This work rejects the notion that gender asymmetries are parallel to those of race, class, and nationality, for race, class and national hierarchies are themselves everywhere constructed in gendered ways, and gender divisions are established with ‘communal’ materials” (229:18). However, while they are not parallel processes or similar hierarchies, race and gender interact within a class system and as some have argued the existence of both complex hierarchies in combination has contributed to the maintenance of inequalities (80, 148, 182, 208).

Race

There is the issue of race (63, 76, 77, 81, 103, 129). Then there is the gendering of race (43, 62, 148, 149), and then there is the issue of a racial and gendered system in relation to class dynamics. All these issues bear directly on analyses of urban poverty and homelessness of the 1990s.

In terms of race, analyses of the underclass, of homelessness, and of urban poverty document the disproportion of people of color who find themselves in these populations. However, in terms of numbers, as has often been mentioned but rarely remembered, most poor people in the United States are not
people of color. Nevertheless, as with the homeless, race has become a visible and politically useful metaphor for the new poverty.

Some studies of poverty simply identify the racial composition or racial identity of the people studied and move from there to the circumstances of poverty or homelessness with little attention to the impact of color on the experience (other than perhaps to refer to the history of racial discrimination in the United States). One might consider those researchers to be using race as a shorthand classification for probable history or opportunities without providing an analysis of race itself (11, 218, 219).

Other studies of poverty focus on the racial hostilities in poor neighborhoods and the experiences of racial discrimination of certain populations. While such studies do not focus specifically on the concept and experience of race, they begin to examine the cross-cutting issues of race and poverty in a more dynamic, analytical way (19, 136, 137, 203, 205, 209, 211). For example, Mercer Sullivan compared the experiences of teenage men in three neighborhoods. He documented the intersecting forces of neighborhood segregation, social networks, racial discrimination in employment, and the structure of the drug economy to explain why young white men find their way out of adolescent criminal behavior while minority adolescents find themselves trapped and defined by the records of their youth (209).

Steve Gregory and Roger Sanjek’s edited collection on race is a recent effort to confront and “historicize” the concept of race in Western capitalism. They provide a political economy of identity by including articles on Jews, Egyptians, and other groups associated with contested racial categories (76). Other researchers have focused on the significance of the gendering of poverty and race (148, 149).

Perhaps conceptualization of the interplay of poverty, gender, and race can be advanced through a more detailed examination of four ethnographies that address poverty among men and women in different contexts: Philippe Bourgois’s recent research among young men in East Harlem, New York City (22–24); Jay MacLeod’s research among working-class teenagers (127); Elijah Anderson’s perspective on young men in a Northeast city (4, 5); and Jagna Sharff’s analysis of women and men’s lives on the Lower East Side of New York City (189, 190).

These ethnographies together force us to confront central questions concerning the ethnographic enterprise among the poor of US urban cities. It is difficult to document the misery of the poor in the contemporary United States without falling into the problem of either romanticizing or minimizing the devastation or of painting such distress, victimization, and brutalization that the description becomes fuel for political assaults upon the poor themselves. Sharff’s description of young men dealing and dying in the drug trade on the lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1970s and Bourgois’s descriptions of the
sale of crack in El Barrio, East Harlem (in northern Manhattan) in the 1990s are similarly graphic and disturbing. Such works might be assailed for presenting the worst and neglecting positive portraits of hardworking or politically active people in the same neighborhoods. However, the struggle to portray people involved in the most condemned activities of our society in human and comprehensible ways must also be recognized as one of the strengths of the anthropological method in both research sites (22).

Each ethnography rewrites gender such that simplistic stereotypes disintegrate in the light of the research. Bourgois described one woman who shot her partner and then became a crack dealer with power largely because, just as with the men, people believe that she will act if double-crossed (22). She does not have to fear violence because, like a man, she has established that she can fight back. This adoption of the “macho role” and its reflection also in her relationship with her new partner can be viewed as a reversal of gender expectations. This woman does not represent most women in El Barrio. However, her experience dramatically demonstrates the situational nature of gender roles as well as illuminates through contradiction a material basis for the continuity and power of machismo.

Sharff outlined women adopting stereotypic roles as they go out dancing, dressed in sophisticated middle-class styles with the explicit intentions of hypergamy. Later, she describes one such woman finally acquiring unionized work and no longer forced to depend on such futile strategies to support her five children (190). Once again, the manipulation of gender roles as situational strategy emerges from descriptions of women’s struggle to support households, rear children, and survive in poverty in the urban United States (14, 228). Nowhere in these ethnographies do we find the stereotypic portrait of the modest Latina woman, trapped by traditional values and unable to change to confront the dangers of poverty and mortality facing herself and her kin. In fact, we find in some descriptions women empowered by organizing in their neighborhoods, fighting for more services, or simply trying to maintain what they have (14, 132, 212, 213, 215, 218, 228).

Anderson, a sociologist, wrote about young men and women and the expectations and behavior of youth in poverty (4, 5). While he provided direct quotes, his work does not fit the methodological and ethnographic model of much anthropological research (25a, 232), which leaves room to doubt the conclusions. Many perceptions from outsiders, such as older residents, are quoted as substantiation for generalizations about cause and effect. Generalizations such as: “Often…teenagers lack interest in school, and in time they may drop out in favor of spending time with their street-oriented peers” (5:92) contrast dramatically with descriptions of the humiliation and misery of school experiences that provide a less pat explanation for the same phenomenon (22, 110, 127). Bourgois, Sharff, and MacLeod (22, 127) are careful to
describe individuals, follow situations, trace events creating a body of literature and thick description clearly judged by anthropological standards. Anderson’s adoption of participant observation follows no such disciplinary tenets. He summarizes and quotes without describing in their full context and varied interconnections the people and events from which his evaluations are derived.

Despite methodological differences, Anderson identified some reversal of gender roles: Young women look for young men by whom to become pregnant and then leave them and set up independent households on the public assistance check (5:126). He quotes some men as saying such “new” women are “just out to use you” (5:126). The young women described by Anderson as trapped by their middle-class dreams are similar to those described by Ruth Sidel (191), and they support Delmos Jones’s emphasis on achievement aspirations among the poor (98, 100). However, generalizations, as well as lack of context or discussion of resistance and agency, tend to fuel discussions that blame the victim or emphasize the individual problems of the poor without sufficient attention to the structural constraints of unemployment and racism within which people create their lives.

Jay MacLeod (127) used the concept of habitus to conceptualize the social reproduction of race and class (18, 65). This approach differs from the approach of Anderson and others because it allows for variation, agency, and resistance. In terms of issues of social reproduction, MacLeod argued that class is not enough because “the way in which individuals and groups respond to structures of domination is open-ended” (127:139). In discussing the lives of two friendship sets of teenage boys, one black and one white, MacLeod argued: “[A]lthough social class is of primary importance, there are intermediate factors at work that, as constitutive of the habitus, shape the subjective responses of the two groups of boys and produce quite different expectations and actions.” (127:140). Is the concept of habitus necessary? Does it mean more or less than socialization, social context, or environment? MacLeod discussed the complex interaction between hegemonic ideas of gender (differentiated by class, although he did not discuss this), structural unemployment, and individual and family history. This he calls habitus. Whatever the label, such conceptualizations allow for more flexibility and difference than a simple class analysis. They avoid laying the blame on families implied in theories of the underclass and the culture of poverty without neglecting the accumulation of social or cultural capital or lack thereof that children acquire from family experiences.

In discussing unemployed white teenage youth, MacLeod emphasized the significance of gender in providing the macho image that allows young boys to build respect among their own group and to validate violence and marginality according to that societal standard. The image of mother is one area in
which young girls can find validation no matter how they fare at school or in the job market (127). Thus, gender again frames the options also defined by poverty and race. In response to similar conditions of school failure and unemployment, young men can opt for validation in the macho image while young girls can see motherhood as a route to success.

Political controversy surrounds ethnographies of poverty, race, and gender because of the implications of the research for the possibilities of social change (5, 22, 127, 190). Not only do ideologies of family and gender vary by class (169, 203, 217, 219), they are also associated with different forms of political mobilization. They reflect varying conceptualizations of inequality, race, nationalism, sexual orientation, and resistance, (17, 62, 149, 213, 215, 251). For example, Leith Mullings noted that for African Americans an integrationist approach to race relations in the United States incorporates the ideologies of middle-class nuclear families (although since this is contested among men and women of the US middle class, we must wonder which concept of gender roles in the nuclear family may be adopted). Nationalist or Afrocentric mobilization against racial discrimination involves an idealization of past traditions that invokes the complementarity of male and female roles and reinforces a male/female gender hierarchy. A transformative or revolutionary approach seeks to change society and the basis for class inequality as well as that of race and gender and attempts to combat gender hierarchies along with discrimination by race (149). The representation of gender in ethnography cannot be seen apart from the political impact of such analysis and is clearly contested terrain.

As this review of recent ethnographies of poverty indicates, the transformation of gender as it interacts with the historically changing construction of poverty and race, shifting gender hierarchies, and escalating gender conflict are marked features of the global economy in the 1990s.

Collapsing Time and Space: Relocating Populations and Shifting Identities Among the Poor and Homeless in the New Global Economy

In line with the growth of the global economy, not only resident minorities are poor but also many migrant populations. Members of many new immigrant groups are poor, work for below minimum wage, have little access to benefits, and live in inner cities (55, 67, 111, 115, 116, 252, 253).

Studies of US poverty such as Carol Stack’s Call to Home (205) discuss return migration among African Americans. Other studies describe children being sent back to Puerto Rico for discipline and other reasons (22, 190). Many discussions of international migration focus on similar phenomena (54, 188, 226). Studies of the homeless also portray a constantly shifting population, as people move across streets, shelters, cities, mental institutions, detoxification
centers, and jails and are then relocated in apartments in new neighborhoods (124, 125, 220, 248). In connecting the experiences of poor immigrants with discussion of urban poverty issues, we can begin to capture the complex and conflicted movement of the poor and the working class associated with the integration of the global economy (115).

Movement across nations, between nations, and through urban areas, as depicted in the homeless literature, must be incorporated into views of the “postmodern” poor and working class. This is true whether one perceives such movement and flexibility according to the flexible economy and the associated flexible bodies (82, 131), the informational society (29, 30), or whether one accepts the prevailing paradigm of an unstructured, unexplainable, constantly shifting and jumbled postmodern world.

The Voices of the Poor and the Creation of Culture in the New Global Economy

Discussions of the culture of the poor have been controversial since the culture of poverty debates of the 1960s (101, 119, 134, 147, 216). However, ethnographies of the US urban poor echo with the voices of suffering and defeat as well as with defiance, resistance, and agency. As Setha Low has noted, neighborhood residents still rally to religious festivals and local parades (126). Women and men still mobilize to protect or demand homes, work, and services for themselves and their children (14, 126, 133, 135, 205, 211–213, 215, 218, 228). Nevertheless, a consistency emerges in the experiences described and the struggles of poverty in the 1990s. Women describe the miseries of raising children in poverty, with little help and many problems. Children report on their own brutalizing experiences at home, in school, and on the streets. Men describe their efforts to work and go straight and the losses of respect and future that underlay their turn to street life. Whether the ethnographer is Anderson, Bourgois, Sharff, MacLeod, or Stack, many of the experiences and the descriptions cry out in similar ways. The ethnographers’ differences surface in the focus on agency and community resistance (14, 126, 132, 205, 211, 213, 215, 218, 228), self-destructive resistance (22, 127), and survival (190) versus misery and defeat (5). No ethnography leaves any doubt about the daily suffering in US inner cities.

Reflections and Mirrors in Ethnography in the New Global Economy

As Carol Stack wrote in a discussion of feminist ethnography, “[W]e are accountable for the consequences of our writing, fully cognizant that the story we construct is our own” (206). Ethnographers of poverty of the 1990s have similarly reexamined their own histories and interactions with the people they describe. Stack, contrasting her work of the 1970s with that of the 1990s,
claims a sense of liberation. No longer constrained to locate logical sequences and objective reports, she is able to identify the contradictions in daily life and to enter her discussions from a variety of perspectives.

June Nash suggests that the hesitancy of contemporary anthropologists to conduct fieldwork almost inevitably results in objectification. Other ethnographers begin to reconsider the construction of their own white and female identities (42, 56, 152, 182). Patricia Zavella noted the difficulties of being partly of one group and partly of others and always in a hierarchical relation with informants. While in a group, as a middle-class academic she is not of that group. She wrote about the cross-cutting identities of sexual orientation and the way in which this structures her Latina, feminist, middle-class discourse (251).

However, as ethnographers grapple with the issues of reflexivity and the incorporation of voices, the hierarchies of “otherness,” and the imposition and creation of identities of color, gender, nation, and foreignness, certain messages emerge clearly.

Current research has yielded visions of the ongoing assault on the lives of the poor and working class in US society as well as the resilience and humanity of those hidden from view in the new global economy. With all the imperfections of representation, the voices that emerge from these works need desperately to be heard. Perhaps they can be heard more fully and in all their contradictions when the anthropologist constructs herself/himself in the same text. However, with the increasing assault upon the living standards and employment security of working people, in which academics are also included, the idea of the other may not be as salient as many fear. The question that Kim Hopper, Kostas Gounis, Stack, Merrill Singer, and others rightfully ask is not whether we can describe the lives of the poor but how we can fight against the misery we see created (73, 88, 92, 93, 197, 206).

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