

“A DIFFERENT KIND OF PEOPLE”:
THE POOR AT HOME AND ABROAD, 1935-1968

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Sheyda Jahanbani was born in Charlotte, North Carolina on September 3, 1976. She attended the Edmund G. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, earning the degree of Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service with honors in International Politics. In 2000, she entered the graduate program in Modern American History at Brown University, where she served as a teaching assistant in courses on the history of the United States. In 2007, she began a tenure-track position in the Department of History at the University of Kansas.

PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I have only come to understand by placing this work in a context much broader than the span of my graduate career, I have been working on this project for much longer than even my ever-patient advisors could possibly know. Indeed, this project, which reflects an interest in the contemporary mechanics of inequality, has been with me for my entire life. For, in a way that I could not have grasped when I began researching and writing it, *A Different Kind of People* represents the intellectual manifestation of deeply personal influences. In fact, to the extent that this project is about the confluence of struggles for social and economic justice at home and abroad, I need only have ever looked at the lives of my own parents to find the font of my curiosity and passion.

My mother grew up as the only daughter of a mill worker in one of the hundreds of mill towns that dotted the red clay of the Carolina Piedmont. Unlike many of their contemporaries, her family did not benefit from the educational opportunities provided by the G.I. Bill of Rights or the loans of the Federal Housing Administration. And, despite repeated attempts, the Textile Workers Union failed to organize the mill for which my grandfather worked. Thus, in an era of abundance, my mother's family was among the thousands who never bridged the yawning gap that separated the working class from the middle-class. My mother, then, was raised by people long-accustomed to hard work and little reward, and the stories of her childhood and, indeed, much of her adulthood, are the kinds of bittersweet tales of a life spent struggling to get by.

What sustained my mother's family through these hardships, however, was a devout and durable faith in the basic American creed of fairness. Nelle Brown Deese and her husband Jim were earnest supporters of the movements for social justice and civil rights that exploded in the 1950s and '60s. Rejecting the conspiratorial, anti-government

sentiment of many of their fellow working-class southern whites, my mother and her family saw their own liberation in the realization of the Great Society about which I write in this book. My mother was raised to be an American liberal. Despite injustice felt through bitter experience, she believes in the existence of a path to social progress that does not require, regardless of the lessons of the past, violence or revolution. In retrospect, it is this mysterious faith of hers, one that I partly share and partly mistrust, that drew me to study American liberalism and its relationship to inequality.

My father came from a very different time and place but his belief in the American creed ran no less deep. He was the eldest son of an eldest son of the Qajar family, a bloodline that ruled Iran for almost two centuries. Born in 1922 and educated in some of the world's foremost centers of higher learning, my father enjoyed a birthright to wealth, privilege, and easy power. All of these, he poured into the nationalist movement that erupted in Iran in the early 1950s. A consciously modernizing project, the nationalization of Iranian oil was believed by its supporters to represent the first step down a path to self-determination and political and economic equality. Revolting against the imperialist machinations of Europe, Iranians like my father looked to the United States for support and guidance on this route towards democracy. However, this admiration turned to stinging disappointment when, in 1953, the Eisenhower Administration actively supported the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and the return to power of a potentate.

Yet, despite this betrayal and to my enduring mystification, my father continued to believe in the integrity of America and the potential of a just and generous American foreign policy. To offer me a vision of such a policy, he spoke lovingly about the enormous meals he had cooked with and for Peace Corps volunteers in Iran, about the American doctors and nurses who had left the comforts of home to treat sick children in the remote

villages of his homeland. He even disassociated the engineers and toolmakers that came to work in Iran's oil fields from the avaricious intentions of their employers. These representatives of what I see as a deeply flawed development project exported by the United States were, to my father, emissaries of the basic decency and innate goodness of American democracy.

Through no lack of intellectual ability or critical thinking—indeed his was a far, far greater mind than mine—my father still believed that American foreign policy was, at its core, motivated more by a love of justice than by narrow national interest. He survived the Nixon, Reagan, and ten of the twelve Bush years with this faith intact. Indeed, I can think of no one who loved the ideals of this country quite so much and who believed so forcefully in the potential of the American people to live up to those ideals as he did. His devotion to this country—my country—and his belief in the integrity of America's global mission (which, like my mother's liberalism, I partly share and partly mistrust) seem to have led directly to the questions I raise in this dissertation about the conflicted nature of the development project that the United States government exported to the Third World.

These two people, who drew on such vastly different experiences, shaped my interest in issues of wealth and poverty, and whatever is useful or illuminating about this project came to be so because of them. One of them will be able to read these pages for herself. I dearly hope that, wherever he is, the other one forgives me for not finishing this work soon enough for him to do the same. I can only take comfort in the knowledge that, throughout my life, his impatience with my pace at finishing things was always exceeded by his pride in my ultimate achievements.

There are, of course, other debts to pay than the ones I owe to my remarkable parents. In graduate school, I have benefited from the tutelage of three historians whose brilliance is matched only by their intellectual generosity. Mari Jo Buhle, Jim Campbell,

and David Engerman have encouraged me to push on without fail over the past six years. Of these, Mari Jo has undoubtedly suffered with this project the most, giving each revision the same level of care and attention as the last and guiding me around the kinds of intellectual and emotional obstacles that are endemic to the process of writing a dissertation. One could not have wished for a better guide.

Of course, as anyone who has experienced graduate school knows, the brunt of the emotional highs and lows of getting through it is borne disproportionately by the friends with whom one shares the suffering. Caroline Boswell and Tom Jundt have quietly absorbed many long years of *strum und drang*. Despite that, two of the most treasured friendships in my life have only deepened. Elliott Gorn, though not a fellow grunt, has eaten enough Mexican food with me to earn this honorable mention.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my most stalwart companions on this journey. G.T.C. was always there and he always helped. And, I can only say that while J.C.H. couldn't carry it, he could and did carry me.

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INTRODUCTION

Towards a History of “Global Poverty”

The autumn of 1952 felt especially long to John Kenneth Galbraith. Ensconced in his office in the Department of Economics at Harvard, listlessly teaching his standard course on agricultural economics and another on industrial organization, the forty-five year old Galbraith found it difficult to put the presidential election of that year behind him. For liberals of a certain age—Galbraith’s age—the dawn of November 5, 1952 marked the abrupt end of a period of political supremacy whose permanence had for some time seemed doubtless. As Galbraith later remarked, liberal control of the White House “had become the natural order of things.”¹ Their standard carried by the cerebral Adlai Stevenson, Galbraith’s fellow travelers—men who had been raised up into American politics at the proverbial knee of Franklin Roosevelt—had thrown themselves into the Democratic Party’s campaign against a beloved wartime hero, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Bucking the “natural order,” however, the Republican Party regained control of the White House for the first time since Herbert Hoover had handed it over to Roosevelt some two decades earlier.

For Galbraith and his contemporaries, Stevenson’s defeat signaled more than just the last chapter in the story of the Age of Roosevelt. Having worked as an economist in the employ of Roosevelt’s New Deal and having become something of a renowned public interpreter of macroeconomic theory for Democratic Party politicians in the post-war years, Galbraith had grown accustomed to being a man whose opinion mattered. Once an “accessible and friendly place,” Washington had now become a “closed, forbidden city.”² The epicenter of Galbraith’s life would now have to be Cambridge, Massachusetts. And,

¹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 303.

² Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 304.

despite a deepening depression and a growing reliance on tipples of whiskey to get through his days, he would have to find something new to think about. Blessed with an effervescent intellect, Galbraith tried to escape his dour state of mind by returning his thoughts to the course he had begun teaching before the presidential campaign had commenced, a course on the still inchoate field of development economics. Far from marking the decline of Galbraith's influence, as he may have thought, 1952 turned out to be just the beginning.

Indeed, the book that eventually became *The Affluent Society* (1958) had its origins amid the hustle of the 1952 campaign. Shortly before he had left Cambridge to campaign for Stevenson—and befitting his chronic tendency to over-commit himself—Galbraith had reached out to his editor at Houghton Mifflin regarding a project that might offer him an opportunity to further ponder some of the ideas he had been exploring in his new undergraduate course, “Problems of Economic and Political Development.”³ Galbraith's *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power* had been a best seller for the firm in 1952, and, owing largely to its incredible popularity, Galbraith had come to see himself as a translator of economic thought for a literate audience. Perhaps, he hoped, he could provide an accessible answer to the central question he explored in his course: why are people poor?⁴ Owing to the Republican triumph at the polls and to his dark mood, however, Galbraith found himself avoiding the project in favor of others that seemed less daunting. Three years later, the Galbraith family exchanged Cambridge for Geneva, Switzerland, where the *pater familias* hoped he might find some peace and quiet in which to write what would eventually become one of the most important American books of the Twentieth Century.

³For this and other biographical details, see Richard Parker, *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), 273.

⁴The working title of *The Affluent Society*, “Why People Are Poor,” demonstrates the extent to which poverty served as the central theme of the book. Galbraith called it the “natural title.” See Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 305-307.

Between signing his contract in 1952 and encamping in the flat he and his wife had hired on *Chemin Krieg* in 1955, Galbraith made little progress. Rather than get down to outlining chapters and themes, he spent the bulk of his time second-guessing his entire intellectual premise. More than just a mere problem of economic planning, Galbraith understood development to be inseparable from questions about the causes of poverty and so, above all else, the book had to discuss this thorny subject. What were “the causes of poverty that made economic improvement so urgent?” he wondered.⁵ What solutions could development offer? If development was the universal solution to poverty, Galbraith reasoned, a book about development had to address poverty around the globe. The project took on bigger and bigger proportions. “Before going abroad to consider the poverty of India, Egypt, or Mexico,” he later recalled, it seemed appropriate first to treat the subject of “domestic deprivation.” He continued, reflecting the frenzied thinking that plagued the early stages of the book, “There was an adequate manifestation [of poverty] scattered in individual cases all over the country. And poverty existed in great concentrations on the Southern Appalachian Plateau, elsewhere in the rural South as well as in the urban slum.”⁶ Trying to organize his thoughts, he even spent some time in the old library of the defunct League of Nations. Despite the pleasant surroundings in Switzerland and the time away from teaching, however, the writing was not going well. “My preliminary chapters...were so devoid that I couldn’t bear to read them myself.”⁷ In a last ditch effort, Galbraith pinned his hopes for a renewal of his sense of intellectual direction on an exotic (and long) vacation.

It was through a chance encounter with a physicist from India in the autumn of 1955 that Galbraith began to understand why his project might be faltering and where he

⁵ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 305.

⁶ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 305.

⁷ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 307.

might go to rescue it. Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis had traveled a unique professional path from the natural sciences to economics and, finally, to economic development.⁸ Serving as a senior member of Jawaharlal Nehru's Planning Commission, Mahalanobis discussed his country's challenges with Galbraith over a dinner organized by a mutual friend. Mahalanobis told Galbraith about his efforts to elicit advice from economists in the United States regarding the future course of Indian development. Responding to his request, he told Galbraith, the Eisenhower administration offered India the services of the University of Chicago's *wunderkind*, the monetarist Milton Friedman. With a flash of his renowned wit, Galbraith responded that inviting Friedman "to advise on economic planning was like asking the Holy Father to counsel on the operations of a birth control clinic."⁹ Charmed and impressed by Galbraith's wide range of interests, Mahalanobis invited him to come to India in Friedman's stead. The evening, Galbraith later recalled, proved to be "of greater personal portent than we could have guessed."¹⁰

Galbraith's trip through India began in the teeming city of Calcutta and ended back there three months later. Upon his arrival, Galbraith was shocked by the destitution that abounded on the city streets. He felt the sheer scale of poverty to be almost overwhelming. "Our way" from the airport, he later remembered, "was through two silent, peering processions...which moved endlessly, where one wondered, on each side of the road." Of the buildings he saw in the distance, he wrote that "beyond the pedestrian chain, deeper in the shadows, were the hovels of those lucky enough to have a roof." He continued, "Visible too were the charpoys or rope cots of those who lived and slept without

⁸For a fuller picture of Mahalanobis's role in Nehru's India, see Ashok Rudra, *Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a more in-depth treatment of Nehru's development program and its relationship to American modernizers, see David C. Engerman, "West Meets East: The Center for International Studies and Indian Economic Development," in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War*, ed. David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 199-223.

⁹Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 324.

¹⁰Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 323.

shelter of any kind.” His view filled with such intense scenes of misery and deprivation, Galbraith admitted that “soon it all became commonplace.”¹¹

Yet, alongside the reality of human misery were tremendously hopeful dreams of an abundant future. Having won their independence from Britain only eight years earlier, the Indian people were embarked upon a massive effort to develop their economic resources. Nehru, one of the heroes of the independence movement, led this undertaking. An avowed socialist, Nehru committed the state to an aggressive development program focused on building heavy industry. By 1955, the country had begun the second of its Five Year Plans to achieve that objective. Prasanta Mahalanobis was responsible for designing that plan. His platform for this project was the Indian Statistical Institute and it was at the Institute’s headquarters in Calcutta that he hosted and further befriended Galbraith. Galbraith was not the only esteemed visitor at the Institute, however. Economists and development experts from around the world—including several who had ties to the Soviet Union—were in residence during Galbraith’s stay. The dinner hour was reserved for discussion and, with this crowd, conversation always gravitated towards India and its economic prospects. In addition to these impromptu seminars at HQ, Mahalanobis also sent his visitors out to see India’s development program in action. Eager to explore the country, Galbraith relished these opportunities. While he was not completely sold on Nehru’s tactics, Galbraith was excited by what he saw. Reflecting on the enormous sense of optimism he felt during those days, he wrote in 1981 that “more seemed then to be possible than one could now imagine.”¹²

While learning about India and its particular challenges and opportunities, Galbraith also found his thoughts returning to his book on poverty. Towards the end of his

¹¹ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 326.

¹² Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 329.

visit, he finally experienced the breakthrough for which he so long had been hoping. “Much was now clear in my mind,” he wrote. Trading the apartment in Geneva for a chalet in Gstaad, he spent the summer of 1956 working at a feverish pace. “Often,” he wrote of the manuscript, “I almost thought it was writing itself.” The insight that had come from his trip through India was quite simple, but it gave the book a conceptual clarity that it had been woefully lacking. While Galbraith may have initially been stunned at the level of misery in India, as an economist he knew that poverty was nothing new. Rather, for two hundred years, economists had assumed that poverty was the natural state of humanity. Reminded of this, Galbraith realized that the challenge of his book was to explain the “new” phenomenon of affluence. What better place to look, he now saw, than the most affluent society in human history, that of the United States of America in the years after the Second World War. This did not mean that Galbraith would have to sacrifice his discussion of “domestic deprivation,” however. Only, that he would have to explain that deprivation in the context of widespread affluence. Why were some people poor in a rich society? After its author’s journey through the muddy streets and dusty villages of an impoverished foreign country, then, the book finally came home again.¹³

The story of John Kenneth Galbraith’s writerly travails and the intellectual awakening he experienced in India opens a window onto the larger phenomenon I explore in these pages. In this book, I argue that the experience of “developing” the nations and peoples of the Global South formed the intellectual and political conditions for the rediscovery of poverty at home.¹⁴ Galbraith and others like him came into contact with

¹³ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 335.

¹⁴ Much debate has transpired about the problematic nature of the semantics of development. “Developing countries,” “less-developed countries,” and the more recent innovation, “emerging countries” all bespeak an evolutionary paradigm which obscures any understanding we might seek of development as a discourse. “Third World,” a moniker introduced by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in the early 1950s, stemmed from Sauvy’s comparison between the yearnings for independence among colonized peoples and the yearnings for freedom and equal representation of the members of the Third Estate during the French Revolution. While not

mass poverty because of the profound reshuffling of the international system that was precipitated by the Second World War and the decline of European imperialism. Those geopolitical realities ushered in the era of American supremacy in global affairs and, not coincidentally, marked the arrival of the vogue of development. “Modernizing” the newly independent nations of what would come to be called the Third World became an American mission. As Galbraith’s story suggests, the process of seeing and making sense of deprivation in the context of that project fundamentally altered the way in which he—and through him, his readers—came to understand poverty as a social problem at home. In essence, for Galbraith and many intellectuals and activists like him, this process transformed all poverty into a problem of development. I argue that conceiving of poverty as a problem of development created the conceptual foundations of what we now call “global poverty.”

The idea of global poverty is commonplace in our time but, in the 1930s, when the story I tell in the following pages begins, most people would have been hard-pressed to make sense of its meaning.¹⁵ The concept of a social problem that transcended the borders of the nation-state, let alone the rigid ideological distinctions that had separated non-white people from white people for centuries, would have been quite alien to educated observers for much of the first half of the twentieth century. That the strange and benighted

without its own terminological complications, this is the term most often used by scholars from the countries that are included in the grouping and is the term I choose to use here. I use the terms “Third World” and “Global South”—an appellation of more recent vintage—interchangeably. For a discussion of the semantics of development, see Barbara P. Thomas-Slayter, *Southern Exposure: International Development and the Global South in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Kumarian Press, 2003), 4. See also Alfred Sauvy, “Les trois mondes et l’une Planete,” *L’Observateur*, August 14, 1952.

¹⁵ The phrases “global poverty” and “world poverty” do not appear in the public papers of presidents or presidential candidates until 1960, when the Democratic Party inserted the term into its platform. Whether or not the term appeared in isolation from political rhetoric, I cannot confirm with any certainty. I do, however, take this to mean that the idiom had not yet reached a level of common understanding. For the first documented usage by a major party political candidate, see “Democratic Party Platform of 1960,” July 11, 1960, *Political Party Platforms*, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29602>.

‘primitives’ of what Theodore Roosevelt famously called the “world’s waste spaces” could be described as suffering from the same condition—“poverty”—as the hardscrabble men and women who tilled American soil and inhabited American cities would have been an unintelligible proposition.¹⁶ By the second half of the twentieth century, however, the belief that these peoples shared a common predicament, and that this predicament was called “poverty,” had been widely accepted by American intellectuals, policymakers, and a literate public. “*A Different Kind of People: The Poor at Home and Abroad, 1935-1975*” explores how and why this dramatic transformation took place.



Galbraith and many of the other men and women whose stories I tell in this book will be familiar figures to readers well-versed in the history of postwar American liberalism. Americans who were all born in the first quarter of the twentieth century, men like Galbraith, Oscar Lewis, Sargent Shriver, and Michael Harrington witnessed the tumult of the first global conflagration either personally or through the eyes of their immediate kin.¹⁷ The agony of the Great Depression, the terrifying rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe and Japan, and the outbreak of another world war shaped their lives as young adults. Unlike their Progressive-era counterparts, however, whose world had come apart and whose dreams of rebuilding it had gotten lost in the fog of war, Galbraith’s generation had been part of a seemingly successful effort to put its broken world back together again. Imbued with a confidence befitting such a triumph, they believed that many of the ancient foes of human enlightenment were on the verge of being vanquished and that it was *their* challenge to strike the final blows. They believed that unlike those earlier progressives, they were on the right side of history.

¹⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, *History as Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 37.

¹⁷ Though born in Canada, Galbraith moved to the United States permanently in 1931. He naturalized as an American citizen in 1937.

Carried by the deep current of Pragmatism that ran through American intellectual life, postwar liberals rejected utopianism but possessed a fundamentally optimistic view of the world and their own ability to make it better. In response to the defeat of radical *laissez faire* capitalism and ethno-racial conflict at home and hyper-nationalism and imperialism abroad, this generation believed that progress towards that better world was far more possible than it had ever been before. Favoring cooperation over conflict, they believed that an activist state, a domesticated labor movement, and the spread of consumer-based capitalism could temper the class conflicts—the “social question”—that had preoccupied their predecessors.¹⁸ On the question of human difference, they held to an explicit doctrine of anti-racism and shared a generally universalistic sense of human potentiality.¹⁹ Rejecting competitive, *real politick* notions of international politics but also eschewing the moralistic idealism of the earlier generation, they saw the world in terms of an international community made up of sovereign states that cooperated to avoid war and solve shared problems through the principle of enlightened self-interest.²⁰ Not unlike their predecessors, they believed that expert administration—a constant reliance on secular “knowledge class” for guidance and oversight—was essential to *their* progressive project.²¹

¹⁸ On what Ira Katznelson calls “the shift from labor as political opposition group to labor as an interest group,” see Katnelson, “Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, eds., Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 185-212.

¹⁹ There is an emerging scholarship on facets of anti-racism in postwar American intellectual and political history. See Jay Garcia, “Psychology Comes to Harlem: Race, Intellectuals, and Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century United States” (doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 2003); Leah N. Gordon, “The Question of Prejudice: Social Science, Education, and the Struggle to Define the ‘Race Problem’ in Postwar America, 1940-70” (doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2008); and, Jonathan C. Hagel, “The Image of the Racist White Psyche in American Thought and Culture” (doctoral dissertation, Brown University, in progress).

²⁰ Indeed, as historian Odd Arne Westad (among others) has persuasively argued, this generation understood the Cold War as a contest between two opposing worldviews, rather than as a traditional power politics conflict. See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²¹ See Katnelson, “Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?,” 185-212. On the relationship between expertise and American liberalism, see Gary Gerstle, “The Protean Character of American Liberalism,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 4. (Oct. 1994): 1043-1073.

For these reasons, no idea captured the imagination of postwar liberals as completely as that of “development.”²² Declared as an imperative of American foreign policy by Harry Truman in 1949, the “development” (or, later, “modernization”) of the postcolonial regions of the world became a means by which Americans could use their newly acquired global power to export the principles of the Fair Deal. Although it was, like its socialist counterpart, explicitly anti-imperialist, the liberal model of development differed from Lenin’s vision in the extent to which it was controllable and consensual.²³ Rather than relying on the forces of conflict and revolution to resolve global inequalities, the liberal model of development promised a manageable and cooperative path towards a future in which those inequalities would dissolve in the solution of shared prosperity. The terminus of this development, as historian Nils Gilman has most persuasively explained, was a modernity that looked very much like the liberal vision for postwar America—a vision that had, through the auspices of war-time economic growth and the establishment of the New Deal welfare state, largely become reality. As Gilman explains, this vision offered “materialism without class conflict, secularism without irreverence, democracy without disobedience.”²⁴ By promoting industrialization and democratic state-building, American modernizers thought they could offer “developing” countries a hand-up rather

²² There is a vast and provocative debate about the nature of the development project—as distinct from imperialism—that I regrettably do not have space to explore here. A most useful summary of this debate can be found in Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, Introduction to *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, eds., Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-45. For a concise exploration of modernization and development in the context of U.S. foreign relations in particular, see Nick Cullather, “Development Doctrine and Modernization Theory,” *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Dean Burns, Alexander DeConde, and Frederick Logevall (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 2002), 477-491.

²³ Historian Nils Gilman suggests that modernization theory is usefully understood as a homegrown version to the linear vision of progress articulated by Marxist-Leninism. See Nils Gilman, “Modernization Theory, The Highest Stage of American Intellectual History,” in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War*, ed. David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), p. 49.

²⁴ Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003), 13.

than a hand-out. And, as Aloysha Godstein has documented, the goal of development was, above all, to provide the tools for “self-help.”²⁵

In the context of international politics, the development imperative provided liberals with a way to understand the Cold War conflict in more sophisticated terms than simple anti-communism or destructive power politics. The Cold War became a contest between two visions of the future, one totalitarian and the other democratic.

Development provided liberals with a way to do good (spread democratic values and export the institutional infrastructure of welfare liberalism) and do well (gain allies in the Cold War conflict with the Soviets) at the same time. For all of these reasons, as sociologist Phillip McMichael explains, development was “the liberal vision writ large in the world.”²⁶

Moreover, and most importantly for my purposes, the liberal development model promised to make progressive social change legible and, thus, universal. The proponents of the liberal development model that emerged in the postwar period replaced what historian Michael Latham calls the “fixed, immutable barrier between ‘savagery’ and ‘civilization,’” with a “spectrum along which the ‘traditional’ might move toward the ‘modern.’”²⁷ Thus, the liberal model of development was based on the notion that the “miracle” of the West was not a product of the innate racial superiority of Anglo-Saxons or, indeed, the favor of a Christian God. Rather, that miracle was the result of a specific historical process that could be identified, understood, and reproduced anywhere and, ultimately, everywhere. In the words of historian Akira Iriye, “race was of far less importance than history.”²⁸ And, for

²⁵ Aloysha Goldstein, “Civic Poverty: An Empire for Liberty through Community Action,” (doctoral dissertation, New York University, 2005).

²⁶ Philip McMichael, *Development and Social Change* (Thousand Oaks, CA/London: Pine Forge Press, 1996), 30.

²⁷ Michael E. Latham, “Modernization, International History, and the Cold War World,” in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War*, ed. David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 5.

²⁸ Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 7.

postwar liberals, history could be learned, learned from, and used to the benefit of all peoples.

From a different perspective, however, race was of central importance to the progenitors of the liberal model of development. Indeed, it is not accidental that the liberal development project and the introduction of an incontrovertibly progressive civil rights plank into the Democratic Party's political platform were born of the same historical moment. The trials at Nuremberg and the recollections of the horrors of Hitler's concentration camps by witnesses to that depravity had done much to awaken elites and the public alike to the gruesome dangers of racial prejudice. Additionally, as historians Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann have argued, the emerging Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union coupled with the wave of decolonization in Asia and Africa made Jim Crow at home problematic for alliance-building abroad.²⁹ For these reasons, this model of development— suffused though it was with its own hubris about Western civilization— was nothing if not explicitly anti-racist in its intentions.³⁰ A crucial part of the story I tell in these pages rests on the fact that the men and women who championed liberal development understood their project to be a fundamentally *liberatory* one that rejected what they believed to be dogmas of a misguided past.³¹

²⁹ Since the publication of Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights* in 2000, scholarship on the linkages between the American civil rights movement and the emergence of Third World nationalism as a foreign policy issue for American decision makers has blossomed. The critical works are Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); and, Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-Colonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁰ Michael Adas identifies "anti-racism" as one of the two critical distinctions between an earlier civilizational model of "Progress" and the postwar modernization paradigm that I explore here. See Michael Adas, "Modernization Theory and the American Revival of the Scientific and Technological Standards of Social Achievement and Human Worth," in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War*, ed. David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 35-36.

³¹ Michael Latham reminds us that as surely as the liberal development model sought to build a pluralistic vision of human culture, its fundamental logic encompassed imperial discourses about the superiority of Western

Even before the rise of Hitler and the emergence of Third World nationalism, the deterministic schema that had ‘rationalized’ European and American imperialism throughout the last half of the nineteenth century had been undermined by the efforts of social scientists in the early twentieth.³² The groundbreaking work of anthropologist Franz Boas and his intellectual progeny—a list of notables including Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead—served to dethrone biological definitions of race. Responding in the last decade of the nineteenth century to the “science” that underpinned Social Darwinism, Boas proposed a historically specific approach to the study of human difference that would bury the reigning distinctions between culture and “Civilization.” Intellectually suspicious of the prevailing belief that humanity was sorted hierarchically—with Anglo-Saxons at the apex of that hierarchy—Boas studied ‘primitive’ cultures as integrated wholes and insisted that they could only be understood by evaluating them according to their own norms and values.³³

Indeed, no term comes up with as much frequency in this book as “culture,” and that is largely due to the long shadow of Boasian anthropology and its relationship to postwar American liberalism. The concept of culture, as Boas and his followers articulated it, offered a way to understand the characteristics that distinguished one people from another as plastic rather than rigid, malleable rather than immutable. The culture concept

Civilization—and, indeed, the American experience, in particular—to the societies of subject peoples. See Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³² The classic works on this subject are Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); and, Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). See also Lee A. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998) and Vernon J. Williams, *Rethinking Race: Franz Boas and His Contemporaries* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).

³³ The Boasian turn in anthropology has been well-explored by historians and anthropologists alike. See George W. Stocking, Jr., *The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); and, Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 1998) for authoritative accounts of Boas’s impact on American social science.

also served as a means by which social scientists and policymakers could embrace pluralism without sacrificing their belief in the religion of American Progress. Indeed, in the liberal development model, “culture” was really more of a symbol than a structure; it provided a kind of glaze to the hard-forged steel of the modern personality. A clear rejection of an earlier mode in which non-white peoples were forced to jettison their arts, their cuisine, their religious symbols, the culture concept that was refined by Boas’s followers offered “backwards” people a way to join the modern world without having to *assimilate* into it. Because it erased preexisting borders of human difference without altering the liberal notion of progressive change, the culture concept also empowered postwar liberals to see through older distinctions of race and nation and re-imagine social problems as truly global. Michael Latham writes that “the very idea of culture, and the assumption that liberal, progressive values would flow across political borders, allowed American modernizers to speak in different terms than their predecessors.”³⁴ In the absence of Boas’s intellectual project, it is hard to see how the development paradigm would have come to be.

In a very real way, then, the ideological turn from biology to culture made the discovery of mass poverty in Asia, Africa, and Latin America intellectually possible for European and American liberals. In colonial times, and well into the twentieth century, the lifeways of the native peoples of those regions were evidence of their “primitiveness,” not their poverty.³⁵ Things had changed rather drastically by the end of the Second World War. Anthropologist Arturo Escobar refers to this shift as the “globalization of poverty.” “If within market societies,” Escobar writes, “the poor were defined as lacking what the

³⁴ Latham, “Modernization, International History, and the Cold War World,” 4.

³⁵ See Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and, Wolfgang Sachs, “The Archaeology of the Development Idea,” *Interculture* 23, no. 4 (1990): 1-37.

rich had in terms of money and material possessions, poor countries came to be similarly defined in relation to the standards of wealth of the more economically advanced nations.”³⁶ In other words, when this new conception of race met the reality of decolonization, the resulting ideological alchemy transformed two-thirds of the world’s people from “primitive” to poor almost overnight.

This project follows in the footsteps of several scholars who are working to historicize the liberal model of development exported by Americans after the Second World War.³⁷ Rather than limit my inquiry to a study of U.S. development efforts abroad, however, I have sought to understand the impact of this development discourse on ideas about the poor at home. In essence, I argue here that the discovery of mass poverty abroad created the intellectual and political conditions for the *re*-discovery of poverty at home. Poor people at home came to be described in almost identical terms as their counterparts in the “developing world,” and remedies that were exported to Asia, Africa, and Latin America found enthusiastic support among anti-poverty warriors working in places as quintessentially ‘American’ as the cities of New York and Boston and the rural hamlets of the American South and West. Through their literal and figurative encounters with the problems of ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’ in the Global South, intellectuals like

³⁶ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 23.

³⁷ Part of the recent scholarly effort to re-imagine diplomatic history as more than a state-centric field of inquiry, historians Michael Adas, Nick Cullather, David Engerman, David Ekbladh, Nils Gilman, and Michael Latham, among a handful of others, have written influential works on the nature of modernization and development as a historical phenomenon and, more specifically, as a problem in the history of twentieth century U.S. foreign relations. This work is a beneficiary of their efforts to understand modernization and development as ideological and discursive constructions. In addition to those works noted previously, see Michael Adas, *Dominance By Design: Technological Imperatives and America’s Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Nick Cullather, “Development? It’s History,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 641-653; Nick Cullather, “The Foreign Policy of the Calorie,” *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 2 (April 2007): 347-364; and, David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order, 1914 to the Present* (Princeton University Press (forthcoming 2009)).

Galbraith and Lewis and policymakers like Shriver saw poverty in the United States through a new lens—the lens of development.

In many respects, mine is not a particularly complicated insight, but it is one that demands a willingness to peek behind the curtain that separates the history of the nation-state from the history of the ‘abroad.’ Part of a movement among historians of the United States to rethink U.S. history in a global context, this project uses a transnational perspective to respond to a challenge laid down by historian James Patterson in his masterful synthesis of anti-poverty efforts in American history.³⁸ Writing in reference to the mid-twentieth century explosion of scholarly and popular interest in the plight of the poor in the United States, Patterson notes, “it is much easier to observe that poverty became a subject of debate than to explain why.”³⁹ By tipping over the pot in which “domestic” history is contained, one can discern the ways in which the American encounter with the world and the American national project are mutually constitutive of one another. In this light, then, the puzzle to which Patterson calls our attention becomes much easier to solve. Optimistic about their abilities to make the world a better place, confident in the integrity of their pluralistic project, faithful in the guidance of objective experts, and entranced by the possibilities that their country’s power and wealth offered to them, postwar American liberals undertook a war against poverty at home because they had already marshaled their forces to such a battle abroad. They could call this a “global war on poverty” because they believed themselves to be fighting the same enemy everywhere.

To see beyond these conceptual and geographic borders, however, is not to overlook the value of the historical scholarship that has focused on that which has

³⁸ Thomas Bender provides the essential historiographical rationale for revising the scope of scholarship in American history in “Historians, the Nation, and the Plenitude of Narratives,” in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 1-23.

³⁹ James T. Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 98.

happened within those borders. The history of poverty fighting in the United States provides a rich resource upon which I have relied to understand just how the liberal development project altered a longstanding discourse about the nature of poverty amidst increasing plenty. Among the most important insights offered by these works is that the belief among middle-class reformers that poor people were somehow fundamentally different from themselves did not begin with the development project. Indeed, as Katz argues, the “language of poverty is a vocabulary of invidious distinction.”⁴⁰ Inherited from England’s Elizabethan Poor Laws, the separation of poor people into two classes—the deserving and the undeserving—has been a rather durable feature of the American poverty discourse. However, while some scholars suggest that these kinds of distinctions served as a foundational logic for the War on Poverty in the 1960s, I argue that the lens of development obscured these older categories in favor of a new, far vaster dichotomy that divided poor, “backwards” people from affluent, “modern” ones the world over.⁴¹ The distinctions made between the poor and the affluent by the advocates of liberal development transcended the moralistic distinctions of an earlier generation of reformers and the even more insidious racial distinctions made by the same social Darwinists who ‘justified’ imperialism abroad. But, those distinctions turned out to be no less constraining to poor people because they suggested that their suffering could only be remedied by a seemingly universal, although explicitly normative path.

The periodization offered by historian Robert Bremner in his still-classic *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* proved equally important to my own

⁴⁰ Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 5.

⁴¹ See Eleanor Burke Leacock, *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971) for the conventional statement of this view. More recently, Laura Briggs has explored the connections between moralistic approaches to poverty and Oscar Lewis’s culture of poverty thesis in a transnational context in her study of American social policies in Puerto Rico. See Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

thinking about these issues. Bremner argues that the first discovery of poverty in the United States was provoked by anxiety over the second industrial revolution and the urbanization that it precipitated.⁴² As Matthew Frye Jacobson helps us understand, that historical moment was profoundly influenced by the arrival of millions of foreign peoples to American shores and by dramatic changes in the role played by the United States in the world, namely the entrance of the U.S. to the league of empires.⁴³ Following Bremner, Patterson and Katz identify the 1950s as the period in which poverty in the United States is rediscovered.⁴⁴ In the pages that follow, I argue that this moment, too, was shaped by an encounter with foreign peoples. Yet, this latter encounter was far different than the first. Rather than satisfy themselves by grabbing land and markets and claiming a share of the “White Man’s Burden,” the progenitors of the liberal development project sought to do no less than remake the world entire, claiming proprietorship over the future of humanity itself.

In sum, the narrative that follows documents the way that the imperative to develop the Global South first infiltrated and then dictated debates about poverty in the United States among intellectuals and policymakers from the New Deal to the Great Society. The key insight that my approach offers to both the history of poverty and the history of U.S. foreign relations is that the development project and the rediscovery of poverty at home were contiguous and that they emerged from the same historical forces as one another. The more provocative questions that spring from this study are how and why the idea of a *global* social problem took shape in the first place and what that phenomenon might tell us about the history of modernity and the history of the United States’s rise to

⁴² See Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1956).

⁴³ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

⁴⁴ Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*, 16; and, Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, 97-111.

global power in the twentieth century as a producer of a very particular vision of modernity. Here I hope to shed some light on how what Arturo Escobar calls the “government of the social” came to be and came to transcend the narrow confines of the nation-state in the postwar American development project.⁴⁵ That question has, I believe, real relevance to continuing debates about the United States’s role in international relations and, indeed, about the soul of American liberalism.

In the service of those rather ambitious goals, this work is built upon three interrelated themes. First, following on the magisterial works of historian Alice O’Connor on the century-long development of a distinctly American “poverty knowledge” and Ellen Herman on the influence of psychology on mid-century American political culture, this is fundamentally a work about the vogue of expertise.⁴⁶ Writing about the influence of social science upon poverty policy, O’Connor documents the shift from political economy as a source of knowledge about poverty to the behavioral sciences. This shift stemmed from the growing relationship between inter-disciplinary centers of knowledge production and the state, and also marked a wider gravitation towards psychology as a means for understanding human society in the wake of Freud. By highlighting the psychological aspects of development—particularly the relationship between culture, personality, and development—I argue that the behavioral sciences enabled postwar liberal elites to see

⁴⁵ Coming from the poststructuralist tradition, Escobar argues that the identification of a population of people as “poor” created the conditions for official intervention and that the very fact of that intervention becomes a defining feature of modernity itself by commanding new functions of the state. Building on the work of Michael Foucault and Jacques Donzolet, among others, Escobar highlights the special place of “apparatuses of knowledge,” the state foremost among them, to diagnose and treat social problems. “The treatment of poverty,” he explains, “allowed society to conquer new domains.” Thus, he continues, “the history of modernity...is not only the history of knowledge and the economy, it is also, more revealingly, the history of the social.” Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 23.

⁴⁶ The historiography of the social and behavioral sciences is now vast. The key works that have influenced my own analyses are Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995); and, Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

beyond the confines of national experience, and to identify a transnational population of poor people who had more in common with each other than they had with their “modern” countrymen and women. Obscuring the line between expert and advocate, men like John Kenneth Galbraith and Oscar Lewis used these insights to articulate a global social problem that the United States alone had the ability to solve.

The second theme running through this narrative is the evolution of American exceptionalism in the twentieth century. As historian Dorothy Ross has shown, the American social sciences developed in no small part to “explain” the uniqueness of the American national experience. Through the crucible of America’s own modernization, Ross argues, social scientists came to revise the ideology of American exceptionalism by identifying a particularly American vision of modernity that was perpetually in the process of becoming.⁴⁷ As Nils Gilman shows us, by fixing the American national experience squarely in the stream of human “Progress,” social scientists in the middle of the twentieth century conflated modernity and American life.⁴⁸ Interestingly, however, the men and women whose stories I tell here found that through their encounters with the “backwardness” of the Third World, they could better critique American society for failing to live up to its own ideals. Unlike their Progressive era counterparts, however, none of these men and women seriously critiqued *modernity* itself. In this way, they reified American exceptionalism by demonstrating the extent to which a vast number of Americans were essentially “foreign” because they were not able to benefit from the bountiful opportunities offered by “mainstream” American life.

By simultaneously defining poverty as un-American *and* as a vestige of the past, these thinkers reinforced the notion that the American experiment was an ideal social

⁴⁷ See Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴⁸ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 12-20.

arrangement. On this theme, I am guided by what Ross calls the “metaphysics of idealism.” American nationalists, she writes, came to see their history as inextricable from the blessings of individual liberty and social equality. “The millennial underpinnings of American exceptionalism made it possible to see those values as both present and potential, both the reality of American society and the ideal toward which reality moved.”⁴⁹ To complicate matters further, however, the essential universalism of the liberal development model destabilized the orthodox interpretation of American exceptionalism by suggesting that all peoples—not just Americans—could take part in the American way of life. This odd marriage of exceptionalism and universalism produced the fundamental belief of American modernizers that inside every man, woman, and child was an American just waiting to get out.

Finally, a third theme running through this story is the way that the growth of American power as a result of the Second World War literally propelled Americans out into the world. While, as Daniel Rodgers demonstrates, many Progressive-era reformers certainly traveled across the Atlantic—and a few even to the Russia—the postwar liberals about whom I write were expected by their mentors, peers, and employers to travel widely about the world as a prerequisite to attaining authority in their professions.⁵⁰ To understand the issues that they cared about—poverty and racial inequality foremost among them—these men and women left the confines of the United States and journeyed to places that just a few decades earlier would have seemed exotic and remote. In the era of universalism, to understand a social problem anywhere, one was expected to have some insight on that social problem everywhere. From Oscar Lewis, who established his career as an anthropologist only after he did his Mexican fieldwork, to returning Peace Corps veterans,

⁴⁹ Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*, 476.

⁵⁰ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

who were later recruited to participate in the American War on Poverty, the experiences Americans gained by crossing borders conferred a measure of legitimacy unavailable to their less well traveled counterparts.

Moreover, the changing imperatives of U.S. foreign relations demanded that American elites build relationships with intellectuals and policymakers throughout the rest of the world in an unprecedented way during and after World War II. The Bureau of Indian Affairs Director, John Collier, traveled across the Rio Grande in the early 1940s to reinforce wartime alliances with the Republics of the Western Hemisphere as much as to learn about shared social problems. Sargent Shriver's duties as Director of the Peace Corps were as ambassadorial in nature as they were policy-oriented. In addition to administering a vast development project, Shriver was also sent abroad to make common cause with the leaders of newly independent nations in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the context of the global Cold War. In the postwar years, then, through the auspices of new modes of transportation and communication, Americans quite literally spread out across the world.⁵¹ What they found beyond their own borders inextricably shaped the way they understood the world within them.



These themes meet in the four chapters of this dissertation. Together, these chapters chart the ways that ideas about poverty in developed societies and underdevelopment in “developing” ones first became entangled, then became intertwined, and eventually became one. I open with what might seem a somewhat marginal story but it is one that helps us understand—in both practical and conceptual terms—how distinctions between

⁵¹ This is not to say that Americans tourism or even emigration was non-existent before World War II, only that its intensity was exaggerated by the geopolitical order that came in the wake of 1945. In fact, some of my insights on this theme are drawn from the work of Helen Delpar who explores the interwar traffic among artists and intellectuals between the United States and Mexico. See Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

poverty and “backwardness” began to dissolve in the years following the Second World War. In Chapter 1, I trace the emergence of a rather small transnational community of technocrats who shared a deep concern about the poverty of indigenous peoples living throughout the Americas in the late 1930s and early 1940s. When John Collier, a ubiquitous figure in American Progressivism, became the Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the New Deal, he intended to use the powers of the Bureau to serve the interests of native peoples rather than those of parochial and powerful concerns. In explicit rejection of the assimilationist policies that the Bureau had pushed for so long, Collier sought to improve the material conditions of Indians without destroying indigenous culture. To achieve this goal, he relied on anthropological and psychological expertise, establishing a Department of Applied Anthropology within the Bureau.

During the previous two decades, Collier had built a transnational network of activists in countries throughout the Western Hemisphere that all faced even greater “Indian Problems” than the United States. Among these allies was the foremost Mexican anthropologist, a student of Franz Boas, Manuel Gamio. In 1941, in the context of the Good Neighbor Policy towards Latin America and the Roosevelt Administration’s effort to preserve the allegiance of the American Republics in the face of looming world war, Collier and Gamio established an institutional home, the Inter-American Indian Institute, from which they could seek remedies for the poverty of native peoples. Through the auspices of this institution, Collier and Gamio and an American anthropologist named Laura Thompson began the Indian Personality Project, a massive, multi-year research project charged with identifying a core “Indian Personality” and assessing its relationship to Indian poverty. Envisioned by Collier as having universal merit for addressing the plight of “dependent peoples” everywhere, the findings of the Indian Personality Project suggested that the condition of Indian peoples could be separated from their biological identity.

A story in microcosm, this chapter allows us to see the earliest glimmerings of a conception of global poverty. For in the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere, Collier and Gamio found subjects whose shared “Indianness” carried ideas about poverty and “backwardness” across geographic borders. Explicitly engaged in trying to break down hierarchical, deterministic notions about the place of native peoples in the so-called family of man, Collier and Gamio both sought to improve the conditions of Indians without forcing native peoples to “assimilate.” These distinctions, however, suggest some complicated intellectual slippages. Among them is the extent to which Collier and Gamio’s beliefs about the nature of an essential Indian “personality” intimated the existence of a *non*-Indian personality. The undeniable fact of Indian poverty similarly suggested that non-Indians possessed some abilities to achieve self-sufficiency that native peoples did not. And, while most New Deal-era poverty knowledge centered on economics, the fact that Collier and Gamio worked on *Indian* poverty and that anthropologists *not* economists studied Indians led them to focus on explicitly non-economic issues. In this small story, then, I begin to explain the ways in which the development discourse reshaped the definition of poverty through the door of John Collier and Manuel Gamio’s “hemispheric thinking.”

In chapters 2 and 3, I explore the evolution of two streams of thought that converged in what can usefully be called a general unifying theory of global poverty in the early 1960s. In the summer of 1943, Oscar Lewis was a young anthropologist possessed of an impressive academic pedigree but lacking any significant experience in the field. Facing something of a personnel crisis in the wake of American entry into the War, John Collier gave Lewis a chance, hiring him to direct the Mexican part of the Inter-American Indian Institute’s Indian Personality Project and to manage its applied programs to improve the nutrition and health of Mexican peasants. Part research endeavor, part social engineering

experiment, Lewis's project focused on the village of Tepoztlán and included a program, overseen by Manuel Gamio, to improve the daily lives of its nearly four thousand inhabitants. Through his research, Lewis concluded that Tepoztlán could only be understood as a community made up of extremely poor people. Accusing other anthropologists of romanticizing the conditions of life in "folk" societies, Lewis argued that the poverty of Tepoztecs had been mistaken for the normal, and, indeed, ideal conditions of "peasant life." Over the next two decades, through fieldwork in rural villages and urban slums in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States, and through the use of techniques including psychological testing and family studies, Lewis built a theory arguing that poverty was better understood as a function of collective mentality or *culture* rather than an economic or moral condition. People were poor, he concluded, primarily because they lacked the psychological tools by which to navigate the vagaries of the modern world. This alienation became self-perpetuating, creating what Lewis called a "culture of poverty."

Gazing through the window of intellectual biography, Chapter 2 explores the means by which the human sciences, anthropology foremost among them, came to describe poverty as a condition that existed outside of modernity. Building on the conceptual scaffolding that undergirded the Indian Personality Project, Oscar Lewis sought to liberate the definition of poverty from the confines that had long contained it, namely the constraints of reductive economics and imperious moralism. While the logic of the Indian Personality Project had relied upon the existence of a trans-national but still coherent ethno-racial marker—"Indianness"—Lewis's research expanded that category to include a heretofore socio-economic identifier—"the poor." Long after his work in Tepoztlán had concluded, and in contrast to the mainstream of American social scientists who still worked in specific geographical, ethno-racial, or historical contexts, Lewis defined poverty as the subject of his research rather than the culture of a specific community, a

particular ethnic group, or even a national unit. Loosening poverty as a social phenomenon from the moorings of a particular site or economic system, Lewis identified an explicitly global culture of poverty that was produced and sustained in vastly different social contexts by a shared mentality of fatalism, hopelessness, and alienation. While he first identified this phenomenon among Mexican peasants, Lewis found the same psychological traits among poor people in “modern” places. Thus, he concluded, poor people the world over were “not really modern men.”

While Oscar Lewis was busy carrying out his family studies in the slums of Mexico City, economists and political scientists from the most prestigious centers of learning in the United States were trying to make sense of the challenges posed by the wave of decolonization that was sweeping over Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Although the Second World War had come to a close, many of the same kinds of geopolitical forces that had fostered the creation of the Inter-American Indian Institute had evolved into the Truman Administration’s Point Four program to “develop” the newly independent countries of the Third World. A promising weapon in the increasingly heated Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, ‘development’ became an American imperative the world over. By the mid-1950s, the theories of economic development that had originally formed the basis of the Point Four’s activities had blossomed into a multi-million dollar knowledge industry devoted to the “modernization” of the Global South.

In Chapter 3, I document the evolution of the concept of *underdevelopment*, a term that Oscar Lewis did not explicitly use but one that became a synonym for his “culture of poverty.” By exploring the growing influence of the behavioral sciences on what had once been the realm of economists and political scientists, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which the concept of underdevelopment began to explain not just the state of former colonial societies but of individual “personalities” as well. When modernization

made this critical shift from the realm of economics and political science to the behavioral sciences, it began to expand its contextual parameters and explain more than just the mass poverty of former colonies. By focusing on the underdeveloped *personality*, modernization theory began to suggest answers to questions about the persistence of poverty in generally wealthy countries as well.

The convergence of Oscar Lewis's anthropological insights about the culture of poverty and modernization theory's concept of "underdevelopment" is nowhere more clearly visible than in the writings of the American intellectuals who awakened public outrage about the plight of the poor in their midst in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Chapter 3 concludes by analyzing the centrality of the culture of poverty and underdevelopment tropes to the immensely popular writings of Michael Harrington, a prominent American socialist who is largely credited by his contemporaries as having provoked the rediscovery of poverty in the United States. The lens of liberal development allowed Harrington to explain that the poor in the United States were not poor because they were simply oppressed by an unequal economic system that needed reform but rather because they were alienated from mainstream American life. Representative of a true revolution of ideas about poverty from activist on the Left, Harrington suggested that the poor in the United States lived in a culture of their own, a culture of poverty, one that was, quite literally, "like an underdeveloped nation."

Finally, Chapter 4 charts the ways in which the conception of global poverty became institutionalized by the United States government in the 1960s. As historians have amply demonstrated, the Kennedy and Johnson years represented the peak of modernization theory's influence on American foreign policy. As this chapter explains, this era saw the high water mark of modernization theory's role in formulating domestic policy as well. Concerned by the popular interest that Harrington's book had stimulated

about the plight of poor people in the United States, John Kennedy asked his staff to begin devising an anti-poverty program that he could propose to Congress should he be re-elected in 1964. Experts like Oscar Lewis and advocates like Michael Harrington had already begun to connect the dots between the Administration's development efforts abroad and the problem of poverty at home and these connections made a powerful impression on the people to whom Kennedy looked for advice. Reflecting the hegemony of the liberal development model, Kennedy's advisers proposed a domestic Peace Corps to mimic their marquis overseas program. By deploying earnest, middle-class volunteers into poor communities in the United States—just as they were doing in the remote villages and urban slums of the Third World—the best and brightest hoped to equip the “Other Americans” with the cultural and psychological tools they needed to integrate themselves into the mainstream of modern American life.

This chapter charts the evolution of three distinct iterations of the Peace Corps idea, all of which depended on the same basic prescription for fighting poverty. First, the overseas Peace Corps sent middle-class American volunteers to Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East to offer “underdeveloped” people the tools they needed to modernize. This was mirrored by the domestic Peace Corps, which sent middle-class volunteers to barrios of East Los Angeles, the slums of Bedford Stuyvesant, and the Indian reservations in the American Southwest. And, lastly, reflecting a spasm of bureaucratic creativity, the makers of the VISTA program launched a pilot program called the Reverse Peace Corps, which brought men and women who had been “modernized” from the Third World to help develop the poor in the United States. To some extent a policy history, I show the ways in which these three programs all rested on the same fundamental conception of poverty as a state of underdevelopment and, thus, as a truly global affliction.

By placing the War on Poverty alongside the Peace Corps we can better understand why Lyndon Johnson eschewed a New Deal-type jobs program or any other redistributive measure in favor of programs that could provide poor people with the guidance of modern, middle-class helpers who could facilitate their escape from the culture of poverty. To policymakers like Sargent Shriver and Harris Wofford, who had both been architects of the Peace Corps, that program's seeming success was evidence that cultural attitudes and values—not merely money—were what separated the poor from the affluent. Bringing their hard-won insights back home, Johnson and the men and women who worked for him took arms against a universal foe in “One Global War on Poverty.”



In the final analysis, this book is about the dissolution of borders—literal and figurative. Through their efforts to improve the conditions of indigenous peoples and because of the exigencies of wartime, John Collier, Manual Gamio, and the anthropologists that they used government money to empower, aggregated Native Americans throughout the Western Hemisphere into one community of “backwards” people. Paid with those dollars to study that same community, Oscar Lewis identified Mexican peasants as poor and concluded that their inability to become self-sufficient was symptomatic of what economists and political scientists would come to describe as ‘underdevelopment.’ The definition of poverty as a state of underdevelopment allowed liberal reformers to understand the struggles of poor people in the United States in a new light—one that suggested that their poverty was in the process of becoming a thing of the past. Using the same tools that they were using to “develop” the poor abroad, policymakers promised to eliminate poverty at home. Over the course of three decades, then, poverty became a global social problem that demanded a global solution. Today, we call this the problem of global poverty.

CHAPTER 1

“Hemispheric Thinking”:

The Inter-American Indian Personality Project and the First “Other American,” 1931-1941

For a bureaucrat, John Collier was a man of rather startling intellectual ambition. When Collier, a former Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner, shepherded the Inter-American Indian Institute into existence as a transnational institution in the early 1940s, and mandated it to address the welfare of indigenous people throughout the Western Hemisphere, he did so to provide a forum in which social scientists and policymakers could nurture ideas that might have global relevance in the post-war world. And, when he proposed the creation of the Indian Personality Project (IPP), a research project that encompassed anthropological fieldwork and psychological testing of Indians in eleven communities in the American Southwest and seven barrios of the village of Tepoztlán, Mexico, he aimed to substantiate his vision of Indian welfare through a practical research agenda. In the foreword to Inter-American Indian Institute’s 1951 publication, *Personality and Government: Findings and Recommendations of the Indian Administration Research*, Collier assessed project’s success in achieving these goals. The IPP, Collier declared, proved that a “study of Indian life anywhere...is relevant and useful to Indian life anywhere.”¹ In fact, the utility of the IPP, Collier hastened to add, went well beyond the narrow confines of Indian policy—even a hemisphere-wide Indian policy. Indians, he wrote, were not very different from all native or indigenous peoples around the world. At the dawn of the age of decolonization throughout Asia, Africa, and Oceania, Collier believed that “the problems, the hopes, and the fears of the pre-literate and pre-industrial people” across the globe were fundamentally the same. By employing the techniques of

¹ John Collier, *From Every Zenith: A Memoir and Some Essays on Life and Thought* (Denver, CO: Sage Books, 1963), 363.

cultural anthropology and psychology, Collier hoped that studies like the IPP could shed light on the “potentialities and dangers” faced by all “dependent” peoples.²

As Collier understood them, however, these potentialities and dangers were not just confined to peoples emerging from colonial rule. Rather, he noted that the problems besetting “pre-literate and pre-industrial” peoples could not be “sharply demarked from those of the literate and industrial people.” Modernity, he asserted, was destabilizing older forms of community throughout the world. Demonstrating his familiarity with contemporary social science, Collier argued that studying *personality* and the forces that shaped it allowed policymakers to manage the process of what one anthropologist had termed “modernization” in the interest of human welfare.³ Rooted in an emerging discourse about culture and modernity, the concept of personality, with its promise of universal applicability, provided policymakers like Collier with more precise tool for diagnosing a process that sociologists had dubbed “social disorganization.”⁴ Thus, Collier concluded, “social disorganization and its moral and psychological consequences preoccupy the urban sociologist in Chicago and London...not less than the sociologist of pre-literate and pre-industrial levels.”⁵ The effects of modernization on human personality, he argued, were universal. In his characteristically woolly style, Collier explained that “the social discoveries and inventions which hold deep hope for perplexed and baffled mankind” could lead to policies that might help ameliorate the degraded conditions of

² John Collier, foreword to *Personality and Government: Findings and Recommendations of the Indian Administration Research* by Laura Thompson (Mexico City: Ediciones del Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1951), ix-xiv.

³ Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlán, A Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 3.

⁴ This term is most commonly associated with the work of sociologists William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki who first explored this concept in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Boston, MA: Gorham Press, 1918).

⁵ Collier, foreword to *Personality and Government: Findings and Recommendations of the Indian Administration Research*, ix-xiv.

those who were, in Collier's words, "baffled" by modernity. For Collier, the Indian Personality Project represented a giant leap towards this goal.

The Indian Personality Project took shape during a period in which notions of human difference and human development were being exhaustively reexamined. Innovations in the social and human sciences pointed toward a future in which both could be wrestled from the cold hands of biological determinism, social Darwinism, and the brand of laissez-faire capitalism that ran roughshod over the social compact of an older time. And, a generation of reformers seized the opportunity to make that future a reality. The categories that had rationalized human knowledge since the dawn of the Enlightenment, and which had crystallized during the late-nineteenth century into deterministic concepts of race and Civilization, were being exposed as shibboleths. Yet the inescapable reality of human difference and the inevitability of social change—namely in the direction of more "advanced" social, economic, and political modes—proved vexing to the thinkers of the early twentieth century. Why, they struggled to understand, did some people—namely non-white people—seem fundamentally unable to participate in this process? The history of the IPP, founded on assumptions about poverty, culture, and modernity that were themselves metamorphosing, offers insights into how answers to those questions evolved in the twentieth century, suggesting, as the next chapter explains, the earliest formulations of a conception of global poverty.

The early twentieth century may be seen as the first phase of a period in which the newly forming concepts of "culture" and "modernity" were stepping into the intellectual spaces that had been vacated by race and Civilization. The story of the Inter-American Indian Personality Project provides a practical means by which to trace that dramatic transformation and how it changed ideas about poverty. Presented in the work of anthropologist Franz Boas, culture as an ethnographic concept distinct from race was

developed as a weapon against the biological determinism of Spencerian sociology. Neither genetic, nor somatic, nor hierarchical, the culture concept allowed for diversity in language, religion, artistic traditions, technologies for living, gender roles, and social organization without imputing particular value. It was also inherently plastic. The culture concept promised to awaken white Europeans and Americans from their illusion of superiority—an ideology that, precisely during this time, was reaching its terrible apotheosis in the ovens of Auschwitz and Dachau.

Yet the problem of explaining human difference—a problem that race had once so neatly resolved—still persisted, and it was this quandary that occupied the generation of social scientists who came after Boas. Importing insights about the nature of the personality from the schools of *Gestalt* and Freudian psychology, social scientists helped fashion a worldview in which non-white, non-Anglo-Saxon peoples were no longer racially inferior but were instead culturally distinct. That anthropologists, through careful, value-neutral research, could serve as translators between the Euro-American and non-white peoples of the world was a central premise of the Inter-American Indian Personality Project. The *indigenismo* movement—which celebrated abstract Indian culture and its gifts to the modern world—that emerged in the United States and Latin America in the 1920s and '30s provided the ideological context for this Project. A product of a trans-national community of *indigenistas*, the Inter-American Indian Institute provided its institutional context.

Whether it was a foil against which to rage or an ideal to be pursued, the concept of modernity worked on the minds of early twentieth century social scientists and reformers in ways that intersected with the evolution of the culture concept. As the Boasian turn demonstrated, the concept of Civilization, with its savage-civilized dyad, was based on a fundamentally teleological worldview. In its most malevolent form, social Darwinism had

scientized the ‘survival of the fittest,’ by asserting that some human populations were so fundamentally primitive that they simply would not survive the process of evolution. In its milder incarnation, Civilization promised the potential for assimilation if only the traditions and foolish beliefs of primitive people could be replaced.

The story of the Indian Personality Project opens a window on the emergence of a new discourse of liberal development. In sharp contrast to the concept of Civilization, the liberal development model cohered around the idea that “backwards” people—in this case, Indians—could become modern without sacrificing their cultural heritage. Figures like Collier, the Mexican Indianist Manuel Gamio, and American applied anthropologist Laura Thompson believed in a modernity that was deeply self-conscious, culturally pluralistic, nationalizing, democratic, progressive, and constantly self-improving. This liberal vision of modernity, then, became everything that Civilization was not. Tolerant of religious and ethnic difference, it promised the fruits of modern technology without the risk of homogenizing identity.

Unwilling to characterize the conditions of Indians in terms of race or Civilization, then, the architects of the IPP and others in their milieu focused on a new marker of difference—poverty. After all, what the subjects of the Inter-American IPP had in common, regardless of whether or not they lived North or South of the Rio Grande, was their literal deprivation—they were all poor. Recognizing that economic dislocation could not fully explain the poverty of the Indian, Collier and his cohort grappled for a better answer. The anthropological culture concept and the liberal development model offered a more compelling, yet still systemic explanation: Indian poverty was caused by cultural backwardness, which was itself caused by social isolation and injurious administration. Collier’s assumption, then, about the universal nature of the “pre-literate and pre-industrial” and “literate and industrial” was informed by their most obvious commonality:

their inability to escape hunger, ill health, and inadequate shelter—their inability to become viable in the modern world despite their demonstrated willingness to work hard and demand little. The IPP would, at its root, identify ways to “acculturate”—not *assimilate*—the destitute native and would focus that acculturation on the aspects of welfare that promised to alleviate poverty. Thus, a strange new tautological discourse of poverty emerged in this dynamic intellectual context, one that settled on some measure of backwardness as both the cause and effect of *all* poverty.

The specter of fascism in Europe that threatened to overwhelm this liberal conception of modernity only added urgency to the project of redefining human difference and development in terms of culture. As such, many figures including Collier, Manuel Gamio, and Laura Thompson thought that they could use their understanding of culture to guide the processes of change in the “laboratory” of Indian Affairs. And, they could do so for the benefit of all humanity in an anxious age. Envisioned practically by these men and women as a way to test the efficacy of recent innovations in Indian administration, the IPP was born of the belief that enlightened administration could control the transition from “backwardness” to modernity for the millions of people who lived on its margins.

Through the six years of its existence, the IPP codified the perception of cultural backwardness not as an endemic aspect of Indian life but as a product of the ‘wrong’ kind of administration—as a product of bad planning. Devised as part of a larger rejection among social scientists, public intellectuals, and policymakers, of the entire civilizationalist project, the IPP offered a new model, one of liberal development. And if they could achieve this modernization for the Indian, they could achieve it for all “dependent” people at home and abroad. Inspired by the reformist spirit of the Progressive Era and the New Deal and the post-revolutionary nation-building project in Mexico, this new approach to

the “Indian problem” and, by extension, to the problem of poverty, was constituted, in no small part, as a utopian endeavor to carefully and wisely engineer social change—to make a better modernity for all.

As U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner, John Collier thus empowered a generation of American anthropologists—Laura Thompson among them—to experiment with and shape policies for native peoples. Manuel Gamio, who saw the integration of the Indian as an essential part of the stability and success of the Mexican nation in the twentieth century, worked to devise a model for indigenous development that disentangled Indian culture from race. Collier, Thompson, and Gamio, and the men and women with which they shared the mission of saving the Inter-American Indian, serve as instruments through which we can begin to understand how drastically changing ideas about race and Civilization, culture and modernity collided and fractured, resulting in the early glimmerings of a global conception of poverty.

What Collier, Gamio, and Thompson shared was the ideological perspective of *indigenismo*, which fused both the “gifts” of traditional, indigenous folkways and the undeniable potential of the modern world’s technology to achieve a better life for all peoples. Inspired by an increasingly global outlook, and confronted with a destitute population of some three hundred and thirty thousand Indians on reservations scattered across the United States, Collier’s philosophy of *indigenismo* was challenged with the task of reviving Indian culture while improving Indian welfare. A staunch anti-modernist in his rejection of the homogenization of modern American society and its valorization of the individual, Collier believed that finding a way to make indigenous culture viable in the modern world was a means of salvation for humanity writ large.

Seeing social, economic, and political advancement as necessary to the survival of a stable, democratic Mexico, Manuel Gamio brought what today might be called a “Third

World” perspective to the same fundamental belief in the value of indigenous cultures to the modern world. The Indian population of Mexico in 1940 amounted to nearly three million people—fourteen percent of the entire population—and potential disharmony among Indians and *mestizos*, Gamio and other Mexican intellectuals feared, threatened the integrity of the state.⁶ Gamio thus believed that an indigenous path to Progress could be devised by men, like himself, who stood at the border between traditional, Indian, “old” Mexico and *mestizo*, European, “new” Mexico. His directorship of the Inter-American Indian Institute provided him with a forum in which to experiment with methods for achieving that goal.

A young woman raised in “the field,” Hawaiian-born anthropologist Laura Thompson would combine her academic training in the fields of acculturation and culture-and-personality with a desire to “enhance human welfare in the global context of our time.”⁷ Attracted to the explanatory power of the functionalist model espoused by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, Thompson was one of the pioneers of a professional shift away from detached observation of “traditional” cultures towards practical, applied anthropology that aimed to help modernize them. Hired by Collier to oversee the Inter-American Indian Personality Project, Thompson modeled it on her earlier studies of the colonial British government in Fiji and the American administration of Guam, establishing a set of universal assumptions about her subjects—all objects of colonial domination—at the outset. Identifying the strands of contemporary intellectual discourses about traditional and modern peoples that influenced Thompson and other applied

⁶ *The Atlas of Mexico*. Edited by Stanley A. Arbingast, Calvin P. Blair, James R. Buchanan, et al., (Austin, Texas: University of Texas at Austin Bureau of Business Research, 1975). Census figures from 1910-1970 available online, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/atlas_mexico/. Longitudinal census data on the demography of indigenous people can be found translated into English at the Mexican government’s official website for its Division of Indigenous People, http://cdi.gob.mx/ini/perfiles/nacional/english/05_demography.html.

⁷ Laura Thompson, *Beyond the Dream: A Search for Meaning*, No. 2, Micronesia Area Research Center Monograph Series (Mangialo, Guam: University of Guam, 1991), 1.

anthropologists gives us insight into how a conception of global poverty began to coalesce in the 1940s.

The history of the ideology of *indigenismo*, its institutionalization in the Inter-American Indian Institute, and, subsequently, the Inter-American Indian Personality Project, then, opens a window onto a rapidly changing landscape in which still-evolving ideas about culture, personality, and modernity collided with the practical imperatives of a new world order, both at home and abroad. This chapter argues that the project of refiguring those categories found its most powerful expression in the work of the Inter-American Indian Institute, particularly the IPP. By identifying the “culture” and “personality” of the Inter-American Indian as the same as the poor and alienated in the “literate and industrial” world, the Inter-American Indian Personality Project is the opening chapter in the story by which *all* poverty becomes reified as the opposite of modern-ness. In trying to establish the commonality of poor Indians in the United States and Mexico, Collier, Gamio, and Thompson among others facilitated the emergence of a fundamentally transnational conception of what being poor means—a conception that would, throughout the twentieth century, cast the net of “backwardness” over anyone who could not get by in the modern world. Salvaging the story of this “hemispheric thinking” from the dustbin of history gives us new insight into the means by which nearly half a century of poverty-fighting reflected a profound shift in the way in which poverty itself was defined. By examining the mid-twentieth century the emergence of *indigenismo* as a development ideology, and by charting the founding of the Inter-American Indian Institute and the political and institutional evolution of the IPP, this chapter tells the story of how the Inter-American Indian came to be the first of the “Other Americans.”

The Making of the Inter-American Indian: *Indigenismo* Across Borders

“Sometimes I wonder,” historian Frederick Pike writes “if Franklin Roosevelt even knew about the vital *indigenista*-primitivist element that facilitated the establishment of Good Neighbor policy.”⁸ To be sure, whether FDR knew it or not, *indigenismo* under girded his administration’s diplomatic efforts to strengthen solidarity in the Western Hemisphere. Through their cooperation under the auspices of the Good Neighbor Policy, in fact, proponents of *indigenismo* played a significant role in shaping the liberal development project that would officially eclipse Roosevelt’s foreign policy. They did this by identifying a class of culturally and economically impoverished Indians who could be studied—and modernized. The Inter-American Indian Institute was the logic of *indigenismo* made manifest.

In 1931, John Collier, then a prominent activist for Indian Service reform in the United States, piled his wife, Lucy, and their three rambunctious boys into a tattered Pierce-Arrow motor coach and embarked from Taos, New Mexico southward towards Mexico City. After a disastrous attempt to visit the year before, which was cut short by the bursting of a child’s appendix and the loss of the Pierce-Arrow’s transmission, the family journeyed once more across the Rio Grande. It had been nearly a decade since Collier’s struggle to promote reform in United States Indian policy had begun—a struggle that had already achieved surprising success with the defeat of Congressional efforts to strip the Pueblo Indians of their land. By 1931, Collier was widely recognized in reform circles in the U.S. as the leading voice in the movement for an end to the policies of land allotment and assimilation in the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Now, using a network of contacts he had made in the States, he was traveling to Mexico to meet the leaders of an

⁸ Frederick B. Pike, *FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy: Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995), 92.

increasingly influential group of artists and intellectuals who had come to be known as *indigenistas*. “So,” Collier recalled, “in 1931 we encountered the anthropological and ‘Indianist’ leaderships of Mexico.”⁹ After Collier’s return, he extended an invitation to prominent members of this “Indianist” leadership, to visit the United States. “We have a world to learn,” Collier explained to a colleague in September 1931, “from Mexico’s policy and experience with Indians.”¹⁰ It was in these meetings, Collier later wrote, that the idea of a cooperative institute for Indian affairs first surfaced.¹¹

In the 1920s and 1930s, artists, intellectuals, and policymakers on both sides of the border began to interact regarding issues related to Native Americans. While there was a rich exchange of ideas about a range of subjects among this transnational community, the activism that surrounded Indian issues in the U.S. and Mexico during the inter-war period provoked an especially intense and long-lived series of exchanges.¹² In both countries, the 1920s saw dramatic change in Indian policies, giving birth to a generation of reformers who constructed an ideological project they labeled *indigenismo*. In an essay on *indigenismo* in the United States, anthropologist Edward Spicer defines the term as “the reaction of dominant peoples against the process of domination.” An ideological movement peculiar to societies in the aftermath of conquest, *indigenismo* or Indianism, Spicer continues, is the result of a process in which “the reaction against the domination of conquered peoples takes the form not only of the growth of sentiments favoring their fuller participation in the means of welfare of the dominant peoples, but also...of the

⁹ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 356.

¹⁰ John Collier to Lewis Merriam, September 1, 1931. John Collier Papers, Folder 155, Box 8, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

¹¹ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 356.

¹² For more on this transnational community, see Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1992).

exaltation of the ways of life of the dominated peoples.”¹³ Clearly, its adherents saw *indigenismo* as a liberatory movement not at all out of place during the era of New Deal reforms.

In the decade after the first forays by Mexican and American activists across the border, *indigenismo* movements—albeit with important differences—flourished in the United States and Mexico. These movements, influenced by a variety of transnational currents, provided the necessary intellectual and institutional context for the founding of an Inter-American Indian Institute (IAII) in 1941, dedicated to preserving Indian culture and promoting Indian integration throughout the Hemisphere. Though not identical, then, *indigenismo* on both sides of the border contributed to the rise of a definition of the Indian as racially equal yet culturally distinct, a definition whose implications would be explored in the Inter-American Indian Personality Project and whose logical extension would one day be the identification of a culture of poverty.

Of the 1911 Mexican Revolution in his native country, Nobel Prize winning author Octavio Paz wrote that it “was a movement attempting to reconquer our past, to assimilate it and to make it live in the present.”¹⁴ Indeed, the past and present role of the indigenous population, which, in 1921 still numbered thirty percent of Mexico’s total population, was central to the post-revolutionary nation-building project. Indians had suffered under the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz, who had pursued the Europeanization of Mexico based on a positivist faith in rational planning and administration. Díaz’s influential cadre of *científicos*—or technocrats—were accorded immense influence and promoted rapid economic development through foreign direct investment in industrialization. Díaz believed that Mexico’s future lay with export-led

¹³ Edward H. Spicer, “Indigenismo in the United States: 1870-1960,” *América Indígena*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, October 1964: 350.

¹⁴ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 132.

capitalism. Questions of social policy were sacrificed in the quest for “Order and Progress.” The Porfiriato (1876-1910), as Díaz’s period of rule is called, was a ruinous one for Mexico’s native peoples. The price of Díaz’s vision of Progress included the exploitation of indigenous labor and the expropriation of indigenous lands. The new social landscape of Mexico relegated indigenous culture to Mexico’s past. Indians, for all intents and purposes, had no place in this brave new world. The Mexican Revolution represented a rejection of the principles of the Porfiriato and included a more egalitarian treatment of Indians among its goals. Yet, while the Revolution succeeded because of the participation of Indians, it was affected without any coherent plan for integrating indigenous Mexicans into the nation.¹⁵ Thus, the quandary of how to make Mexico modern without sacrificing its indigenous culture was left to the generation of intellectuals and artists who grew up in the shadow of the Revolution.

Debates over the causes of the low status of Indians and the role of the state in improving the conditions of Indian life were among the most significant issues facing these inheritors of the revolutionary project. Sharply contrasting the emergence of rigid racial distinctions in the United States, race had long been a wobbly category throughout Latin America. Crude distinctions between “Indian” and “Mestizo” dated back to the 16th century. The 1821 movement for independence legally eliminated the racial category of Indian. By that time, however, largely because of centuries of race-mixing among Europeans, Indians, and Africans, the category of “Indian” had become far more useful as an economic identifier rather than a somatic one. While the 1857 Constitution prohibited the use of racial terms to identify groups, the Porfiriato re-inscribed a bounded definition of Indian as a “backwards,” uneducated peasant. Even this distinction, however, was

¹⁵ Alan Knight, “Racism, Revolution, and *Indigenismo*: Mexico, 1910-1940,” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990), 76.

somewhat plastic; in Diaz's Mexico, an Indian could transcend his racial status through education and by adopting 'modern' and 'white' ways. Understandably, in light of these slippery distinctions, the advent of a deterministic doctrine of scientific racism in the late nineteenth century, and its exportation from the United States to Mexico, provoked a crisis for this multi-racial, largely *mestizo* society.

The rising popularity of Social Darwinism in the United States and Europe at the turn of the twentieth century threatened to foreclose the possibility of modernity for a mixed-race society, which is what Mexico most certainly was. For Mexico to be recognized as a potentially modern society, the proponents of racial determinism had to be defeated. This became the foremost goal the liberal elite who picked up the mantle of the Revolution.¹⁶ Mexico's political tumult provided reformers with the impetus for asserting incontrovertibly that the racial "inferiority" of Indians was merely a chimera. Anthropologist Franz Boas's groundbreaking theories about culture and race offered hope to these architects of the post-revolutionary nation.

No member of this class was as personally influenced by Boas's work as Manuel Gamio. Born into an upper-middle class, *ladino* family in Mexico City during the infancy of the Porfiriato, Gamio, in Maurice Tenorio-Trillo's colorful construction became "the intellectual caudillo of post revolutionary Mexico."¹⁷ Time on his father's ranch outside of the capital provided the well-heeled young man with his first encounters with Indian communities.¹⁸ Confining his early scholarly work to the field of archaeology (largely because Mexico's ethnological tradition was confined to this field), Gamio soon found favor with an American archaeologist who gave him passage to New York to study

¹⁶ Alexander S. Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2004), 5.

¹⁷ Maurice Tenorio Trillo, "Stereophonic Scientific Modernisms: Social Science between Mexico and the United States, 1880-1930," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, Issue 3 (December 1999): 57.

¹⁸ Miguel Leon-Portilla, "Manuel Gamio, 1883-1960," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 64, No. 2 (April 1962): 356.

anthropology with Franz Boas at Columbia. Gamio left for the States one year before revolution began to spread across his country.

Gamio's arrival at Columbia coincided with Boas's newfound interest in Mexican ethnology. In fact, Gamio obtained his Masters in anthropology from Columbia in the same year that Boas was working to found the International School of American Archaeology and Ethnology in Mexico City. Like John Collier, Manuel Gamio came of age at a unique moment in his nation's social development and his study of anthropology under Boas provided him with a way to understand the momentous change he witnessed and define a role for himself as an agent of that change. Boas's influence on the young man's thinking was unmistakable. As one scholar explains, "Boasian racial theories...became a driving force behind Latin American cultural nationalism...Scientists such as Gamio...used Boas's anthropological constructs on race to defend their civilizations from the disabling effects of a Eurocentric scientific determinism and to predict future grandeur for the mixed-race civilizations of Latin America."¹⁹ Indeed, in Gamio's rise to political power in Mexico in the years after the Revolution, Boasian anthropology and the Mexican nation-building project became fused.

Upon Gamio's return to Mexico, he established his credentials as an influential public intellectual with the publication, in 1916, of the most significant statement of his nation-building ideology, *Forjando Patria* ("Forging the Homeland"), which transformed the various strands of Mexico's emerging cultural nationalism into an ideological project with explicit policy implications. The ideology of *indigenismo* that Gamio explicated in *Forjando Patria* asserted that Mexico's various ethnic groups were not divided because of racial superiority or inferiority, but were instead isolated from one another because of

¹⁹ Kelley R. Swarthout, *Assimilating the Primitive: Parallel Dialogues on Racial Miscegenation in Revolutionary Mexico* (New York/Washington, D.C./Baltimore: Peter Lang, 2004), 15-16.

language and culture. A unified Mexican culture was the only solution to the problem of a fractured and weak national identity and that culture would have to pay homage to the nation's Indian past as well as its sizable contemporary indigenous population. After all, wrote Gamio, Indian culture and the ideals of the Revolution grew from the same seed. The Indian did not make the Revolution what it was, but, Gamio argued, "its deepest roots grew and continue to grow in the Indian...It was in that population that [the Revolution] found its primordial origin."²⁰

Gamio's *indigenismo*, respectful of indigenous culture and convinced of fundamental racial equality, did not, however, deny the imperative of modernization. Modernization was critical to the health of the nation-state but the process must be undertaken with sensitivity and an eye towards allowing what was essential and culturally rich about Indians to persist while helping to alter their ways of life in the interest of the body politic. In what serves as the most coherent statement of Gamio's vision of *indigenismo*, he explained to a North American audience that "[f]rom a purely materialistic point of view, cultural contacts have taken place, but when these are not accompanied by amalgamation with abstract cultural concepts, they are merely superficial and artificial." The mentality of native peoples, Gamio believed, had to change before modernity could be attained. "For instance," he continued, "the Ford, the sewing machine, the phonograph come heralding the modern civilization and penetrate to the most remote Indian villages." But, he concluded, this "is not enough." Modernization required "an understanding of [Indians'] mental attitudes, their hopes and aspirations. This, Gamio concluded, was

²⁰ Manuel Gamio, *Forjando Patria* (México, Porrúa Hermanos, 1916), 171.

“essential to an effective substitution of the instruments and institutions of modern civilization, or to a fusion of the modern and the primitive.”²¹

Asserting the importance of social science to the task of reuniting the two strands of Mexico’s ‘native’ culture, Gamio addressed himself directly to the nation’s Indians, urging them to hold fast in their quest for betterment. “You will not awaken spontaneously....It will be necessary for friendly hearts to work for your redemption.”²² Gamio and his contemporaries (including members of Mexico’s revolutionary political elite) sought to construct “a powerful country...and a coherent nationality,” and the redemption of the Indian was the cornerstone of that edifice. Anthropology would provide them with the tools this generation of powerful men would need to do so.²³ “This task,” Gamio wrote of the challenge of modernization, “does not belong to the government, not to educators, nor to the sociologist; it is exclusively destined to the anthropologist and in particular to the ethnologist, whose apostolate demands not only enlightenment and abnegation, but principally outlooks and points of view absolutely uncolored by prejudice.”²⁴ Anthropology could save the Indian and, by doing so, Gamio insisted, build a new Mexico. Anthropologists like himself could serve as translators—mediators to help native peoples make the transition to modernity without losing their core identities.

The publication of *Forjando Patria* catapulted Gamio to the attention of political elites, a position from which he began to establish ties to government that could empower anthropology to address the nation’s Indian Problem. If, as he insisted, the Indian problem was one of language and culture and not of biology, anthropology could serve to glean an understanding of the Indian mentality, as well as to promote policies that could

²¹ Manuel Gamio and José Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1926), 122.

²² Gamio and Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, 122.

²³ Manuel Gamio, *La Población del Valle de Teotihuacan*. 3 vols. (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1922), 9.

²⁴ Gamio, *Forjando Patria*, 25.

effectively change it. Less than a year after *Forjando Patria* was published, Gamio was heading the *Dirección de Antropología*—or Directorate of Anthropology—within the government. With a staff of forty, the *Dirección* became a training ground for a generation of Mexican social scientists, beginning with an ambitious project to prove Gamio's theories about how to modernize native peoples.²⁵

Using Boasian methods of physical anthropology and ethnography in the field, Gamio saw a way to disprove the notion of Indian inferiority while also identifying the cultural elements that seemed to prevent Indian integration into modern Mexico. The study of Indian villages in the Valley of Teotihuacán that served as his first major field study was designed by Gamio to demonstrate his larger theories about the indigenous populations of the country, paving the way for the integration of these people into the body of the Mexican nation. Following Boas's research program in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), Gamio's *La Población del Valle de Teotihuacan* sought to prove that Mexico's Indians were not racially inferior, as social Darwinists had claimed.²⁶ Incorporating methods of physical anthropology, including cephalic indices, Gamio evaluated the status of the Valley's inhabitants on a scale from "indigenous" to "modern" (living conditions, food habits, medical treatment, and religious traditions were among the criteria). He found that some of the Indian residents of Teotihuacán were, in fact, already culturally modern. As historian Alexander Dawson explains, this study showed that "Indians were capable of becoming modern as any other sector of the population, when not mired in poverty." Poor nutrition, inadequate shelter, illiteracy and alcoholism—all rooted in the

²⁵ Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico*, 9.

²⁶ Here it deserves to be noted that both Dawson and Swarthout, authorities on Gamio's work, contend that the degree to which Gamio followed the full implications of Boas' work is controversial, at best. As Dawson explains, "Boas would have objected both to Gamio's image of the 'foggy'-headed primitive, and to his use of a model that posited linear evolution from the primitive to the modern. True cultural relativism would have actually made a homogeneous nation impossible, so Gamio adopted the Boasian concept that behavior was culturally determined (allowing the primacy of biology to be discarded), but mixed it with a vision of cultural evolution that was close to Tylor than to Boas." Dawson, 13; Swarthout, 104-105.

geographic, linguistic, and cultural isolation of the Indian—were the real determinants of “backwardness.”²⁷ This conclusion began to knit ideas about poverty and “backwardness” together, foreshadowing both the idea of a universal culture of poverty and the concept of “underdevelopment.”

Despite ongoing political turmoil at the highest levels of government, *indigenistas* achieved real change in policy. Rejecting the onerous strategies of assimilation adopted in countries like the United States (namely the reservation system), the policy implications of *indigenista* anthropology centered on a strategy to promote secular education throughout the country. Gamio and Moisés Sáenz, another Mexican anthropologist who had also done his graduate work at Columbia, experimented throughout the 1920s with various schemes to implement their theories about modernizing the Indian. In the meantime, *indigenistas* continued to make connections with likeminded reformers in the United States. During a period of particularly insurmountable political controversy, Gamio found himself at the University of Chicago, mentoring a young American anthropology graduate student named Robert Redfield, who also happened to be the son-in-law of Robert Park, the intellectual progenitor of Chicago’s renowned Sociology department. The relationship Gamio and Redfield established would be an important one in the development of transnational currents of thought about poverty and underdevelopment, as we shall see later. Through relationships like those that he enjoyed with Park and Redfield, Gamio sought allies who would help him aggrandize the role of anthropology in the realm of welfare policy. Throughout this period, then, anthropology achieved significant policy-making authority and *indigenismo*, as a nation-building ideology, achieved hegemony in Mexican politics. When political stability returned to Mexico, the two forces came together in a cooperative venture with the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs.

²⁷ Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico*, 3-5.

Anthropologist Edward Spicer, reflecting in 1964 upon the history of *indigenismo* in the United States, wrote that although a homegrown brand of Indian advocacy had emerged in the U.S. in the years after the passage of the Dawes Act (1877), “a certain convergence took place between *indigenismo* in Latin and Anglo-America as a result of, most especially, the collaboration of Manuel Gamio and John Collier, after 1931.”²⁸ Spicer uses the term “convergence” because, by 1931, the contours of a North American Indianist movement had certainly begun to take shape, provoked in no small part by the efforts of John Collier. As an advocate and, later, as the Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Collier spearheaded a movement to revive what he feared was a dwindling indigenous culture. Though Collier did not possess academic credentials like Gamio’s, he shared his Mexican counterpart’s belief in the utility of anthropology to shed light on the complexities of Indian culture and help devise a sensible strategy to integrate and modernize Indians into the American body politic. Collier used his skills as an advocate, his political power, and his governmental authority to dramatically refashion thinking about the “Indian problem” in the United States.

Energized of the reformist spirit of the Progressive era, interest in Indian affairs in the United States peaked among American activists during the interwar period. The devastating effects of historic genocide and nearly half a century of explicitly assimilationist policies banning communal landholding had condemned the nearly 400,000 Indians still living in the United States to poverty and political alienation. In 1922, a congressional effort to resolve a land dispute between the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and other interests making claims to their land gained considerable attention because of a small network of particularly shrewd and effective white advocates who had

²⁸ Spicer, “Indigenismo in the United States: 1870-1960,” 353.

been drawn to New Mexico by Mabel Dodge Luhan, the *grande dame* of Greenwich Village's bohemian salons.

Amid this assortment of artists and activists was a washed up, thirty-five year old eccentric who had made a name for himself in the immigrant community education movement in New York. John Collier had been drummed out of New York by the First Red Scare only to be scorched again by the increasingly conservative political climate in California, where he had taken a post working for the State Commission on Housing and Immigration. He had come to Taos predominately to escape from the disillusionment he felt surrounded by at home. Befitting his tendency towards activism, however, Collier was deeply moved by the plight of the Pueblo Indians. Sensing this, Mabel Luhan summoned her friend to action in the Pueblo's defense.

Having already started to advocate for better living conditions for the Taos Indians—among the poorest in the country—Collier found himself at the center of a significant movement both to defeat a specific congressional bill aimed at a specific tribe, and also to affect meaningful reform on a nation-wide level. While his fellow activists busily corresponded with the Indian Bureau in Washington over the Pueblos' land rights, Collier re-read old reports of Indian commissioners past, detailing what he recognized as short-sighted and racist educational policies, inadequate health care, and the dreadfully inefficient use of Indian land for anything other than white gain. Collier's ire was raised.

American Indian administration had long been incompetent at best, nefarious at worst. It had done little more than to impoverish a proud people. As Collier later explained, he found that over a century of Indian policy had created an untenable situation in which "ever-deepening Indian poverty followed in the wake of the land deprivations and the government absolutism." Unlike Gamio, who came to the problem of poverty through a project to modernize Indians, Collier began his journey towards the

liberal development model from a position of outrage about Indian poverty. Indeed, Collier described this mission as a moral crusade rather than a nation-building project. Somewhere between his spiritual awakening in Taos to the Indian's "gift for us all" and his reintroduction to a familiar world of political activism, Collier became a warrior against Indian poverty.²⁹

In the effort to defeat the Bursam Bill, then, Collier was laying the groundwork for a more ambitious reform agenda. Although he was ostensibly focused on the impending legislation, Collier rarely missed an opportunity to talk about the larger challenge of eliminating Indian poverty. In his January, 1923 testimony before the House Committee on Indian Affairs, Collier rose to testify, confining his remarks to reading reports of the egregious living conditions of Pueblo communities. "I read into the record these reports," Collier recalled, "which showed that the Tesque people were living on a per capita annual income of \$14.68, including the farm goods and livestock that they themselves raised and consumed, and the people of San Ildefonso on a per capita income of \$16.20 a year." Collier believed that he moved his audience to action by evoking the shameful reality of Indian poverty in the face of the Federal Government's explicit responsibility. "The reports were shocking," Collier concluded, "and began the education of the Committee members."³⁰ Collier's public relations campaign was surprisingly effective. Countless letters to the editor by Collier convinced many that Indians were stoic and uncomplaining—that their destitution was not a symbol of their own failures but rather that of an unfeeling federal government. A *New York Times* article on the battle over the Bursam Bill noted that although "they [the Pueblos] are all poor, they are not paupers."³¹ In an era in which

²⁹ John Collier, *The Indians of the Americas* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1947), 19.

³⁰ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 134.

³¹ "New Struggle Ahead of Congress on Disposal of Indian Lands," *The New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1923.

the distinction was vitally important, Collier worked to ensure that Indians would fall on the noble side of the ledger.

One of the most significant products of Collier's tireless advocacy was the appearance of the Merriam Report, which documented in great detail the poverty of American Indians.³² Formally titled *The Problem of Indian Administration*, this 847-page report assessed the federal government's Indian Bureau and the efficacy of its policies. The first incarnation of the organization that would later come to be known as the Brookings Institution, the Institute for Government Research published the account of a two-year long investigation of living conditions among Indians in America, offering a damning assessment of Indian administration. Publicized after its publication by Collier and other advocates, the Report sharply criticized the Bureau of Indian Affairs for mishandling land allotment issues and accused the Bureau of gross neglect in the areas of health, education, and income support. The summary of findings began with the most glaring fact that the investigators had encountered. "An overwhelming majority of the Indians are poor," the Report began, "even extremely poor, and they are not adjusted to the economic and social system of the dominant white civilization." The Report continued, asserting that "the poverty of the Indians and their lack of adjustment to the dominant economic and social systems produce a vicious circle....of poverty and maladjustment."³³ Something drastic had to be done to reform the administration of Indian Affairs to prevent further disaster in Indian communities. Although Collier and his fellow activists had allies in Congress, they were not powerful enough, in 1928, to enact the kind of wholesale reform the Merriam Report recommended. Yet, by raising awareness of the plight of Indians over a ten-year

³² For a fuller description, see Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 90-91.

³³ Lewis Merriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration: Report of a Survey made at the Request of Hubert Work, Secretary of the Interior and submitted to him, February 21, 1928* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928; New York/London: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971), 3. Citations are to the Johnson Reprint.

period, they created a groundswell that carried Collier to the Commissionership of the Indian Bureau.

While the Great Depression served to exacerbate the destitution of Indians, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932 created an unprecedented opportunity to attack these problems. In the words of his biographer, Collier “set out to capture control of Roosevelt’s Indian policy.”³⁴ Due to the sponsorship of Roosevelt’s choice for Interior Secretary, Harold Ickes, Collier was somewhat controversially nominated to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs. “I do believe...” Ickes wrote to an opponent of the nomination who had been an ally in the Indian policy reform effort “that no one exceeds [Collier] in knowledge of Indian matters or his sympathy with the point of view of the Indians themselves. I want someone in that office who is the advocate of the Indians.”³⁵ Collier’s nomination was approved and he took office in early 1933. The official era of *indigenismo* in the United States had begun.

While the nation struggled to begin the recovery from social and economic disaster, Collier spent the better part of his first year in office busily drafting a piece of legislation that would finally transform Indian policy and seek to alleviate Indian poverty. In addition to plugging Indians into New Deal agencies to help relieve immediate needs, Collier and his staff of Indianists began to shape the cornerstone of their Indian New Deal: the Indian Reorganization Act. As Collier later wrote, the new policy had three objectives. They were “Economic rehabilitation of the Indians, principally on the land; Organization of the Indian tribes for managing their own affairs; and, Civil and cultural freedom and

³⁴ Lawrence C. Kelly, “Choosing the New Deal Indian Commissioner: Ickes vs. Collier,” *New Mexico Historical Review*, Vol. XLIV, No. 4, 1974: 272.

³⁵ Harold Ickes to Francis Wilson, April 18, 1933, “Pueblo Lands Board,” Part 4, Folder 1; General Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, 1907-1977, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Record Group 48, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

opportunity for the Indians.”³⁶ The policy program was devised, in the abstract, in the years before Collier’s appointment. “These policies,” he recalled, “...were derived from some knowledge of anthropology, a rather wide knowledge of colonial administration, and a knowledge of the Indian affairs history of the hemisphere from the time of Las Casas onward.”³⁷ Indeed, Collier’s encounter with Mexican *indigenismo* played a significant role in shaping his own brand of Indian advocacy and administrative reform, particularly its reliance on anthropology to provide guidance to administrators.

While the basic outline of the Indian New Deal was taking shape in the minds of Collier and his fellow reformers, the growing influence of *indigenistas* in Mexico captured their attention. Collier’s 1931 visit to Mexico City resulted in the publication of an article in the journal *Progressive Education*, which devoted an entire issue to the theme of Indian education. In it, Collier wrote, “Mexico has lessons to teach the United States in the matter of schools and of Indian administration. Lessons which are revolutionary and which may be epoch-making.”³⁸ Collier explicitly identified Mexico’s Indian policy as a model for the United States government. “Mexico,” Collier continued in the article, “is pursuing attainable goals of present urgency and great ultimate importance.” He continued, arguing that “similar conditions in the United States, would release [among Indians] similar enthusiasm, joy in work, happy self-sacrifice and a similar genius for teaching and leadership.” How could this be achieved, Collier asked rhetorically. He replied: “similar conditions in the Indian Service of the United States would transform the service and open a new heaven and a new earth to the Indians within the term of one presidency.”³⁹

³⁶ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 173.

³⁷ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 173.

³⁸ John Collier, “Mexico: A Challenge,” *Progressive Education* 9 (February 1932): 95.

³⁹ Collier, “Mexico: A Challenge,” 96.

Mexico's reliance on anthropology as a true handmaiden to government administration of Indian Affairs most strongly sparked Collier's admiration. Having come of intellectual age at the dawn of a new era in American social science—anthropology in particular—Collier was excited by the potential for fruitful collaboration with some of the new generation of experts in Indian cultures. Alfred Kroeber, who had been Boas's first Ph.D. student, and who had done extensive fieldwork among the Indians of California, was one of the first anthropologists whose expertise Collier sought out. The Mexican example, however, provided Collier with a template by which he might establish an official place for social scientists at the proverbial decision-making table in the Bureau. "Applied anthropology in North America," Edward Spicer concluded, "had its beginnings in Mexico."⁴⁰

Anthropology, through the acts that constituted the Indian New Deal, did indeed find a place by Collier's side in the Bureau.⁴¹ Although Congressional critics managed to chip away at some of the more radical aspects of the legislation, the IRA effectively reversed the previous century of U.S. federal policy towards Indians, decisively renouncing land allotment and assimilation. And, it gave Collier and his allies a platform from which they could continue to promote Collier's version of Indianism. To achieve this goal, Collier established an Applied Anthropology Unit (AAU) within the Bureau to help implement

⁴⁰ Edward Spicer, "Early Applications of Anthropology in North America," in *Perspectives in Applied Anthropology*, eds. Anthony F.C. Wallace, J. Lawrence Angel, Richard Fox, Sally McLendon, Rachel Sady, and Robert Sharer (Washington, D.C., American Anthropological Association, 1977), 116.

⁴¹ The legislation that formed the backbone of the Indian New Deal included the Wheeler-Howard Act, or Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), and the Johnson-O'Malley Act, both passed in 1934. The IRA reversed land allotment, legislated tribal self-government, and established an economic development strategy to improve Indian access to capital. The Johnson-O'Malley Act focused on education, allowing, most importantly, for research projects to be undertaken jointly with private institutions. See Graham D. Taylor, *The New Deal and American Indian Tribalism: The Administration of the Indian Reorganization Act, 1934-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

the IRA.⁴² The two aspects of the IRA that most demanded anthropological insight, Collier believed, were the formation of constitutions by Indian tribes on their way to self-government and the methods by which they might improve their land-use techniques to develop their economies. Deepening his ties to key figures in the hubs of American anthropology at the University of Chicago and Columbia, Collier delivered an address at the 1934 meeting of the American Anthropological Association and asked, directly, for assistance. “Will American anthropology,” he asked, “long accustomed to study the Indian as a specimen of ‘man,’ actively help the government in its efforts to give a quarter of a million Indian wards a new deal?”⁴³ Many present replied affirmatively and, by the middle of 1935, the AAU was up and running.

Over the next three years, however, staff anthropologists such as Scudder Mekeel and Julian Steward found themselves frustrated by the Commissioner’s pressure on them to only deduce scientific facts relevant to the process of devising practical solutions. Collier did not want to spend government money on science for the sake of science. Within a few years, administrative clashes between the AAU and the division of the BIA put in charge of overseeing the drafting of native constitutions provoked a crisis, and in 1938, Collier disbanded the Unit. Long after he had become a very influential academic, Julian Steward criticized the underlying assumptions upon which Collier created the AAU. “Although the nature of native cultures had been anthropology’s former interest and Collier’s goal was to recreate these cultures, it was apparent to most of us that the course of modernization could not be halted, let alone reversed to some earlier but unspecified condition of ‘Indianhood.’”⁴⁴ Still, Collier did not relinquish his belief that anthropology had a role to

⁴² Lawrence C. Kelly, “The Indian Reorganization Act: The Dream and the Reality,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (August 1975): 296.

⁴³ “Anthropologists and the Indian Program,” *Science* 81, No. 2094 (February 15, 1935): 170-171.

⁴⁴ Julian H. Steward, “Limitation of Applied Anthropology: The Case of the Indian New Deal,” *Journal of the Steward Anthropological Society* 1 (Fall 1969): 8-9.

play in devising Indian policy, and he would revive the interests of anthropologists by promoting a different research program that focused on evaluating the cultural impact of existing Indian policy—this would take the form of the Indian Personality Project.

By 1940, looming War with Hitler and the partial improvement of the national economy had pushed Indian reform issues off of the political front burner. Money and interest in Collier's still-ambitious plans for implementing new policies had dwindled. From his days as a private citizen and professional advocate, Collier had learned how to raise money for a cause, and in the improvement of the lives of minority populations like those of the Indians he had found one that provoked his extraordinary passion and ingenuity. Collier shrewdly understood how to connect the major problems of the day to the plight of the people he was interested in helping. Thus, when the nation's attention turned to foreign relations, so did Collier's. The time finally seemed ripe to formalize collaboration with his intellectual allies in Mexico and throughout Latin America.

In his memoir, Collier recalls that the idea of addressing Indian problems throughout the hemisphere was first expressed to him by Ernest Thompson Seton, one of the founders of the Boy Scouts of America and one of Collier's fellow travelers from his days among the community reformers in New York. At a meeting in 1924, Seton "dwelt with insistence and at length upon our United States Indians and their hopes, as representative of the Indians of the Western Hemisphere. His was the first voice, Collier recalled, "to speak of the ill effects, from the Rio Grande to Chile, of our victimization of the United States Indians."⁴⁵ After his own 1931 visit to Mexico City, Collier had to work consistently to both maintain his relationships with *indigenistas* like Gamio and Saénz, and to further investigate the extent to which the policy programs of the U.S. and Mexican Indian Services might benefit from greater communication and cooperation. The

⁴⁵ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 159.

growing sense of anxiety about national security and American foreign relations provided him with an opportunity to obtain support for an institution that might facilitate this cooperation.

Diplomatic historian Arthur Whitaker has charted the rise of what he terms the “Western hemisphere idea” among American policymakers in the 1930s and, in this context, Collier placed Indian affairs in the growing list of issues on which North and South Americans could cooperate.⁴⁶ Upon taking office in 1933, Roosevelt had worked to forge a new relationship with the states of Central and South America. Calling his a “good neighbor policy,” Roosevelt promised an end to the ignoble history of U.S. military and economic intervention in the affairs of the American Republics. By abolishing the Platt Amendment that had subordinated Cuba’s sovereignty to U.S. control, promoting fairer terms of trade, and establishing stronger diplomatic ties in both political and cultural arenas, Roosevelt sought to undo the ill will that previous administrations had created. As involvement in the War in Europe grew more and more inevitable, shoring up ties with allies in the Western Hemisphere became a major priority.

As Hitler continued his march across Poland in 1939, the State Department became increasingly concerned about his growing popularity in the Americas. The Division of Cultural Relations, whose creation over the preceding two years had been an on-going challenge for Pan-Americanists in the U.S. government, began to establish programs that would foster greater interaction and understanding between Latin Americans and the United States. These programs took on a decidedly more functional tone to reinforce political alliances. As the Director of the Division explained, “We do not establish strong ties by exchanging culture in general, but rather by sharing some interest or activity which

⁴⁶ See Arthur P. Whitaker, *The Western Hemisphere Idea: Its Rise and Decline* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1954).

has rich meaning for each of us.”⁴⁷ A year later, the Division of Cultural Relations would be overshadowed by a wartime agency with immense power and vast resources. Through the offices of that new agency, the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics, Collier enacted a fusion of *indigenista* elements in the U.S. and Latin America, defining Indian affairs as one of these shared interests.

A prominent scion of the Standard Oil empire, Nelson Rockefeller served as a somewhat unlikely ally in Collier’s mission. From the mid-1930s onward, Rockefeller, whose political influence stemmed primarily from his family’s enormous wealth and philanthropic pursuits, had taken to traveling throughout Latin America. And, by the time storm clouds had covered Europe in 1939, he was gravely concerned about the state of relations among the American Republics. Losing access to the immense wealth of natural resources the countries of Latin America possessed as well as losing allies was not a prospect Rockefeller, or Roosevelt, wanted to imagine. The young Republican and the *pater familias* of the Democratic Party joined forces to establish the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics as a separate entity under the Council of National Defense. Of a July 1940 meeting with James Forrestal, who had been charged with overseeing Inter-American Affairs by Roosevelt, Rockefeller reported that “I talked with all the enthusiasm and conviction of one who sees clearly the possible solutions of a problem but is not inhibited by the necessity of working out the details of its execution.”⁴⁸ Within less than a year, Rockefeller would be in a position to work out precisely those details. So, in late 1940, when John Collier wanted to

⁴⁷ Ben M. Cherrington, “Cultural Ties that Bind in the Relations of the American Nations,” *Hispania*, XXII (October 1939): 246-247.

⁴⁸ Nelson A. Rockefeller, “The Reminiscences of Nelson Rockefeller,” Nelson Rockefeller Oral History, Chapter 1, Folder 1, Series I, Record Group 4, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York Rockefeller Archive, Tarrytown, New York.

rustle up some money for an Inter-American Indian initiative, he knew where he could find it.

A real fear of Axis infiltration of the large indigenous populations served as the catalyst for Rockefeller's acquiescence to Collier's request for funding. Rockefeller was keenly attuned to anything that smacked of anti-American sentiment in the Western Hemisphere, and by March of 1941 Collier had convinced him that there were foreign policy imperatives to anthropological work in Latin America, as both the Nazis and Japanese were quietly trying to foment rebellion among the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁹ Creating a Division of Latin American Cooperation in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Rockefeller agreed to provide funding for an Inter-American Indian Institute "with which the Division of Inter-American Cooperation will collaborate." The work of this Institute "offers an opportunity for cementing bonds of common interest between the United States and other American Republics." The press release continued, "Cooperation between officials and scholars dealing with this great and varied population [of Indians] will play a vital role in reinforcing the hemispheric solidarity so essential to the preservation of democracy in this era of world disturbance."⁵⁰ Collier and his allies in Mexico had, indeed, found an opportune moment to realize their hopes of a comprehensive strategy towards Indian affairs that would, once and for all, transform the place of indigenous people throughout the Western Hemisphere.

A month later, during the convocation of the First Inter-American Conference on Indian Life in Patzcuaro, Michoacan, Mexico, the Inter-American Indian Institute was

⁴⁹ Supporting material to the documentation outlining the Inter-American Indian Institute's mission and organization sent to Rockefeller included fact sheets on this subject. Inter-American Indian Institute, Press Release, "Falangist Propaganda and the Indians," December 1, 1941; Inter-American Indian Institute Press Release, "Japan's Bid for Indian Good Will," December 1, 1941; and, Inter-American Indian Institute Press Release, "Nazi Commercial Activities Among Indians," December 1, 1941. John Collier Papers, Folder 78, Box 30, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁵⁰ Department of the Interior Information Service Press Release, May 21, 1941. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

born. Naturally, the Commissioner represented the United States delegation. The nationalist President Lazaro Cardenas of Mexico shared the responsibility with Collier of delivering the opening address, demonstrating the momentousness of the occasion. In the “Acta Final”—the final resolution—the delegates “resolved to establish a permanent Institute to serve as the medium for collaboration by governments and interested citizens on the social, education, health, economic, etc., problems of the thirty millions of Indians in the Americas.”⁵¹ With a small staff funded by Cardenas’s government (and therefore headquartered in Mexico City) and funds made available from Rockefeller’s office, the Inter-American Indian Institute charter was ratified by the five nations required, and, by November, 1941, was up and running.⁵²

One of the central premises that Collier and Gamio agreed upon was the role of anthropological research in developing a comprehensive body of knowledge about Indian life and Indian Service policy. To apply the recommendations of the Institute, the member states were each responsible for creating National Indian Institutes, whose tasks included collecting, soliciting, arranging and distributing anthropological reports. These reports targeted several key questions including: “a) scientific investigations in regard to Indian problems; b) legislation, jurisprudence and administration of Indian communities; c) activities of any institutions interested in such groups; d) material of all kinds utilizable by the Governments as basis for development of policies looking to economic and social improvement of living standards among Indian communities; e) recommendations made by the Indians themselves in regard to any matters of concern to their people.”⁵³ The

⁵¹ Draft Memorandum for the File by Emil Sady, Member of the U.S. Delegation to Patzcuaro, March 20, 1941. John Collier Papers, Folder 76, Box 30, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁵² Department of the Interior Information Service Press Release, May 21, 1941. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

⁵³ International Convention of the Inter-American Indian Conference, December 1940. John Collier Papers, Folder 76, Box 30, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

Policy Board that was established to oversee the U.S. National Indian Institute was required to include representatives designated by the National Research Council, the Social Science Research Council, and the American Council of Learned Societies and the final membership counted four anthropologists.

The father of *indigenismo*, Manuel Gamio, was appointed as the Director of the IAI, a post he would serve in until his death in 1960. Commending Gamio to the Policy Board, Collier noted that “Gamio has an international reputation as an Indianist, and...a richer and more direct interest in the contemporary, sociological and economic problems of the Indian” than any other Mexican Indianist.⁵⁴ One of Gamio’s students, Miguel León-Portilla, concurred, writing that Gamio was “impelled to convert his ideas into actual reality in the inter-American Indian movement.”⁵⁵ After its inception, the IAI immediately began publishing *América Indígena*, a bi-lingual journal that would showcase some of the most innovative anthropological research on Indians throughout the Hemisphere. In the first issue, Gamio declared that “another very important aspect in outlining a work program for the Institute” would be “to elucidate and clarify Indianist theory so that differing opinions may be reconciled and Indianist efforts may have a scientific orientation.”⁵⁶ Although the Institute would engage in several practical programs to improve Indian health, housing, and diet, the project of clarifying Indianist theory would, for John Collier, require a deeper understanding of the subject. “It is my contention,” Collier explained in a speech at Yale “that it is largely the inability of people...to comprehend the Indian mind” that prevents understanding among the peoples

⁵⁴ Minutes of the Meeting of the Policy Board, Inter-American Indian Institute, February 4, 1942. John Collier Papers, Folder 77, Box 30, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁵⁵ León-Portilla, “Manuel Gamio: 1883-1960,” 359.

⁵⁶ *América Indígena* 1, no. 1 (October 1941): 5.

of the American Republics.⁵⁷ The Inter-American Indian Personality Project would be undertaken to remedy exactly this problem.

The Inter-American Indian Personality: Opening the Door to a "Culture of Poverty"

Going through his office files in January of 1942, John Collier came across the draft of an old proposal he had written a year before Harold Ickes made him Indian Affairs Commissioner. In a handwritten note to his brother stapled to the document, Collier asked whether it might be "of some interest as an antecedent document of the National Indian Institute?"⁵⁸ In the proposal, made a decade earlier, Collier had requested research funds from the Guggenheim Foundation to begin a comparative study of the Indian policies of the United States, Canada and Mexico. Collier explained that his "ultimate purpose as a student is sociological understanding, but more specifically, the understanding and practical influencing of 'culture complexes.'" The study, Collier asserted, was relevant to a much-wider range of issues than just Indian affairs. "The above facts will be enough to suggest that Indian life, for centuries past and now, has been and is a field of experimentation (conscious or unconscious) by governments in the treatment of subject or dependent races." He continued, adding that the value of the project would include its ability "to state the Indian problem as an international one, as an international (trans-national) field uniquely favorable to educational, economic, and social pioneering and experimentation." His report, he concluded, would "have its place within the growing literature dealing with a) the governmental treatment of and b) the self-help...of 'backward,' 'dependent,' mandated peoples throughout the world." Denied the funding

⁵⁷ John Collier, "Inter-American Indian Program Draft," 1941. John Collier Papers, Folder 76, Box 30, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁵⁸ John Collier, Memorandum to Charles Collier, January 29, 1942. John Collier Papers, Folder 77, Box 30, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

from Guggenheim, Collier waited less than a decade to begin his inter-American Indian Personality Project.⁵⁹

The Indian Personality Project grew out of the fortuitous meeting of John Collier and a young anthropologist who was committed to doing useful, applied research on the cultures of “dependent” peoples. Through Laura Thompson, and connections she had made to anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner at the University of Chicago, Collier oversaw the development of a research project that could finally begin to ask the questions he had posed in his 1932 proposal, namely how administrative policies shaped the development of Indian peoples at the level of individual “personality.” Derived from his often-facile understanding of a variety of major anthropological theories, Collier’s assignment to the social scientists of the IPP was to explore the Indian personality with an eye towards devising more effective policies to help Indian become integrated into the modern world.

Less than six months after the research began in Indian communities throughout the American Southwest, Collier’s colleagues at the Inter-American Indian Institute expressed interest in the establishment of a similar project to study Mexican Indians. True to his vision in 1932, Collier was more than happy to oblige and, with Thompson’s help, he exported the Indian Personality Project to Mexico. The enduring image of the “changing” Indian that emerged from this transnational project was one of a destitute Other whose native culture had become “disorganized” by policies of forced assimilation and muddled by a process of haphazard acculturation—and whose poverty was a direct result of their backwardness. *Indigenistas* in the U.S. and Mexico believed that anthropology, unique among all methods of research and assessment, could serve as a translator between this poor, backwards Indian and the modern world, managing the

⁵⁹ John Collier, “Appendix D, Plans for Study,” n.d., 1932. John Collier Papers, Folder 88, Box 30, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

integration of the two. In the process, the terrible poverty of the Indian became the conceptual foundation of a theory that encompassed poor people around the globe.

In the spring of 1941, a charismatic, thirty-six year old Dr. Laura Thompson arrived in Washington on a one-way flight from Honolulu, seeking to use her anthropological training in the service of the government at a time in which she believed war was impending. Raised in Hawaii, with its large Japanese and Polynesian populations, and having spent two years in Nazi Germany, Thompson expected that her insights might be useful if the U.S. entered the Pacific or Atlantic theaters of war. Thompson had been one of “Kroeber’s girls” at the University of California, Berkeley, where she had taken a doctorate under the guidance of the august Alfred Kroeber. There, Thompson had become keenly interested in the ways in which culture studies could shed light on practical issues facing government.

Thompson found few takers in Washington and was compelled to take the advice of a colleague who, during Thompson’s layover in Chicago, had suggested that she might speak with the Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. John Collier had started the first Applied Anthropology unit in the government and was always interested in hiring anthropologists. The Commissioner “is interested in bright young women,” Thompson’s friend told her.⁶⁰ Collier, it turned out, had read some of Thompson’s work on the influence of European missionaries on native culture in Fiji, and had found her conclusions about the relationship between culture change and government administration compelling. “I have thought for a long time,” Collier told her during their first meeting, “about a systematic effort to evaluate the effects of the Indian New Deal on

⁶⁰ Thompson, *Beyond the Dream*, 101.

tribal Indian administration, but I have not been able to find the right person to head it.”⁶¹ After reading her book, Collier told Thompson, he believed he had found the right person. *The Fijian Frontier*, published in 1940, carried an introduction from none other than Bronislaw Malinowski, who was, as Collier later wrote, one of the most important social scientists of his time.⁶² In Thompson, Collier found someone who was experimental in her approach to anthropology, concerned about the pressing social issues of her day, and who shared his fundamentally international outlook. “John Collier’s suggestion,” Thompson later wrote, “was my kind of challenge.”⁶³

Although outside expertise would be necessary, Thompson’s well-received studies of cultural change and her enthusiasm for applied anthropology gave Collier hope that his research project might actually come to fruition. At her suggestion, he traveled to the University of Chicago to flesh out the idea with other professional social scientists. There, Collier met with W. Lloyd Warner, an anthropologist whose work had included fieldwork among Australia’s aborigine tribes and, more notably, three major studies of American communities.⁶⁴ Warner had come to Chicago to study industrial relations and undertake community studies. He had just joined an inter-disciplinary group of Social Science faculty on the University’s Committee on Human Relations. Originally established by faculty members at the University of Chicago as the Committee on Child Development in 1930, the Committee on Human Development was rechristened to “signify its interest in the

⁶¹ Laura Thompson, “Chapter 13: Indian Personality Project,” *Beyond the Dream*, Third Draft, revised 1987, Series 7, Box 36, Papers of Laura Thompson, National Anthropological Archive, Smithsonian Institution, Suitland, Maryland.

⁶² Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 435-436.

⁶³ Thompson, *Beyond the Dream*, 104.

⁶⁴ Alice O’Connor identifies Warner’s role in the construction of a theory of “lower-class culture” that would come to strongly influence the work of anthropologists Allison Davis, among others. See O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 61-64.

study of human individuals at all age levels.”⁶⁵ The Committee grew from a “small experimental faculty-student program to a vigorous interdisciplinary unit with the size and momentum and visibility of a Department in the Division of the Social Sciences” and, by 1941, counted among its members the well-known Warner and an innovative education expert named Robert Havighurst, whose research focused on cross-cultural child development and education studies.⁶⁶

Warner’s advice resulted in the establishment of the Project as a joint undertaking with the Committee, giving the undertaking an academic pedigree. Collier was thrilled. “When I [was] in Chicago,” John Collier later wrote, “...the question was put to Dr. Warner as to whether [it] was possible to give us a detailed picture of personality trends among Indians or any other native...group.” “Then” he continued, “I learned of the work of the Human Development group...and the project it was launching in the City among the emigrants doing the very thing I had been inquiring about.”⁶⁷ Part of the Indian New Deal legislation had made funding available to the Bureau for use in contracting with private organizations to undertake Indian research. Using these resources, the Bureau and the Committee agreed to undertake a long-range research project to study the effects of Indian policy on Indian personality with the aim of producing more effective administrative techniques. A subcommittee, placed under Warner’s control, was established in Chicago to oversee the research, and Warner and Collier agreed that Laura Thompson should be appointed Project Director. With a director, an institutional

⁶⁵ “Report of the Committee on Human Development to the Executive Committee of the Division of Social Sciences,” October 1944. University of Chicago. Office of the President. Hutchins Administration. Records, Box 109, Folder 3, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁶⁶ “The Committee on Human Development in the 1940s,” *The Committee on Human Relations, 25th Anniversary Booklet*, p. 21. Havighurst, Robert J.. Papers, Box 35, Folder 9, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁶⁷ John Collier, Draft of “Commissioner’s Opening Talk Before Chicago University Group,” November 17, 1941, 6; Records of Commissioner John Collier, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

relationship to one of two major hubs of anthropological research in the world, and funding adequate to begin planning, the Indian Personality Project was underway.

In choosing to affiliate the project with the University of Chicago's Division of Social Sciences, Collier knew he was stepping into the middle of a professional schism that had developed between the leading figures in mid-century American anthropology located in the academic departments at the University of Chicago and Columbia. Urging Thompson to consult immediately with members of the Columbia's "culture and personality school," Collier feared that even hinting at engaging in this kind of research without the input of such giants as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead would alienate potential allies. Worrying about the fallout, Collier instructed Thompson to seek Benedict and Mead's involvement. "Mead [and] Benedict...ought to be consulted early rather than late," he wrote to Thompson. Demonstrating the extent of his familiarity with the dynamics of professional American social science, Collier was concerned about the appearance of having taken sides with the Chicago group. To the Columbia anthropologists, he wrote, it would be a shock if "all of a sudden, (so far as this New York group knows), the Indian Service embarks on...important research projects with the University of Chicago."⁶⁸ What Chicago had to offer was a focus on what had come to be called "acculturation studies," an important wellspring for modernization theory.

Although they paid a debt of intellectual gratitude to the psychological emphasis on personality of the Columbia approach, acculturation studies were based on insights from the theories of social change that Robert Park and his colleagues in the Department of Sociology at Chicago had promulgated, particularly in relation to immigrant and African-American "assimilation" in urban America. Giant figures in the field of early twentieth

⁶⁸ John Collier to Laura Thompson, October 28, 1941; Records of Commissioner John Collier, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

century American social science, Park and his colleague Ernest Burgess built on the tradition that W.I. Thomas had established at Chicago of investigating the conditions of assimilation and urbanization among immigrants in Chicago. Thomas's *The Polish Peasant* (1918-1919) was a model of "empirical sociology" that relied on individual accounts, personal documents such as letters and diaries, and field research.⁶⁹ Although Chicago's Social Science division was certainly dominated by the sociology department of Robert Park, anthropology became both an independent department and a major player in promoting alternatives to the then well-established Boasian tradition. Throughout the 1930s, Chicago would increasingly become the epicenter of efforts to reintroduce generalized, scientific principles to the study of culture. And yet, embodied by Edward Sapir, one of Boas's first and most brilliant students, the Boasian spirit lived even in Hyde Park.

If there was a single figure at the confluence of the streams of transnational thinking about culture change, it was Robert Redfield, one of the founders of acculturation theory. Redfield's expertise on Mexico catapulted him to fame in the field and, being the expert on Mexico that he was, he participated in portions of the IPP research. Park's son-in-law, Redfield had been mentored by Manuel Gamio during his fieldwork in Mexico. While studying at Chicago, the Boasian paradigm, and its then still insistent position on the importance of taking "snapshots" of primitive cultures whole cloth, did not speak to the young Redfield as much as Park's beliefs about processes of social change. The "salvage anthropology" that Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead engaged in interested Redfield far less than the process of what he would label "modernization." Five years after the publication of his well-received monograph on the culture of a Mexican village, Redfield

⁶⁹ See Clifford Wilcox, *Robert Redfield and the Development of American Anthropology*, (Lanham/Boulder/Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), 21-22.

made this position official by co-authoring the seminal statement on what he termed acculturation studies with Melville Herskovitz, a Boas student working on the impact of culture contact on African-Americans, and Ralph Linton, Boas's aforementioned replacement at Columbia. Their work on acculturation would lay a roadmap for the IPP in both the U.S. and Mexico.

Both trained at Columbia, Herskovitz and Linton found that their work—Herskovitz's on Africans in America and Linton's on Southwestern Indians—seemed incomplete without some way to contextualize and describe the processes of culture change, particular the process by which indigenous cultures began to integrate with “advanced” European ones. Thus acculturation was an idea born, essentially, and as Linton would explicitly state, from a very particular moment in history. Seemingly liberated from the shibboleths of “savagery” versus “Civilization,” acculturation provided a way to understand the means by which new technologies and new ideas might be more gently introduced to pre-modern peoples. As John Collier's implicit belief in the theory of acculturation would demonstrate, it also offered guidance in forming practical approaches to preserving those aspects of traditional culture which need not change for modernization to occur.

Although the Indian Personality, Education and Administration Project (later renamed the Indian Personality Project) originally sought to study the “effects of the new administrative policies on the Indians as individuals and as tribes,” it quickly became apparent that Collier believed that understanding Indian personality was essential to this objective.⁷⁰ He wanted to study the process of culture change as experienced by the individual. In a letter written later in 1941, Collier posed the question that would orient the entire project. “At what point in the growth of the individual,” he wrote to Thompson,

⁷⁰ Collier, foreword to *Personality and Government*, 11.

“does the new situation begin to register and produce observable effects? Where does the effective stimulus come from?” Further explaining himself, he asked, “Is there a change in the *zeitgeist* of tribes or of the whole Indian race?”⁷¹ Anthropologists who could apply culture and personality techniques to problems of acculturation were particularly well-suited to help Collier learn what made the American Indian tick and the advisory board and staff list of the various field projects of the Indian Personality research read as a who’s who of important figures in the field.⁷² But, the Project also needed to reflect psychological research. Although she was an accomplished field worker and had utilized some psychological methods in her own research in Fiji and Guam, Laura Thompson, Collier believed, needed to be more familiar with the specific techniques psychologists used to identify personality traits and uncover the intimate thoughts of their subjects. Thompson enrolled in a summer program at Chicago, under the tutelage of the Human Development faculty. In the winter of 1941, Thompson traveled to Arizona to conduct a pilot study among the Papagos. Four women who would remain with the Project throughout its U.S. phase joined Thompson in Arizona, including Ruth Underhill, a student of Ruth Benedict’s who had worked for Collier in the Applied Anthropology Unit, Rosamond Spicer, who, along with her husband studied culture in community, and Alice Joseph, a psychiatrist who engaged in the mental testing aspect of the project.⁷³ With their solid grounding in psychological testing and participant-observer fieldwork, these women formed the backbone of the IPP research team.

⁷¹ John Collier to Laura Thompson, December 17, 1941; Records of Commissioner John Collier, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

⁷² See Ellen Condliffe Lageman, *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 150-154; *The Committee on Human Development: A Brief History of the Committee on the Occasion of its 25th Anniversary*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965).

⁷³ Several major women anthropologists began their professional careers in the Bureau of Indian Affairs Applied Anthropology Unit and, later, the Indian Personality Project. See Katherine Spencer Halpern, “Women in Applied Anthropology in the Southwest: The Early Years,” *Hidden Scholars: Women Anthropologists and the Native American Southwest*, ed. Nancy Pareto (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 189-202.

Based on findings from the Pilot Study, the researchers of the IPP's North American phase found themselves spending the late summer of 1942 devising a research strategy to implement in five "culturally well-documented" Indian communities.⁷⁴ Staffed in large part by some of the leading female figures in American anthropology and psychology, the team chose the most "favorable laboratories" for their work: the Hopi, Papago, Zuni, Navaho, and Dakota Sioux reservations.⁷⁵ Then, based on the testing that had been undertaken in Arizona, they chose the battery of psychological tests they would administer to children in each of the communities they studied. As the Pilot Study had done, the research would be geared entirely towards studying children in these communities.⁷⁶ The psychological aspect of the program included several tests aimed at determining the extent to which traditional beliefs (animism, for example) still influenced the way Indian children saw the world. These included the Rorschach Psychodiagnostic Test, the Bavelas Moral Ideology test, and Arthur Point Performance test and the Thematic Apperception Technique. The personality testing aimed at discovering "how recent changes in were affecting the Indian psychologically, in social and natural context." "[W]e would," Thompson wrote, "be able to define [the Indian's] real needs and resources more precisely and help him more effectively to make a creative adjustment to in the modern world."⁷⁷ This action research, as Collier and Thompson called it, began in earnest with the testing of what would eventually number 1000 Indian children. The U.S. phase of the Project employed a combined estimate of over 100 social scientists in addition to

⁷⁴ Thompson, *Beyond the Dream*, 104.

⁷⁵ Thompson, *Beyond the Dream*, 104.

⁷⁶ Neither Thompson nor Collier, nor anyone else affiliated with the IPP, addressed the question of why the U.S. phase of the study focused exclusively on children. The fact that the Committee on Human Development had once been the Committee on Child Development seems to have played a role in limiting the study in this way. Robert Havighurst, who served as an invaluable adviser to Thompson as she devised the program, was a child-development and education expert and might have been influential in this decision.

⁷⁷ Thompson, *Personality and Government*, 12.

nurses, teachers, and Indians themselves to undertake this fieldwork. The immensity of Collier's vision was, indeed, matched by the Project that Thompson designed.

While Thompson was preparing her Pilot Study in Arizona, Collier and the other members of the policy board of the National Indian Institute discussed the progress of the Personality Project and whether or not they should begin to export it. The Governing Board of the IAI had, in early 1942, accepted sponsorship of an Inter-American study of Indian personality and acculturation, but until that summer no steps had been taken to make this goal a reality.⁷⁸ Several major studies were already well underway in Mexico City, including a practical research into Indian diet and nutrition habits and a medical research program to eliminate the spread of *onchocercosis* (river blindness). Adding another, more complicated study might strain the resources of the Institute. By the summer of 1942, however, members of the staff in Mexico had officially asked Collier to assist the IAI in planning a "parallel" personality study.⁷⁹ He suggested that the Policy Board allow Laura Thompson to travel to Mexico City and confer with Gamio and the other members of the IAI executive staff. Thompson's "exploration," Collier later wrote, "...discovered interest in a good many quarters."⁸⁰ "It became evident," Collier continued "that the conduct of research was wanted in Mexico, and the organization and plans were worked out in consultation with different elements of the governmental and scientific life in Mexico

⁷⁸ "Project for Research on Indian Personality in Mexico," May 6, 1942. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁷⁹ "Project for Research on Indian Personality in Mexico," May 6, 1942. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁸⁰ Alfonso Caso was a Mexican ethnographer who was, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, a leading figure in Mexican anthropology and archaeology. Director of Mexico's National Museum, founder of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, and, from 1944-1945, President of the National University, Caso was a colleague of Gamio's and an influential advisor to the IAI.

over some weeks of time.”⁸¹ Laura Thompson found herself on a plane headed for Mexico City within a few days of the Policy Board’s approval of Collier’s proposal.

The war, which had not yet affected the Project in any significant way, cast its shadow over the planning phase of the Mexican study. Collier, Thompson, and Gamio cast about for another anthropologist who had experience in Latin America, fluency in Spanish, and experience in psychological studies.⁸² After their first choice was poached by the Draft Board, Collier settled on Oscar Lewis, a young, Columbia-trained anthropologist who had been worked for the Strategic Index for Latin America division of the Human Relations Area Files at Yale. Lewis had recently been transferred to the Justice Department’s Special War Policies Unit to analyze pro-Axis propaganda in Latin America. For his part, Lewis had trained with Ruth Benedict and psychologist Abram Kardiner at Columbia and had been looking for a vehicle through which he could undertake his first significant field research. John Collier gave him that opportunity.

Through training and correspondence with Laura Thompson, Oscar Lewis and his wife Ruth, who had extensive experience in psychological testing, laid the groundwork for a personality study that would expand on the model Thompson had devised for the five tribes in the U.S. by including studies of adults as well as children. The Project’s staffing woes delayed its implementation until the summer of 1943, when the Lewis’s traveled to Mexico City to take up residence at the IAI. Thompson, back in the United States, was busily overseeing research for the five tribal monographs. (And, it deserves to be mentioned, engaging in an increasingly serious courtship with Collier, whom she would marry a few months later). Nonetheless, she offered much advice, including sending Ruth

⁸¹ John Collier, Memorandum to Laura Thompson, October 3, 1944. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁸² Comas had taken a teaching post that would not allow him the necessary time to direct the fieldwork. Collier, Gamio, and Thompson agreed that the Project would need the full attention of a director and encouraged Comas to serve as an advisor instead of heading up the program.

Lewis copies of the research reports from the five tribes research. Thompson wanted to be sure that the Lewis's took most of their cues from Gamio and the Mexican staff to demonstrate the true partnership that she and Collier believed the IAI to represent. "[T]he plans for the Mexican project," Thompson told Ruth Lewis, "lie in the hands of the Mexican group themselves and any ideas that we have are merely in the line of suggestions."⁸³ One suggestion Thompson did make without hesitation was that the research be expanded to include interviews with adults as well as children. "As the analysis of our project progresses," she wrote to Ruth Lewis, "we realize more and more clearly how important it will be to have adults as children of a community studied and tested—we are left with a feeling of incompleteness with our results—wishing all the time that we knew what happened to the individuals in adulthood."⁸⁴ The Lewis's took this advice to heart. By the late autumn of 1943, they had chosen a community for study and devised a research strategy to undertake there. The village of Tepoztlán, which had been studied by Robert Redfield for his doctoral fieldwork, would be the site of the Mexican phase of the Indian Personality Project.

While Gamio and the Lewis's were drafting the specifics of their research strategy and devising the practical programs that Gamio insisted be included as part of the Project, Thompson and her staff of anthropologists and psychologists in the U.S. were slowly completing the first phase of their research. By 1944, only one of the research teams had completed its report, *The Hopi Way*. The Committee on Human Development had grown concerned about the pace of completion on the remaining four monographs and, giving no official reason, terminated its contract to co-direct the Indian Personality Project.

Collier and Thompson struggled to find another sponsor, finally succeeding with the newly

⁸³ Laura Thompson to Ruth Lewis, August 11, 1943. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

⁸⁴ Laura Thompson to Ruth Lewis, March 29, 1944. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

founded (1941) Society for Applied Anthropology. In urging the Society of Applied Anthropology to assume the organization of the project after the University of Chicago's sponsorship expired, Collier further exhorted the singularly important role of social science in pinning down the characteristics of "Indian personality." "The project," he explained, "keeps its focus...upon the Indian rather than upon the governmental operations. As such, it fundamentally is carried out within the field of social science rather than within the field of government."⁸⁵

Although the individual reports on the five North American tribes studied under the umbrella of the IPP took some time to come out, their conclusions were ultimately fairly uniform. The "traditional coercive pressures toward assimilation" to which the tribes had long been subjected by U.S. Indian policy had been ineffective at best and disastrous at worst. Indeed, the coercion that had characterized American Indian policy for the previous century had done little else but foster apathy and "emotional emaciation" among native peoples. The experience of being humiliated and defeated, impoverished and alienated actively produced personalities that resisted change, undermining the very purpose of assimilation. Moreover, the results of the IPP indicated that rapid assimilation was an inherently flawed undertaking being hastily prosecuted through futile measures. Thompson explained this insight in detail. "If we view the 'Navaho problem,' for example, primarily as one of assimilating the individual Navaho into American industrial civilization by turning him into a white man as rapidly as possible mainly through formal schooling and technological aid, we may advocate costly institutional services." She continued, "The logic of this assumption rests on the assumption that the assimilation of the Indian is not only inevitable but highly desirable, and that it may be accomplished through a temporary

⁸⁵ John Collier, "Statement made to the Committee on Administrative Research of the Society for Applied Anthropology," October 26, 1944; Records of Commissioner John Collier, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

increase in technological aid...Our findings reveal the fallacy of these assumptions.”⁸⁶

Indeed, as Gamio had written several decades earlier, the instruments of modern life were meaningless without promoting a change in attitudes. This psychological approach to modernization would enter the mainstream of American social science and public policy within a decade of the Indian Personality Project’s completion.

As the results of the IPP became clear, Collier and Thompson began to assess the Project’s direct policy implications. They sought to devise a blueprint for a system of indirect management through which administrators could both protect Indians from the onslaught of assimilation while helping them modernize themselves enough to survive and thrive. Of this indirect administration—a strategy that he saw as having unlimited, cross-cultural uses—Collier wrote that “it is the technique of enabling the personality of the bushman, the personality of the Fijian, the personality of the Navajo, to bridge that awful enormous gap between his world in which he was born in which his childhood was lived and the great world in which he has to be a part.”⁸⁷ In medical service, education, land use, and tribal governance, Collier and Thompson argued that the administrator must devise ways to modernize Indian lifeways for Indians and re-educate them. Collier believed that Indians had to be a part of the process of preserving their own Indianness as they entered the modern world. Whether or not they possessed enough information to do this, Collier believed that social scientists were the only hope for administrators who wanted to help Indian peoples survive in the modern world. Reflecting on his own efforts at reforming Indian administration, Collier wrote, “[a] part of our comparative triviality of effort across these years in this matter has been due to a wise caution that it is better to be ‘hands off’ than to interfere ignorantly or uniquely. This present project has tried to supply the means

⁸⁶ Thompson, *Personality and Government*, 191-193.

⁸⁷ John Collier, Rough Draft, “Commissioner’s Opening Talk,” November 17, 1941; Records of Commissioner John Collier, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

for surmounting this wise caution...and we think that now...we do possess the data which should make possible an actually dominating attention to the cultural factors.”⁸⁸ Despite the “data”, the policy program that emerged from the findings of the IPP alienated many in Congress who believed that the IRA had already achieved the necessary reforms. As the War wound to a close and as the many eyes in Washington turned towards making a new world order, Indian Service reform had finally fallen completely off the agenda, regardless of what Collier did to rescue it. He resigned in 1946, broken-hearted, and began, himself, to work on issues relating to decolonization and dependent territories under the administration of the United Nations. He hoped to apply the conclusions of to IPP to other communities of “dependent” peoples.

That the conclusions found in the course of the IPP research could be utilized in other cross-cultural programs was no surprise to Collier or Thompson—they had envisioned the Project as having profound global significance from the outset. In the final report from the U.S. phase of the IPP, *Personality and Government*, Thompson explicated this underlying premise of the study. It was hoped, Thompson wrote, that the conclusions drawn from the IPP “might...point the way toward a new scientific approach to the human welfare problem in dependency or community government, and might contribute to the development of a scientific method whereby progress in the direction of improved human welfare might be measured at the personality level.”⁸⁹ The anthropologist, the IPP studies concluded, could offer the administrator the “golden opportunity to relate and

⁸⁸ John Collier, “Statement made to the Committee on Administrative Research of the Society for Applied Anthropology,” October 26, 1944; Records of Commissioner John Collier, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁹ Thompson, *Personality and Government*, vxi.

guide basic indigenous orientations to urgent modern problems and to bridge the gap between the traditional Indian world-view and emergent modern world views.”⁹⁰

The Inter-American Indian Personality Project was therefore founded on the belief that white, urban social scientists could re-educate Indians in their own cultural vocabularies, helping them filter the imperatives of modernization through a timeless set of core values. Of this objective, Thompson wrote, “[i]t is not a naïve or reactionary attempt to cut the Indians off from outside influences and to preserve their native cultures, like zoological preserves, without thought of adjustment to the pressures of modern civilization.” “On the contrary,” Thompson continued, “the new policy attempts to treat the Indians like normal human beings capable of working out...a satisfying adjustment to life within the framework of the American nation and the world community, yet maintaining the best of their own grouphood, culture and individuality.”⁹¹

Oscar Lewis, his wife Ruth, and a team of researchers both Mexican and American, continued to toil on in Tepoztlán. They devised a research program that was, in deference to Gamio, practical, and in deference to Collier, a study of the effects of government on Indian personality. In pursuit of Lewis’s own objectives, his study was based on a detailed examination of the lives of people who lived on the margins of the modern world. The research Lewis engaged in during this time eventually form the basis of his monumental first book, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Revisited* (1951). That book started him down the path towards devising his theory of the “culture of poverty.” The roots of this idea, as we shall see in the next chapter, were planted in the fertile soil of a Mexican village under the auspices of the Inter-American Indian Institute that John Collier and Manuel Gamio brought into being. Contrary to those men, however, Lewis found no virtue in

⁹⁰ Laura Thompson, “Attitudes and Acculturation,” *American Anthropologist* 50, New Series, no. 2 (Apr.-Jun., 1948): 213.

⁹¹ Thompson, *Personality and Government*, 11.

traditional ways and saw modernization as the only hope for the poor, uneducated masses. Thus, the “hemispheric thinking” that sprouted on both sides of the Rio Grande, that flowed from the ideology of *indigenismo*, and that was institutionalized in the Inter-American Indian Institute led to the creation of the first ‘Other American,’ poor, backwards, and in need of the helping hand of experts who could shepherd him into the modern world.

CHAPTER 2

Not Modern Men:

Oscar Lewis and the Origins of a Transnational Culture of Poverty, 1941-1964

Browsing the pages of the August 1947 issue of the *Scientific Monthly*, the inimitable W.E.B. DuBois came across a short article written by a young anthropologist entitled “Wealth Differences in a Mexican Village.”¹ The article, full of facts and figures about poverty in the rural village of Tepoztlán, Mexico, grabbed the attention of the aged activist, who had pioneered the application of social science to contemporary problems of poor and disfranchised people. So much so, in fact, that Du Bois was moved to review the article for his weekly column in *The Chicago Defender*, the nation’s highest-circulating African-American newspaper. “Here then” Du Bois wrote, “is a picture of the poverty of the world. It is not the worst poverty imaginable: these people get food to eat; they have something of clothing and shelter: but three-fourths of them do not get enough to be healthy or send their children to school.” “With more facts like this,” he continued, “we would have a firm starting point at which we could say: what is wrong with this civilization? With our work, with our technique, with our distribution of wealth? Why is it that the great majority of the people of the world, in this heyday of civilization, in this day of mounting wealth, luxury, and power—why is it that the vast majority of the people of the world are desperately, and as it seems to most of us, inexcusably poor?”² That Du Bois interpreted data about a Mexican village of some thirty-five hundred souls as having worldwide significance—as telling us about poor people the world over—speaks to the dawn of a new conception of poverty that would influence public policy and popular assumptions for the balance of the twentieth century.

¹ Oscar Lewis, “Wealth Differences in a Mexican Village,” *The Scientific Monthly* LXV, no. 2 (August 1947): 127-132.

² W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Winds of Time: Poverty,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1947: 15.

In the decades after Du Bois's writing, his intuition that Americans should begin to look at poverty as a global phenomenon blossomed into a definition of poverty as a fundamentally universal human condition. Rather than seeing poverty as a moral or strictly economic condition, Americans came to understand it as a function of collective mentality or *culture*—it came to be seen as a state of *underdevelopment*. Through the work of social scientists, public intellectuals, policymakers, and an engaged public, poor people in the slums of Harlem, the barrios of Mexico City, the villages of Africa, and in the East End of London came to be seen as suffering from the same challenges. By the 1960s, this universal notion of poverty would form the backbone of both the anti-poverty programs deployed at home and the international development policies exported abroad. The poor would come to be seen as not merely suffering from material want but as being “backward.” They were, in the words of the young anthropologist whose work Du Bois applauded, “not really modern men.”³

By the time this new liberal orthodoxy had congealed, Du Bois, of course, had repudiated it, adopting a socialist internationalism that would carry him into the Communist Party and into self-imposed exile in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana.⁴ The anthropologist whose work he highlighted in that 1947 column, however, would become a hero to the liberal mainstream. As the author of the theory of the “culture of poverty,” Oscar Lewis would come to be identified as a passionate and authoritative spokesperson for the poor the world over.

From 1947 until his untimely death in 1971, Lewis wrote vivid and provocative accounts of the hopelessness and despair of the poor. But, his advocacy did not stop there.

³ Oscar Lewis to James A. Clifton, April 24, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 55, University of Illinois Archives.

⁴ For details of Du Bois's fall from grace among American liberals during the Cold War and his embrace of radical socialism, see David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).

Lewis agitated for more aggressive government efforts to help lift poor people out of their degraded circumstances and inspired a now five-decades old debate about the nature of race, poverty, urbanism, and government policy addressing all of these themes at home and abroad. A professional anthropologist whose academic career began in the middle of circle of eminent scholars, Lewis became, by the early 1960s, one of the most popular non-fiction authors in America and one of its most celebrated public intellectuals. Lewis's advice was sought out by local activists in American towns and cities, by educators and public health officials, and by development administrators pursuing foreign policy objectives that included victory in the war in Vietnam and the modernization of the newly independent societies of much of the Southern Hemisphere. Over thirty years of writing, speaking, and teaching, Oscar Lewis became the most authoritative translator between the middle-class bureaucrat, an engaged American public, and the rural and urban poor the world over.

Lewis's culture of poverty thesis occupies a pivotal place in American intellectual history. The theory became central to many and varied public policy initiatives and it has continued to possess much explanatory power in helping policymakers and the public alike interpret the problem of poverty across the globe. First introduced in a 1958, the culture of poverty, as Lewis described it, transcended "regional, rural-urban, and national differences." Lewis believed the culture of poverty to be marked by several key characteristics, including a lack of participation in society's major institutions, inadequate and unstable housing, tenuous extended family structures, the absence of a delineated and "protected" period of childhood, feelings of marginality and dependence on the individual level, and a "strong present-time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future." Lewis understood poverty "...and its associated traits as a culture...as a way of life which is passed down from generation to generation

along family lines.”⁵ The culture of poverty was essentially born of the physical, economic, political, and cultural alienation of poor people from the mainstream of modernizing as well as already modern societies.

The theory identified poverty not just as a condition of circumstance, but as a state of mind. “[It] is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society,” he wrote.⁶ Poverty, defined this way, was a universal problem. Explicitly distinguishing the people who lived in the culture of poverty from those who lived in the isolated primitive cultures that had for so long been the subject of anthropology, Lewis argued that those who dwelled in the worldwide culture of poverty were not only spatially isolated but also culturally and psychologically isolated. Unlike preliterate tribes in the far reaches of the world, the poor lived among the modern middle-class. They were aware of their own deprivation. They felt an aching sense of marginality. And, this awareness only made their isolation more complete. A vicious cycle of hopelessness and passivity was both caused by and perpetuated by a worldview of men and women who were *in* but not *of* the modern world. Indeed, they felt their invisibility to the institutions of power and their alienation from the prosperity that made middle and upper-class life possible.

Lewis devised the culture of poverty as part of an explicit rejection of the heavily racialized, savage-civilized dyad that had characterized anthropological studies for the previous century. Yet his theory was the outgrowth of a very particular set of ideas about modernity and “backwardness” that were swirling around him in the mid-twentieth century. Lewis based his theory on psychological insights about the pathology of the poor. He valorized modernity. Yet, he also possessed an earnest desire to absolve poor people

⁵Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” *Anthropological Essays* (New York: Random House, 1970), 67-80.

⁶Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” *Anthropological Essays*, 70-73.

from the historical blame they had received for their own plight. Though a progeny of the Boasian tradition, Lewis was not a relativist by any stretch. He believed that poverty was an evil; and, “progress” was a good, albeit a problematic one. For Lewis, the two were diametrically opposed and as an anthropologist and political actor, he sought to awaken others to the ways in which the march of progress had failed to include millions of men and women, and how it had marginalized, alienated, and embittered so many. But Lewis never questioned the ultimate desirability or inevitability of technological advancement and the replacement of the “superstitions” of the pre-modern world-view with “middle-class values.” Despite his role as a sort of professional malcontent, Lewis’s was unquestioningly optimistic about Progress. As such, his attitudes very much suited the *zeitgeist* of his age.

Lewis’s took his first steps towards developing his culture of poverty thesis, as DuBois’s comments demonstrate, in his early work in the village of Tepoztlán in Mexico. The quintessential insight of that theory—that alienation and passivity were the responses of the poor to changing world—has its roots in his Tepoztlán study. Threaded throughout the text of his *Life in a Mexican Village*, Lewis embedded a bold critique of the conclusions that other anthropologists had reached about the nature of culture change. In this critique, Lewis specifically targeted Chicago anthropologist Robert Redfield, who had famously studied the same Mexican village some twenty years earlier. Redfield saw the contact between Tepoztecan peasants and immigrants from Mexico City or other urban centers as fundamentally destabilizing. He understood this process as a source of social disorganization. Modernization, Redfield argued based on his own education in Chicago sociology, was a process that heralded the often painful breaking down of traditional cultures. In response to Redfield’s interpretation, Lewis explicitly revolted against what he deemed to be precious “Rousseauian” notions about “folk” peoples that under laid such

theories of social change. Rather, Lewis argued that Western intellectuals who were themselves disenchanted with modernity glossed over the reality of the terrible deprivation and bitter competition over scarce resources that marked the “traditional,” quotidian lives of these embattled people.

In his critique of what he saw as sheer intellectual idealism, Lewis began to define a new problematic for anthropologists that rested on exploring the less bucolic aspects of peasant life, identifying the sources of poverty and describing the desperation with which the poor lived their lives. Despite his critique of Redfield’s value judgments about the nature of “Progress,” Lewis agreed that the modern man’s personality was different from the peasant’s. Modern people were imbued with a spirit of reform. Lewis demonstrated the passivity of his subjects as the antithesis of that modern personality. Neither empowered nor knowledgeable enough to solve their own problems, the poor peasants in the villages of the Third World and the poor slum dwellers in cities across the globe suffered from the same psychological obstacles to improving their own lot. Lewis argued that concerned social scientists could open the eyes of the modern world to these terrible realities and could provide the essential guidance that the poor needed to finally escape their woeful plight. What emerged from Lewis’s project, then, was a transnational theory of a culture of poverty that defined poverty as neither a moral failing nor an exclusively economic condition but instead as a state of arrested development.

By the time of his death, Lewis, more than any of his contemporaries, had conceptualized a universal social problem that reflected neither regional, historical, nor ethnic factors, but was instead isolated at the level of individual and family mentalities. The seeds of Lewis’s cross-cultural concept of poverty drifted into the fertile soil of contemporary debates about how to absorb the millions of people whom post-war decolonization throughout the Third World had thrown into the mix of global power

relations. Lewis's culture of poverty would blossom and grow into a discourse that constructed all poor people as culturally backward and psychologically damaged. This chapter explores the origins of the theory of the culture of poverty and its role as a fundamental part of a larger discussion about poverty and backwardness in the United States carried on among an informed public, an activist government, and an influential cadre of intellectuals in the era of growing affluence and at the height of the vogue of modernization.

An Heir to the "Great Humanist" Tradition

In a 1961 note responding to a request for references to accompany a grant proposal, Oscar Lewis despaired of the loss of his mentors. "For a number of years now," Lewis wrote, "I have found the task of submitting names of colleagues as references, a sad and difficult one. The anthropologists whom I most admired and whose evaluation of my work would have meant the most to me, are now gone." He continued, "I refer to Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton, Robert Redfield, Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber. These were the great humanists in anthropology." Lewis concluded on an even gloomier note. "I'm afraid the humanistic focus has become a scarce commodity among the younger generation."⁷ While Lewis was certainly not the last American anthropologist to address himself to urgent social ills, he was a man who came of intellectual age among an extraordinarily prolific and influential community of activists in American social science. Educated by the luminaries of one of the strongest social science programs in the world, Oscar Lewis was a young man whose intellectual development had been guided by a faith in science to illuminate contemporary social problems. Indeed, the humanist tradition to which he referred implied the obligation that social scientists had to work towards the

⁷ Oscar Lewis to Gordon Ray, October 16, 1961. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 56, University of Illinois Archives.

improvement of human life. His education, coupled with his own personal experiences, contributed to his “discovery” of poverty as a worthy subject of scientific inquiry and as an issue worthy of passionate advocacy. In his training and temperament, Lewis was particularly well-suited to building a new anthropology of poverty that would follow in the Great Humanist tradition that he so admired.

Oscar Lewis first encountered poverty not in the classroom but in the context of his own childhood. Born into a Polish family at Manhattan’s Jewish Maternity Hospital on Christmas Day, 1914, Yehezkiel Lefkowitz, as he was named, spent his early childhood in the tenements of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Like so many families during the early twentieth century, the Lefkovitz’s fled religious persecution in Europe in search of peace and prosperity on American shores. Although New York City teemed with activity and a pervasive sense of opportunity, Lewis’s parents struggled to put food on the table for their five children. Even the children worked to ensure the family’s survival. To improve their chances, the family traded the muddy, crowded streets for the countryside when Lewis’s father decided to move his household to the town of Liberty, New York. There, the family used their meager savings to buy a small farm that they turned into a modest hotel. Considerably younger than his sisters and his one brother, Lewis felt isolated and lonely. Introspective and often ill, the intellectually precocious Lewis began to find solace not in the orthodox religious teachings of his rabbi father but in the contemporary political and philosophical debates of his time. He came to know an organizer for the Communist Party who was a frequent guest at his parents’ hotel. Through this friendship, the now-thirteen

year old Lewis was introduced to the writings of Marx and Lenin. Lewis's education in theories of social inequality and justice began very early indeed.⁸

Determined to escape the banality of country life, the prodigious Lewis completed his high school education three years early and entered the City College of New York at the age of fifteen. He worked three jobs on the side to earn money for books. He dreamed of becoming an historian. Strongly influenced by such eminent figures as Marxist historian Philip Foner and philosopher Morris R. Cohen, Lewis completed his degree at City College and began his graduate work in history education at Columbia Teachers College in the fall of 1936. The course work bored him. Absent was the excitement he had felt in college for the stories of resistance and protest embodied in the histories of trade unionism and slave revolts. Rather than the intellectually stimulating environment he had hoped to join, Lewis found Columbia's History Department dogmatic and stultifying. He shared his disappointment the brother of his college sweetheart, psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow advised Lewis to seek counsel from a well-respected and innovative professor of anthropology named Ruth Benedict. Oscar Lewis was reborn as an anthropologist the day he stepped into Benedict's office.

Lewis spent the next four years in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia being personally trained by some of the most innovative and important social scientists of the twentieth century. One of two major poles of anthropological scholarship in the country (the University of Chicago being the other), Columbia's department had come into its own under the direction of Franz Boas. At the time of Lewis's arrival, Boas's former students, including Benedict, Ralph Linton, and Margaret Mead, dominated the department. These figures emphasized, in the Boasian vein, rigorous empiricism, the

⁸ This biographical sketch is largely informed by the work of Susan M. Rigdon, *The Culture Façade: Art, Science and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1988), 9-27.

necessity of first-hand fieldwork, the plasticity of human culture and behavior, the diversity of culture complexes, and the overarching potential for anthropology to prove fundamental human equality. Seeking to meet these objectives, Boas's *héritiers* maintained a fundamental commitment to science in the humanistic tradition.

Benedict and Linton, in particular, built on the Boasian tradition by importing psychoanalytical insights into cultural anthropology, creating the new subfield of culture and personality studies. Benedict and her *protégé* Margaret Mead believed that psychoanalytic research was a powerful lever by which they could pry open the mysteries of human culture. As such, Benedict and Mead began to introduce psychological literature into the canon of sources required for a solid grounding in cultural anthropology. Building inter-disciplinary connections with leading psychologists, Linton invited researchers and faculty to address theoretical and practical aspects of culture and personality studies in his Culture and Personality Seminar. Although Lewis remained more interested in the material reality of social and economic inequality than in what he might have disparagingly called head shrinking, he attended Linton's seminar and soon switched his minor field from history to psychology. Lewis was also drawn to psychology because of his marriage to Ruth Maslow, an educator with an undergraduate degree in psychology who would become Lewis's lifelong professional collaborator. Throughout his career, Lewis hesitated to identify himself as a culture and personality anthropologist, but these steps towards incorporating psychology into his work clearly pointed him in that direction and would influence his research agenda for the next three decades.⁹

Among his advisers, Ruth Benedict grounded Lewis's training most explicitly in the tradition of humanistic social science. Benedict's 1934 *Patterns of Culture* had set the field

⁹ Lewis's biographer writes that Lewis was uninterested in psychology in graduate school. See Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 11-12.

of anthropology afire, particularly because of its enormous popular appeal. Inspired by Franz Boas's emphasis on the plasticity and relativity of human cultures, Benedict's work reinforced her mentor's belief in the primacy of culture over biology, particularly any biological notion of race, in determining human behavior. Using the tools of *Gestalt* psychology, Benedict sought to understand how behavior reflected underlying and oftentimes subconscious beliefs about one's own society. Benedict's conclusion was that a given culture was the product of the generalized personalities of the individuals within it. Psychology, therefore, played a crucial role in her understanding of culture.¹⁰ Making the culture concept intelligible to a broad audience, Benedict's life experience, as an introspective and reserved woman in a field dominated by men, only strengthened her belief in the socially-redeeming work anthropology could do in the service of human equality. Benedict's beloved friend Margaret Mead got to the heart of Benedict's intellectual evolution and its larger significance for the field when she wrote that "as her knowledge of different cultures grew, so her initial sense that the individual was the creature of culture and so was in no way responsible for the discomfort of his position if he was born or accidentally bred to deviance, changed to a detailed consideration of where and in what ways men could shape their culture closer to their highest vision."¹¹ In Benedict's example, Lewis found a spirit sympathetic to his own.

This is not to say that Lewis agreed entirely with Benedict's scholarly assertions. The culture and personality program that Benedict had built at Columbia was itself riddled with professional antagonisms and theoretical quarrels, and the academic career Lewis began there reflected the divergent opinions and approaches of some of the most eminent figures in the field. What troubled Lewis most about the culture and personality approach was its

¹⁰ Margaret Mead, preface to *Patterns of Culture* by Ruth Benedict (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), xi.

¹¹ Mead, preface to *Patterns of Culture*, xii.

seeming antipathy to the material conditions under which people lived. Uncomfortable with the areas in which he felt that psychological theories eclipsed structural explanations of human behavior, Lewis remained intellectually committed to the basic assumptions of Marxist history. Later in his life, he reflected on the complex relationship he shared with Benedict's ideas. "As a student of Ruth Benedict, I admired her writing and her conceptual powers, especially her search for some larger patterns and themes which would organize and explain the mass of detail, of custom and belief, which appeared in the monographs of anthropologists," Lewis stated. "At the same time," he confessed, "I had reservations about the accuracy of her cultural configurations which played down the role of economic factors and which stressed homogeneity at the expense of the range of variation of behavior and values found even in the simplest tribe."¹² Although he would remain distrustful of the explanatory power of the culture and personality approach for the duration of his career, at its core, Lewis's need to weave an overarching humanist thread into the tapestry of his scientific theorizing was satisfied by the research strategy that Benedict inaugurated at Columbia. While he spent a lifetime denying it, Lewis found generalizations to have great utility in popularizing his work beyond the confines of the Academy. And so, it is no surprise that near the end of his own life he recalled the esteem in which he held Benedict. Responding to a reader inquiring about his most significant mentor, Lewis wrote that "Ruth Benedict was my most inspiring and influential teacher." Explaining himself, he added, "she had a great sense of the problem and she managed to integrate beautifully the humanistic and scientific aspects of anthropology."¹³ It was that challenge that Lewis chose to take on in his own work.

¹² Oscar Lewis, introduction to *Anthropological Essays*, xvii.

¹³ Oscar Lewis to Patricia Levine, August 2, 1968. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 58, University of Illinois Archives.

Though certainly shaped by the particular theories and methodologies of his mentors, Lewis was nothing if not an eclectic thinker. His biographer and former student Susan Rigdon observed that “Lewis was a man who seemed to take something for later use from everyone he studied or worked with and from everything he read.”¹⁴ Margaret Mead, herself no stranger to path-breaking methodology, recognized the value of this quality, calling Lewis “a great innovative anthropologist.”¹⁵ Whether it was merely a temperamental inclination or an intentional strategy, Lewis chose from the multiple strands of dominant thought in his own field, as well as that of history, sociology, and psychology. Ambitious and intellectually gifted, Lewis wanted to innovate—and he did.

Despite his skepticism of the uses to which Benedict and others in the culture and personality tradition put psychological insights, as well as his own intellectual fealty to some form of historical materialism, Lewis was influenced by two of the most important psychologists working in the United States. Abram Kardiner and Otto Klineberg were colleagues at Columbia and were both key members of the interdisciplinary community that sprang up around Franz Boas. Kardiner’s *The Individual and His Society*, published in 1935, was a bedrock text in the field of psychodynamics—the study of the way in which external forces shape human behavior. The book, which included psychological studies of primitive cultures, was central in establishing a new kind of Freudian psychology, one that, in Kardiner’s words, “emphasized the *adaptational* rather than *instinctual* aspect of Freudian theory.”¹⁶ Otto Klineberg was a founder of the field of social psychology. His book, *Race Differences*, also published in 1935, marked the beginning of his lifelong effort to disprove theories of the mental inferiority of minority

¹⁴ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 1.

¹⁵ Margaret Mead, introduction to 1975 edition, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, Oscar Lewis, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1975), ix.

¹⁶ Abram Kardiner, “The Influence of Psychodynamics,” *They Studied Man*, ed. Abram Kardiner and Edward Preble (New York, NY: Mentor Books, 1961), 213. Emphasis in the original.

people, African Americans in particular. Both Kardiner and Klineberg—like the anthropologists with whom they worked at Columbia—were explicitly engaged in the humanistic cause of undermining the logic of white supremacy in the United States. Their intellectual activism, as well as the fundamental lexicon of psychological theories and methods, would have an unmistakable influence on the way Lewis would choose to shape his own body of work.

Armed with the professional support of one of the country's centers of social science research, an education that spanned the latest trends in interdisciplinary theories about culture and human behavior, and an earnest desire to put his skills into practice, Lewis cast about for a job as his academic career was coming to an end. The Depression made financial support for academic research scarce and field work, which was an essential component of an education in modern anthropology as it had been taught at Columbia, was hard to finance. To ensure that Lewis would be able to learn how to undertake field research and enable him to complete his dissertation, Ruth Benedict had arranged for funding to send Lewis and his wife on their first field trip to study the Blackfoot Indians of Montana and Alberta, Canada. Upon his return to Columbia, Benedict helped him publish his findings in 1940. Despite the efforts of his advisors, however, Lewis found himself struggling to find employment. Academic jobs in anthropology were still very limited in number and museum posts, which had been the opportunities most commonly available to young practitioners, were in limited supply and of limited interest to cultural anthropologists like Lewis. What Lewis sought was a way to make a living while engaging in field research. Working for the federal government offered Lewis the opportunity to do just that.

The field that came to be called Applied Anthropology was born in the years immediately preceding the American entry into the Second World War. A New Deal

midwife attended the delivery. Reflecting their roots in the Progressive movement, New Dealers in many of the government agencies established to address the havoc wrought by the Depression believed in finding creative ways to apply the sciences of society to their practical work. As the previous chapter explains, anthropology occupied a privileged place in this landscape. To be sure, at a moment in which the totality of American life was being re-examined, cultural anthropology promised to explain how and why people worked, played, ate, loved, reared children, and lived as they did. And, a new generation of anthropologists was eager to help government administrators improve the way the state could help citizens do those things more successfully. The Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Agriculture would be the first agencies to make use of professional anthropologists. Eventually, Oscar Lewis would spend time working for both of them.

Contrary to their attitude towards American involvement in the First World War, anthropologists unanimously supported U.S. entry into the Second World War, and wholeheartedly welcomed the opportunity to help achieve victory in that titanic struggle. Before his death in 1942, Franz Boas himself had begun the overt intellectual dismemberment of the racist theories under-girding the ideology of Nazism in the mid-1930s. Though fundamentally opposed to the employment of anthropologists as intelligence-gatherers, Boas had long emphasized the responsibility for activism inherent in his profession. Working to undermine racism at home and abroad, Ruth Benedict and others who inherited Boas's mantle as leaders in American cultural anthropology expanded the definition of that mission by becoming active participants in defeating fascism in Europe and imperialism in Japan. By 1943, over half of American anthropologists were actively engaged in the U.S. war effort, working for the War Relocation Authority, the Office of War Information, and the Office of Strategic Services among other agencies. Oscar Lewis was one of them.

The use of anthropologists in the war effort was perceived by policymakers to be a “secret weapon.” Just as the profession was beginning to yield insights into domestic policy problems, anthropology also offered a window into the lives of the ordinary citizenries of enemy nations, giving policymakers insight into how diplomatic and military strategy might be made more effective in dealing deadly blows to the Axis powers. Studies of national character, of propaganda, of the sympathies of various groups within a given society all served as a new brand of intelligence gathering. Government administrators asked anthropologists to “profile” the populations of both enemy and allied nations. After a summer of intensive language training, Lewis was hired to do the latter, serving as a liaison between the U.S. government and experts in and on subjects relevant to Latin American politics and culture.

While it provided Lewis with gainful employment, his war-related work kept him behind a desk instead of out in the field—and out of the mainstream of academic anthropology. Lewis’s success at Yale led to a post in the Justice Department’s Special War Policies Unit, in which he analyzed Falangist (fascist) propaganda in South America. Now fluent in Spanish, familiar with leading political appointees in most of the Republics of Latin America, and well schooled in the history of the region, Lewis was a valuable intellectual commodity. It was not until he was appointed as Field Representative for Latin America for the National Indian Institute, however, that he would finally get an opportunity to direct field research. It was through that position that Lewis was finally given the chance to establish his place as a major American anthropologist. In the summer of 1943, then, with wife and young son in tow, Lewis headed for Mexico City.

(Re)Visiting Tepoztlán

“When I arrived in Mexico,” Lewis wrote in a 1944 letter to Ruth Benedict, “I was under the impression that my job would be a fairly easy administrative position, editing of the

Bulletin, the pleasantries of a goodwill mission, siestas, Mexican beer, cocktail parties, etc. Instead, I soon found myself directing a large scale research project in Tepoztlán. My long awaited Latin American field trip certainly came with a bang!”¹⁷ Indeed, upon first blush, what awaited him in Mexico was not a field study of much significance. In agreeing to serve as the U.S. field representative to the Inter-American Indian Institute in Mexico City, Lewis understood his duties to include the planning and execution of a research project on the effect of government policies on Mexican Indians parallel to the Indian Personality Project already underway in the United States. What he found on the ground, however, was a subject of extraordinarily rich potential for precisely the kind of comprehensive field study he longed to begin. So, with a small and often undependable staff of hastily-trained personnel, his wife Ruth responsible for all psychological testing, an unpredictable and always limited budget, and the input of varied (and sometimes contradictory) voices from the U.S. and Mexico, Lewis transformed his mission, designing and directing an ambitious research program that would grow into his first major monograph. That study, published in 1951 as *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Revisited*, marked Lewis’s arrival as an American social scientist of major significance. Asserting Lewis’s participation in an on-going conversation among social scientists about the nature of “Progress” and its impact of traditional cultures and communities, the Tepoztlán study also marked the intellectual path that eventually led its author to discover the culture of poverty.

Though hasty, Lewis’s welcomed his appointment as the National Indian Institute’s man in Mexico City as a chance to finally get into the field. Hired at a last-minute, Lewis came highly recommended to John Collier, the Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian

¹⁷ Oscar Lewis to Ruth Benedict, April 26, 1944. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

Affairs, and Laura Thompson, the Director of the Indian Personality Project. Yet, in keeping with the format for the Project's North American field studies, the job required someone with knowledge of and experience administering psychological tests, including the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) and the Rorschach.¹⁸ Although Lewis had neither, and had, in fact, seemingly little interest in the psychological dimensions of culture change, his wife Ruth was capable of learning both and for Thompson and Collier, this would have to suffice. After a flurry of reading and research, Ruth, Oscar, and their young son Gene began the long drive to Mexico City.

Almost immediately upon his arrival, Lewis began to spend most of his waking hours in the offices of the Inter-American Indian Institute at 2 *calle* Liverpool. There, he navigated the politics of a transnational institution with a headstrong director, fulfilled the duties of an envoy responsible for the obligations of a foreign post, and planned a rather ambitious anthropological research project. Lewis embraced the challenge. "I put in about fifteen to eighteen hours daily on work related to my job here and love it," he wrote to a colleague in Washington.¹⁹ Although translating the Institute's publications and supporting the daily work of the Director in making contacts with other Latin American governments took up the lion's share of his time, it was the planning and execution of the research project that truly captured Lewis's imagination. Far from the limited personality project envisioned by Thompson and Collier, Lewis saw in Mexico the opportunity to research and write a truly holistic study of the history, economy, politics, and culture of a living

¹⁸ Developed in the 1930s and widely used in psychoanalysis and psychological testing by the 1940s, the TAT and Rorschach tests were both commonly used as projective tests. Subjects would be presented with random stimuli (the Rorschach ink blot cards, for example) and then quizzed on their emotional and intellectual responses. Projective assessments were believed to provide a glimpse of unconscious personality. See Philip H. DuBois, *The History of Psychological Testing* (Boston: Allen & Bacon, 1970).

¹⁹ Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, October 27, 1943. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

community. To achieve his ambitious goal, Lewis relied upon the absolute support of the Institute's Director, Manuel Gamio.

A student of Franz Boas, an intimate of Robert Redfield, and an anthropologist of international reputation, Gamio could make or break Lewis's project.²⁰ Yet, with every effort Lewis made to stretch the scope of the research project further and further towards a comprehensive study of an entire community's history and culture, he cannily emphasized the extent to which the project could fulfill Gamio's objective of providing a real basis for policy change for Indians in Mexico. A few months into Lewis's tenure, he had persuaded the Director, ensuring the support of an invaluable ally. Assuaging the fears of administrators in Washington, Gamio endorsed Lewis's plans to expand the project. "If at first I looked upon the development of this project with a great deal of pessimism...today I am completely optimistic." Gamio added, "I consider Dr. Lewis an extremely competent and dynamic person and I believe he will develop an interesting piece of work."²¹ Writing his own report to Ernest Maes, the Institute's Washington Secretary, Lewis boasted that "Gamio is more enthusiastic about the project than ever and precisely because I have insisted that the scope of the study be extended to include ecological, economic, and other subjects."²² With Gamio's support secured, all Lewis had to do was find a place to begin his research.

In choosing where to make this study of the Mexican Indian personality, Oscar Lewis made a decision that would affect his career and his field for years to come. Although during the month he and Ruth spent traversing the dusty roads—sometimes on

²⁰ It was at Gamio's request that Redfield met with Oscar and Ruth Lewis on their journey to Mexico. Manuel Gamio to Robert Redfield, September 1943. Redfield, Robert. Papers, Box 15, Folder 10, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

²¹ Manuel Gamio to Ernest Maes, December 1, 1943. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

²² Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, December 1, 1943. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

horseback—through dozens of Mexican towns and villages, the choice, and its significance for his career, was far from obvious. “It is certainly a job,” Lewis wrote after one of these journeys, “to translate into action what sounds like a simple matter on paper.”²³ Mexican and American anthropologists and archaeologists researching pre-Columbia and Indian cultures had favored the villages of post-revolutionary Mexico for much of the early twentieth century. Notables from Boas to Bronislaw Malinowski had undertaken field research in Mexico, not to mention the Mexican social scientists that they helped train. Upon his arrival, Lewis was offered ample advice on which communities to choose. “Everyone approached for suggestions quite naturally recommended the group he or she had worked with,” Lewis reported with more than a hint of frustration.²⁴ It was thus left to him and Ruth to sort through all the recommendations they had received and make a decision. The criteria, at least, were clear. Lewis had to find two communities of different levels of “acculturation,” or contact with the urban center. And, for practicality’s sake, he had to find communities in which the majority of the townspeople spoke Spanish so that he, Ruth, and their few fieldworkers could obtain the maximum amount of data in the shortest period of time. Proximity to Mexico City, where Lewis would still be required to fulfill his responsibilities at the Institute, and a relatively decent level of sanitation (Ruth and the baby had already suffered paralyzing bouts of dysentery) were also serious considerations. By early November, one village had emerged as a viable site: a village called Tepoztlán.

Befitting his self-confidence, Lewis was undaunted by the fact that the community with which he had decided to begin his anthropological career had been, for the previous two decades, associated with the name of one of the founders of the modern field. The

²³ Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, November 6, 1943. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

²⁴ Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, October 27, 1943. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

largest of all the villages Lewis surveyed, Tepoztlán and its three thousand five hundred inhabitants had been the subject of Robert Redfield's first major monograph, *Tepoztlan: A Mexican Village* (1931). Justifying the choice of Tepoztlán precisely because of Redfield's "background" work and the opportunity it provided to do a follow up project, Lewis would, in fact, later claim to have undertaken the first express "restudy" of a community researched by another anthropologist.²⁵ Although he referred to Redfield's study in his early documentation on the personality study as his "control" and used it as a training tool with his field workers, Lewis's restudy would eventually become an explicit critique, something to which an early note on Redfield's study gingerly hints.²⁶ "Redfield's interest [in Tepoztlán] was very selective," Lewis wrote to Ernest Maes, explaining why he had to undertake his own background research, "and his material of the most general sort."²⁷ Thus, in choosing to work on the same problems, and to revisit the acculturation process taking place among the people of Tepoztlán, Lewis was actively turning away from a limited culture and personality study and stepping into a larger debate about modernization and development that Redfield had begun nearly two decades earlier.²⁸

As Chapter 1 documents, Robert Redfield's Mexican fieldwork, undertaken in the late 1920s, gave rise to a bold new approach in the field, shifting the focus of American anthropologists from the method of "ethnographic photography," in which the cultures of primitive societies were documented before their presumed disappearance, to the study of contemporary processes of social change. Before Redfield met his wife, Margaret (Greta) Park (the daughter of famed Chicago sociologist Robert R. Park), there was little evidence

²⁵ Oscar Lewis, "Tepoztlán Restudied: A Critique of the Folk-Urban Conceptualization of Social Change," *Rural Sociology* 18, no. 2: 121.

²⁶ Oscar Lewis, "Memorandum on the Recent Progress on the Personality Study in Mexico," December 28, 1943. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

²⁷ Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, November 6, 1943. John Collier Papers, Folder 91, Box 44, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

²⁸ Indeed, by the 1940s, Benedict, Mead, and many of their contemporaries in the culture and personality school had famously limited their ethnographic research to studies of national character.

that he might have such a significant impact on the American social sciences. Marked by wanderlust, Redfield's early academic life led him to a half-hearted commitment to go to law school at Chicago. Assuming the leadership of his father's law practice after the senior Redfield's unexpected death, the young man found himself stuck in a career that neither excited nor developed his exceptional intellect. In marrying Greta in 1920, however, Redfield became part of a family whose patriarch, Robert E. Park, provided him much-needed guidance and an outlet for his untapped intellectual vivacity. The founder of the Chicago school of sociology, Park, perhaps more than any other American social scientist, had devised a scientific explanation for the social tensions he witnessed in early twentieth century American cities. Rising to preeminence during his three decades at the University of Chicago, Park was, by the time of Redfield's introduction to the family, a giant in the social sciences. Sensing his new son-in-law's *ennui*, Park sent the young couple on a trip to Mexico in 1923 to travel through the countryside and meet a few of Park's professional acquaintances. The villages of the Mexican countryside and his acquaintance with a Mexican anthropologist would serve to change Redfield's course forever. That anthropologist was Manuel Gamio.²⁹

If Redfield could be said to possess an intellectual lineage, Manuel Gamio and Robert E. Park were his two very devoted parents. Gamio's humanistic focus on the social problems of his time appealed to Redfield, while the power of Park's explanations for social change provoked his thinking, inspiring an enthusiasm and sense of purpose he had lacked for most of his life. Reflecting an embrace of the basic premise of evolutionary theory, there was a notion of social change at the heart of Park's sociology that traced the nature of transition from the countryside to the city—the shift from parochial to

²⁹ Here and in the brief biographical account that follows, I refer the reader to Clifford Wilcox, *Robert Redfield and the Development of American Anthropology* (Lanham/Boulder/New York: Lexington Books, 2004).

cosmopolitan, from holistic community to the diverse, anonymous metropolis. Identifying the process of urbanization as a fundamentally destabilizing, Park and his colleague Ernest Burgess further explained that the city was the crucible through which people from different societies would become one, organized, modern society. Burgess's "zonal hypothesis" literally charted the increasing organization that occurred closer and closer to the city center. For Park, "marginal men" were those who lived with each foot in a different culture—the modern and pre-modern, the country and the city. These men carried the burden of serving as agents of social change. In his son-in-law, Park saw a thinker who could reintroduce these ideas of social change to the field of anthropology. As Redfield's biographer writes, "[Park] personally challenged Redfield to make his career serve as a bridge between these two closely related disciplines."³⁰ Thus, the theme of culture change became the bedrock of Redfield's dissertation, which he published upon obtaining his doctorate in 1928 as *Tepoztlán: A Mexican Village*.

Redfield's nine-month long stay in Tepoztlán in 1926 was geared towards studying the "comparative mentality" of people on both sides of the process he came to call "modernization."³¹ Portraying Tepoztlán as a society emerging from rural isolation into increasing levels of modernity because of contact with the urban center of Mexico City, Redfield found Tepoztecan society to be divided between two groups he described as *los tontos* and *los correctos*. *Los correctos* were men and women who, because of their vocations (tradespeople, for example) interacted with the urban center frequently. They were more accustomed to modern ways—medicines, foodstuffs, dress, and modes of enjoyment and leisure. *Los tontos* were the peasants who remained in Tepoztlán and engaged with the

³⁰ Wilcox, *Robert Redfield and the Development of American Anthropology*, 28.

³¹ Robert Redfield, "Statement of the Nature of the Field Work Proposed," [Summer 1925]. Redfield, Robert. Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library; on "modernization," see Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlán, A Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1930), 3.

capital only through the stories of others. *Los tontos* were more likely to remain superstitious about health and medicine, retain a sharp sense of class distinctions, control the religious fiestas, and preserve traditional customs in art, gastronomy, and dress. Explicitly following Park and Burgess, Redfield described the emotional turmoil experienced by the “marginal man” in Tepoztecan society, a man who is the lone cosmopolite in the village, having gone to Mexico City to become educated. This man returned to Tepoztlán to find himself alienated from his own culture.³² Modern ways were forcing a process of disorganization that could more precisely be labeled a process of modernization. Redfield concluded that “the disorganization and perhaps the reorganization of the culture here considered under the slowly growing influence of the city is a process.” Redfield added, “[It is] a diffusion process.”³³

Through Redfield’s *Tepoztlán*, which became an immensely influential text and guaranteed its author a place of respect in his chosen profession, Robert Park’s theories of social change found their way into the science of anthropology. With Redfield as its handmaiden, Parkian sociology also emerged as an alternative to the dominant Boasian paradigm. Although he wholeheartedly accepted Boas’s fundamental insights about the flaws of evolutionary theories of culture, Redfield wanted to find a way to explain social change from an anthropological perspective. “There is,” he wrote in the opening pages of the book, “a growing disposition on the part of cultural anthropologists to study social processes as such, rather than to rest content with the mere description of cultures or the solution of specific historical sequences.”³⁴ Asserting his theoretical approach, Redfield wrote, “that it is still possible to study the more isolated groups of Mexico in order to learn

³² In fact, Lewis refers to Redfield’s theory as “the old Redfield and Park formula.” Oscar Lewis to Robert Scott, November 5, 1958. Robert Scott Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 60, University of Illinois Archives.

³³ Redfield, *Tepoztlán*, 14. Emphasis added.

³⁴ Redfield, *Tepoztlán*, 10.

something about the pre-Columbia cultures, and about the changes which they underwent when they came in contact with the Spaniards, is not to be denied.” But, he continued, “such a study would be a study of a dead culture and of a past change. It is merely to be pointed out that such was not the interest which took the writer to Mexico.”³⁵ Indeed, what Redfield was trying to understand was a process he and a community of sympathetic scholars would term “acculturation.”

Acculturation became a new theoretical lens for anthropologists and, indeed, social scientists of other stripes. Five years after his *Tepoztlán* was published, Redfield, along with Melville Herskovitz and Ralph Linton (two anthropologists trained by Boas), officially tried to reconcile the historicist insights of Boasian relativism with the search for a legitimate science of social change, particularly as that change related to pre-modern, predominately indigenous cultures. They introduced the term and the concept in their jointly written 1936 Memorandum on Acculturation. As they explained in the Memorandum, acculturation was defined as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.”³⁶ The authors continued, addressing the role of the individual and of the individual’s psychology in the “integration of traits into the patterns of the accepting culture.”³⁷ Shifting the discipline away from the strictures of the Boasian turn and towards the study of processes of change, Redfield and his colleagues made modernity as much the purview of his field as pre-modernity had historically been, and this is exactly what Oscar Lewis found compelling about anthropology. Through Lewis’s work, culture change and social interaction, imbued by the methodology and insights of the culture and personality approach became the guideposts

³⁵ Redfield, *Tepoztlán*, 12-13

³⁶ Robert Redfield, Melville Herskovitz, Ralph Linton, “Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation,” *American Anthropologist* New Series 38, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1936): 149.

³⁷ Redfield and others, “Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation,” 151.

of anthropological research in the United States, catapulting Lewis and others like him into new positions in their field as mediators between old and new worlds.

Due more to their very different temperaments than to fundamental differences in their approaches, Lewis elicited a far different picture of Tepoztlán than had Redfield. More than just a study of the psychological make-up of the Tepoztecan Indian (which Collier and Thompson originally hoped to see), *Life in a Mexican Village* encompassed a broad examination of the “social, economic, and political life of [Tepoztlán].” Lewis would do a culture and personality study, but he would do so in the service of a much broader objective. This approach, he wrote, promised a “more rounded study, [that] would give much more meaning to the psychological materials.”³⁸ By the end of 1943, Lewis had in the field one psychologist (in the form of Ruth Lewis) and four students from Mexico’s School of Anthropology (having no English and no field research between them, Lewis embarked on a hasty orientation for these four, spending an hour a day improvising a translation of Redfield’s book out loud). To this mix, Lewis added another anthropologist from the Mexican Department of Indian Affairs and two statisticians to make sense of the socio-economic data Lewis intended to collect and compare it to the 1940 Mexican census. A law student from the University of Montevideo in Uruguay joined the team (“his background does not qualify him for this work,” Lewis wrote, “but I am banking on his common sense”) as well. In case any gaps were left unfilled, Lewis also hired a historian to research Tepoztlán’s past, two agronomists to study agricultural practices and diagnose possible areas of improvement, four social workers, one doctor, and one woefully overworked typist!³⁹ Borrowing personnel from eight different government agencies, Lewis

³⁸ Oscar Lewis, “Memorandum on the Recent Progress on the Personality Study in Mexico,” December 28, 1943. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

³⁹ Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, November 29, 1943. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

had a motley crew of twenty by the time field work in Tepoztlán began.⁴⁰ On holiday leave from his post in Mexico City, Lewis happily spent the Christmas of 1943—his twenty-ninth birthday—in Tepoztlán, where, he wrote to Laura Thompson, “a group of Tepoztecs came to our door and began to serenade me, as is their custom on birthdays.” He continued, with a touch of pride in the attention he had received from the villagers, “the thing that was really funny was to listen to them try to sing ‘Oscar.’ They sure had a tough time.”⁴¹ As Lewis soon discovered, his name was not the only thing with which Tepoztecs had a tough time.

Lewis’s preliminary survey of the eight villages in the *municipio* and the seven *barrios* of Tepoztlán, often carried out alone and by and large on foot, led to the urgent development of several action programs that shaped the nature of his conclusions about culture change. In meetings with local leaders, Lewis asked the heads of the larger families in the *municipio* to discuss their daily problems. Rather than rely on anthropologists to deduce their problems, Lewis later wrote, “they knew their problems only too well.”⁴² Medical care and agricultural expertise were among their most fervent requests. Far from the abstract obligation Lewis felt to do something charitable for the people of Tepoztlán after the personality research was completed, he recognized, through these encounters, that the provision of social services could actually serve to facilitate his research agenda.⁴³ True to his character, Lewis wished to make genuine connections with the men and women whose community he studied but also to induce better data from the villagers by mitigating some of their daily troubles. In a larger sense, this approach reflected Lewis’s interest in the

⁴⁰ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 29.

⁴¹ Oscar Lewis to Laura Thompson, December 28, 1943. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

⁴² Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1951; repr., Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1963), xv. Citations are to 1963 reprint.

⁴³ Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, xv.

difficulties faced by the people of Tepoztlán and how they understood the potential for solving them.

The action programs that he began provided Lewis with a barometer by which he could personally witness the process of acculturation in action and measure the malleability of Tepoztecan culture. Among these were the establishment of a medical cooperative and, at Gamio's insistence, the development of a project to improve the local diet by planting, raising, and harvesting soybeans and teaching locals how to integrate this new crop into the regional cuisine. The response of the villagers to the programs provided solid evidence of the degree to which Tepoztecs were and were not open to increasingly modern ways of life.⁴⁴ "It was as if," Lewis wrote in his monograph, "we had set up an experimental situation to study the reactions of the villagers to outside influence."⁴⁵

Empowering the medical doctor employed by the Project to act as a *de facto* field worker while performing clinical services, Lewis instructed him to note each patient's analysis of his own disease to document Tepoztecs' beliefs about illness. This, Lewis believed, would provide the doctor with a lexicon that he could use to explain illnesses to his patients in ways they would be more likely to understand. "If we can gain their confidence in this way," Lewis wrote, "we can later teach them more scientific

⁴⁴ The soybean project was something of a crusade for Gamio whose devotion to it became an inside joke for Lewis and Maes. "Gamio's enthusiasm reached a high peak today," Lewis wrote to Maes, "when he thought of the idea of introducing soybeans to Tepoztlán as part of our project. This came about after a discussion in which I suggested that we try to do something practical for the people of Tepoztlán, such as getting the government to pipe water to the village from a nearby source. His soybean idea may be good. I prefer that it wait until we have collected some data on the food habits of the people. I also fear that it will mean taking the time of some of our workers from collecting psychological materials to teaching the Tepoztecs new food habits. However, far be it from me to cross Gamio on soybeans!" Oscar Lewis to Maes, December 21, 1943. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives. Later, Lewis reported, "there has been some progress with the soy bean experiment. I took some soybeans out to Tepoztlán last week and started our cook and a few neighbors on making *pinole*, *gordas*, and *tortillas*. They turned out very tasty and the people showed great enthusiasm in learning how to make these products." Oscar Lewis to Maes, March 9, 1944. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, p. xv.

rationalizations” for their maladies.⁴⁶ Despite his efforts to train the cooperative’s doctor to communicate with villagers more effectively, Lewis found the challenges faced by the cooperative evidence of Tepoztecan’s obstinate reliance on their healers, or *curanderos*, and suspicion of the medical testing that was part of the doctor’s job. The soybean experiment provided Lewis with a different perspective, demonstrating one aspect of Tepoztecan culture that seemed remarkably open to change. “Tepoztecan,” Lewis later wrote, “have many resistances to culture change but these do not appear to be in the field of agricultural innovations.”⁴⁷ Writing to George Murdock, his old boss at Yale, Lewis shared some conclusions about the use of practical aid in his research program. “This is a novel approach for academic anthropology but one that has been long overdue and...that should flourish after the war,” he predicted. “Incidentally,” Lewis added with a note of sly satisfaction, “it works magic in establishing rapport with the people.”⁴⁸

The research methodology that Lewis initiated in Tepoztlán became his most significant contribution to the field of academic anthropology and led him directly to the culture of poverty theory. Between his weekly commute back and forth from Mexico City to Tepoztlán, Lewis helped Ruth prepare for the immense undertaking of beginning the psychological testing and field questionnaires, managed two aid programs, and tried to work through the theoretical challenges that his ambitious objectives presented. The result was the family study approach. Studying families as smaller units of a given community was not common in anthropological field work.⁴⁹ As Lewis explained, however, he grappled

⁴⁶ Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, March 9, 1944. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

⁴⁷ Oscar Lewis to Edward Spicer, July 10, 1950. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 60, University of Illinois Archives.

⁴⁸ Oscar Lewis to G.P. Murdock, March 14, 1944. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

⁴⁹ Lewis mentions Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki as one of the few social scientists to have used the family study. See Oscar Lewis, “An Anthropological Approach to Family Studies,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 55, no. 5: 470n1.

with several questions that led him to experiment with this technique. “How might we reveal the great variety of practices and the range of individual differences in such a complex village?” he later wrote of the challenge of his Tepoztlán study. He continued, “Though we came prepared with the traditional anthropological techniques as well as with some of the psychologist’s...something more was needed, and we turned to the study of the family.”⁵⁰

Embedded in Lewis’s turn towards the family was a critique of existing approaches to the study of culture and personality. As Lewis saw it, the culture and personality approach risked overlooking the role of the individual—the flesh-and-blood person, who navigated the challenges of their very real lives. “Indeed,” he wrote, “as theoretical concepts in the study of culture have increased and our level of generalization and abstraction has been raised, we have come to deal more and more with averages and stereotypes rather than with real people in all their individuality.”⁵¹ Understanding the dynamics that contributed to personality development—a key objective of all of the Indian Personality Project research—was, Lewis argued, only possible if one could assess the group dynamics of the “culture” in which the individual developed. The tools available to Lewis as an anthropologist, he deemed unhelpful. As he later wrote, “the traditional anthropological reliance upon a few informants to obtain a picture of the culture and the people, though perhaps feasible in a small, primitive, tribal society, was inadequate to this situation.”⁵² Instead, Lewis turned to a larger unit within the culture and focused his attention on the families of Tepoztlán. Identifying three “representative families” in each of the seven *barrios* of Tepoztlán—selected on the basis of the census data the team had collected—Lewis’s assistants each moved into the households they had targeted. “We applied to the

⁵⁰ Lewis, “An Anthropological Approach to Family Studies,” 471.

⁵¹ Lewis, “An Anthropological Approach to Family Studies,” 472.

⁵² Lewis, “An Anthropological Approach to Family Studies,” 469.

single family,” Lewis explained, “all the techniques traditionally used by the anthropologist in the study of an entire culture.”⁵³

The rest of Lewis’s long career pivoted on the technique of the family study. It was this approach that captured his attention after Tepoztlán and become his standard methodology. As he wrote to a friend in 1948, “I am becoming convinced that...family case studies based upon living with the family and using interviews as well as projective psychological testing techniques such as the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Tests offers an excellent way to build up inductively a picture of the total culture.” He continued, “It may mean however that we anthropologists must be satisfied with writing monographs on single families before we write tomes on entire cultures.”⁵⁴ Indeed, ten years after he left Tepoztlán, Lewis would grow so enamored of the approach that he would allow himself to blur the lines between the two.

Because of wartime exigencies and budget shortfalls, Lewis and his team left Mexico in late 1944—but not before he had made some initial judgments about the contrast between his Tepoztlán and that of Robert Redfield. Lewis discovered much that he believed Redfield had simply missed, not all of it attributable to the twenty years that had passed between their studies. Instead, Lewis wrote to Ernest Maes that “...if there is one conclusion that can be made at this stage of the research it is that the picture of Tepoztlán as written by Redfield...has been highly romanticized. Actually their [Tepoztecans’s] lot is a hard one and more important, they are aware of it.”⁵⁵ This critique foreshadowed an assessment that had profound repercussions after the publication of his findings. Lewis got chance to follow through on this impression when he and Ruth returned to Mexico in the

⁵³ Lewis, “An Anthropological Approach to Family Studies,” 471.

⁵⁴ Oscar Lewis to Carl Taylor, April 20, 1948. Tepoztlán Project Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

⁵⁵ Oscar Lewis to Ernest Maes, February 22, 1944. Correspondence Folder, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 107, University of Illinois Archives.

summers of 1947 and 1948 where they completed the family studies, psychological testing, and background research required for their write-up. By 1951, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*—a window into the daily lives and, more importantly for Lewis, the daily struggles of the thirty-five hundred people of Tepoztlán—was ready for publication.

Twenty years after he published his findings and publicly questioned Redfield's conclusions, Lewis reflected on nature of the disagreement that, for a time, dominated the field of cultural anthropology. "[Redfield] would explain our differences in terms of hidden questions which guided our respective research," Lewis wrote. "He suggests that his question was, 'What do these people enjoy?' and my question was, 'What do these people suffer from?'" While claiming to disagree with Redfield's assessment, Lewis went on to justify the significance of his approach. "Concern with what people suffer from...lends itself to more productive insight into the human condition, the dynamics of conflict, and the forces for change."⁵⁶ Indeed, with a few notable exceptions, the overarching view that Lewis's *Tepoztlán* provided into the lives of this Mexican village was one of men and women too poor, hopeless, and ignorant to improve their own lives. Tepoztlán, in Lewis's view, was a community that had adopted some of the novelties of the modern world without truly *becoming* modern, leaving its residents mired in lives of deprivation and suffering.

A thoroughgoing five-hundred pages in length, Lewis's study showed Tepoztecos to be guarded and detached in their inter-personal relations, suspicious in their dealings with one another, and generally unwilling to share their scarce resources. This contrasted dramatically with Redfield's view that, in Lewis's words, Tepoztlán was "a relatively homogeneous, isolated, smoothly functioning, and well integrated society made up of a

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Anthropological Essays*, 251-252.

contended and well-adjusted people.”⁵⁷ Lewis stressed two major themes about Tepoztecan society. The first was the people’s material unhappiness, which, he asserted, Redfield simply did not notice because he thought of them as peasants and he thought of peasant life as primitive. The second was the passivity of Tepoztecan themselves about improving their own circumstances. Explicating these central points, Lewis introduced readers to an argument he would eventually refine into his theory of the culture of poverty—an argument about a people who were too passive and apathetic to alleviate their own misery.

In the course of his twenty chapters, Lewis detailed the harsh realities of village life. After devising a complex scale by which to measure the relative wealth of village families, Lewis found some eighty-percent of Tepoztecan families to live below minimum standards “for decent subsistence.” He attributed the problem to a complex set of factors, including the impact of the 1911 Revolution (which saw many of the village’s young men killed and the local economy severely hampered), prolonged illness, and unwise spending habits. (Lewis noted that the poorest people of Tepoztlán spent the bulk of their income on religious fiestas). While what little land Tepoztecan owned was becoming increasingly unproductive, Lewis found that those families without land already had to resort to a “variety of activities which together provide a meager income.” Lewis also identified the need for irrigation and the villagers’ oft-mentioned longing for better soil. From what he saw in the early 1940s, Lewis wrote that “the village could not support itself by agriculture alone.” Poverty contributed to poor nutrition, inadequate housing and sanitation, and increasing incidents of illness. Throughout his survey of Tepoztecan life, Lewis emphasized the extent to which the village failed to live up to modern standards of living and suggested that the village would not be likely to change without outside intervention.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, 428.

⁵⁸ Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, 174-175; 80.

The passivity of the villagers, Lewis observed, only reinforced the stagnation of Tepoztecan life. And, the trials and tribulations experienced by most villagers in their daily lives only exacerbated that passivity. Personal initiative was virtually non-existent among his subjects. On issues of economic mobility, Lewis observed that “most Tepoztecan are convinced of the impossibility of becoming wealthy, and accordingly do not organize their lives around the goal of wealth.” Instead, “they are concerned with the day-to-day problems of subsistence.” Even wealthier Tepoztecan (those who owned land and livestock) were unlikely to learn how to use modern household conveniences, preferring to “live the way they have always lived.” Lewis also observed static family dynamics, noting that “there is in Tepoztlán...a notable absence of open ‘revolt’ against the authority of parents or against local tradition” among the young. Displaying a characteristic lack of ambition and imagination, only “a very small percentage of...youths are willing or able to strike out on new paths.” Further demonstrating their inertia, Tepoztecan neither understood nor appreciated what social assistance they did receive from the Mexican state. “Most Tepoztecan,” he wrote, “view [taxation] as an imposition...[but] accept fatalistically the necessity of paying taxes.” Despite the proximity of a federally funded medical clinic in Cuernavaca—a city to which most Tepoztecan traveled frequently—“the majority...do not use it because they still prefer *curanderos* (local shamans).” But why, Lewis asked, was apathy so prevalent among these people?⁵⁹

Lewis argued that while material conditions certainly accounted for much of their trouble, the psychology of the villagers was the real obstacle to reform. “It is a psychology of living with problems,” he wrote, “rather than solving them, of constantly adjusting to difficulties rather than eliminating them.” Having embraced the potential of psychological methods to elicit a community’s mentality, Lewis concluded that Tepoztecan were

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, 177; 185; 395; and, 42.

neither a primitive nor folk people, as Redfield had argued, but were simply poor and resigned to their poverty. Lewis emphasized the relationship between the people's passivity and the absence of economic and cultural development. While Redfield had seen an isolated and cohesive culture that was being infiltrated by modern ideas, Lewis's Tepoztlán was, in many ways, a modernizing community in which poor people were somehow being prevented from becoming fully modern by their own apathy. "We have seen," he wrote, "that in the increased contact with the outside world in recent years, Tepoztecs have taken many new traits of modern life. They now have Coca-Cola, aspirin, radios, sewing machines, phonographs, poolrooms, flashlights, clocks, steel plows, and some labor-saving devices. They also have a greater desire to attend school, to eat better, to dress better, and to spend more." Yet, he continued, "in many ways their world view is still much closer to sixteenth-century Spain and to pre-Hispanic Mexico than to the modern scientific world." His final observation was directed to his readers: "It is clear that for the most part," he concluded, "[Tepoztecs] have taken on only the more superficial aspects and values of modern life. Can western civilization offer them no more?" Lewis made it abundantly clear to his readers that the modern world could offer these poor people much more indeed.⁶⁰

The debate that Lewis initiated with Robert Redfield about the character of life in Tepoztlán brings the earliest glimmerings of his culture of poverty theory into view. What Lewis began as a follow-up to Redfield's study became an all-out attack on his colleague's worldview, and, by the late 1940s, Lewis was identifying his monograph as an explicit restudy of Redfield's 1926 field work, addressing what he thought was either incorrect or missing altogether in Redfield's picture of the village. Lewis's critique centered on two major issues. First, Lewis chafed at what he thought were Redfield's too-precious notions of

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, 447-8.

peasant life and Redfield's antipathy towards modern civilization. "Underlying [Redfield's] folk-urban dichotomy," Lewis wrote, "is a system of value judgments which contains the old Rousseauian notion of primitive peoples as noble savages, and the corollary that with civilization has come the fall of man." Continuing the attack, Lewis wrote that "again and again in Redfield's writings there emerges the value judgment that folk societies are good and urban societies bad. 'Progress' and urbanization now are seen as inevitable, but they are still evil." Lewis, in contrast, believed that "Progress" was not an evil at all. In fact, it promised to bring vital technologies for improving standards of living to people living hard-scrabble lives. Progress, in fact, promised to liberate men and women from their daily struggles, allowing them to become more engaged in the civic project of building modern and egalitarian societies. How, Lewis tried to understand, could anyone seek to deny the benefits of this process to all?⁶¹

Indeed, Lewis later reflected on the conflict, concluding that the rift did not simply owe itself to different perceptions of the cost of 'Progress' but that it was predicated on an even larger philosophical disagreement. "It has to do," he wrote, "with the question of what is a good society." In the introduction to a collection of essays on peasants, Lewis asserted the transnational nature of his emerging theory of poverty. "I have a conception of a good society as an ideal type, against which I would measure both the urban life of Chicago and the peasant life of Tepoztlán and find them both wanting." He continued, "The fact that I have stressed some of the dismal aspects of peasant life—the poverty, the high death rate, the physical violence, the frustrations, suspicions, suffering, and the waste of fine human talent—in no sense implies that I personally dislike peasants. On the contrary, some of my best friends are peasants. It is my concern for peasants as human beings that has sensitized

⁶¹ *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, xi; 435.

me to their problems.”⁶² At the root of both of these assertions, and in sharp contrast to Redfield’s position, was Lewis’s abiding faith in the notion that no culture could be isolated and studied as if it existed outside of the great stream of human life. Also evident was the fundamentally prescriptive orientation with which Lewis approached the entire project and the work of social science. Social scientists, Lewis argued through his own work, existed to diagnose cultural maladies, to bring sharper vision to the darker corners of human life. And, it was incumbent upon them to prescribe solutions.

Lewis’s own understanding of what made societies modern is nowhere more evident than in his surprising embrace of one of Redfield’s later works, a slim volume entitled *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (1953).⁶³ Originally written as a series of lectures on the “Birth of Civilization,” Redfield’s text explored the extent to which generalizations about human civilization might be profitably made and, consequently, how to make more illuminating distinctions between diverse cultures. Redfield first focused on the basic life experiences which all human beings—in all times and places—have encountered, including birth, death, maturation, and procreation. Noting the degree to which anthropologists were beginning to return to the search for a “universal culture pattern,” Redfield identified one avenue by which an understanding of human nature might be achieved. “One of the aspects of human nature,” he wrote, “is to be found in the extent to which all men look out upon the same universe.”⁶⁴ This perspective Redfield identified as a “worldview.” Documenting a transition in worldviews from primitive to modern man, Redfield wrote that “if we compare the primary worldview...with that which

⁶² Lewis, *Anthropological Essays*, 252. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Oscar Lewis to Robert Redfield, April 25, 1954. Quoted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 212.

⁶⁴ Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953), 91.

comes to prevail in modern times, especially in the West, where science has been so influential, we may recognize one of the great transformations of the human mind.”⁶⁵

Demarcating modern and pre-modern worldviews, Redfield identified the source of this “great transformation” in a way that made sense to Oscar Lewis. In a chapter revealingly titled “Man Makes Himself,” Redfield argued that the most significant distinction between all manner of pre-modern men and their modern counterparts was the willingness of modern man to “undertake to make their future world different from the one in which they live.” Thus, Redfield deduced, “the West invented progress and reform.” Although Redfield recognized that change in pre-modern societies was real, he argued that this change happened *unto* and was not consciously precipitated *by* human beings. “On the whole,” he concluded, “I think that neither the primitive societies nor the ancient civilized societies show us, except rarely, the phenomenon of conscious reform of their institutions.” Finally, Redfield admitted, “it is not easy for men to adopt the explicit position that it is their work to make over human living.” What made man modern was an essential spirit of reform—precisely the spirit that Lewis had found wanting in the villagers of Tepoztlán.⁶⁶

Despite posing very different questions about the nature of village life in Tepoztlán, then, there was common ground between Lewis and Redfield that illuminates the origins of Lewis’s culture of poverty theory. In the last pages of his *Primitive World*, Redfield notes that both he and Lewis eschewed the strict objectivity of Boasian anthropology. Instead, they both brought their own values into the field and strove to make productive generalizations.⁶⁷ In the spring of 1954, after a visit to Redfield’s office in Chicago, Lewis wrote to Redfield, noting that “I had inadvertently given the impression

⁶⁵ Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, 109.

⁶⁶ Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, 111; 123.

⁶⁷ Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, 155.

that I was critical of your attempt to find broad generalizations about the processes of culture change.” Lewis continued, “This was brought home to me forcefully after reading your recent book on *The Primitive World and Transformations* for I found myself in hearty agreement with most of what you were saying.”⁶⁸ Reflecting on his study of Tepoztlán, Lewis again wrote to Redfield that “it is true that I had often thought how far ‘we’ had come compared to Tepoztlán.”⁶⁹ Indeed although they debated the benefits of modernity’s arrival, Lewis and Redfield shared a strikingly similar vision of what modernity actually *was*. Yet it was Lewis alone who believed he could play a significant role in making that modernity a reality for the men and women he studied.

Although Lewis never identified himself as an “applied anthropologist,” his work, like much of American social science in the post-war era, was oriented towards the liberal project of applying scientific methods and insights to the great challenges facing humankind. For Oscar Lewis, the greatest challenge facing the world was the deprivation and ignorance of people he identified, in *Life in a Mexican Village*, not just as peasants but as a part of a global population of poor people. Demonstrating the reformist attitude that characterized all of his work, Lewis frequently suggested ways that outsiders could improve Tepoztecan life. Explaining the concurrent action program he oversaw, Lewis reported that at the outset of his field work “one dignified, elderly Tepoztecan rose and said, ‘many people have come here to study us, but not one of them has helped us.’ “It was clear,” Lewis wrote, “that we would have to help them.”⁷⁰ The work he did in Tepoztlán would lay important analytical building blocks for Lewis’s greatest challenge: developing an “anthropology of poverty” that would awaken public outrage and provoke genuine reform. “Helping” the poor and neglected people of the world, then, would be Lewis’s life’s

⁶⁸ Oscar Lewis to Robert Redfield, April 25, 1954. Quoted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 212.

⁶⁹ Oscar Lewis to Robert Redfield, May 13, 1954. Quoted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 213.

⁷⁰ Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, xv.

mission, provoking criticism and controversy and distilling a dramatically new conception of what poverty really meant.

Locating the Culture of Poverty

When Lewis took the podium at one of the sessions at the thirty-third meeting of the International Congress of Americanists in the summer of 1958, few knew that the man who had earned his professional fame seven years earlier with the publication of an immense monograph on the lives of peasants in a rural Mexican village was about to elucidate a concept that would influence the way urban life was understood. “The Culture of the *Vecinidad* in Mexico City: Two Case Studies” was the title of Lewis’s paper, delivered to an auditorium full of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and members of the emerging field of Area Studies in the National Museum in San Jose, Costa Rica. While the humid heat of late July in the tropics dampened the energy of Lewis’s audience, the attention his colleagues eventually paid to the ideas he introduced in San Jose only intensified in the aftermath of the meeting. That attention catapulted Lewis to public and political prominence as the world’s foremost expert on a people he identified as living apart from the rest of the modern world, people who lived in the “culture of poverty.”⁷¹

This study of life in a Mexico City slum (*vecinidad*) served as a bridge between Lewis’s work on the problems of the rural poor in Tepoztlán and his subsequent theorizing about the causes and consequences of urban poverty around the world. In Tepoztlán, Lewis made two key arguments that his later work would serve to reinforce. First, in his challenge of Redfield’s interpretation of Tepoztecan culture, Lewis argued that what Redfield called modernization was inevitable *and* desirable. Second, using insights gleaned from broad psychological testing and intensive family studies, Lewis identified an apathetic

⁷¹ Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of the *Vecinidad* in Mexico City: Two Case Studies,” *Actas del XXXIII Congreso Internacional de Americanistas* 1 (San Jose, Costa Rica: Lehmann, 1959): 387-402.

mentality that the poor peasants of Tepoztlán shared, the psychology of “living with problems rather than solving them.”⁷² In the years between the publication of *Tepoztlán* and the appearance of the *vecinidad* paper, Lewis placed both of these ideas in a new context—the urban slums of Mexico City. Throughout this process, Lewis was working out a series of intellectual problems that would eventually lead him to a full-blown theory about why poor people, around the world, were suffering from a fundamental alienation from modern life.

Although the paper Lewis read represented the debut of his explicitly cross-cultural theory about the persistence of poverty in urban *and* rural settings, little besides his suggestive introduction indicated as much. In the research for the *vecinidad* article, Lewis was following a lead that he had discovered in 1951. For that 1951 study, which he called a “Socio-psychological Study of Mexican Families of Rural Backgrounds in Mexico City,” Lewis obtained funding from the University of Illinois (where he had taken a faculty position in 1948) and the Guggenheim Foundation to document and analyze the urban lives of Tepoztecs in Mexico City.⁷³ The article that appeared from this research, “Urbanization without Breakdown,” was perhaps Lewis’s most analytically rigorous work, making an even more compelling case for the abandonment of the old Chicago School conception of urbanization as a *cause* of social disorganization than he had ventured in *Life in a Mexican Village*.⁷⁴ Lewis’s goal in undertaking this research, he explained, was “to study the process of urbanization *directly* by analyzing changes in customs, attitudes, and value systems” among specific Tepoztecs who had migrated to the capital.⁷⁵ It was the first time Lewis had done fieldwork in an urban setting.

⁷² Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, 447.

⁷³ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 48n1.

⁷⁴ Oscar Lewis, “Urbanization without Breakdown: A Case Study,” *Scientific Monthly* 75, no. 1 (Jul., 1952), 31-44.

⁷⁵ Lewis, “Urbanization without Breakdown: A Case Study,” 33. Emphasis added.

The Chicago school interpretation of urbanization as a destabilizing social process served as the backbone of most early twentieth century theorizing about “Progress.” According to the Chicago model, the process that Redfield called modernization entailed a specific set of steps. These included moving from the country to the city, shifting from agricultural work to wage labor, and trading the social harmony of small, homogeneous communities for the tension and possible hostilities attending contact with people from vastly different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. This process, William Thomas, Robert Park, and other Chicago sociologists argued, prompted a sort of psychological disorientation. With time, this disorientation would begin to subside as migrants became assimilated into the dominant society. In his work on Tepoztecan peasants in Mexico City, however, Lewis refuted this widely-accepted view.⁷⁶

Contrary to the Chicago model as he interpreted it, Lewis argued that peasant culture could survive the onslaught of city life. In his research, Lewis found that the majority of Tepoztecan migrants had arrived in the city between 1910 and 1920, forced out of the countryside during the chaos of the Mexican Revolution. Of the one hundred families he studied, the majority lived in the most densely populated parts of the city. Far from seeing the “disorganization” or breakdown of “traditional” modes of life that the Chicago model suggested (particularly in relation to family cohesion), Lewis found that “families remain strong.” Indeed, Lewis found evidence that family cohesiveness increased in the face of urbanization. In myriad other ways, from religion to food to medicine, Lewis determined that the migrants were able to maintain some of their traditional values. From this, he concluded that the Chicago model was deeply flawed. “Urbanization,” he concluded, “is not a simple, unitary, universally similar process [as the Chicago model

⁷⁶The authoritative history of the Chicago School’s major figures and their theories can be found in Andrew Abbott, *Department & Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

implied], but...it assumes difference forms and meanings, depending upon the prevailing historic, economic, social, and cultural conditions.”⁷⁷ In fact, among a broad cross-section of migrant families, Lewis found culture to be remarkably resilient. With this article, then, Lewis believed he had finally proven, beyond any doubt, that the tendency of social scientists “to view the city as the source of all evil and to idealize rural life” was a terrible error of judgment.⁷⁸ For Lewis, this represented the final statement on his quarrel with Redfield.

Five years later, Lewis returned to Mexico City to further explore one of the other major themes of his Tepoztlán work, the everyday lived experiences of poor people. In his research on urbanization, Lewis found that forty-four per cent of Tepoztecan migrants lived in Mexico City’s *vecinidad* (slum) and it was to these locales that he now turned his attention. Reflecting his longstanding interest in the socio-economic aspects of culture, he proposed a study on “Lower Class Culture Patterns and the Process of Urbanization.”⁷⁹ He wanted to know how the people of the *vecinidades* really lived. Basing his study on two carefully-chosen neighborhoods, Lewis and his staff of research assistants from Mexico’s National School of Anthropology and History questioned the members of nearly one-hundred households. Lewis and his team asked their subjects about their lives, their families, their dreams, and their religious beliefs. They observed the food their subjects cooked, the utensils they used, the illnesses they had, and the cures they sought. Through this research, Lewis devised a coherent image of what slum life was like for his subjects. What he saw was not entirely unfamiliar.

The problems Lewis documented were not particularly different from those that had plagued the poorest among his Tepoztecan subjects in the village—particularly the

⁷⁷ Lewis, “Urbanization without Breakdown: A Case Study,” 38.

⁷⁸ Lewis, “Urbanization without Breakdown: A Case Study,” 32n1.

⁷⁹ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 51n5.

superstitions and rejection of modern conveniences. Yet the residents of the *vecinidad* seemed to display these traits regardless of whether they were migrants from the countryside or had lived in the slums all their lives. “Indeed,” Lewis told his audience in San Jose, “we found no sharp differences in family structure, diet, dress and belief systems of the *vecinidad* tenants, according to their rural-urban origins.” He continued, “the use of herbs for curing, the raising of animals, the belief in sorcery, spiritualism, the celebration of the Day of the Dead, political apathy and cynicism about government seemed just as common among persons who have been in the city for over thirty years as among more recent arrivals.” From this data, Lewis concluded that “one might call these people the urban peasantry.”⁸⁰

Just as he argued that urbanization need not produce social disorganization along the lines of the Chicago model, Lewis also concluded that urbanization did not necessarily lead to *modernization*. This finding explicitly contradicted the consensus about urbanization among social scientists. “I have serious reservations,” he wrote a few years later, “about [the] basic assumption that urbanization tends to create a universalistic way of life which can be defined as universalistic middle-class culture.” The question that inspired his further research, he noted, had been “to determine under what conditions people who live in large cities take on a universalistic middle-class culture and under what conditions they do not.”⁸¹ When it came time to write up his findings from the *vecinidad* study, Lewis answered this question with a rather provocative preamble that would form the basis for all his further research and the source of all of his future fame. Noting similarities he had observed between depictions of poor people in other parts of the world—including “lower class Negroes in the United States”—and the inhabitants of the

⁸⁰ Lewis, “The Culture of the *Vecinidad* in Mexico City: Two Case Studies,” 400.

⁸¹ Oscar Lewis to John Hobgood, October 2, 1962. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 57, University of Illinois Archives.

vecinidades, Lewis told his audience in San Jose that while poverty among preliterate or peasant communities could be identified as the product of “poor technology or poor resources or both,” poverty in the city posed greater analytical challenges to the anthropologist. “Poverty,” in the modern world, he argued, “becomes a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and creates a sub-culture of its own.” Distinct from race or region, poverty itself separated poor people from the rest of society. Lewis thus concluded that “one can speak of the culture of poverty for it has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members.”⁸²

Before Lewis would adequately explain what the culture of poverty *was*, he wanted to explain why his readers should care about the people who were stuck in it. Another more comprehensive study of poor families in the *vecinidades*, coupled with a return to one of the families Lewis had gotten to know in Tepoztlán, provided him with enough material for his second major monograph, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1959). Attesting to the kind of work he believed himself to be doing, Lewis originally used the more expansive “anthropology of poverty” as his subtitle.⁸³ Indeed, as he wrote to his friend political scientist Maurice Halpern, “These *vecinidad* families are part of the great mass of urban poor in the world who have few spokesmen.” Electing himself to that position, he added that “I believe anthropology has a new historic task in reporting honestly and realistically the way of life of these people. I don’t know how my colleagues will take to this idea but I am convinced that there is a job to be done as a social scientist and a humanist.”⁸⁴

Balancing scientific objectivity and a humanist imperative to shed light on the suffering of others was always difficult for Lewis. In his own work, he often relied on

⁸² Lewis, “The Culture of the *Vecinidad* in Mexico City: Two Case Studies,” 387.

⁸³ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 55.

⁸⁴ Oscar Lewis to Maurice Halpern, April 11, 1958. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 57, University of Illinois Archives.

unscientific sources of information. The most significant influences on the early expressions of the culture of poverty theory were the novelistic treatments of the poor that Lewis encountered in his wide reading. Fictional accounts of urban life among the poor, including Somerset Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) and Arthur Morrison's *Tales of Mean Street* (1895) among others, shaped the way Lewis interpreted his Mexico City data. "All of this," he wrote of a list of novels and other nineteenth century accounts of slum life (British author Henry Mayhew's 1861 opus *London Labour and The London Poor* most notable among these latter works), "suggested that what I had found in Mexico City was a cross-cultural phenomenon." He continued, "It was on the basis of this experience that I conceived of the idea of a subculture of poverty which cut across national differences."⁸⁵ Aware of the potential risks of relying on fictional accounts as a basis for scientific theory-building, Lewis wrote to a friend, "Can all the many cross-cultural similarities I have noted be the result of accident or coincidence?"⁸⁶ Lewis answered his own question by relying so heavily on these sources. The extent to which his own findings confirmed the depictions of poverty in these fictional accounts reinforced his confidence in their usefulness. Lewis believed that anthropologists, in their zeal to document the lives of preliterate, isolated tribes, had overlooked the most compelling subjects in their midst, the urban poor, and that the novelists and muckrakers of the nineteenth century had merely picked up the slack.⁸⁷

In addition to serving as theoretical building blocks, the Victorian novels and journalistic accounts of poverty in European and American cities contributed to Lewis's sense that a new style of anthropological reportage had to be devised to convey, accurately

⁸⁵ Oscar Lewis to Elizabeth Harzog, March 29, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 57, University of Illinois Archives.

⁸⁶ Oscar Lewis to Conrad Arensberg, November 3, 1960. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 55, University of Illinois Archives.

⁸⁷ Oscar Lewis to Gustavo Duran, August 11, 1958. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 56, University of Illinois Archives.

and fully, the condition of his subjects. In *Five Families*, he first employed a style in which he presented the stories of five families—he was now fully committed to the family study methodology he had developed in Tepoztlán—by describing a typical day in the lives of each of them. “The study of days,” Lewis wrote in his introduction to *Five Families*, “attempts to give some of the immediacy and wholeness of life which is portrayed by the novelist.”⁸⁸ To distinguish between the literary style he used and the very real subject matter about which he wrote, Lewis emphasized that “These days are not composites; they are real days. And the individuals are not constructed types but are real people.”⁸⁹ Lewis was enamored of his own device. In a letter to an eminent chronicler of poverty, novelist John Steinbeck, Lewis described *Five Families*, noting that “I call [my] approach ethnographic realism in contrast to literary realism.” Asking for Steinbeck’s opinion of his manuscript, Lewis added with a hint of pride in his own writerly stylings that “any resemblance between these family portraits and fiction is purely accidental!”⁹⁰

The germinal idea of the culture of poverty was not simply a product of Lewis’s earnest imagination or his reading of compelling accounts of life in the slums. Indeed, the notion of a distinct lower-class culture had its roots in New Deal social science.⁹¹ Among these New Deal era social scientists, Lewis identified two key figures whose work directly influenced his own thinking. W. Lloyd Warner’s approach consisted of applying the participant-observer methodology of anthropology to the intellectual problems common

⁸⁸ Lewis, *Five Families*, 5.

⁸⁹ Lewis, *Five Families*, 5.

⁹⁰ Oscar Lewis to John Steinbeck, October 6, 1958. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 61, University of Illinois Archives.

⁹¹ Alice O’Connor explains, in great detail, the emergence of the concept of lower-class culture among popular writers and social scientist. Ranging from cultural critiques of capitalism to analyses of the culture of the lower-class communities, O’Connor demonstrates the extent to which the categories of class and culture became muddled in the 1930s. O’Connor concludes that “Without necessarily denying—indeed, often embracing—the need for economic reform and cultural uplift, social scientific poverty knowledge would concern itself with chronicling the deeper cultural lags sustaining poverty and especially the cultural contradictions between economic reality and democratic ideal.” See O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 55-73.

in sociology, namely how modern industrial societies were organized and how social status within them was made manifest. Warner's work would suggest many of the strands of thought that Lewis would later more fully develop in the culture of poverty thesis, including the role of non-economic factors in determining class, the singular role of the family as a transmitter of social status, and the influence of status on the growth of personality. "While significant and necessary," Warner and his co-authors explained in their seminal text, *Social Class in America* (1949), "the economic factors are not sufficient to predict where a particular family or individual will be or to explain completely the phenomenon of social class." Instead, they argued, "Something more than a large income is necessary for high social position. Money must be translated into socially approved behavior and possessions, and they in turn must be translated into intimate participation with and acceptance by, members of a superior class."⁹²

By presenting a set of diagnostic standards by which to measure social class, Warner's work offered Lewis with a compelling starting point for his own research. In his work on class in two American communities—fictionalized as "Yankee City" and "Deep South"—Warner outlined a class typology proposing that within the lower-class there existed two sub-groups, including, most importantly for Lewis, a "lower-lower" class. Ranked "below the Common Man" that typified the average American for Warner, the lower-lower class had a "bad reputation' among those who are socially above." But, Warner deduced from his fieldwork, "many of them [are] guilty of no more than being poor and lacking in the desire to get ahead, this latter trait being common among those above them."⁹³ In addition, below even the lower-lower class, Warner identified the

⁹²W. Lloyd Warner and others, *Social Class in America; A Manual of Procedure for the Measurement of Social Status* (Chicago, IL: Science Research Associates, 1949), 21.

⁹³Warner and others, *Social Class in America; A Manual of Procedure for the Measurement of Social Status*, 15.

peculiar condition of the “color caste” in the American South. A founder of the so-called “caste and class” tradition in American discourse about race relations, Warner noted that for black people in the South, their frequent position among the lower-lower class was complicated by a racial caste system that “forbid the members of the lower caste from ever climbing out it.”⁹⁴ In an otherwise relatively sanguine treatment of class and social mobility in America, his identification of a “Negro caste” was Warner’s gloomiest note. With no racial caste system to concern himself with, Lewis began his research in the *vecinidad* on the basis that he might find a variation of lower class groups, as had Warner.⁹⁵ On the ground, however, Lewis became more fascinated by the similarities among the people he studied than by any real distinctions.

Another member of the “caste and class” school, Allison Davis, provided Lewis with guidance about how to address the mentality of the poor from an anthropological perspective. Davis’s work provoked the intellectual leap that would allow Lewis to place these theories of the culture of social class into an explicitly *cross*-cultural framework. Having studied with Warner, Davis’s interests also focused on class and culture, particularly the nature of lower-class life in America. In his 1946 article “The Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker,” which Davis contributed to a volume about industrial relations, he addressed the attitudes of middle-class bosses towards under-performing, lower class workers. Davis argued that the middle-class values that make for success on the shop-floor, including punctuality, responsibility, and ambition were learned traits. These traits, Davis wrote, were “part of [the worker’s] cultural environment, of the way of life, of the social

⁹⁴ Warner and others, *Social Class in America; A Manual of Procedure for the Measurement of Social Status*,

⁹⁵ Lewis, “The Culture of the *Vecinidad* in Mexico City: Two Case Studies,” 400.

environment with its social and economic rewards and punishments in which he has been reared.”⁹⁶

In ways that would be repeated almost verbatim in Lewis’s formulations of the culture of poverty thesis, Davis demonstrated that the environment directly affected the mentality of the underprivileged worker. Profiling the experiences of specific families, Davis wrote that, in the absence of a profusion of opportunities, the lower-class had to be trained to be more ambitious, to be psychologically and emotionally invested in the rewards of achievement. Davis identified the goal of being able to own a decent home as the lynchpin of a worker’s motivation. To the contrary, most lower-class workers lived in squalor. Without the actual possibility of reaching this goal—a goal that, for many in the lower-class, was simply impossible because of economic realities—lower-class workers had no reason to want to do better, and, in fact, no deterrent for doing poor work. Being malnourished, living in dilapidated conditions, and failing to adequately provide for their children served to reinforce feelings of worthlessness among the lower classes. “The most important consideration here,” Davis wrote, “is that the underprivileged worker becomes accustomed to these conditions.”⁹⁷ In addition to prescribing a real change in the economic opportunities for the poor, Davis advocated

Of Davis’s article, Lewis later wrote “undoubtedly it was one of the things that impressed me and helped me toward my own formulation of a culture of poverty which is cross-cultural rather than a class bound phenomenon within a single culture.”⁹⁸

Lewis’s longstanding insistence that the material conditions of the lives of his subjects mattered—and his repeated criticisms of his colleagues for failing to recognize that

⁹⁶ Allison Davis, “The Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker,” in *Industry and Society*, William F. Whyte, ed. (New York & London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1946), 85-86.

⁹⁷ Davis, “The Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker,” 97.

⁹⁸ Oscar Lewis to William Whyte, March 4, 1961. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 62, University of Illinois Archives.

fact—demonstrate a preoccupation with class and class dynamics. Similarly, his reliance on the conflict model as an underlying explanation of human society, of which his intellectual, even ideological battle with Redfield was just one example, reflects a kind of temperamental commitment to a Marxist worldview. But, Lewis believed that social mobility was real and that the transition from lower-class to middle-class was a thoroughly verifiable phenomenon and one that represented the promise of modern democratic societies. What Lewis's entire body of work suggests, then, is that the transition from lower-class to middle-class was also part of the larger and longer transition, among people in the "underdeveloped" parts of the world, from the peasant to the modern. Some people, he discovered, the most impoverished of these peasants, could not make the transition completely and could get caught in a cycle of poverty—despite the fact that some of these people lived in the "modern world." Lewis recognized that, at some level, economic factors caused urban poverty—but he was more interested in why people could not escape poverty even if their economic conditions improved. As he explained to a Mexican newspaper reporter, poverty "“is the product of economic socio-systems.” But, he continued, “it creates a vicious circle that I very much want to break by showing what is cause and what is effect.””⁹⁹

Psychology and the insights into the mentality of the poor that it provided turned out to be the keys with which Lewis believed he could open the lock to the mystery of why some people got trapped into a culture of poverty. Although he had been skeptical of his adviser Ruth Benedict's reliance on psychoanalysis in her anthropological theorizing and unfamiliar with some of the testing his team had done in Tepoztlán, by the late 1950s, Lewis had finally embraced psychology as a means for understanding the problems in which he was interested. Through a friendship with Erich Fromm, a major figure in

⁹⁹ Oscar Lewis, *El Nacional* interview, November 6, 1967. Quoted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 178.

twentieth-century psychology, Lewis met Carolina Luján, a psychologist at Mexico's Psychoanalytic Association. Luján took over the psychological work of Lewis's studies from Ruth Lewis and offered critical interpretations of all of Lewis's own interviews with his informants. Luján provided Lewis with the essential psychoanalytic building blocks of the culture of poverty.¹⁰⁰

Although *Five Families* did not represent a full explanation of what Lewis meant by the culture of poverty, it did mark the beginning of a fusion of Lewis's new insights about urban poverty with his earlier focus on the process of acculturation. In the book, Lewis profiled the Martinez, Gomez, Gutierrez, Sanchez, and Castro families, each of which represented a different point on the spectrum of those who lived within the culture of poverty. Economically, these families represented a wide variation, from the poor Martinez and Gutierrez families to the rich Castro family. Yet Lewis identified all of them as "case studies in the culture of poverty." Interestingly, Lewis wrote in the introduction that the "use of tableware for eating has proved to be the single most diagnostic item for socioeconomic level."¹⁰¹ Not the possession or access to tableware—but its *use*. Indeed, more than their material economic status, it was his subject's level of acculturation to middle-class values or lack thereof that made them members of the culture of poverty. As he had in Tepoztlán, Lewis was associating poverty with an absence of fluency in the ways of modern life.

To this end, Lewis went to great pains to explain the extent to which each of his families were or were not acculturated. The Martinez family, peasants in a village not far from the city, was only partially acculturated. Like the poor Tepoztecs whose hopelessness he had described nearly a decade earlier, Lewis wrote that Pedro, the family

¹⁰⁰ Rigdon gives an excellent overview of Lujan's influence on Lewis's fieldwork. See Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 64-68.

¹⁰¹ Lewis, *Five Families*, 13.

patriarch, “did not understand the changing times, the money economy, or the business values of post-Revolutionary Mexico. He knew only that was still a landless peasant.” The Gomez family had come from the village, where they were among the more well-to-do, to the city to achieve a better life. They had lived in the Casa Grande, one of the *vecinidades*, for nearly two decades. The father, Agustin, had found a job as a bus driver and provided the family with the opportunity to enjoy some of the benefits of modern life. The Gomez family, Lewis wrote, “made a good adjustment” to the city and had experienced a “gradual modernization of many beliefs” although that process was far from complete. The Gutierrez’s were the poorest family Lewis profiled. Having spent his whole life in the city’s poorest *vecinidad*, Guillermo Gutierrez showed a “complete absence of middle-class values.” Much like the underprivileged workers Allison Davis describe in his article, the Gutierrez’s and their children possessed no sense of ambition or motivation to change their lives.¹⁰²

Despite being the most financially successful of the families, the Castro family offered Lewis the greatest sense of the durability of a “poor” mentality. Though born and raised in the slums, David Castro had “energy, daring, and shrewdness, which bordered on unscrupulousness.” Having been abandoned by his father at birth and plunged into a life of poverty, David had been encouraged by his “self-sacrificing, affectionate, and indulgent mother” who happened to run a brothel in the *vecinidad*. David finished elementary school and wound up taking advantage of a small windfall of money to start a business. This business had catapulted him into Mexico’s growing middle-class. Having grown up on tortillas and beans at each morning meal, David now insisted that his children be offered pancakes made from a packaged mix every day. Sprinkling references to American brands like Pepsi, Coke, and Walt Disney throughout his story of the Castro family, Lewis noted

¹⁰² Lewis, *Five Families*, 32; 13-15.

that David “admired the United States and unquestioningly accepted many of its standards and customs as superior to his own.” Yet, despite this awareness of middle-class values—and their association with the powerful, modern society to the north of his own—David was not a fully modern man. From his eating habits to his style of dress, Lewis conveyed that David himself was a rather garish character. Sleeping on satin bedding and wearing gaudy if “modern” clothing, David still admitted, when confronted with a dinner of charbroiled steak, to wanting tortillas instead of bread. Brutish and authoritarian with his children’s mother, Isabel—with whom he lived in a free union—David chafed at Isabel’s efforts to “civilize” him. Contrary to David, Isabel had been raised in the middle-class and imbued with a desire for improvement. His time with the Castros revealed to Lewis “the extent to which the father in this family has carried over lower-class patterns to his new status.”¹⁰³

The final family Lewis described would give him enough material for the rest of his career and provide him with the last piece of the puzzle he had to solve to finally conjure a complete picture of the culture of poverty. Lewis had originally encountered Consuela Sanchez through one of his informants in the Casa Grande *vecininidad* in the summer of 1956. On his first visit to their “rather dreary, run down” apartment, Lewis met the twenty-seven year old woman who was home recovering from a serious illness. “I explained,” Lewis later wrote, “that I was a North American professor and anthropologist and had spent a number of years living in a Mexican village studying its customs.”¹⁰⁴ He began his interview by asking Consuelo whether she thought people were better off in the country or the city and then proceeded to ask a series of questions about her and her family members. Towards the end of the interview, Consuelo’s father, Jesús walked in and

¹⁰³ Lewis, *Five Families*, 306-16.

¹⁰⁴ Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961), xviii.

began asking what Lewis was doing in his house. Lewis explained his purpose and Jesús began to answer his questions. “Country life,” this middle-aged man who had long ago left his village for the city said, “was far superior to city life.” Indeed, for Jesús Sanchez, city life had never been easy. Although he had won a small amount of money through the lottery and purchased a very modest house for the eldest of his children’s mothers in a new development on the northern edge of the city, Sanchez, who had lost his first wife to illness when their children were very young, lived in the *vecinidad*. Sanchez’s children Manuel, Roberto, Consuelo, and Marta all lived in the *vecinidad* too. Open and willing to answer Lewis’s questions, the Sanchezes were precisely the kind of informants Lewis had hoped to find. “As I began to learn something about each member of the family,” he wrote, “I became aware that this single family seemed to illustrate many of the social and psychological problems of lower class Mexican life.”¹⁰⁵

According to their anthropologist-advocate, the children of Jesús Sanchez did not all live in the culture of poverty but their experiences and the comparisons Lewis made among the family members and among the inhabitants of other Mexico City slums did provide him with important insights into the values of the poor. Unlike the residents of the Panaderos *vecinidad*, the far more dismal of the two slums, Roberto, Manuel, and Consuelo all demonstrated what Lewis called “a lot of value stretch.” He explained this concept by noting that “they were more influenced by the values of the larger society than many other poorer families I have studied.”¹⁰⁶ The Case Grande *vecinidad*, Lewis also observed, was far more acculturated to modern ways and middle-class values than the Panaderos. In the Panaderos, Lewis founds that more people slept on the floor instead of in beds, cooked with kerosene or charcoal instead of gas, drank *pulque* instead of beer, and

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, xix.

¹⁰⁶ Oscar Lewis to Hyman Rodman, July 26, 1965. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 59, University of Illinois Archives.

celebrated the Day of the Dead with traditional offerings in their homes instead of going to Church.¹⁰⁷ In every estimable way, the poorer a place was, the more removed from modernity it was. The Sanchez family, with their fondness for and fluency with some modern conveniences and some middle-class aspirations, provided Lewis with a rich counter-example.

“The children [of Sanchez] live in a modern state,” the well-respected critic Elizabeth Hardwick wrote in her *New York Times* review of *The Children of Sanchez*, “but they are ‘marginal,’ unprotected; they are sophisticated and knowledgeable way beyond their father but it does not yet mean a genuine advantage.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the family that Lewis presented in his wildly popular book were part of the “unknown and urban and peasant masses.”¹⁰⁹ In *The Children of Sanchez*, Lewis would even more forcefully convince his readers of the essential backwardness of which poverty was both a product and a cause. That backwardness, identifiable by a constellation of personality traits, was, Lewis finally explained, perpetuated from generation to generation in the slums. The psychological factors that Lewis discovered contributed to a trait list that served as a practical tool with which to identify a culture of poverty. Divided into categories that distinguished economic from social and psychological traits, Lewis delineated a list of characteristics that spoke to his subject’s relative acculturation to modern life. Among these, he listed the use of herbs for curing, the belief in sorcery and spiritualism, limited membership and participation in formal and informal associations, feelings of marginality and helplessness, a limited sense of history, and an absence of class-consciousness. Lewis also noted that “members [of the culture of poverty] attempt to utilize and integrate into a workable way of life the

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, xvi.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Hardwick, “Some Chapters of Personal History,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1961.

¹⁰⁹ Hardwick, “Some Chapters of Personal History.”

remnants of beliefs and customs of diverse origins.”¹¹⁰ Neither primitive nor modern, these were a cross-cultural community of poor people who could not seem to escape their own misery. “One of the tragic aspects of the Sanchez family,” Lewis wrote to his friend the esteemed historian of Mexico Frank Tannenbaum, “is that the individuals are unable to fully take advantage of the new opportunities of the Mexican scene because of deep-seated psychological problems, which are in turn, a product of their personal histories and their milieu.”¹¹¹

Somewhat controversially, Lewis made the choice to define these characteristics as a discrete “culture,” as a way of emphasizing the totalizing nature of the mentality he had discovered among the poor. In a telling correspondence with one of his friends, Lewis mounted a staunch defense of his use of the term “culture” to describe what his correspondent—another social scientist—felt was merely a series of social conditions that could be found among poor people in many parts of the world. “Hunger, and coping with it, or bad housing and crowding, and coping with it,” Lewis’s friend wrote in the middle of 1960, “are not cultural phenomena, any more than are cold, and coping with cold, and though they are part of the lives of people of the places, cultures, societies, these phenomena, these copings do not make culture.”¹¹² Lewis retorted that “the crucial meaning of the term culture...is that it is a way of life which is passed down from generation to generation.” He continued, “Poverty and all that goes with it is literally stable, persistent, and passed down...along family lines.”¹¹³ Lewis also wanted to show that

¹¹⁰ Lewis fiddled with the traits listed over a period of many years. The last and most complete version was published in 1969. See Oscar Lewis, “Á Puerto Rican Boy,” in *Culture Change, Mental Health and Poverty*, ed. Joseph Finney (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), 150.

¹¹¹ Oscar Lewis to Frank Tannenbaum, January 6, 1961. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 61, University of Illinois Archives.

¹¹² Conrad Arensberg to Oscar Lewis, May 10, 1960. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 55, University of Illinois Archives.

¹¹³ Oscar Lewis to Conrad Arensberg, November 3, 1960. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 55, University of Illinois Archives.

the poor used their culture to defend themselves against the insufferable realities of their hard-bitten lives. More than this, however, the use of the culture concept suited his goal of building a fundamentally universal definition of the mentality of the poor. By creating a cultural space in which the rural and urban poor in the First and Third World could all be placed, Lewis devised a common definition that he thought could provide the crucial insight social scientists and policymakers needed to help ease the transition of the poor to modern, middle-class life and the transition of poor nations to membership in the modern world.¹¹⁴

Drawing on the apathy he had identified among Tepoztlán's poorest villagers as well as similar depictions of the urban poor in other parts of the world, Lewis suggested that the common psychological thread among all of the people who shared the culture of poverty was a pervasive sense of fatalism. "Once we conceive of a 'culture of poverty' rather than just 'poverty,'" Lewis explained, "it becomes more clear that we are not dealing with economic deprivation but with a whole complex of inter-related attitudes and value systems at the core of which is a feeling of marginality of not belonging."¹¹⁵ In the city, the "psychology of living with problems rather than solving them" that Lewis identified among the poor in Tepoztlán was confronted with the most overwhelming problems the modern world posed—the problem of survival amidst rapid change and modernization. The material challenges of life for the poor, whether in the countryside or the city, were simply too great and their psychological capacity to confront those challenges was simply too limited to ever find a way out.

¹¹⁴Lewis believed that the "level of aspiration" that exempted people from living in the culture of poverty was far rarer in underdeveloped countries than in industrialized ones because the "ideology and actual possibilities of upward mobility are extremely limited...and authoritarian values still persist in both the urban and rural milieu." See Oscar Lewis to Richard Morse, November 23, 1965. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 58, University of Illinois Archives.

¹¹⁵Oscar Lewis to Bernard Shiffman, April 16, 1961. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 60, University of Illinois Archives.

In 1962, a book based in no small part on Lewis's culture of poverty thesis would make poverty a pressing national problem for Americans at home by explicitly comparing it to underdevelopment abroad. Michael Harrington's *The Other America* became a national bestseller and a clarion call for the 1960s. Through Harrington's book and Lewis's own wildly popular writings, including *La Vida* (1968), which won the National Book Award for non-fiction, the notion that poverty was not a product of the pressures of the modern world but a characteristic of being unable to *become* fully modern had gained enough legitimacy to become *de facto* common sense. Through the process of fighting poverty around the globe under the mantle of the American development project, policymakers came to believe that the seemingly intractable woes faced by the men and women in America's inner cities and rural outposts were fundamentally similar to the struggles of the people of the former colonies of the Old World. All of these poor people were suffering from the same brutalizing combination of hopelessness and ignorance, a syndrome that Lewis has conveniently labeled "the culture of poverty." As the next chapter explains, the convergence of Lewis's theory and an existing liberal development discourse would have significant repercussions for the kind of war the American government fought on poverty at home and abroad for the next two decades.

As for Oscar Lewis himself, the passing of time made *him* more and more hopeless about the potential for real improvements in the lives of the poor. The United States government's disastrous war in Vietnam had made its efforts to expand the benefits of modernity to the people about which Lewis had written seem hypocritical, ineffective, or both. Disappointed, Lewis found himself seeking some encouraging signs about the fate of the men and women whose improvement he had so long advocated. In the spring of 1967, already showing signs of the failing heart that would soon claim his life, Lewis delivered a talk at the University of California at Davis in which he tried to explain that although they

might be poor and alienated from the larger society in which they lived, the members of the culture of poverty did possess something of which “modern man” could be envious. “I suppose,” Lewis explained, “modern man is ideally represented as highly educated, organized, responsible, disciplined, well informed, worldly, well-traveled—the individual who enjoys almost unlimited horizons as well as the material fruits of modern life—the person who is acutely aware of the social and economic problems past, present, and future not only of his own country, but of the entire world.” Lewis continued, no doubt expressing some of his own personal frustrations, by observing that “as a result, modern man feels small, helpless, unhappy, lonely, and alienated.” In comparison, he concluded, “I must say that the people in the culture of poverty that I’ve studied share practically none of these characteristics.”¹¹⁶ Their poverty and their marginality protected them from the terrifying complexities of the modern world.

The man who nearly two decades earlier had so boldly attacked Robert Redfield for “romanticizing” the plight of the peasants of Tepoztlán was now valorizing the qualities that protected his own subjects from the ravages of modern consciousness. Having lost faith in the U.S. government’s efforts to eradicate poverty and now teetering on the edge of disillusionment with the revolutionary socialism he thought might be the ultimate panacea (he spent the last years of his life studying the culture of poverty in Cuba), Lewis had come to reflect not on what these people were suffering from but, in his own words hurled at Redfield as insults so many years earlier, as a study of what they enjoyed. This did not represent a change of heart but rather a sad effort to rescue some meaning from what he had learned. Thus, more clearly than he had ever explained it before, Lewis concluded

¹¹⁶ Oscar Lewis, “The Anatomy of Loneliness” (lecture at University of California-Davis, n.d. 1967). Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 45, University of Illinois Archives.

that even if they lived in a modern world, “the people in the culture of poverty are not really modern men.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Oscar Lewis to James Clifton, April 24, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 55, University of Illinois Archives.

CHAPTER 3

“Like an Underdeveloped Nation:”

The Development Paradigm and the Re-Discovery of Poverty amidst Progress, 1949-1964

A year before he completed *The Other America*, the book largely credited with “rediscovering” poverty in the United States in the 1960s, Michael Harrington was not unlike any other freelance journalist with too many deadlines looming over him. Throughout the 1950s, Harrington, a disciple of Dorothy Day and member of the Catholic Worker Movement, had filled his plate with assignments, editing the Socialist Party’s newspaper, *New America*, writing long-form stories for the leading leftist publication in the country, *Dissent*, and penning reviews and other short pieces for the liberal Catholic magazine, *Commonweal*. Through the pages of these publications, Harrington had begun to build a reputation as a leader on the American Left. He had also learned how to really write.

In the autumn of 1961, Harrington’s most pressing assignment was to review a book by an anthropologist about poverty in Mexico for *Commonweal*. In the wake of the publication of John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* three years earlier, Harrington had taken a special interest in poverty in the United States and had become quite well-read on the subject. Since John F. Kennedy’s election the previous year, Harrington had been closely following the debates among economists within the administration about rising poverty rates and how to deal with them. In addition to economic debates about poverty, however, Harrington read the works of social scientists, including anthropologist Oscar Lewis. He was familiar with Lewis’s previous books and Lewis’s culture of poverty theory had already begun to shape Harrington’s own conclusions.

Now, charged with reviewing Lewis's most recent book, *The Children of Sanchez*, Harrington made his thoughts clear on the relationship between the Mexican poverty about which Lewis wrote and the American poverty about which he himself was concerned. "The first thing which struck me [about *The Children of Sanchez*]," Harrington wrote in *Commonweal*, "was the similarity between the Mexican and American poor." Noting that "poverty in the United States rests upon a much higher standard of living; it is not so extreme," he nonetheless saw their similarities. "The basic patterns of human response seem to be the same," Harrington wrote. "In Mexico, as in America, the poor tend toward acting out, to immediate gratification rather than to saving, sexual promiscuity, and so on." In these ways, Harrington concluded, "poverty would seem to be a culture, a way of life, no matter what its broader economic setting may be."¹ Although Harrington had never personally traveled to Mexico—or to any other Third World country for that matter—Lewis's vivid descriptions of the mentality of the Mexican poor seemed, to Harrington, universal. Through Harrington, then, Lewis's culture of poverty thesis became forever linked to the plight of the poor at home.

The explosion of anxiety about and study of poverty in the United States that began with the publication of *The Affluent Society*, and that Harrington fueled with *The Other America*, was not the first of its kind.² A generation of Progressive-era muckrakers and reformers had explored the deprivation caused by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. The renown of activist-intellectuals such as Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Henry George, and Jacob Riis, among a host of other notables from this period, owes itself to the concern they shared

¹ Michael Harrington, "The Agonizing Voice of the Poor," *The Commonweal* LXXV, no. 8, November 17, 1961: 214-215.

² Most notable among these is James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

with one another and with their readers about the plight of the poor.³ From Stephen Crane's novella, *Maggie, Girl of the Streets* (1893) to W.E.B. Du Bois's sociological survey of *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), the lived experience of poor people was a topic of intense interest. Through complex social studies, vivid photographs, and sympathetic literary depictions, these Progressive reformers raised public awareness about the poverty that existed in the shadow of the swelling wealth of the Gilded Age. Their advocacy resulted in the creation of what historian Michael Katz labels the "semi-welfare state."⁴

The outbreak of World War I in Europe diverted much of the attention of Progressive anti-poverty crusaders away from the squalor of American cities, marking the end of this first discovery of poverty amidst plenty. Despite the spartan conditions of life in rural America and the persistent struggles of the urban poor, the widespread prosperity of the 1920s marginalized any broad, popular discussion of poverty. Anti-Bolshevik hysteria also pushed mainstream debate over the inequities of the American system onto the backburner. By the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, the overwhelming reality of sudden, mass poverty in what had been the richest country in the world made any "discovery" of deprivation seem trifling and irrelevant. After the Crash of '29 and the subsequent spike in unemployment, poverty was understood by elites who talked about it and the millions of ordinary people who experienced it as a fundamentally systemic problem caused by an over-heated and structurally faulty economy. While historians note that the earliest applications of the culture concept to poverty in the U.S. emerged in the writings of scholars and social critics who contemplated the causes and consequences of the Depression, any debate about poverty in the 1930s was, at its core, a debate about the American economic system and the perception that capitalism itself had run terribly

³ The classic monograph on the first "discovery" of poverty in the U.S. remains Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1956).

⁴ Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, Tenth Anniversary edition (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 116.

amuck.⁵ Ironically, however, the end of the mass poverty of the Depression brought the discrete problem of “the poor” back into the limelight.

It was the ascendance of the United States to the status of global hegemon that laid the foundations for the second rediscovery of poverty. While, in December of 1943, Franklin Roosevelt famously remarked that “Dr. Win-the-War” was being called in to replace “Dr. New Deal,” American involvement in the Second World War paradoxically resulted in reviving concern for the poor.⁶ In one respect, as historian Elizabeth Borgwardt has convincingly argued, post-war American foreign policy was built on the premise of internationalizing the New Deal by guaranteeing, as Roosevelt and Winston Churchill declared in the Atlantic Charter in 1941, that “all the men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want.”⁷ Far from mere rhetoric about providing for the common man, however, much of the postwar planning—which began while war still raged on—was based on the assumption that a series of economic factors that deprived average people of their basic needs was to blame for global conflict. Building an international economic order around the core principles of the New Deal was, policymakers believed, an essential part of remaking the world and forging a lasting peace.

The durability of what we might term New Deal values was not the only factor in provoking renewed interest in poverty. Rather, the reshuffling of the global balance of power that the end of the War precipitated put the United States in direct contact with millions of people who lived in what came to be known as the Third World. The European powers that had for so long dominated most of Africa, Asia, and Latin America through formal and informal empires were now too weak to maintain their overseas interests and

⁵ See Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 55-72.

⁶ Roosevelt quoted in David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 783.

⁷ Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision of Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).

the nationalist aspirations of the peoples of those regions were unleashed by the real potential of independence. An historic distaste for European imperialism coupled with growing anxiety over the potential of Soviet opportunism in these regions provoked American policymakers to address what they saw to be millions of poor people in need of assistance. In many cases, national leaders who sought membership for their newly independent countries in the family of nations reached out to American foreign policymakers. Faced with what scholar Arturo Escobar calls the “‘discovery’ of mass poverty” in these “colonized” regions, American policymakers made *development* a primary occupation of the United States government, which it remained for the balance of the twentieth century.⁸

Reflecting some years later on the zeal with which liberal social scientists like himself took to development as a sort of religion, John Kenneth Galbraith explained, with characteristic wit, that “...having the vaccine, we identified smallpox.”⁹ While the development project that American policymakers began in earnest in the late 1940s may have possessed some resemblance to the colonial “improvement” schemes of the nineteenth century, it relied explicitly on a new vocabulary both for diagnosing the causes and symptoms of “economic backwardness” and prescribing an attainable cure.¹⁰ From Harry S. Truman’s first pronouncement of development as a policy of the United States government in 1949 to John F. Kennedy’s suggestion, twelve years later, that the United Nations declare the 1960s the “Decade of Development,” the idea of development utterly charmed American policymakers. The notion itself, with its attendant emphases on self-

⁸ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 20.

⁹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), vi.

¹⁰ One of the first economics textbooks to include economic development as a field of study identified the “mounting unrest in the economically backward nations of the world” as the source for “increasingly insistent demand for economic development.” See P.T. Ellsworth, *The International Economy* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 786.

help, participatory democracy, and consumer capitalism fit a very unique bill. Congruent with U.S. national interests as the Cold War became a grave reality, development was also consonant with the belief that, in Henry Luce's words, the United States could and should be the "Good Samaritan of the world."¹¹ In a very real way, development as an undertaking gave meaning to and was the quintessential product of the American Century.

In the interval between Truman's pronouncement and Kennedy's proposal, the development project also benefited from the establishment of a firm intellectual foundation. At the time of *The Other America's* publication, the imperative that had emerged in the post-war moment to develop the Third World had been a potent force in the American academy for nearly a decade. The scholarly ruminations on processes of "modernization" that American anthropologists like Robert Redfield had commenced some time before the war had, by the late 1950s, blossomed into a multi-disciplinary, multi-million dollar field of inquiry.¹² In fact, the "behavioral sciences revolution" that historian Alice O'Connor identifies as a key element of the larger rediscovery of poverty in the U.S. was ideologically inspired in large part by the challenge of international development and financed by the branches of government that were charged with promoting it abroad.¹³ If scientizing the social effects of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration had been the primary occupation of American social science in its infancy, making the process of human and national "development" legible and manageable represented the full flowering of its adulthood. Development specialists held unprecedented sway and theirs was no humble theory of this or that policy. Instead, theirs was an interpretation of history and a definition of social change. And, at the peak of their

¹¹ Henry R. Luce, "The American Century," Originally published in *Life*, February 17, 1941. Reprinted in *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 170.

¹² See Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization in Cold War America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

¹³ O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History*, 102-107.

political influence, social scientists possessed deep wells of institutional power from which to draw in their efforts to shape policy. The “romance” of expertise, as historian Ellen Herman calls it, however, was not the only factor in the ascendance of development as a worldview.¹⁴

The vogue of development was also perpetuated by the force of a particularly triumphant moment for American liberals. Contrary to their formative and rather desultory experiences in the wake of victory in the First World War, American liberals emerged from the crucible of World War II with a deep sense of relief from having survived the realization of their worst nightmares. American democracy had been imperiled both by foreign enemies and domestic crises. The U.S. economy, over-heated and under-regulated in the 1920s, had well nigh imploded, and the specter of fascism had taken on frighteningly corporeal dimensions. By 1945, the renewal of a vigorous American economy under the oversight of an activist and progressive government, the vanquishing of Hitler and Tojo, and the forging of a new international system based on a spirit of cooperation and mutual security proved to American liberals that the modern world was not doomed. In fact, the economic abundance of the post-war period in the U.S. and the doctrine of racial liberalism that was beginning to congeal into a consensus ideology filled the hearts of American progressives with newfound confidence. They really *had* learned how to make a better world. And, the emergence of the United States as a global superpower provided them with the opportunity, indeed, the *imperative*, to make their vision a reality. The development project itself was the result of this convergence and it would endure as a *raison d’etre* for American liberals for the next five decades at home and abroad.¹⁵ While

¹⁴ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁵ For important discussions of the linkages between modernization theory, in particular, and post-war optimism among American liberals, see Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); and, Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*.

the increasingly chilly Cold War with the Soviet Union served to bring them back down to earth, it also deepened the urgency with which this global social engineering project had to be undertaken. The increasingly hostile attitude that took shape towards progressive social policies at home in the 1950s only sharpened this urge to export “liberalism in the form of the energy and ideas of [the U.S.’s] best social thinkers and the funds of its largest philanthropies.”¹⁶

No concept was as central to the development project in intellectual and political terms as that of *underdevelopment*. When Harry Truman commenced his inaugural address on the frosty morning of January 20, 1949, poverty was largely taken to mean an economic condition that could befall any unlucky soul. Less than an hour later, the word “poverty” conveyed more than just misfortune; it was the condition that resulted from an absence or inadequacy of development. Over the course of the two decades after Truman’s first use of the term, “underdevelopment” was deployed to describe poor regions, poor nations, and poor people. More important than the hunger, illiteracy, and disease that befell them, the underdeveloped regions, nations, and, eventually, people all shared one common ailment: they existed outside of the scope of modernity. In addition, unlike an older notion of poverty—with the attendant biblical injunction that the poor shall always be with us—the concept of underdevelopment spoke to the possibility, indeed the *inevitability*, of eliminating poverty by developing the poor. Unlike the vexing poverty of old, then, underdevelopment was an ailment for which there was a known cure.

For all of these reasons, by the early 1960s, the concept of underdevelopment had grown diffuse enough to encompass not just the plight of foreign peoples but that of Americans as well. From the findings of social scientists such as Lewis to the jeremiads of

¹⁶ Nick Cullather, “Development Doctrine and Modernization Theory,” in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Dean Burns, Alexander DeConde, and Frederick Logevall (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 2002), 482.

reformers like Harrington, the contrast between development and underdevelopment became a lens through which poverty in the United States was defined and described. Depicted in spatial as well as temporal terms, the poor at home and abroad became fundamentally different from modern people, occupying spaces untouched by the abundance of post-war life and inhabiting a time somehow separate from the present. More than temporary misfortune or systemic inequality, poverty was caused by some kind of fundamental backwardness—some kind of inherent inability to navigate the modern world. While few claimed that the poor everywhere were identical, the underlying cause of poverty was understood by the mainstream of social science, public policy, and popular concern to be universal—people were poor because they were underdeveloped.

If the liberals of the pre-war era had seen poverty as the *by-product* of Progress, then, liberals in the post-war era saw poverty as the *absence* of Progress, and fighting it at home and abroad became a crucial part of winning the Cold War. Rooted in a universal definition of poverty as a state of backwardness, the development project connected the poor in the rural villages of the Third World and the inner cities of the First World in a way that had heretofore been intellectually incoherent. Development became more than a policy program; it became a worldview that allowed intellectuals, policymakers, and a concerned citizenry to see the despair of the poor with new eyes.

Diagnosing the Illness: Poverty as “Underdevelopment”

Clark Clifford wracked his brain and his file cabinet before he found the document for which he’d been searching. A couple of weeks after Harry S. Truman’s unexpected triumph over New York Governor Thomas Dewey, the President had sat down with his most trusted aide to talk about his inaugural address. Discussing the most notable precedents in the storied past of the American presidency—namely those of Lincoln and Washington—Truman humbly mused about how he wished he could come up with something “unique

and outstanding” that might make his speech worthy of remembrance. In the back of Clifford’s mind, he recalled a memorandum he had read some months before from a staffer at the State Department that might fall in line with the boss’s wish.

Searching through his “Future Idea File,” Clifford eventually found the memo outlining a new strategy in the increasingly hostile confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁷ In it, Benjamin Hardy, who had reported for the *Atlanta Journal* before joining the Public Affairs Office at State, proposed a global “technical assistance” program that would help the “underdeveloped areas of the world” transform their colonial economies into ones befitting newly independent nations.¹⁸ Clifford took the memo back over to the Oval Office and presented the idea to Truman. “He got pretty excited about it,” Clifford recalled of the President’s response. “It seemed to be what we were looking for, for it did something that was new and innovative.”¹⁹ “Point Four,” as the program Truman proposed came to be called, was, indeed, new and innovative and one can only understand the evolution of the liberal model of the development and its relationship to the creation of a conception of global poverty by returning to 1949.

Although the program that would result from Hardy’s memo was based on rather pragmatic strategic interests and had modest antecedents in the war years, Point Four opened the door to a new era in poverty-fighting, declaring it the mission of the United States to help the peoples of the “underdeveloped” regions of the world escape their deprivation. On the most basic level, “underdeveloped” areas were identified by an absence of the characteristics that were increasingly widespread in the United States and, thanks to the Marshall Plan, western Europe. Underdeveloped areas were plagued by inadequate

¹⁷ Oral history interview, Clark Clifford, March, 1971-February, 1973, 352-354. Harry S. Truman Library. <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/clifford6.htm> - 352.

¹⁸ Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade – and After: American, 1945-1960* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 92-93.

¹⁹ Oral history interview, Clark Clifford, March, 1971-February, 1973, 355-356. Harry S. Truman Library. <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/clifford6.htm> - 352.

food, the prevalence of disease, and, most importantly, a “primitive and stagnant” economic life. “Living in conditions approaching misery,” the peoples of the underdeveloped areas suffered from poverty. “Their poverty” Truman concluded, “is a handicap and a threat to both them and the more prosperous areas.”²⁰ While “development” may have seemed something of an abstract concept to those in the audience on Truman’s Inauguration Day, the nature of the ailment it was meant to cure—underdevelopment—was all too obvious.

While it was clear that underdevelopment was a synonym for poverty, the precise causes of that poverty were less apparent. Truman himself had a very particular understanding of why people in these regions were poor and why they needed American aid. Against the backdrop of burgeoning independence movements during the immediate postwar years, Truman and many in his milieu believed that decades of Western imperialism had impoverished the colonial territories of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. “Point Four,” Truman wrote in his memoirs, “was aimed at enabling millions of people in underdeveloped areas to raise themselves from the level of colonialism to self-support and ultimate prosperity.”²¹ Colonialism had “drained wealth” out of these regions and had buttressed the formation of political institutions that explicitly favored foreign investors at the expense of the native populations.²² The “economic legacy of empire,” another commentator wrote in 1950, “is poverty.”²³

Truman and others could reach such seemingly obvious conclusions during these early years because there was a surprising paucity of scholarship on underdevelopment from

²⁰ Harry S. Truman, Inaugural Address of President Harry S Truman, January 20, 1949. Harry S Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inaugural20jan1949.htm.

²¹ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman*, vol. 2, *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 232.

²² Owen Lattimore, “Point Four and the Third Countries,” *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science: Formulating a Point Four Program*, ed. Ernest Minor Patterson, 270 (July 1950), 3.

²³ Harold Isaacs, “Political and Psychological Context of Point Four,” *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science: Formulating a Point Four Program*, ed. Ernest Minor Patterson, 270 (July 1950), 53.

which policymakers could draw. Even economists, in whose wheelhouse questions of poverty and prosperity surely seemed to reside, were scrambling for ideas. Bereft of what economists Michael Todaro and Stephen Smith label a “readily available conceptual apparatus,” experts drew on their recent wartime experiences to derive policy proposals for the decolonizing regions of the world.²⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, who sat on the State Department committee charged with turning the Point Four idea into a viable program, recalled the somewhat inchoate nature of the task at hand. “Rarely can deliberations have been more unstructured,” he remembered.²⁵ What these scholars did agree upon, in the wake of the second global conflagration of the century, was the core notion that prosperity and peace were inextricably linked. As U.S.-Soviet relations began to harden into Cold War, then, poverty-fighting came to be seen as a powerful weapon in America’s struggle for global supremacy.

The linkage between prosperity and peace was an original precept of development theory. Economist Paul Rosenstein-Rodan was perhaps the most influential of the vanguard of economic development theorists and one whose ideas about the relationship between economic and political development were most unequivocal. A Polish émigré living in London during the War, Rosenstein-Rodan first began theorizing about the economically “depressed” regions of Southern and Eastern Europe. In two essays written while the war against Nazi Germany still raged on, Rosenstein-Rodan articulated what would come to be the core intellectual premise of economic development theory. Exhorting policymakers to awaken to the reality that “inequality of distribution of income” among nations is “not only a moral, but even more a political and economic problem because we can always assume that people will always prefer to die fighting rather

²⁴ Michael P. Todaro and Smith, Stephen C., *Economic Development*, 8th ed. (Boston: Addison Wesley, 2003), 112.

²⁵ Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, 25.

than to see no prospect of a better life.”²⁶ Whatever economic development was, then, a man like Truman understood that promoting it was essential to preserving peace in the post-war international order.

With the stakes well established the question of precisely *how* to foster prosperity in such diverse areas became urgent. In the more widely-read of his two seminal essays, Rosenstein-Rodan identified the essential aspects of a viable development strategy, noting that slight adjustments would have to be made to suit development to each of the “five vast international depressed areas, the five economically backward areas.” Among these regions, he included the Far East, the “colonial empires” (he specified most of Africa as belonging to this category), the Caribbean, the Middle East, and finally, South-East Europe.²⁷ Interestingly, Rosenstein-Rodan’s inclusion of part of Europe—and ideological and rhetorical linkages between the Marshall Plan, Point Four, and aid to Greece and Turkey—reveals the extent to which the conception of the “underdeveloped” world as an exclusively post-colonial, exclusively non-white geographical unit was still not completely crystalline. As Rosenstein-Rodan explained, then, the commonality these regions shared was the inefficiency of their economic systems. While diversifying and improving agricultural techniques was important, he explained that eliminating poverty in most “depressed” areas required establishing conditions for systemic economic growth through industrialization. Industrialization, as Western development had demonstrated, was the clear route to raising standards of living. “The movement of machinery and capital towards labor,” he elaborated, “instead of moving labor towards capital, is the process of industrialization, which, together with agrarian improvement, is the most important aspect of the economic

²⁶ Paul Rosenstein-Rodan, “The International Development of Economically Backward Areas,” *International Affairs* 20, no. 2 (Apr. 1944): 158.

²⁷ Rosenstein-Rodan, “The International Development of Backward Areas,” 159.

development of the depressed areas.”²⁸ A key precondition for this process was going to be building the infrastructure necessary to take unemployed people from the agrarian sector and train them to do industrial work.²⁹

In this critical intellectual’s work—which would be followed and expanded upon by a teeming army of development “experts” over the coming decade—the first prescription for underdevelopment took shape.³⁰ Assuming that it was primarily an economic condition, curing underdevelopment required an investment of capital to move “machinery towards labor” while also making workers out of unemployed agrarian people by training them in the arts of industrial production. Enacting the process of industrialization that had unfolded “naturally” in Western Europe and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American policymakers could create the vital preconditions by which “underdeveloped” areas could become wealthy and politically stable. These ideas, translated into politically acceptable language (i.e., made to seem inexpensive), became the basis of Point Four. In practical terms, the program that derived from Truman’s address sought to encourage private investment in the economies of developing countries and offer direct technical assistance to build local industry. Although the U.S. government had provided funds for technical assistance missions to foreign governments in East Asia and Latin America before, Point Four became the United States’s first global program for economic development.³¹

²⁸ Rosenstein-Rodan, “The International Development of Backward Areas,” 161.

²⁹ Rosenstein-Rodan, “The International Development of Backward Areas,” 160.

³⁰ For a more detailed examination of early development theory, see Vernon W. Ruttan, *United States Development Assistance Policy: The Domestic Politics of Foreign Aid* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 52-53.

³¹ Several secondary sources document the origins of U.S. “foreign aid” programs, including, most notably, an elegant volume co-written in 1954 by the august historian Merle Curti. See Merle Curti and Kendall Birr, *Prelude to Point Four: American Technical Missions Overseas, 1838-1938* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1954); Samuel Hale Butterfield, *U.S. Development Aid—An Historic First: Achievements and Failures in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT/London: Praeger, 2004); and, Ruttan, *United States Development Assistance Policy: The Domestic Politics of Foreign Aid*.

Despite these seemingly straightforward strategies, an American development program that had, as its ultimate goal, a decisive victory against the forces of communist revolution, was never *just* a program of technical assistance. Crucial to the logic of the development project was the assumption, shared by post-war liberals like Truman, that building the foundation for prosperity abroad and ensuring that the fruits of wealth were distributed with some equity was an undertaking inextricably linked to promoting democracy itself. Selling the program on Capitol Hill, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who had originally thought the Point Four concept to be half-baked, explained the importance of training people not just in technology but rather a uniquely American worldview. In an exchange with one of the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Acheson noted that “...While we agree that we have done a fairly good job in Europe, the general consensus is that we could have done a better job if we had shot into the thought stream of the people the concepts...of Lincoln, Washington, and the American way of life.” Referring to the technical assistants that would be sent abroad, Acheson explained that “Every one of these experts will be a missionary. They will be a political, they will be an economic missionary of the American way of life. There isn’t any question that they can go out and improve the productivity of the land. Can they go out and improve the productivity of the minds of men? We hear that this is a battle for the minds of men.”³² From its origins, then, the American development project was seen as a vehicle of ideology.

The ideology Truman and his peers wanted to export was less a simple vision of American prosperity than one of progressive social change—the kind of change for which the New Deal had stood so boldly. Although Truman himself brought to light the specific

³² U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *An Act for International Development*, 81st Cong., 2d sess., 1950, 15.

skills that American technocrats could offer to poor nations, he was also articulating an alternative to communism. “Communism,” Truman explained, “maintains that social wrongs can be corrected only by violence. Democracy has proved that social justice can be achieved through peaceful change.”³³ As the New Deal had also proven, revolution was unproductive when genuine reform was truly possible. Truman recalled that Point Four represented his effort to turn the basic logic of the New Deal outward. “During the administrations of Roosevelt and myself,” he wrote, “it had been proved that the way to build a successful economy in which the most people enjoyed high standards of living was to keep the national resources out of the hands of special interests and in the possession of the people themselves. This was our program domestically, and I wanted to make it a permanent part of our foreign policy.”³⁴ In the lexicon of Point Four, terms like “relief” and “recovery” were used frequently with reference to foreign aid and development programs, demonstrating and drawing connections between the American experience and those of “developing” countries.³⁵ The message of all this was clear: “development” was the democratic path and it was attainable.

As an ideology, development was also an explicit rejection of imperialism. “The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans,” Truman asserted in his Inaugural Address.³⁶ Not just a dig at the now-feeble Great Powers of Europe and their capricious *mission civilatrice*, the remark also harkened to the rhetoric of containment, reminding the newly independent nations of the voracity of Soviet Russia and Stalin’s supposed ambition to build a totalitarian empire. Thus, development was both

³³ Harry S. Truman, Inaugural Address of President Harry S Truman, January 20, 1949. Harry S Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inaugural20jan1949.htm.

³⁴ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman*, 232.

³⁵ See Robert Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University press, 1973), 52.

³⁶ Harry S Truman, Inaugural Address of President Harry S Truman, January 20, 1949. Harry S Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inaugural20jan1949.htm.

the kind of change that the poor people of the Third World needed and which the United States—practically alone among nations because it was both free of the “old” imperialist tendencies and because it was a paragon of democratic development itself—could help them achieve.

Through the process of designing and debating the United States’s first overseas development program, intellectuals and policymakers came to a few important conclusions about the nature of underdevelopment. First, underdevelopment was synonymous with “the burden of poverty” and human misery.³⁷ While it possessed some non-economic aspects, to be sure, the primary solution had to be economic in nature. Raising standards of living was the remedy; identifying “underemployment” in underdeveloped societies and diverting the underemployed towards industrial labor was the strategy.³⁸ Second, this poverty “problem” could be rather simply solved by injecting massive doses of private foreign investment into underdeveloped areas to build the infrastructure necessary for industrialization and provide training in the technical skills that made modern, efficient economies work. Importantly, unlike the rhetoric of the White Man’s Burden, post-war development advocates argued that the poverty of the “underdeveloped areas” was a kind of poverty that Americans had weathered themselves in the past. References to the Tennessee Valley Authority, for example, were all too common among the early speeches of Point Four supporters.³⁹ Political scientist Robert Packenham

³⁷ Although a common phrase, here I cite the testimony of Secretary of State Dean Acheson. U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *An Act for International Development*, 81st Cong., 2d sess., 1950, 10.

³⁸ *Measures for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries*, Report by a Group of Experts appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations (New York: United Nations Publication, May, 1951), 4.

³⁹ Historian David Ekbladh has probed the singular importance of the TVA as a symbol for development advocates in his article, “Mr. TVA: ‘Grass Roots’ Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933-1973” *Diplomatic History* 26 (Summer 2002): 335-374. See also David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order, 1914 to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2009).

argues that the naïveté of early development theorists about the easiness of change stemmed from the experience and perception of *American* development, per se.⁴⁰ Thus, although it was ostensibly rooted in a New Deal sensibility about an equitable distribution of wealth that took years of progressive activism to make manifest, it was not direct and public capital transfers so much as *access* to private investment and information that liberals saw as the real antidote to underdevelopment.

The last assumption that early proponents of economic development shared was that underdevelopment was a material problem but also a fundamentally ideological one. By transforming the pervasive “sense of injustice” felt by millions of impoverished people around the world and channeling their energies towards building industrial economies, American technical experts could demonstrate what Harry Truman called “democratic fair dealing” in action.⁴¹ Failing to export this enlightened ideology made people vulnerable to totalitarianism and threatened the United States with defeat in the Cold War. In such a case, poverty around the world and the unwillingness of the United States to do anything about it would surely provide the Soviets with proof that capitalism was a failed ideology. Identifying the problem, supporters of Point Four drew clear connections between poverty and the increasing appeal of Soviet communism. In the words of one such writer, “the only condition likely to turn any country Communist (apart from the presence or proximity of the Soviet Army) is that country’s awareness of its...poverty.”⁴² With his 1952 “Message to the Congress on the Economy,” Truman echoed this sentiment, explaining

⁴⁰ Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science*, 20.

⁴¹ Joseph P. Warburg, “A New Look at the Economic Challenge,” *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science: Formulating a Point Four Program*, ed. Ernest Minor Patterson. 270, July 1950, 22.

⁴² Willard R. Espy, *Bold New Program* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 245.

“chronic poverty now affects the ability of some of these countries to maintain independence in the face of threatened aggression or subversion.”⁴³

Only American development efforts could disprove the central tenets of communism. “Communist propaganda holds that the free nations are incapable of providing a decent standard of living for the millions of people in the underdeveloped areas of the earth,” Truman said as he signed the Point Four program into law. “The Point Four program will be one of our principal ways of demonstrating the complete falsity of that charge.”⁴⁴ According to this logic, an American development project could both overturn the ideology of victimization that colonialism had fostered among the people of underdeveloped regions as well as inoculate the same people against the persuasive power of communism. In action, Point Four—and the establishment of the Technical Cooperation Agency that was to administer it—represented the belief that, in the Cold War, Americans could do good and do well at the same time.

Of course, in application, Point Four did not cure the poverty of the world as some of its advocates had hoped, but it did create the impetus for an explosion of scholarly thinking about the nature of underdevelopment. As John Kenneth Galbraith recalled some years after he first began teaching the subject at Harvard, “No economic subject more quickly captured the attention of so many as the rescue of the people of the poor countries from their poverty.”⁴⁵ Practically speaking, the “humanitarian” aspects of Point Four were much diminished by the mid-1950s. The “fall” of China in 1949, the acquisition of atomic

⁴³ “Annual Message to the Congress: The President’s Economic Report, 1952,” January 16, 1952. *Public Papers of the President, Harry S. Truman, 1952*, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14139>.

⁴⁴ “Statement by the President Upon Signing Order Concerning the Point 4 Program,” September 8, 1950. *Public Papers of the President, Harry S. Truman, 1950*, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14139>.

⁴⁵ Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, 29.

weapons by the Soviets in the same year, and the coming of war to the Korean Peninsula in the summer of 1950 sharpened Republican criticism of the “soft power” approach embodied in Point Four. American development efforts began to take on an increasingly security-oriented tone, making foreign assistance a considerably less abstract tool of Cold War diplomacy than it had been just a few years earlier.⁴⁶ But while development policy was growing more direct in its objectives, scholarship about development was becoming far more intellectually complex. Voices from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology were joining political scientists and economists in debating the causes and implications of underdevelopment. Perhaps the chronic poverty of the underdeveloped areas was not just a vestige of colonial economies or rooted in the absence of industrial infrastructure. Perhaps there were far more intransigent challenges in the way of global prosperity.

Prescribing the Cure: Modernizing the “Underdeveloped” Personality

To answer precisely these questions, modernization theory blossomed from the leading centers of American social science, including Harvard’s newly-formed Department of Social Relations, the Social Science Research Council, and the Center for Comparative Politics.⁴⁷ Clustered under the topic of “modernization,” many and varied social scientists undertook the intellectual problem of re-conceptualizing development as more than just a process of economic planning. Foreshadowed by anthropological studies of “acculturation” in the 1930s, which emphasized the spiritual and psychological experience of becoming “modern,” modernization theorists nearly two decades later proposed a purposive strategy for total social transformation in the place of economic development.⁴⁸ The transformation with which they were occupied was a complete and unrepentant transition

⁴⁶ Ruttan, *United States Development Assistance Policy: The Domestic Politics of Foreign Aid*, 70-72.

⁴⁷ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*.

⁴⁸ For a brief but useful discussion of the anthropological model of modernization—associated with Robert Redfield most notably—see Cullather, “Development Doctrine and Modernization Theory,” 477-491.

from traditional ways of life to modern ones. Undertaken at the social, cultural, and political levels, modernization would make economic development on the Western industrial model possible because it promised to create rational economic actors and sophisticated planners out of people too long accustomed to a simple life of meager subsistence.

In specific terms, modernization theory was the product of an interdisciplinary approach that moved the locus of development from the nation to the individual. The meaning of development shifted from the realm of ideology, where it sought to make allies out of newly independent nations by transplanting the institutions of American-style capitalism, to that of personality, where the ultimate objective was to make modern men out of “backward” ones. Lucian Pye, one of the movement’s key figures and the founder of the subfield of Political Development explained, “economic criteria are not unimportant and they should not be casually disregarded, but they are not adequate for our policy towards the underdeveloped areas.”⁴⁹ Instead, in keeping with anthropologist Robert Redfield’s identification of “modernization” as a change in attitudes, Pye and his fellow travelers described modernization as a “syndrome” that involved a fundamental shift in the mindset of men and women who would have to abandon their traditional values for modern ones.⁵⁰ Originally prompted by sociologist Talcott Parson’s efforts to understand the complex cultural and social foundations upon which Western modernity had been built, the attention of many modernization theorists became fixed on distinguishing between “modern” and “traditional” personalities.⁵¹ In more holistic terms than economics had ever endeavored, modernization theory sought to explain the values that

⁴⁹ Lucian Pye, *Politics, Personality, and Nation-Building: Burma’s Search for Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 297.

⁵⁰ Redfield’s authorship of the term ‘modernization’ is widely noted. See Clifford Wilcox, *Robert Redfield and the Development of American Anthropology*, (Lanham/Boulder/New York: Lexington Books, 2004).

⁵¹ Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts*, 137-138.

produced affluence and that perpetuated poverty. Just as anthropologists—Oscar Lewis most notable among them—contributed the notion of culture to the post-war conceptualization of poverty, modernization theorists identified an absence of modern attitudes to the conception of underdevelopment.

Recent scholarly treatments have documented the rise of modernization theory from institutional and intellectual perspectives, but few address the ways in which it shifted the poverty discourse. Over the course of nearly two decades of intellectual hegemony, the body of literature about modernizing the newly independent countries of the Third World contributed three deeply inter-related insights to the definition of underdevelopment. These insights would prove particularly durable, altering the lens through which poverty came to be viewed anew at home as well as abroad. First, modernization theorists argued that chronic poverty was deeply rooted in individual psychology. Instead of explaining underdevelopment as a product of colonial or pre-industrial economies, modernization theorists claimed that “underdeveloped” personalities perpetuated chronic poverty. Second, poor people were “caught in time”—neither preliterate and isolated nor modern and mobile. Stuck in a temporal no-man’s land, they were victims of “culture lag.”⁵² And, holding on to “traditional” ways of life prevented them from the revolution in attitudes that modernization demanded. Finally, the chronic poverty of the underdeveloped had trapped its unlucky inhabitants in perpetuity, creating a “vicious cycle” that was inescapable without external intervention.

The most prominent modernization theorists highlighted the role of the individual and, subsequently, his or her psychology, in the perpetuation of underdevelopment. From

⁵² The concept of “culture lag” was certainly not an invention of modernization theorists. In fact, its origin is most often identified with the work of sociologist William Ogburn. The concept—and the basic assumptions that gave it meaning—appeared in many of the American community studies of the 1920s and 1930s, most notably Robert and Helen Lynd’s pathbreaking study of Muncie, Indiana, *Middletown* (1929). For further reading, see O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History*, 58-61.

Talcott Parson's "general theory" on the relationship between individual agency and social change to the elaborate psychological fieldwork of David McClelland and Alex Inkeles on the emotions and worldviews of "traditional" people, scholarly focus shifted from economies and governments to individuals. Echoing Max Weber, Parsons sought to understand the evolution of Western modernity anew, searching for clues as to the social action that had made Western Civilization possible.⁵³ He found these clues in the "rational" as well as the "non-rational" motivations for human action and in particular "value patterns" that promoted economic growth.⁵⁴ This insight fundamentally oriented modernization theory towards the study of the explicit *and* latent sources of human motivation, tilting the definition of underdevelopment in the same direction. Attacking what historian Nils Gilman terms the "hegemony" of economics, "the aim of social action theory was to provide a framework for analyzing all of social behavior that mirrored the rigor of economic theory in its particular sub-domain of economic behavior."⁵⁵ Parsonian theory laid the foundation for the behavioral shift in the development discourse.

Inkeles and McClelland were among the many scholars who built on the "non-rational" elements of Parson's postulate about human action, focusing attention not just on individual behavior but also on the underdeveloped personality. A social psychologist by training, Alex Inkeles undertook his research under the assumption that purely economic development had failed to achieve any significant change for poor of the Third World. An expert in the psychology of Soviet Communism, Inkeles spent the late 1950s and early 1960s creating a scale for evaluating individual modernity. Starting in 1962, Inkeles and a large team of psychologists associated at Harvard worked for the Project on the Social and Cultural Aspects of Economic Development, surveying nearly six thousand young men in

⁵³ For an excellent overview of Parson's life and theories, see Uta Gerhardt, *Talcott Parsons: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, 84-92.

⁵⁵ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, 82.

six developing countries.⁵⁶ Although he did not publish the findings of this research until 1968, Inkeles had outlined his theory of modernization in several articles on social stratification in Soviet Russia.⁵⁷ “Nation-building and institution-building,” he wrote in *Becoming Modern*, “are only empty exercises unless the attitudes and capacities of the people keep pace with other forms of development.”⁵⁸ Although for Inkeles, nation-building meant promoting widespread education, urbanization, industrialization, a bureaucratic form of government, and an extensive and rapid system of communications and transportation, he believed that any valid strategy for developing whole nations, must begin with the individual. People had to be made modern before nations could be modernized.

Following on the heels of his *The Achievement Motive* (1953), Harvard psychologist David McClelland published *The Achieving Society* (1960), which placed theories about human motivation at the center of the modernization discourse. McClelland argued that the key to Western development had been a quantifiable psychological trait—*n* Ach. This “achievement motive” propelled modernization in the West on an individual basis. Dismissing the notion of “economic development” as shortsighted in the face of the absence of a society full of men with high *n* Ach quotients, McClelland argued that the motivation to succeed was the crucial ingredient to transform poor societies.⁵⁹ Reaching into the daily lives of the poor, McClelland promoted solutions such as child-rearing practices that would “decrease father-dominance” and promote individualism. “The precise problem of most underdeveloped countries,” McClelland explained, “is that they do not have the character structure, which would lead them to act in the ways required.”

⁵⁶ Alex Inkeles, “Making Men Modern: On the Causes and Consequences of Individual Change in Six Development Countries,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 75, no. 2 (Sep., 1969): 208-210.

⁵⁷ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, 96.

⁵⁸ Alex Inkeles and David Houghton Smith, *Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 3.

⁵⁹ Nicolas Lemann, “Is There a Science of Success?” *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994): 83-98.

McClelland continued, “The model is like a combustion engine without the gas to make it go.”⁶⁰ Failing to foster the achievement motive, McClelland argued, meant reinforcing what a close acquaintance of his, anthropologist Oscar Lewis, came to call a “culture of poverty.” Indeed, McClelland liked Lewis’s theory so much that he made it required reading in his courses at Harvard. “Your approach is an extremely useful one,” he wrote to Lewis. “[It] seems very sensible to me.”⁶¹

Having established the role of the individual in perpetuating underdevelopment, modernization theorists concluded that the poor suffered such a fate because they were still psychologically oriented towards the past, indeed, many still lived in the past. Historian Nick Cullather notes that in the discourse of modernization, “centuries became yet another statistical measure of material progress.”⁶² More than just prosaic terminology, terms like “backwards,” “traditional,” and, indeed, “underdeveloped” itself, proceeded from very clear notions of the relationship between temporality and prosperity.⁶³ Rooted in a universal conception of Progress—an inevitable, linear process that all human beings have experienced or will experience—poverty became a vestige of the past.⁶⁴ Modernization—a process ostensibly designed to “cure” underdevelopment—demanded what one seminal text called the “passing of traditional society.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1961), 429.

⁶¹ David C. McClelland to Oscar Lewis, November 21, 1960, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 58, University of Illinois Archives.

⁶² Nick Cullather, “Development? It’s History,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000), 644.

⁶³ The problematic of temporality is a subject of significant discussion among scholars and theorists and is too immense to address in greater detail here. For further reading, see Nick Cullather, “Development? It’s History,” fn 17; Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, 39-52; and, Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, Rev. ed., (London: Zed Books, 2002), 35-40.

⁶⁴ For more on the relationship between conceptions of progress and the development discourse, see Jose Maria Sbert, “Progress,” *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 1992), 192-206.

⁶⁵ Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Chicago, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958).

Thus, poor people were poor not because they were exploited or oppressed by the machinery of modern life but because they were *outside* of it.⁶⁶ Change demanded that the connection that “underdeveloped” people felt towards their cultural traditions be dissolved. David McClelland argued that a key strategy of any government or agency seeking to promote the achievement motive was to “break orientation toward tradition.”⁶⁷ Convincing poor people that “traditional norms *must* give way to new ones” was a necessary first step towards promoting development.⁶⁸ Alex Inkeles noted that the majority of poor people in underdeveloped societies experienced a “desperate clinging to fixed ways of doing things.”⁶⁹ By the early 1960s, the assumption that poor people were fundamentally backward had even filtered down to intellectuals not commonly associated with the modernization discourse. Economist Robert Heilbroner explained that peasants in underdeveloped societies were poor because they were caught in the “shackles of backwardness.” This backwardness propelled and was propelled by an orientation towards traditional superstitions. To the peasant, unlike the modern farmer (whom Heilbroner described as a “businessman of the land”), “the world of nature is fixed and immutable; it is to be propitiated rather than vanquished.”⁷⁰

In a very real way, then, modernization theory locked poor people into the past. Nowhere was the poverty of people in underdeveloped regions (of the Middle East in this particular study) explicitly attributed to their traditional worldview as clearly as in Daniel

⁶⁶ It is worth noting that the 1950s also saw the emergence of a counter-discourse to modernization known originally as structuralism and later as dependency theory. Associated most closely with the scholarship of economist Raul Prebisch, the structuralist analysis suggested that it was unfair terms of trade and the receipt of development aid that further impoverished “developing” countries not “traditional” beliefs or cultural rigidity. See Robert Packenham, *The Dependency Movement: Scholarship and Politics in Development Studies* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁶⁷ McClelland, *The Achieving Society*, 393.

⁶⁸ McClelland, *The Achieving Society*, 394.

⁶⁹ Alex Inkeles and David Houghton Smith, *Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 4.

⁷⁰ Robert Heilbroner, *The Great Ascent: The Struggle for Economic Development in Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 57.

Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Published in 1958, Lerner's book was recognized as one of the first comprehensive statements of modernization theory in American social science. In Lerner's analysis, the historical appearance of "Moderns," whose personality Lerner dubbed "mobile," was precipitated in Europe by the rise of industrialization and the abandonment of agriculture as a primary source of income, creating the conditions for Western prosperity. Severed from their attachment to a fixed parcel of land, these transitional figures were forced to make choices about their own future. Some moved to cities where they were removed from the ties of kinship and community. From this experience, Lerner wrote, men came to understand that they possessed control over their own individual destinies. "People come to see the social future," Lerner explained, "as manipulable rather than ordained and their personal prospects in terms of achievement rather than heritage."⁷¹ Mobile personalities were flexible, responsive, and willing to experiment. Through the spread of literacy and mass media, they became participants in a social unit built on shared interests instead of obsolete loyalty to place and people. They became "participants" in what would eventually evolve into a democratic culture. These "mobile personalities" were, in short, little engines of "Progress." By contrast, "Traditionals" possessed none of the same spirit of initiative.

The emphasis that modernization theorists placed on the connection between 'traditional' values and enduring poverty placed a temporal division between people who were poor and people who were affluent. Although it was not an entirely innovative interpretation (the discourse of savagery and primitivism included an abundance of such insinuations), the idea of backwardness as a problem of economic development had supplanted such explicitly racial or ethnic distinctions between peoples. Demonstrating their desire to avoid associating with that earlier imperial discourse, modernization

⁷¹Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, 48.

theorists largely avoided such problematic terminology. Though, as Nils Gilman notes, “for American social scientists, *underdevelopment* invoked poverty, agriculture, morbidity, illiteracy—in short, backwardness, a term it was meant to replace.”⁷²

Finally, one of the most durable metaphors to emerge from the modernization discourse depicted underdevelopment as uniquely self-perpetuating. Though its precise etymology is unclear, the term “vicious cycle” was used with great frequency in mid-century social science. Economists Gunnar Myrdal and Ragnar Nurske used the term to describe a host of problems that possessed “circular causation.” In his last book, Nurske, an Estonian economist who had worked for the League of Nations before that organization’s dissolution, apologized for explaining an “obvious” concept, but continued to note that “[the vicious cycle] implies a circular constellation of forces tending to act and react upon one another in such a way to keep a poor country in a state of poverty.” Specifically, he described the challenge of capital formation in poor countries, the obstacles to savings and investment in economies plagued by low-wages, and the resultant lack of productivity.⁷³ In one of his earliest studies in development economics, Myrdal was even less specific, subtitling a chapter “The Vague Notion of a Vicious Cycle.”⁷⁴ However, the notion that poverty reproduced itself was, at the time, neither innovative nor particularly controversial.

If underdevelopment was primarily a problem of psychology, as modernization theorists argued, however, then the vicious cycle of poverty was no longer a “vague” notion at all. It described a causal link between certain attitudes and beliefs and the plight of the poor. No one expressed this as effectively as one of the founders of development

⁷² Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, 36.

⁷³ Ragnar Nurske, *Problems of Capital Formation in Underdeveloped Countries* (New York/London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 4-5.

⁷⁴ Myrdal deployed this notion most explicitly in his report on racial prejudice in the United States, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944). He discussed this notion far more abstractly in an early text on the problems of global economic inequality. See Gunnar Myrdal, *Rich Lands and Poor: The Road to World Prosperity* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), 11.

economics, Albert O. Hirschman. Writing in 1958, Hirschman reflected that “It would seem that all we have achieved [after ten years of development programs] is to saddle ourselves with yet another vicious circle.” Hirschman continued. “But, to paraphrase Orwell, while all development circles are vicious, some are more vicious than others. All circles result from a two-way dependence between development and some other factor. But the circle to which our analysis has led may perhaps lay claim to a privileged place in the hierarchy of these circles inasmuch as it alone places the difficulties of development back where all difficulties of human action begin and belong: *in the mind*.”⁷⁵ Described variously as fatalism, apathy, and helplessness, the mentality of poor people came to be seen as paralyzed. This psychological—and by extension, cultural—paralysis reproduced the very factors that made these people poor in the first place. “The lifeways and deathways of a traditional society tend to become interlocked in a vicious cycle of poverty,” Daniel Lerner summarized in *The Passing of Traditional Society*.⁷⁶

The concept of underdevelopment that emerged from modernization theory prepared the way for a very particular interpretation of Oscar Lewis’s culture of poverty thesis. Indeed, what Lewis was really talking about when he described the culture of poverty was a state of underdevelopment. And, while the modernization and development discourse pathologized poverty, it also made this ancient scourge of humanity seem eminently remediable. Unlike the rhetoric of poverty fighting during the Progressive era, the development discourse made the elimination of poverty reliant upon the very kinds of economic structures that had been identified as the *cause* of poverty a few decades earlier. Poverty was not the product of a fundamentally exploitative system of industrial capitalism, as an earlier generation of reformers had suggested. Rather, it was caused by the

⁷⁵ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Strategy of Economic Development* (New Haven: Yale University, 1958), 11. Emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, 217.

absence of capitalism, particularly its cultural and psychological dimensions. The notion of poverty as underdevelopment thus implied that prosperity was inevitable and that intervention promised to be effective. As anthropologist Gilbert Rist writes, “the appearance of the term ‘underdevelopment’ evoked not only the idea of change in the direction of a final state but, above all, the possibility of bringing about such change.”⁷⁷ That possibility coincided with the optimism of the New Frontier and the imperative of winning the Cold War. It was an undertaking for which Americans would show surprising enthusiasm.

Invisible No More: “Underdevelopment” Comes Home

In June of 1950, *Harper’s Magazine* published a thought-provoking little article by a frequent contributor entitled “Who Are the American Poor?” Robert Heilbroner, then a young lecturer in the Department of Economics at New York’s New School for Social Research, was gaining something of a reputation as a popularizer of contemporary economic thought. In large part, the article celebrated American affluence in the heyday of booming, post-war economic growth. Taking just a single year—1948—as his statistical baseline, Heilbroner explained that Americans “received the largest amount of purchasing power ever distributed in any nation in history.” And, he added, “Our average standard of living was the highest ever achieved by any civilization of which we know.”⁷⁸ Happy days were, indeed, here again.

Yet, all of this abundance only made the other statistics Heilbroner added more chilling. “One out of every two single-dwelling individuals lived on less than \$1,000. One family out of ten got along—to the extent that a family could get along—on \$20 a week or less. Out of forty million families in the nation, ten million shared in the greatest boom

⁷⁷ Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, 73.

⁷⁸ Robert L. Heilbroner, “Who Are the American Poor?” *Harper’s Magazine* 200, no. 1201 (June 1950): 30.

in history with an income of less than \$40 a week—just over \$13 per person.” The contrast between these two realities shocked Heilbroner. “It is because our total national income is so large,” he concluded, “that the thinness of thirty million slices of the income cake at the bottom is disturbing and provoking.”⁷⁹ Heilbroner identified some of the groups who received those thin slices as rural people, the aged, the disabled, “Negroes,” and the products of “broken families.” The last group was comprised of people who, despite holding down jobs, could not earn enough money to maintain a decent standard of living. In 1950, in an age of unimaginable plenty, Robert Heilbroner told his educated, middle-class readership, *these* were the American Poor.

While Heilbroner noted that the poverty of these particular groups was not entirely surprising because of the historical obstacles to prosperity that they faced, the character of post-war American poverty on the whole seemed unique to him. “Poverty is nothing new to us Americans,” Heilbroner wrote. “We still have clear memories of the breadlines and Hoovervilles and the stagnation of the thirties. But this poverty...is different.”⁸⁰ This poverty was different in no small part because it was *not* a problem of systemic unemployment. In fact, despite a brief recession in 1949, the unemployment rate hovered at or below a remarkably low five percent from 1942 to 1950.⁸¹ From this, Heilbroner deduced that “the fact that we suffered poverty amidst plenty was not an indictment of a system which did not work,” as the poverty of the 1930s had been. Instead, he explained reassuringly, “the fault...is not spectacular. It lies partly in the fact that...there have been laggard sectors, which have failed to keep up with the general advance toward a better way of life.”⁸² In a perhaps unwitting semantic nod to modernization theory, Heilbroner drove

⁷⁹ Heilbroner, “Who Are the American Poor?”, 30.

⁸⁰ Heilbroner, “Who Are the American Poor?”, 30.

⁸¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Household Data—Annual Averages, 1942-2007,” <http://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/lf/aat1.txt>.

⁸² Heilbroner, “Who Are the American Poor?” 31.

the point home, noting, “by now, some of these sluggish backwaters of inactivity are almost detached from the rush of the main current.”⁸³

Heilbroner’s article was just the first of many sparks that would ignite political and public concern about poverty in a time of relative abundance, culminating with the publication of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* in 1962. American social scientists, public intellectuals, and cultural critics showed greater interest in few other subjects during the 1950s and early ‘60s. This explosion of scholarly and journalistic interest in the poor also brought a major legislative initiative into being to achieve “total victory” against poverty in the United States, Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty.⁸⁴ One historian notes that this rediscovery of poverty may have been inspired by rising public concern over social problems such as juvenile delinquency and economic problems including three post-war recessions.⁸⁵ However, by reading even Heilbroner’s early article through a different lens, one can see that the rediscovery of poverty was more than just a spasm of political energy and public guilt. What readers of Heilbroner’s article were witnessing was the rediscovery of poverty in the United States as a problem of *underdevelopment*.

Over the next fifteen years, surface slippages like Heilbroner’s would give way to tectonic shifts in the way Americans understood and explained poverty in the United

⁸³ Although he did not publish on the topic until 1961, there is good reason to believe that Heilbroner was very familiar with the existing literature on economic development and modernization at the time in which he wrote this article. A regular contributor to *Harper’s* throughout the 1950s, he produced an extensive review of several works on development for the magazine in May of 1961. Two years later, Heilbroner wrote a book of his own on this subject that was published by Harper & Row as a sort of layman’s primer on modernization. *The Great Ascent: The Struggle for Economic Development in Our Time* synthesized the core themes of modernization theory explored earlier in this chapter, most tellingly in a section entitled “The Shackles of Backwardness” which covered topics including the “the problem of social attitudes” and the “vicious cycles” of poverty in the Third World. See Heilbroner, *The Great Ascent: The Struggle for Economic Development in Our Time*.

⁸⁴ President Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress Proposing a Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty,” March 16, 1964. *Public Papers of the President*, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64, Book I, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26109&st=war+on+poverty&st1=>.

⁸⁵ Patterson, *America’s Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, 111.

States. Owing to over a decade of poverty-fighting in the Third World, intellectuals and policymakers had become steeped in the language of modernization and development. This exposure to the evolving modernization discourse, with its persuasive explanations for the causes of underdevelopment, prompted Americans to rethink the vexing problem of why poverty still existed in the richest country on earth. In this context, Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty thesis, popularized in his own writings and, of course, through the work of Michael Harrington, served as a powerful explanatory device. Rather than portray poverty as a *product* of industrial capitalism, as Progressive reformers or their New Deal counterparts had done, Lewis and Harrington were, in essence, suggesting that poverty at home as caused by an *absence* of enough capitalism—or at least the values and attitudes upon which capitalism depended. Thus, the solution to poverty at home focused not on redistributing wealth but on integrating the poor into an already wealthy society.

By the mid-1960s, then, intellectuals and activists had come to see poor people at home much like their counterparts in the Third World. Rural or urban, black or white, male or female, the American poor were spatially isolated and temporally backwards. They were bereft of hope, suspicious of change, mired in their own despair. They were locked in vicious cycles. And theirs was a “culture of poverty.” In short, they were a “different kind of people” from upwardly mobile, modern Americans.⁸⁶ This picture of the American poor, with its essential optimism and implicit promise of inevitable success, provoked unprecedented elite and popular commitment to making a more equitable American society. Because the generals and soldiers could finally identify the enemy, and because they believed that they possessed the technology to defeat that enemy, a war could finally be declared on poverty at home just as it had been abroad.

⁸⁶ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 146.

Indeed, nowhere is the evolution of this new synthesis as visible as in the capstone texts of the rediscovery of poverty, John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) and Harrington's *The Other America*. Both bestsellers, these books became icons of modern American arts and letters, on par with Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—two texts that awakened public concern for the poor during the first half of the twentieth century. Published four years apart, Galbraith and Harrington renewed public awareness of poverty in the United States and, by most authoritative accounts, provoked the massive legislative initiative that would come to be known as the War on Poverty. Recollecting the origins of that legislative program, scholar and Kennedy memoirist Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. noted the impact of these texts on just one American reader. Explaining John Kennedy's concern about poverty, Schlesinger wrote "it was not till toward the end of the decade [the 1950s]—and especially with the publication in 1958 of Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*...that chronic poverty began to impinge on the national consciousnesses as a distinct issue."⁸⁷ Schlesinger continued, "Then in 1962, *The Other America*, a brilliant and indignant book by Michael Harrington, translated the statistics into bitter human terms." He concluded, "Kennedy read both Galbraith and Harrington; and I believe that *The Other America* helped crystallize his determination [to begin] a poverty program."⁸⁸ While subsequent accounts quarrel with exactly how much of either book Kennedy really read, Schlesinger's choice of those two volumes speaks to their unassailable importance to the rediscovery of poverty.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 1010.

⁸⁸ Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, p. 1010.

⁸⁹ Almost every participant and scholar who has written about this subject agree that these two books personally influenced Kennedy's thinking about poverty—though many question the extent to which Schlesinger's account might be over-simplified or somewhat apocryphal. The consensus is that Kennedy read Galbraith—whom he counted as something of a tutor in economic matters before he ran for President—but probably did not read Harrington. Instead, most believe that Kennedy first encountered a *New Yorker* review of *The Other America* written by Dwight MacDonald. In either case, both books were widely read by the

Equally important is the way that both books relied on a new language to describe persistent want—the language of underdevelopment.

Although he began by endeavoring to write a book about poverty abroad, John Kenneth Galbraith made a far more important contribution to public awareness about poverty at home in *The Affluent Society*. If it had been released the year before, in the midst of one of the most booming years of a booming decade, perhaps the book might have made less of a splash, but in the midst of the rather steep recession of 1958, *The Affluent Society* became a bestseller within weeks of its debut. And, while Galbraith's discussion of poverty was confined to only one of the twenty-five chapters of his hefty tome, his book provoked a broad popular debate about the causes and consequences of want and plenty in modern America. "Are We Living Too High on the Hog?" one reviewer pointedly asked in his headline.⁹⁰ Galbraith's friend and fellow economist, Robert Heilbroner called the book "as disturbing as it is brilliant."⁹¹ More than conveying the plight of poor people in the United States to his readership—of which he did almost none at all—Galbraith provoked a conversation about poverty by challenging his readers to question their own ways of life and think soberly about their government's economic and social priorities. His was less an exposé than a broad social critique.

And, of course, as its title suggests, the book wasn't really about poverty at all—it was about affluence. Galbraith's thesis, in grand terms, was quite straightforward. As he discovered upon his return from a four-month long sojourn in India, poverty and starvation had been the preoccupation of economics from its origins because they had

influential and un-influential alike. See Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 82; Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 119; and, Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, 97;

⁹⁰ "Are We Living Too High on the Hog?" Edwin L. Dale, Jr., *The New York Times*, June 1, 1958.

⁹¹ Heilbroner quoted in Parker, *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), 292.

been the preoccupation of humankind. In a society like that of the United States, however, over the course of a decade as prosperous as the nineteen-fifties, affluence had become the norm. As such, the *raison d'être* of the discipline of economics should shift from exploring the production of wealth to exploring the production of what philosophers might have called the good life. Economists and policymakers, Galbraith suggested, should begin to think about what to do with wealth instead of how to make it grow. It was this thesis that led Galbraith to write, in his chapter on “The New Position of Poverty,” that unlike the poverty of the past, poverty now “can no longer be presented as a universal or massive affliction.” In one of the most quoted lines of the book—and one that provoked the ire of many impassioned reformers, Galbraith concluded that poverty in America “is more nearly an afterthought.”⁹²

In the context of an older tradition of muckraking about the excesses of industrial capitalism, Galbraith’s dismissal of poverty as a major issue in American life may have seemed flippant. But set against the backdrop of the development paradigm, his was a very serious analysis indeed. The core assumption upon which Galbraith rested his discussion of poverty was that in modern economies that were regulated according to the basic principles of Keynesian macroeconomics, poverty “ceased to be a general case and became a special case.” This reality, he wrote, “put the problem of poverty into its peculiar modern form.”⁹³ He then grouped American poverty into two categories, “case poverty” and “insular poverty.” The first category was caused by “individual deficiencies” on the part of the poor such as insufficient education or, he explained, “the inability to adapt to the discipline of modern economic life.” Resting as it did on personality characteristics and

⁹² John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 323.

⁹³ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 323.

personal traits, case poverty was a diagnosis made at the level of the individual. Insular poverty, by contrast, applied to groups.

It was not “proper or wise,” Galbraith wrote in an effort to be unambiguous about his intentions, to characterize entire groups as having any sort of general “deficiencies.”⁹⁴ Insular poverty, he suggested, was caused instead by one’s environment. “Insular poverty,” he explained, “has something to do with the desire of a comparatively large number of people to spend their lives at or near the place of their birth. This homing instinct causes them to bar the solution, always open as an individual remedy in a country without barriers to emigration, to escape this island of poverty into which they were born.”⁹⁵ Here Galbraith noted that in many cases such escape was simply impossible because of racial discrimination and limited opportunity. Although his language may have echoed with the strains of Victorian moralism or, even, a tradition of social Darwinism, his purpose was quite different. The quintessential modern liberal intellectual, Galbraith believed in an activist government, a full-employment economy, and the cause of civil rights. Above all, however, he saw the world through the lens of development.

Galbraith’s prescriptions for eliminating case and insular poverty bespoke his developmentalist worldview. Short of providing a guaranteed income that would ameliorate the worst kind of suffering among the poor, Galbraith suggested that a public investment in the education and general well-being of poor children could prevent poverty from becoming “self-perpetuating.” “In the strategy of the attack on insular poverty,” he added, “a place remains for an attack on the frustrations of the environment itself.”⁹⁶ Clearing slums and reorganizing the relationship between land and capital in what he

⁹⁴ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 326.

⁹⁵ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 326.

⁹⁶ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 331.

called “rural slums” could be effective weapons against insular poverty.⁹⁷ A devoted New Dealer, an apostle of Keynes, a proponent of social democracy, Galbraith took pains to add that one of the most prominent features of the “new” poverty was that it was not eradicated by a redistribution of wealth or an increase in income in general.⁹⁸ The central strategy of a previous generation of anti-poverty activists was, he suggested, insufficient to the challenges of eliminating poverty in the affluent society.

In a larger sense, readers of *The Affluent Society* gleaned a very particular—and very new—picture of the poor in America. While Galbraith noted that the institution of poverty in the United States was not like its counterpart in a country like India—in terms of both magnitude and in depth—he was one of several authors who believed that the poor *people* of the world had quite a bit in common. In describing the rural and urban poor in the United States, Galbraith chose language that placed their experiences in the context of a the still-crystallizing idiom of underdevelopment. To emphasize the isolation of the poor, for instance, Galbraith wrote that unlike a country in which being poor was the norm, the United States was a country in which the poor were separated from the affluent society in which they lived and “forgotten” by most of their fellow citizens.⁹⁹ Spatially isolated in “islands” of poverty, the poor were parochial (they felt the powerful tug of a “homing instinct” that kept them in depleted communities). Lacking what Daniel Lerner would call the “mobility” of modern man in a book published only a few months after Galbraith’s, the poor were trapped and despairing in their remote pockets of poverty.

Yet, as with their counterparts in the Third World, the eventual absorption of the poor into the mainstream was inevitable. Even those individuals who were trapped in case poverty could look forward to eventual escape. “Much can be done,” Galbraith wrote, “to

⁹⁷ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 331.

⁹⁸ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 327. *Emphasis added.*

⁹⁹ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 328.

treat those characteristics which cause people to reject or be rejected by the modern industrial society.”¹⁰⁰ While Galbraith urged a dramatic shift in economic and social priorities in the United States in the rest of the book, in this chapter on poverty his focus was on integrating the poor into the mainstream rather than overturning the system that produced that mainstream. Through the lens of development the answer was clear. Enlightened public policy that focused on preparing poor people for modern life—instead of significantly redistributing wealth and power—was, the only remedy for a poverty that had previously seemed so intractable. Galbraith’s effort to open the eyes of Americans to this “new” poverty and convince them of the need to eliminate it would not stand alone for long.

If, despite his rural upbringing in Canada and his Ph.D. in agricultural economics, John Kenneth Galbraith had become one of the most visible members of the political and academic elite in late 1950s America, Michael Harrington was, in many ways, his antithesis. Born twenty years after Galbraith, Harrington had left his hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, for Holy Cross College, then Yale, then the University of Chicago, before becoming a *bona fide* stalwart of the bohemian underground of Greenwich Village, where he moved in December of 1950.¹⁰¹ He kept a roof over his head by freelancing as a journalist. Raised as a devout Catholic, Harrington had grown disillusioned with the Church until his encounter, a few months after his arrival in New York, with Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker Movement. Drawn to Day’s personal commitment to social justice and to the principles of the Catholic Left, Harrington found himself writing a regular column for the *Catholic Worker*, including one written in June, 1952 titled “Poverty—U.S.A.” Inspired by the 1950 census, Harrington noted for his readers that

¹⁰⁰ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 331.

¹⁰¹ For biographical details, I rely on Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000). I also rely upon Harrington’s own rather unconventional “autobiography,” Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1973).

some fifty percent of American families lived on \$3,100 a year when most economists agreed that the minimum annual income needed for a family of four to live decently in the U.S. was \$3,295.¹⁰² While Harrington would shift his energies from the Catholic Worker Movement to the Young Socialist League, writing about poverty would remain a constant in his career. In fact, despite his central role in some of the most significant doctrinal debates among American leftists throughout the 1950s and '60s, it was poverty that would make Harrington as much of a political insider as Galbraith had become.

“The year 1958 was more than a personal revelation for me,” Harrington recollected of the year he undertook the research for what would eventually become *The Other America*. “It was a fateful turning point.”¹⁰³ Harrington was referring to the “liberal-labor resurgence” he witnessed in his many and varied travels around the country in that year—but it was something quite removed from those journeys that made 1958 a professional turning point for him.¹⁰⁴ Over lunch in December of that year, Anatole Shub, a fellow leftist and an editor at *Commentary*, asked Harrington to write an article on poverty for the secular Jewish magazine. The idea was to take advantage of some of the buzz that *The Affluent Society* had produced for the purpose of further exploring what Galbraith had called the “new” poverty. With the exception of his 1952 piece for the *Catholic Worker* and his growing reputation as a trenchant writer, Harrington had no real expertise on the subject. “The logic of the assignment was not as self-evident at the time as it might have seemed in retrospect,” his biographer notes.¹⁰⁵ Yet, as Harrington recalled some years later, “I realized that I had spent at least seven years doing research. My time at the *Catholic Worker* and my tours across America had given me a visual, tactile, personal

¹⁰² Michael Harrington, “Poverty U.S.A.,” *Catholic Worker* 18 (June 1952): 7.

¹⁰³ Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 89.

¹⁰⁵ Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington*, 176.

sense of what poverty meant.”¹⁰⁶ What poverty meant to Harrington largely became what poverty meant to his many readers—presidents counted among them—over the next decade.

Central to Harrington’s analysis of poverty in the United States was his belief in the existence of a separate and distinct *culture* of poverty. It is not entirely clear from biographical or autobiographical accounts exactly when Michael Harrington came into contact with the ideas of anthropologist Oscar Lewis. Yet in “Our Fifty Million Poor,” the first of two articles that he wrote for *Commentary* on the subject, Harrington committed what historian Maurice Isserman calls a “momentous act of intellectual borrowing” by relying so heavily (and, as Lewis rarely failed to mention, without attribution) on Lewis’s theory of the “culture of poverty.”¹⁰⁷ Lewis’s culture of poverty thesis, first elucidated as an explanation for the persistence of poverty in “underdeveloped” countries like Mexico, identified poverty as not merely an economic condition but as an emotional and

¹⁰⁶ Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 92.

¹⁰⁷ Worthy of much greater attention than space allows is the rather odd intellectual relationship between Lewis and Harrington. No evidence exists to indicate that the two met. The only indication of the existence of correspondence between the two is a note from Lewis to a colleague in which he notes “I have now had direct confirmation from Michael Harrington that he had never heard of the concept of a culture or a subculture of poverty before reading my book in 1959.” See Oscar Lewis to Lloyd Ohlin, February 1, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 59, University of Illinois Archives. Lewis referred to Harrington’s use of his work a great deal in sometimes laudatory and sometimes irritated tones. His earliest mention of Harrington comes in a reply to a piece of what he called “fan mail.” Although he was not a particularly prompt correspondent with professional colleagues, Lewis replied to this note with haste. Explaining his existing research plans, he praised—and ultimately demurred—his correspondent’s suggestion to study black poverty in Washington, D.C.. But, before signing off, he commended a few recent publications to his fan’s attention. “Have you seen Mark [*sic*] Harrington’s book, *The Other America*? It’s very worthwhile reading.” Lewis added, with a tone of self-satisfaction, “Yes, it seems that poverty in the U.S. is being rediscovered on all sides. The surprising thing is that it has taken so long and it has been hidden so well from the public eye until now.” See Oscar Lewis to Margaret Lipchik, February 6, 1963. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 56, University of Illinois Archives. Over the next few years, in addition to occasionally carping about Harrington’s failure to cite Lewis in his writings, Lewis also tried to distance himself from Harrington’s interpretation of the “culture of poverty”—particularly as the theory came under greater scrutiny from scholars and activists who were dissatisfied with the War on Poverty programs. See Oscar Lewis to David Pines, March 2, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 56, University of Illinois Archives. For his part, Harrington glowingly reviewed several of Lewis’s books for major publications. See Michael Harrington, “The Agonizing Voice of the Poor,” *The Commonwealth* LXXV, no. 8, November 17, 1961: 214-215; Michael Harrington, “The Voice of Poverty Speaks for Itself,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1964; and, Michael Harrington, “Everyday Hell,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1966.

psychological one. Alienating and self-perpetuating, the culture of poverty was one in which the process of modernization that had historically served as a lever of social mobility had been stymied. The poor were trapped and isolated in a static culture that reinforced traditional beliefs and that counteracted the mobility and ambition upon which success in the modern world relied.

From his reading of Lewis, Harrington also came to see the poor in the United States as having been left behind by modern life. Indeed, Lewis's insistence that the culture of poverty was marked by its separateness from the mainstream and that its inhabitants were mired in a kind of inescapable backwardness became the hallmark of everything Harrington wrote on the subject. In "Our Fifty Million Poor," Harrington echoed, almost verbatim, Lewis's conclusions. "In large measure," he wrote, "poverty is a separate culture, another nation, with its own way of life." In his second article for *Commentary*, "Slums, Old and New," he developed this theme even further. Contrasting the character of mid-century American slums with their early twentieth century antecedents, Harrington wrote that while the old "ethnic slums" had served as agents of modernization, the contemporary slums were no-man's lands that had become impervious to modernization. "The old slums, closed communities, were indeed centers of poverty," Harrington explained. "But, out of them their inhabitants drew the strength to encounter the new society." Most of them, he wrote, did just that, transcending poverty by integrating themselves into the mainstream of American life. Springboarding his analysis off a nearly century-old Chicago school consensus about ethnicity and social change, Harrington wrote that those who remained in the ethnic slums were "old people who refuse to wrench themselves away from their past."¹⁰⁸ Directing his thoughts to the new slum—that which housed the country's "internal migrants"—Harrington wrote that "the phrase that most aptly

¹⁰⁸ Michael Harrington, "Slums, Old and New," *Commentary* 30 (August 1960): 119.

summarizes the major difference between the new slums and the older ones of the great immigration is: the absence of aspiration.”¹⁰⁹ In language that mirrors David McClelland’s discussion of the significance of the achievement motive in modernization, Harrington wrote “a certain level of aspiration...is necessary before one can take advantage of modern opportunities.”¹¹⁰ Harrington concluded by borrowing a concept central to the definition of underdevelopment. “Any possible sense of aspiration,” he explained, was undermined by “the vicious cycle set up by the slum dweller’s view of society.”¹¹¹

A growing national conversation about poverty among opinion-makers ranging from Galbraith to Edward R. Murrow, coupled with the success of his articles for *Commentary* and his widening reputation as a thoughtful social critic gave Harrington the opportunity to write a longer, more in-depth piece. Despite involving himself and the Young Socialist League in the civil rights movement and the presidential campaign of 1960, Harrington managed to complete the book by the end of 1961. *The Other America*, published by Macmillan in March of 1962, received “friendly, if modest, reviews” and yielded Harrington the largest sum he had ever been paid for his writing: \$1500.¹¹² Finding the whole thing somewhat anti-climactic, Harrington began a long-anticipated sojourn to Paris. Upon his return nearly a year later, he discovered himself to be the author of a book on its way to becoming a best seller.¹¹³ The eventual success of the book may have come as something of a surprise to its author but Harrington’s ambitions were grand from the start. The poor, he wrote in *The Other America*, “need an American Dickens to record the smell

¹⁰⁹ Harrington, “Slums, Old and New,” 121.

¹¹⁰ Harrington, “Slums, Old and New,” 123.

¹¹¹ Harrington, “Slums, Old and New,” 121.

¹¹² Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 172.

¹¹³ Although the book was not officially on the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list until 1964, by December 1963, the book had sold 70,000 copies in hardback and was being re-released as a paperback by Penguin. See Isserman, *The Other American: The Life and Times of Michael Harrington*, 208; and, Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, 97.

and texture and quality of their lives.”¹¹⁴ Although he claimed not to be that kind of writer, he certainly did hope to bring to life, as Dickens had, the ferocious cruelty of poverty in an affluent society.

While Harrington’s first writings on poverty implicitly reflect both the influence of encounters with Third World poverty and a familiarity with concepts central to developmentalist thinking, *The Other America* makes these linkages very explicit.

Notwithstanding the fact that Harrington thought that Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* had seriously understated both the magnitude and severity of poverty in the United States, he generally agreed that the American poor were the “first minority poor in history” and that their poverty was caused by their inability to take advantage of opportunities that Progress had provided. African-Americans in urban ghettos, rural whites, the elderly, the mentally ill, and industrial workers whose capabilities were made obsolete by technological progress were among the people Harrington identified as suffering from the conditions of this new poverty. To Harrington, these people had all “missed the political and social gains of the thirties.”¹¹⁵ He based this analysis of the new poverty on the central fact that the trade union movement had catapulted so many on the margins of society into the middle-class during the 1930s and ‘40s. Harrington wrote that “the first step towards the *new* poverty was taken when millions of people proved immune to progress.”¹¹⁶ In terms that would have seemed very familiar to readers acquainted with the discourse of development, Harrington presented the poor in the United States as victims of spatial isolation and temporal backwardness. Both produced a self-perpetuating culture that prevented the poor from pursuing own advancement. The new poor as Harrington described them were, for all

¹¹⁴ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1962; Harmondsworth, UK/New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1977), 18. Citations are to the Penguin edition.

¹¹⁵ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* 10.

¹¹⁶ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 1-19.

intents and purposes, as alienated from modern life as the poor of the far-removed underdeveloped world.

One of the most unambiguous ways in which Harrington's description of the American poor was filtered through the development worldview was in his assertion that the poor were, quite literally, living in a land foreign to middle-class Americans. Throughout the book, and, indeed, in the title itself, Harrington described the poor in the United States as living in another America, a country within a country. More separate from modern America than any (modern, American) reader could probably imagine, the poor dwelled in an "invisible land."¹¹⁷ They traded their meager resources for food and services in an "economic underworld" that was located "off the beaten path" of the rest of America.¹¹⁸ The poor were "internal aliens" whose way of life was both invisible to and completely different from the "familiar America."¹¹⁹

Characterized in terms very similar to those that explained the relationship of the Third World to the First, the distance between the poor in the Other America and the affluent in the "Familiar America" was measured in temporal metaphors. Harrington depicted poor Americans as lost in time. Their culture was a fundamentally backwards one that manifested itself in their lifeways and attitudes. The inhabitants of the Other America had become unhinged from their society—a society that was implicitly and explicitly constantly moving forwards. "The poor," he wrote, "are losing their links with the great world. In a variant on a narrative of declension, Harrington explained that the poor had been left behind by American progress. "The new poor of the other America saw the rest of society move ahead," he wrote. "They went on living in depressed areas and became

¹¹⁷ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 1.

¹¹⁸ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 2; 3.

¹¹⁹ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 17; 1.

depressed human beings.”¹²⁰ Their failure to keep up with the forward movement of American society, Harrington explained, locked them behind the metaphorical walls of another country.

Harrington demonstrated that many of the Other Americans were quite literally being left behind because of the automation of American industry. Again emphasizing that “These are the people who are immune to progress,” Harrington elaborated. “The other Americans are the victims of the very inventions and machines that have provided a higher living standard for the rest of the society.”¹²¹ Unable—because of intellectual incapacity, emotional unwillingness, or structures of discrimination—to take advantage of educational opportunities that might make them more capable of working in the new economy, many were left to flounder in an increasingly remote American past. “Those who miss out at the very start find themselves at a new disadvantage,” Harrington wrote, and are left behind in a “poor farm for the rejects of society and of the economy.”¹²² From this experience, Harrington suggested, the poor came to believe that “Progress is misery.”¹²³ And, this belief shaped attitudes that became self-perpetuating. “The poor view progress upside-down, as a menace and as a threat to their lives.”¹²⁴ Unlike affluent Americans who welcomed the future as an undiscovered country of limitless possibility, the poor looked backwards, to the past as a source of comfort in a cruel life.

The experience of living in this spatial and temporal no-man’s land created entrenched ways of life that were not unlike the ways of life of the poor in the slums and villages of the underdeveloped world. Harrington sprinkled several examples of this throughout the book. In many cases, when confronted with better conditions, he noted

¹²⁰ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 11.

¹²¹ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 13.

¹²² Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 11.

¹²³ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 13.

¹²⁴ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 15.

that the Other Americans were repeatedly unable to deal with the accoutrements of the modern world. Elucidating the emergence of new housing projects in inner cities, he explained, “It is an enormous jump from the teeming slum street to the modern administrative existence.” He continued, “Indeed, some of the project dwellers are literally terrified at first by their new advantages. In St. Louis a social worker tells of encountering families who become constipated because of their perplexity in the presence of modern plumbing.” Continuing in this vein, he added that despite good plumbing and a basic knowledge of how to use it, “in some projects, where the people have good sanitary facilities for the first time, the halls and elevators still become noisome with the odor of urine and feces. This is a most unmistakable survival of the old culture of poverty in the new hygienic environment.”¹²⁵

In a vicious cycle not dissimilar from that of the underdeveloped countries, the culture of poverty of the Other Americans produced and was reproduced by a fundamentally backwards-looking worldview too.¹²⁶ Like the “traditionals” of Daniel Lerner’s underdeveloped Middle East, the Other Americans lacked the psychological apparatus to aspire and look forward. Their poverty suffocated the energy and sense of aspiration that was required to mobilize for their own betterment. “Their horizon,” he writes, “has become more and more restricted; they see one another, and that means they see little reason to hope.”¹²⁷ He further explained, “The individual cannot usually break out of this vicious circle. Neither can the group, for it lacks the social energy and political strength to turn its misery into a cause.”¹²⁸ In passages like this throughout the text,

¹²⁵ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 159.

¹²⁶ While he may have been using the term “vicious circle” to hearken back to a trope of the Progressive reformers, as biographer Maurice Isserman suggests, Harrington’s audience would, by 1963, have supplemented that association with other images: images of underdevelopment in the Third World. See Isserman, *The Other American: The Life and Times of Michael Harrington*, 407n158.

¹²⁷ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 11.

¹²⁸ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 16.

Harrington repeatedly remarks on how different and how removed the new poor are from the politically-active poor of the Depression years, the socialists and radicals with which he was most familiar. To drive the point home, he drew a provocative comparison that his reader could be sure to understand. “Like the Asian peasant, the impoverished American tends to see life as a fate, an endless cycle from which there is no deliverance.”¹²⁹

Without leaving room for misinterpretation, Harrington concluded by using unequivocally clear words to describe the circumstances of the American poor as rooted in their underdevelopment. “The United States,” he wrote in his concluding chapter, “contains an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty.” He continued, “Its inhabitants do not suffer the extreme privation of the peasants of Asia or the tribesmen of Africa, yet the mechanism of the misery is similar.” Reaffirming their isolation, Harrington wrote of the poor, “They are beyond history, beyond progress, sunk in a paralyzing, maiming routine.”¹³⁰ The poor were “think and feel differently.”¹³¹ And, modern, middle-class America was leaving them behind. “The poor are slipping out of the very experience and consciousness of the nation,” Harrington wrote.¹³²

If the cure for underdevelopment abroad was the transformation of people’s attitudes and values, the same remedy could succeed at home. What was needed, Harrington argued, was a revolution in values as well as a transformation of social policy. Without both, he argued, the Other America would remain severed from modernity. He shared an anecdote that drove this point home. “Much of this can be summarized in the report of a single incident,” Harrington wrote. Describing a family from a New York housing project, he told his readers that the family had planned a trip to the beach, adding that this was “hardly a difficult or expensive task for a New Yorker.” Upon their return to

¹²⁹ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 170.

¹³⁰ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 167.

¹³¹ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 146.

¹³² Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 4.

the project, Harrington explained, there was “excitement and surprise at their adventure.” Shockingly, “people who had lived within a subway ride of the ocean for most of their lives had never seen it, and neither had their children.” This, Harrington wrote, spoke to the central cause of poverty in the Other America. “The trip to the beach required more than an afternoon and a subway token; it involved a transition in their values, one that they had not yet made.”¹³³

Not unlike the underdeveloped peoples of the Third World, the American poor would have to be shown a path to acquiring modern values. Although he was a socialist, and although he struggled with whether or not to explicitly advocate for socialism in the pages of this jeremiad, Harrington concluded that beyond just changing economic policies or promoting economic growth, “any attempt to abolish poverty in the United States must seek to destroy the pessimism and fatalism that flourish in the other America.”¹³⁴ The federal government could work to eliminate (*de jure* and *de facto*) racial discrimination, could provide better housing, health care, and educational opportunities. But, beyond this, social workers must be deployed to regions of the Other America to help the poor gain a sense of possibility and hope. With political will, Harrington argued, all of this could be achieved and the Other Americans brought into the modern world. “The means are at hand to fulfill the age-old dream,” he wrote, “poverty can now be abolished.” Pointedly placing the responsibility for action on the shoulders of his readers, Harrington left them with one question. “How long shall we ignore the underdeveloped nation in our midst?”¹³⁵

Michael Harrington left for Paris too soon after the publication of *The Other America* to witness the realization of his most hopeful ambitions for the book. Some months after Harrington had ensconced himself in the smoke-filled cafés of the Left

¹³³ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 162.

¹³⁴ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 176-177.

¹³⁵ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 184.

Bank, the well-known leftist intellectual Dwight MacDonald wrote a review of *The Other America* for *The New Yorker*. Clocking in at over forty pages, MacDonald's feature, entitled, "Our Invisible Poor," was the longest to have ever been published in the magazine and became a call to arms about the problem of poverty in the United States. Of *The Other America*, MacDonald wrote, "It is an excellent book—and a most important one."¹³⁶ More than just a report on Harrington's achievement, MacDonald sought to give his readers a full picture of American poverty by synthesizing several other, considerably more academic publications. The final product provided readers with a clear and compelling portrait of income inequality in the United States. And, in both size and substance, MacDonald's review garnered the attention of the American *illuminati* and the American president alike.

Liberally quoting passages from *The Other America*, MacDonald explained Harrington's thesis to his readers. Contrasting Harrington's work with that of Galbraith, MacDonald wrote that while Galbraith's intentions were pure, his conclusions about the poor focused too much on "individual defects." Interestingly, however, MacDonald noted no such similar flaws with Harrington's use of the culture of poverty thesis. While, he noted, "Mass poverty still exists in the United States, and...it is disappearing more slowly than commonly thought," the problem was not one of wealth distribution.¹³⁷ It was deeper than that. "Inequality of wealth is not necessarily a major social problem per se," MacDonald explained. "Poverty is."¹³⁸ Just what was poverty then? It was an absence of money, yes, but also an absence of aspiration. "The children of the poor now tend to lack what the sociologists call 'motivation,'" he wrote.¹³⁹ "The poor are different...both

¹³⁶ Dwight MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 1963, p. 2.

¹³⁷ MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor," 2.

¹³⁸ MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor," 3.

¹³⁹ MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor," 14.

physically and psychologically,” he continued.¹⁴⁰ Describing regions of the United States as “economically backward,” MacDonald compared the “new” poverty to the “old” poverty, as Harrington had done. Unlike the old poverty of the urban immigrant enclaves, the new poverty was “more intractable” and “self-perpetuating.” MacDonald added that “as poverty decreases, those left behind tend more and more to be the ones who have for so long accepted poverty as their destiny that they need outside help to climb out of it.”¹⁴¹ Without remedies for these problems, MacDonald concluded, the Other Americans would continue to live separate and unequal.

In “Our Invisible Poor,” Dwight MacDonald never mentioned the poverty of the Third World. Unlike Harrington and Galbraith, he did not compare American and Third World poverty. He did not even use developmentalist parlance. Indeed, he did not need to use the same words to achieve the same meaning. By describing the “new” poverty, poverty rooted less in the maldistribution of wealth or in faulty macroeconomic policy than in the culture and psychology of a hopeless and apathetic poor, MacDonald was relying on the central assumptions of the development discourse. By the early 1960s, the American understanding of what poverty was had been so thoroughly altered by the encounter with deprivation abroad that MacDonald’s readers didn’t need him to be explicit. They knew that poverty was underdevelopment; they knew that the poor lacked the motivation to find their way out of the Other America; and, they knew that an affluent society could remedy this blight at home as effectively as it was around the world.

“In the last year,” Dwight MacDonald wrote of 1962, “we seem to have suddenly awakened, rubbing our eyes like Rip Van Winkle, to the fact that mass poverty persists, and that it is one...of our gravest social problems.”¹⁴² What historians call the “rediscovery

¹⁴⁰ MacDonald, “Our Invisible Poor,” 8.

¹⁴¹ MacDonald, “Our Invisible Poor,” 13.

¹⁴² MacDonald, “Our Invisible Poor,” 2.

of poverty” was an awakening to be sure, but the first stirrings had come over a decade earlier when Harry Truman made it the responsibility of the United States to fight poverty abroad. The logic of the development discourse that had evolved in the intervening years was clear. Poverty was not produced because of too much *laissez-faire* capitalism or because of the excesses of an inegalitarian system. It was, instead, a problem created by the absence of the values, the culture, and the social institutions that capitalism required. Oscar Lewis’s culture of poverty theory fit right into this discourse. Like Lewis, Galbraith, Harrington, and MacDonald could see this reality only because they looked upon the poor with new eyes—eyes that had seen and sought to understand the poverty of the Third World. The war against poverty that Harry Truman had originally declared in January of 1949 now had a new front and it was much closer to home.

CHAPTER 4

"One Global War on Poverty:"

Deploying Volunteer Armies at Home and Abroad, 1960-1968

Arriving in Washington on a frigid night in late January 1964, the usually indefatigable Sargent Shriver could think of little more than a good night's sleep. Shriver, the primary architect and director of the Peace Corps program, had just completed a whirlwind tour of program sites in Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Jordan, Nepal and Thailand. Sprinkled in among the meet-and-greets with earnest volunteers and enthusiastic locals in tens of towns and villages, Shriver met with kings, presidents and even the Pope, who was in Turkey on a mission of ecumenical goodwill. Shriver had been scheduled to take this trip in late November 1963, but, rather than an epic journey to promote his agency abroad, those weeks brought a crisis both political and personal—President John F. Kennedy's assassination. When the President's widow Jacqueline got back to the White House after the long, terrible flight from Love Field in Dallas, it was into Shriver's hands that she placed the responsibilities of planning the state funeral that was to follow. From that moment on November twenty-second to the last leg of his flight back to the States from his round-the-world voyage over two months later, Shriver had hardly spent an hour away from his work.

A hands-on administrator with a reputation for exerting personal control over everything his agency did, Shriver had been concerned that his absence from the Peace Corps in the immediate aftermath of the assassination might result in a sense of anomie among his staff, many of whom were particularly hard-hit by Kennedy's murder. During those grey months of 1963, then, Shriver spent almost all of his waking hours in his office at 806 Connecticut Avenue or on recruiting trips around the country. When he sat down

to think about it, he realized that despite all the work, even his own spirits were beginning to flag.

Much added to the sense of physical fatigue that was creeping up on the fit and youthful forty-eight-year-old. As the rumor mill inside the Beltway began once again to grind away after a brief period of dignified quiet in the early weeks of December, Shriver found himself uncommonly shadowed by political intrigue. There were whispers that Kennedy's successor, President Lyndon Johnson, was leaning towards appointing Shriver—and not J.F.K.'s heir apparent, Robert Kennedy—to the Vice Presidency. At the usually boisterous farm in Rockville, Maryland on which Shriver lived, there was an eerie silence. Shriver's wife Eunice had packed up their three children and abandoned Washington for Hyannis Port, seeking some peace in which to spend the last months of her fourth pregnancy and hoping for an opportunity to console her distraught parents. The mood in the capital, even for the preternaturally cheerful Shriver, was grim. "I was," he later recalled, "in a very unusual psychological and emotional situation."¹

Over-worked and lonely though he was there was still much to do before Shriver could cut himself some slack. And, so, as the year's cheerless Christmas holidays came and went, Shriver returned again to the trip he had never had the chance to take. Now that its most powerful sponsor was gone, the Peace Corps had to keep showing results to survive. Because the agency only sent volunteers to countries that invited them, Shriver felt pressure to shore up the relationships he had built with foreign leaders and ensure their continued support. As he saw it, the round-the-world trip was the only way to keep the Peace Corps alive and growing. Shriver departed on his journey two days into the New Year. Nearly a month later, reassured that his program would continue to thrive after a

¹Sargent Shriver quoted in ed., Michael Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 28. *Launching the War on Poverty* is a published volume of oral histories taken by Michael Gillette of the major figures in the creation and implementation of the War on Poverty programs.

triumphant reception in every country he visited, Shriver's thoughts finally turned to his hopes for getting some extended rest. In the last hours of his flight to Washington, Shriver allowed himself to contemplate a vacation to someplace warm and breezy. He daydreamed about spending a few weeks running around after his kids and smoking cigars by the pool. Having expected a taxi, the official White House car waiting for him at the bottom of the tarmac suggested that President Johnson had other plans.²

Far from the vacation he had hoped to enjoy, "Sarge" Shriver, as he was known to most, spent the next two and a half years of his life commuting back and forth between his desk at Peace Corps headquarters—where he spent Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays—and his other desk at the Office of Economic Opportunity—where he was to be found on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and, despite his devout Catholicism and unswerving belief that even the Lord took Sundays off, the Seventh Day of every week.

Shriver could not have predicted any of this the night he returned to Washington from that long voyage. Instead, in the afternoon hours of January thirty-first, as he looked out the window of the plane that was taking him home, Shriver felt fairly contented with his work at the Peace Corps. His agency was running smoothly, he had the friendship and trust of the new President, and despite this rarity for a Kennedy family member, he hadn't lost the admiration for which he had fought among his wife's relatives. Even for a man who was, by nature, drawn to a life of constant activity, the waters appeared to be calming down. By the morning after his return, however, the gentle ripples had turned into a tidal wave.

Less than twelve hours after his homecoming, Shriver found himself on the phone with the President, being given a hard sell. Johnson wanted Shriver to serve as the

² Although Shriver never completed an autobiography, his biographer Scott Stossel collaborated closely with Shriver on a singular account of his life and times. I rely here on Stossel's authorized work. See Scott Stossel, *Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 345-346.

commanding general of the administration's newly announced War on Poverty. Shriver demurred, declaring his loyalty to the Peace Corps and the work he still left unfinished at the agency. Johnson didn't see what the problem was—he didn't want Shriver to leave the Peace Corps. He just wanted him to add the administration of the War on Poverty to his duties. Deploying the persuasive “treatment” for which the Texan was famous, Johnson assured Shriver that the two jobs were complementary. “I’m going to make it clear that you’re Mr. Poverty, at home and abroad,” Johnson simply said. Ramping up the pressure, the President ended the discussion. “I want you to get rid of poverty [and] the Sunday papers are going to say that you’re Mr. Poverty, unless you got a real compelling reason which I haven’t heard.”³ Despite his sincere efforts, Shriver could offer no such compelling reason.

To be sure, when Johnson told Shriver that he would now be at the helm of an “international Peace Corps, one abroad, one at home,” he did so more for political rather than philosophical reasons.⁴ Shriver was well-liked on Capitol Hill, having demonstrated himself to be an extraordinarily able administrator, and his appointment provided Johnson with a way to keep the Kennedy family close to him while still sticking it to his political and personal enemy, Robert Kennedy, whose Department of Justice had been working on poverty issues for the previous three years.⁵ Shriver’s characteristic stamp of innovation and rapid-fire efficiency promised to lend the new poverty program a high profile and glamour that Johnson found appealing. If the Peace Corps that Shriver built

³ Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon Johnson and Sargent Shriver, telephone conversation, February 1, 1964, 1:02PM, Citation #1804, Recording and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (*hereafter* LBJ Library).

⁴ Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon Johnson and Sargent Shriver, telephone conversation, February 1, 1964, 1:02PM, Citation #1804, Recording and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJ Library.

⁵ The antipathy Johnson felt towards Robert Kennedy and Kennedy’s equally passionate dislike of LBJ has been well documented by historians. See, among others, Jeffrey Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud that Defined a Decade* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998); and Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000).

stood for the cool bravura of J.F.K.'s New Frontier, the War on Poverty would be the heart and soul of Johnson's Great Society. As Johnson later told Congressman George Mahon, "the only proposal that's strictly mine is the poverty bill...and I've got it all centralized under the best administrator I've got."⁶

While, as a disciple of Franklin Roosevelt New Deal, Johnson felt some urgency to finally put his stamp on a piece of major social legislation, the War on Poverty was also a response to a rise in public awareness of and concern for the plight of the poor in the United States. During the late 1950s, liberal Democrats in Congress including Senators Hubert Humphrey and Paul Douglas and powerful party operatives like New York Governor Averell Harriman had begun to highlight the problem of poverty and the opposition of Republicans to doing anything about it. In addition to proposals to study poverty locally—Douglas agitated for more aid to the economically depressed areas of his state of Illinois, for instance—Democrats began to stir the political pot by talking more and more about the "pockets" of poverty that persisted amidst the abundance of modern America.⁷ Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, several popular books like Harrington's *The Other America*, high-profile magazine articles like Dwight MacDonald's review of Harrington, and widely-seen television programs had also galvanized popular sentiment for doing something about poverty. By 1964, then, Lyndon Johnson wanted to quickly harness the growing support in Congress for an anti-poverty program—regardless of whether a legitimate blueprint for such a program existed yet or not. On top of the political desirability of appointing Shriver and the hurry to get something done, however,

⁶ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon Johnson and Congressman George Mahon, July 29, 1964, 7:33PM, Citation #4407, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJ Library.

⁷ See Carl M. Brauer, "Kennedy, Johnson, and the War on Poverty," *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 1 (June 1982): 98-119.

the challenges of fighting poverty at home and poverty abroad did not, to Johnson or any of his advisers, seem all that different.⁸ Shriver's appointment seemed a natural fit.

The politics of Shriver's appointment aside, then, his simultaneous direction of the Peace Corps and the War on Poverty reflects the extent to which widespread recognition of poverty's consequences for American leadership in the world and a new conception of the causes of poverty had begun to percolate at the highest levels of domestic and foreign policymaking. This new conception, as chapters 2 and 3 explain, fused poverty and underdevelopment. Identifying persistent deprivation, first and foremost, as a problem that could be solved through the "development" of the individual and the mobilization of the community, this new conception of poverty was no mere reformulation of the Progressive-era model of moral improvement. To Shriver and many of his *milieu*, development had become the ultimate expression of a liberal worldview, focusing on more than just the education and training of poor people in technical skills that would facilitate industrialization and economic growth. More importantly, development had come to be understood as the process of exposing the poor to the attitudes and values of modern people.

Ultimately, as the shared assumptions of the Peace Corps and many of the War on Poverty programs demonstrate, development was interpreted as, first and foremost, the psychological empowerment of the apathetic people who were caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and despair. Through the emergence of the conception of a transnational culture of poverty and the universal prescription of social development to eliminate it, the battle against poverty made national borders irrelevant. This was reflected in one of the first congratulatory letters sent to Lyndon Johnson on the occasion of Shriver's appointment.

⁸ Shriver had been suggested to Johnson as a potential head of the War on Poverty by several *confidantes* and advisers, including John Kenneth Galbraith. Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and John Kenneth Galbraith, January 29, 1964, 11:55AM, Citation #1620, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJ Library.

“Sargent is a very able young man possessed of vision and dedication,” a businessman-friend of the President’s wrote to him. “As Director of the Peace Corps he has waged a successful global war on poverty. He can and will with your help direct an equally effective War on Poverty at home.”⁹ With Johnson’s official declaration in 1964, the War on Poverty now had two fronts—one abroad, one at home. Rather than possess expertise in any one region or field, then, all Shriver needed to serve as the general of both assaults was a deep faith in the value of developing the poor and a plan for how to turn that faith into action.

To help millions of people around the world begin the process of what they called “self-help,” the architects of both the Peace Corps and the War on Poverty programs focused their efforts on the strategy of “community development” or “community action.”¹⁰ Without specific instructions to teach, build, or plant, volunteers charged with the task of community development had to assess the needs of the community themselves and work to show the people of the community how one might go about fulfilling those needs. Community development focused on the individual as a lever of change—both the volunteer and, by extension, the object of aid. By embedding caring, committed volunteers in the “pockets” of poverty at home and abroad, “CD” (as many of its supporters referred to it) promised to awaken poor people to the potential for change by providing them with “human models” in the form of literate, democratically-minded, middle-class guides that could show them how to navigate the difficult path to a

⁹ Dick Golding to Lyndon Johnson, February 5, 1964. Folder: 1/5/64-8/19/64, EX & Gen FG 105-4/A, Box 144, White House Central Files (*hereafter* WHCF), LBJ Library.

¹⁰ On the subject of “self-help” and community development, see an immensely valuable study by Alyosha Goldstein. Alyosha Goldstein, “Civic Poverty: An Empire for Liberty through Community Action,” (doctoral dissertation, New York University, 2005).

productive, modern way of life.¹¹ Building this human capital would add to the ranks of productive citizens and contribute to the economic growth that was necessary for true modernization—both in developing countries throughout the Third World and in the depressed areas right here at home. The vicious cycle of poverty would finally be broken as the poor became more fluent in the ways of modernity and began to participate more fully in democratic—or democratizing—societies.

The community development approach was also predicated on a particular set of ideas about democracy and self-determination. If one of the primary criteria for modernity was the spirit of reform to which anthropologist Robert Redfield had once referred, the chief requirement for a modern democracy was individual participation. Based on a profoundly universalistic view of humanity, community development also offered a means by which the poor themselves could be transformed into agents of change who could, in turn, truly become participants in the democratic process and advocate for structural (i.e., economic and political) changes that could help their own cause. For many post-war liberals, Shriver included, modernity and participatory democracy had become synonymous.¹² According to this worldview, poverty was both an obstacle to development and also an enemy of democracy at home and abroad. The men and women who were dispatched into poor communities to foment community development were, by their very participation in volunteer programs, strengthening American democracy too. As such, the community development activities performed by volunteers stand as the apotheosis of liberal modernization. They served as a means to reinforce the modern democratic nature

¹¹ VISTA Planning document, 1964; Entry 1006, VISTA Planning 1964; OEO General Council Records Regarding President's Task Force in The War Against Poverty; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

¹² Among that of others, David Engerman's treatment of American perspectives on Soviet modernization explores the extent to which American intellectuals believed modernity and democracy to be intertwined. See David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).

of middle-class youth and to transform the poor and backward into modern democratic personalities.

Both the Peace Corps abroad and the domestic Peace Corps—the initiative that would come to be called Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)—revolved around this basic understanding of how to provoke change among the chronically poor. Proposed soon after the initiation of an international Peace Corps, the domestic Peace Corps program that eventually became VISTA looked to provide the same kind of transformative example to impoverished peoples at home that the Peace Corps offered to those who lived in the “huts and village” across the globe to which John Kennedy referred in his inaugural address.¹³ Originally called the National Service Corps, VISTA was a product of the belief that Kennedy, his brother Robert, and a team of their advisers shared with a growing number of social scientists that the same brand of idealistic volunteer that had been drawn into service by the Peace Corps could serve the poor in depressed rural and urban areas of the United States. The VISTA program, more than any other aspect of Johnson’s War on Poverty, stands as evidence of the extent to which the community development approach to eradicating poverty captured the imagination of a generation of policymakers and American citizens alike.

Based on shared assumptions about the causes of poverty, the Peace Corps and VISTA, then, more clearly than any other contemporaneous policy initiatives, deployed the community development strategy in the barrios of Lima, Peru as well as in the barrios of East Los Angeles, in the ghettos of Rio and Harlem, in the rural communities of Appalachia and sub-Saharan Africa, and among the indigenous peoples of Malaysia and the American Southwest. Although none of the other War on Poverty programs was

¹³ John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy, Washington, D.C., January 20, 1961. John F. Kennedy Library.
<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03Inaugural01201961.htm>

patterned as explicitly on the model of the Peace Corps as was VISTA, the community development approach writ large also found expression in the Community Action Program and the Job Corps program. In fact, the principle of community development, rather than structural economic measures like wealth redistribution or an outright jobs program, served as the foundational logic of every aspect of the War on Poverty. The emphasis Shriver and his cadre of expert administrators placed on using returned Peace Corps volunteers in the War on Poverty programs is but one more example of the extent to which the two programs shared one fundamental prescription for alleviating deprivation: making poor people truly modern.

Despite these persuasive connections, it was not until the mid-1960s, with the proposal of a pilot program dubbed the Reverse Peace Corps, that the conception of poverty as a state of underdevelopment became most crystallized in policy. As part of a larger foreign policy effort to expose people in the Third World to the social problems that the United States faced at home and showcase the solutions it was undertaking to meet them, the Reverse Peace Corps invited educated elites to come to the U.S. to participate in community development programs to aid America's poor. This program, enthusiastically supported by Shriver, represented a rejection of a nationalistic development ethos that equated American life with the highest form of modernity. Instead, the hopes of the men and women who built and worked in these programs rested on the power of modern personalities—no matter from whence they came—to transform the backwardness of the poor at home and abroad. The extent to which Shriver and others urged foreign nations to begin their own Peace Corps programs reiterates this faith in a worldwide community development movement based on a conception of global poverty. Springing from a common body of knowledge and a shared set of assumptions, the dream that Shriver and his followers shared was that the best and brightest of the 1960s might begin to wage a

truly global war on poverty that looked to the modern, middle-class man and woman, young or old, of any and all ethnicities and religions, as the most powerful agent of change.

The founding of the Peace Corps, the creation of its domestic counterpart, and the subsequent internationalization of the liberal development model that underpinned both programs all demonstrate the means by which poverty came to be seen by American policymakers as a truly global phenomenon. Built on the fundamental assumption that all poor people shared a culture of despair and apathy, an overarching belief in the mantra of development as a strategy for building modern, democratic societies, and an ability and willingness to experiment in communities in the U.S. and in the Third World, the Peace Corps, VISTA, and Reverse Peace Corps are products of a particular strain of American liberalism in the Cold War era. This strain of liberalism was infused with the tenets of cultural pluralism, a boundless optimism about the nature of Progress guided by objective experts, and a desire to demonstrate that American capitalism need not be antithetical to social equality. The adherents of this strain of liberalism undertook a global war on poverty that could only be won in the hearts and minds of the poor at home and abroad.

Planning for Battle: Developing the Poor at Home in the Kennedy Years

In the lore of presidential history, John Fitzgerald Kennedy's election represents a handful of firsts. He was the first Catholic president, the first president to be born in the twentieth century, and the first president to eschew hats as a matter of course; from the ridiculous to the sublime, Kennedy's political identity and personal image were shaped by the symbols and ideas of a consciously modern, explicitly new America. A shrewd politician, Kennedy actively cultivated this image, noting in his Inaugural Address that the torch of leadership had been passed to a new generation of Americans in the election of 1960 and asking his fellow countrymen to join him at the edge of a New Frontier. Kennedy's election also

marked a less obvious but no less important first. He was the first president whose worldview had been fundamentally shaped by the development project.

Kennedy was at the beginning of his second term in Congress when Harry Truman first spoke of fighting underdevelopment abroad and he had been made a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the first year of the great wave of Third World decolonization. Most of Kennedy's inner circle of advisers hailed from one or another of the prestigious universities that dotted the Charles River. From W.W. Rostow, the author of the enormously influential tract on the development process, *Stages of Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960) to John Kenneth Galbraith, Kennedy's advisers were either architects of or fellow travelers in the world of modernization theory. As such, the Third World occupied a central location in the topology of Kennedy's map of the Cold War struggle. The condition that made the Third World most vulnerable to Communist influence was the "mass misery" of poverty. Kennedy understood poverty as a source of global instability, the "progenitor," as Galbraith once wrote, "of much further pain—from hunger and disease to civil conflict and war itself."¹⁴ Curing the poverty of the Third World was, then, an essential component of American foreign policy.¹⁵ And, in keeping with his immersion in the ideas and semantics of development, Kennedy believed that poverty could actually be cured. That the poor shall always be with us was not part of this particular Catholic's worldview. Indeed, while Catholicism may have been his religion, liberal development was Kennedy's faith.

In keeping with the centrality of the development project to his personality as a politician, the word 'poverty' came up in almost every major speech delivered by John Kennedy, on the stump and off, about foreign or domestic policy in the 1960 presidential

¹⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 21.

¹⁵ Michael Latham's treatment of modernization in the Kennedy era is essential reading on this subject. See, Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

race. The contest, in which the notably young Massachusetts senator opposed Vice President Richard Nixon, revolved around two seemingly timeless themes in presidential politics: how to build a foundation for world peace and how to revive American prosperity after a period of economic dislocation. Owing to his understanding of the Cold War as a fundamentally ideological struggle and his belief in the importance of the Third World to eventual victory, Kennedy saw both of these goals as inextricably connected. As he explained in one address, “We will never convince Africans or Asians that we are concerned with their welfare if we fail to show concern for Americans who are out of work, or living in poverty.”¹⁶ On another occasion, he noted that the United States “can better unite the free world in an aggressive battle against poverty and disease and illiteracy when we have successfully eliminated those same features from our own system—when we have demonstrated that we are on the move in this country—when we have demonstrated that we are capable of leadership at home as well as abroad.”¹⁷ In Kennedy’s quest for the presidency, then, he was sketching the outlines of a global war on poverty.

After his election to the presidency, Kennedy and his advisers sought to follow through on this intention. In the international arena, as historian Michael Latham has ably documented, Kennedy initiated a new development-centered strategy in U.S. foreign policy with the founding of the Peace Corps, the creation of the Alliance for Progress in the Western Hemisphere, and the establishment of the United States Agency for International Development. In his first address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, Kennedy pledged the United States to a “decade of development” to relieve the

¹⁶ John F. Kennedy, Address at Zembo Mosque Temple, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, September 15, 1960. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=74037>.

¹⁷ John F. Kennedy, “Rear Platform Remarks on Pathways to Peace,” Fresno, California, September 9, 1960. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25722>.

deprivation of the millions of people struggling to survive and build newly-independent nations of their own. At home, the Kennedy administration also began to use the insights of modernization theory to address the “pockets of poverty” in the United States about which Galbraith and others had begun to write. A few months after taking office, Kennedy signed the Area Redevelopment Act to provide aid to the “depressed areas” of Appalachia. Less than a year later, Kennedy also signed the Manpower Training and Development Act to prepare “unemployable” people to join the workforce by training them for jobs in the modern economy.¹⁸ The development of poor people at home had, in piecemeal measures, become a major theme of what Kennedy expected to be his first term in office. Perhaps, he thought, it was time to make that theme an even bigger part of his quest for re-election.

Thus, when Dwight MacDonald’s *New Yorker* review of Michael Harrington’s book found its way into Kennedy’s stack of night reading in the late spring of 1963, it came as a welcome sign that his instincts had been right. That the public’s interest in poverty had finally been stoked was plain to see. Kennedy need only have noted the buzz about MacDonald’s essay, the growing interest in Harrington’s book, and the sensational public response to two widely viewed television programs about economic inequality to sense that something was changing in the zeitgeist where poverty in the United States was concerned.¹⁹ In his iconic narrative of Kennedy’s “thousand days” in office, the Administration’s court historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., recalled a growing determination on the part of the President to make a more systemic attack on poverty in the United

¹⁸ Alice O’Connor has explored the ways in which both the Area Redevelopment Act and Manpower Development and Training Act reflect key assumptions of modernization theory. See Alice O’Connor, “Modernization and the Rural Poor: Some Lessons from History,” in *Rural Poverty in America*, ed. Cynthia Duncan (New York/Westport, Connecticut: Auburn House, 1992), 215-235.

¹⁹ In an oral history, Kennedy economic adviser Robert J. Lampman mentioned the public response the administration received to a television program written and produced by CBS News’s Howard K. Smith on the problem of poverty. *Howard K. Smith Presents* actually addressed poverty in two programs during this period but it is likely that Lampman was referring to the latter, “What is Really Wrong with the American Economy?” originally aired February 17, 1963. See Lampman in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 5.

States a theme of his re-election bid. Schlesinger remembered how preoccupied Kennedy was becoming with the issue by the fall of 1963. Impersonating a reader of Kennedy tea leaves, Schlesinger carefully reported that having taken a quick peek at the President's legal pad after a Cabinet meeting on day, he noticed that even "the doodles show the word 'poverty' half a dozen times, encircled and underlined."²⁰ More substantively, Schlesinger added, "One day in November, musing about the 1964 State of the Union message, [Kennedy] remarked to me, 'The time has come to organize a national assault on the causes of poverty, a comprehensive program, across the board.'" In Schlesinger's recollection, Kennedy planned to make poverty at home "the centerpiece of his 1964 legislative recommendations."²¹

Particularly enthusiastic about Kennedy's interest in the issue was his chief economic adviser, Walter Heller, who had been devising a domestic anti-poverty strategy since early 1963. With his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Walter Heller possessed an educational pedigree far removed from the Charles River, but his ideas converged rather seamlessly with the theories of modernization and development that had issued from Cambridge and that were in such vogue in the Kennedy White House. Although he was a Keynesian like Galbraith, Heller aggressively promoted what came to be called growth economics. Emphasizing the need to expand consumption to "grow" the economy, Heller and his peers believed that the solution to the problem of poverty was not the regulation of capitalism but its expansion. Tax cuts to promote corporate investment and consumer spending—not public jobs programs to provide guaranteed incomes—were the weapons of choice for Heller and his team. Historian Alice O'Connor notes that this school of thought "made the struggle against poverty compatible with lightly managed, if

²⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 1012.

²¹ Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 1012.

not free-market, capitalist growth.”²² A critical departure from the New Deal tradition, growth economics posited the notion that poverty was caused by an absence of enough capitalism rather than its overbearing presence.²³

The strategy for fighting poverty at home was, for Heller and his team, wrapped up in more ambitious plans for fiscal reform. In pursuit of a coherent policy to encourage economic growth, Heller spent the first two years of his time at the Council working to gain support for a massive tax cut that would, he argued, get the country out of recession and reduce unemployment. By the summer of 1962, despite Kennedy’s longtime aversion to deficit spending, Heller had won the day. The Administration proposed an unprecedented \$10 billion corporate and personal tax cut in its 1963 budget. The tax cut, however, was not going to cure poverty, even if it worked according to plan.

Reflecting the influence of modernization theory and its emphasis on the nature of backwards personalities and their inability to navigate life in modern, capitalist economies, Heller had also come to realize that something would need to be done to integrate the “unemployables” into a growing economy. In the spring, 1963, confident that his tax cut would pass, Heller asked the President if he could begin brainstorming with other members of the Administration about strategies for helping the poor learn how to take advantage of what he believed would soon be new opportunities. What would they do, one of Heller’s advisers recalled, for “the people passed over, left out?”²⁴

The public rediscovery of poverty sparked by MacDonald’s essay, among other things, served as a catalyst for Heller’s efforts behind closed doors. Through a series of roundtable discussions held on weekends throughout that summer, Heller and his “Saturday group” had begun to sketch the outline of a comprehensive poverty program.

²² O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 143.

²³ See O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 140-158.

²⁴ Lampman in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 5.

Relying on pro-growth poverty experts like his fellow Wisconsin graduate Robert Lampman (who had publicly disputed Galbraith's thesis in *The Affluent Society* about the limitations of growth), Heller tried to determine who, precisely, would be left behind by the "rising tide" of economic growth and how the government might reach them. Even Lampman, who many regarded as something of a Pollyanna on the poverty-fighting potential of an exclusively growth-oriented fiscal policy, believed that some groups would prove "immune to economic growth." These groups, Lampman continued, should be provided with "exits out of poverty." Among these, Lampman listed a domestic peace corps, the area redevelopment program, and, community redevelopment efforts. In what he called a "free-wheeling discussion of the general problem," Lampman emphasized the extent to which the poor were separate from mainstream America. "It is helpful to think of the nation as made up of two worlds of poor and non-poor." He continued, "Our aim is to keep the non-poor population increasing faster than the poor and...to have a strong net migration of youthful poor to the non-poor world." The challenge was more than just providing services to the poor to help them make that migration, Lampman concluded. Focusing on young people, training them, and providing them with a chance to escape and remain out of the poor world were imperative. "Perhaps it is fair," he told his colleague with candor, "to say that until we do [this] we aren't dedicated to the eradication of poverty."²⁵

Crystallizing the nature of the problem for Heller and his team, Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty concept entered the discussion, reinforcing the extent to which the problem of poverty in the U.S. was very much like a development problem abroad. Poverty was not a problem of economic dislocation and, as such, the "social work model" as one of

²⁵ Memorandum from Robert Lampman to Walter Heller, June 3, 1963. Council of Economic Advisors Draft History of the War on Poverty, Legislative Background: Domestic Crises and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Box 1, WHCF, LBJ Library.

Heller's aides called it was useless.²⁶ As Thanksgiving neared, Heller asked Kennedy if they should go forward with devising a plan. "Keep your boys at work," Kennedy told Heller on the nineteenth of November.²⁷

A few days later, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. By happenstance, a rather stunned Walter Heller ran into Lyndon Johnson on his first day at work in the Oval Office. After forty minutes of conversation, Johnson gave Heller his blessing as well. "That's my kind of program," Johnson said. "I'll find money for it one way or another."²⁸ Although the program Johnson endorsed didn't really exist yet in any meaningful way, an understanding of the problem did. By Christmas, Heller finally put a proposal into writing that was consistent with the development activities that had been exported abroad. Unemployment was not the problem to which Heller addressed his remedy. 'Unemployableness' was. Contrary, then, to a revival of the jobs programs that characterized the New Deal—programs that even the new president remembered with such fondness—"the emphasis of the proposal," Heller wrote to Kennedy's special assistant Ted Sorensen after the assassination, "is on human development."²⁹

Almost overnight, the War on Poverty, as it came to be called, was under way. Johnson appointed Sargent Shriver, the Director of the Peace Corps, as the program's director. By February of 1964, Shriver, known for the efficacy of managerial style, had gathered together a broad group of the best and brightest social scientists, elected officials, government staffers, businesspeople, and, even the occasional artist or athlete, to turn the skeletal plan proposed by Heller and his team into a major legislative program. From Robert Kennedy's office at the Justice Department came proposals for the inclusion of a

²⁶ William Capron in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 11.

²⁷ Walter Heller in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 15.

²⁸ Heller in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 16.

²⁹ Memorandum from Walter Heller to Theodore Sorensen, November 22, 1963. Folder: WE 11/22/63 to 3/4/64, Box 1, WHCF, LBJ Library.

domestic peace corps and a community action program that would seek to help teach the poor how to participate in civic life.³⁰ From none other than Michael Harrington, who was invited to join the group in Washington, came descriptions of the vicious cycle of poverty and its human cost. Psychologist Leonard Duhl, who worked at the National Institute for Mental Health, offered a second opinion. The poor “do not have the basic skills of living in our society; attitudes to job, money, and education; ability to use resources available in the health, welfare, and education fields.”³¹ From experts in early childhood education that Shriver’s wife Eunice knew came an idea for free preschool for poor children to help them break out of the culture of poverty. All of these ideas were founded on basic assumptions about the need to ‘develop’ the poor at home and none seemed out of place to Shriver. He was familiar with the same concepts from his work at the Peace Corps and in that context they seemed to be working. Moreover, by the early 1960s, poverty had ceased to be understood as anything but a development problem.

Nowhere is this massive intellectual shift more visible than in the absence of a jobs program in the largest legislative assault on poverty in American history. Vigorously championed by Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz—a liberal Democrat and avowed New Dealer—a jobs program never materialized as part of the War on Poverty’s arsenal. “Without question,” Wirtz argued in a memo to Ted Sorenson, “the biggest single immediate change which the poverty program could bring about in the lives of most poor people would be to provide the family head with a regular, decent paid job.”³² To Shriver,

³⁰ Both of these proposals were explicitly modeled after programs that had served as cornerstones of American development efforts in the Third World. See also, Alyosha Goldstein on the connection between community development in the Third World and community action in the United States. Alyosha Goldstein, “Civic Poverty: An Empire for Liberty through Community Action,” (doctoral dissertation, New York University, 2005).

³¹ Memorandum, Leonard Duhl to Sargent Shriver, February 4, 1964. Robert Sargent Shriver Papers (*hereafter* RSS Papers), Box 39, John F. Kennedy Library (*hereafter* JFK Library).

³² Memorandum from Willard Wirtz to Theodore Sorenson, “A Declaration of Unconditional War on Poverty,” January 23, 1964; White House General File; Records of Secretaries; Records of Officials of the Department of

Wirtz proposed a \$1.25 billion employment program instead of complicated and largely untested initiatives like the Community Action Program. Wirtz, however, held what Adam Yarmolinsky, Shriver's closest aide, called a "minority view." Yarmolinsky explained that "one of the choices we...had to make," during the planning of the War on Poverty, "was whether to concentrate on preparing jobs for people or preparing people for jobs."³³ They chose to do the latter because by 1963 the politics of passing a jobs bill had been evacuated of all of its logic. The problem wasn't the absence of jobs; it was the absence of people capable of taking them.

When Wirtz took his case directly to the President—not a man known for any particular affection towards obtuse social science theories—Johnson simply ignored it.³⁴ The development worldview had even pervaded the outlook of an avowed New Dealer and a man generally predisposed to mistrust the experts—or "Harvards," as he called them with more than a hint of disdain—upon whose knowledge Kennedy placed such importance. As Johnson, a former National Youth Administrator for FDR, recalled in his memoir, "the problem of poverty in the 1960s was not the same as that of the hard times of the 1930s." He continued, "the most significant aspects of this new poverty, once the spotlight of attention was thrown on it, were the dismaying nature of its stubborn entrenchment and

Labor, 1907-1996; Records of the Department of Labor, Record Group 174; National Archives Building, College Park.

³³ Adam Yarmolinsky in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 91.

³⁴ Political scientist Judith Russell has written extensively about the process by which a jobs program was excluded from the War on Poverty. Not unlike much of the historiography of the War on Poverty, Russell argues that political cowardice and a misplaced belief in the principles of commercial Keynesianism prevented a meaningful assault on poverty. Such an assault, Russell argues, would have placed a jobs program on the level of the Works Progress Administration at its center. Indeed, along with many of his compatriots on the Left, Michael Harrington also criticized the Economic Opportunity Act for being too politically timid to initiate genuine reform along these lines. Critiques of this nature, however, fail to see the way in which the widespread understanding of why poverty persisted had completely transformed from a Progressive Era/New Deal interpretation to that of the development discourse. See Judith Russell, *Economics, Bureaucracy, and Race: How Keynesians Misguided the War on Poverty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

the total entrapment of its victims from one generation to the next.”³⁵ While Johnson was never entirely sold every aspect of the War on Poverty, he agreed with the assumptions upon which the undertaking was founded. The closest Willard Wirtz got to his jobs program was the Job Corps, a scheme aimed at training young men and women for jobs that the Administration believed a growing economy would produce in abundance. The Economic Opportunity Act that Lyndon Johnson signed into law on a humid August day some fourteen years after Harry Truman had put the underdevelopment of the Third World in the crosshairs was a development program above all else. It employed modern, middle-class Americans to shepherd the Other Americans into the mainstream. After nearly two decades and an intellectual revolution in the way systemic deprivation was understood and described, the United States government began to fight a truly global war on poverty.

Agents of Change: The Peace Corps Model

Sargent Shriver’s first official day on the job as “Mr. Poverty,” was a frenzy of what one aide later called “wild brainstorming” sessions with some of the brightest minds in the country.³⁶ Shriver, who had served as a lieutenant and confidant to his brother-in-law John Kennedy for the years of his presidency, was still reeling from having been assigned such an intimidating new responsibility by Kennedy’s successor. After spending so much of his time and energy getting the Peace Corps in smooth working order over the preceding three years, Shriver had hoped for some rest instead of the entirely new and very difficult task of making President Johnson’s War on Poverty a reality. Shell-shocked and intimidated by the enormity of the task the President had assigned to him, Shriver did what came

³⁵ Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 72.

³⁶ Stossel, *Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver*, 361.

naturally—he reached out to anyone and everyone that he thought might have ideas to bring to the table.

The War on Poverty task force focused its attentions on the strategy of “community action.” But the proponents of community action at the table with Shriver felt he was being dismissive of their approach. “He hardly heard us,” one remembered.³⁷ In fact, Shriver had heard them; he just didn’t think what they were saying was particularly new. “The conceptualization of community action,” Shriver later recalled, “I favored from the beginning. In fact community action—which the people in community action thought was so revolutionary—was something that we had been running in the Peace Corps for four years before it ever got into the War on Poverty. So I thought community action was absolutely sort of normal. To me it was routine; to them it was a giant revolution.”³⁸ To Shriver, the principles of community action seemed very familiar indeed.

He had been the first official in government to implement those principles as a means to eradicate poverty—just not poverty in the United States. “[Community action],” Shriver clarified, “was the approach which we in the Peace Corps called ‘community development.’”³⁹ Shriver continued, “community development in Ecuador is, philosophically and substantially, no different than doing the same thing in some West Virginia hollow.” Offering an example, he added, “Now, I’m not trying to say West Virginia hollows are like Ecuador, but the concept of going into Ecuador to try to help people decide their own problems, and to energize them, motivate them, assist them to be able to handle their own problems themselves is no different than the psychology you take into West Virginia or to the South Bronx.”⁴⁰

³⁷ William Cannon in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 31.

³⁸ Shriver in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 35.

³⁹ Shriver in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 65.

⁴⁰ Shriver in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 65-66.

More than any other anti-poverty program, VISTA mimicked the development strategy that U.S. policymakers exported to the Third World in the guise of the overseas Peace Corps. In addition to common ideologies about how to provoke change among the very poor, the two programs were rooted in the same institutional soil. Indeed, there were no effective barriers between the planning, implementation, and programming of VISTA activities and those of the Peace Corps. Much as that organization sent young and idealistic Americans to towns and villages throughout the Third World to support the modernization of the developing world, VISTA's planners deployed caring and committed volunteers into "pockets of poverty" at home, to "bridge the widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots in America." Policymakers assumed that without the help of these emissaries from modern America, "the poor" at home could not "reach across this gulf."⁴¹ Although VISTA eventually developed something of its own institutional identity, the Peace Corps was always at the core of the domestic volunteer program's existence. The history of how the Peace Corps came to be and an explanation of precisely what it aimed to do provides vital background to the story of its domestic counterpart.

A program that grew to epitomize the spirit of its age, the Peace Corps was a product of very good political timing.⁴² When then-Senator John Kennedy proposed the creation of a "peace corps" at the University of Michigan campus in October of 1960, he was elevating an existing proposal that had been circulating in Washington for some time to the position of an official campaign issue, one that touched a nerve among young people in America unlike any other aspect of his platform. Throughout the remaining month of the presidential campaign and into the first weeks after the election, letters

⁴¹ *Volunteers in Service to America: An Invitation to Serve*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965).

⁴² For a thorough discussion of relationship between the Peace Corps program and the larger shifts in American culture in the 1960s, see Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

poured into the White House by the thousands from (primarily young) people whose interests had been galvanized by the idea and who wanted to serve. In an era of increasing sensitivity to cultural homogeneity, the children of the proverbial “organization men” saw in the promise of the Peace Corps an opportunity to both serve others and improve themselves by testing their abilities to conquer the rigors of life in places far removed from the comfort of their suburban homes and college campuses. The Peace Corps promised to be an “organization for those who don’t want to become organization men.”⁴³ The program also offered a human counterpoint to the technology-centered superpower arms race in which the United States was engaged around the world.⁴⁴ Revealing a particular strain of American exceptionalism, the intentions of the United States government, (despite evidence to the contrary during a phase of the Cold War in which the U.S. began to aggressively militarize the Third World) were deemed to be pure and worthy of promoting by thousands of young people.

If he did not know exactly what this already wildly popular program was going to look like when he took office, Kennedy placed the proposal on a very particular trajectory with his choice of his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to the task of researching the possibilities and drafting an outline for a legitimate initiative. Shriver’s importance to Kennedy had grown throughout the campaign and this seemed an ideal task to give him. A graduate of Yale Law School who had an enviably successful background in business and first-hand experience with the preeminent “study abroad” program of the pre-World War II era, The Experiment for International Living (Shriver had been a group leader of the organization for several years in a row), Shriver was a social activist at heart and also a sometimes ruthlessly efficient administrator. To boot, important people in Washington

⁴³ Harris Wofford quoted in Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s*, p. 58.

⁴⁴ Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s*, 3.

liked him and trusted in his abilities. At the end of a few weeks of endless meetings, memos, and debates, Shriver had drafted a blueprint for what would become President Kennedy's cornerstone program.

Beginning as the product of an Executive Order and later given the enthusiastic endorsement of the Congress, the Peace Corps had three major objectives. These were "1) to provide interested countries with qualified volunteers to help these nations meet their needs for trained manpower; 2) to help other people understand America better; and 3) to help Americans understand the other peoples of the world better."⁴⁵ When it came time to transform the Peace Corps from a program established by presidential fiat to an agency approved by Congress, Shriver mounted a two-pronged attack to first, keep the agency independent (both the State Department and Agency for International Development wanted institutional authority over the Peace Corps) and second, quell the fears of a few pointed critics who argued that the exportation of a bunch of idealist "kids" into the middle of Cold War tensions in the Third World might seem undignified at best and farcical at worst.⁴⁶ As a result of Shriver's personal efforts and those of his now well-organized staff of young talent, the program that Congress approved in June of 1961 included the establishment and administration of an independent agency with a Director subject to congressional confirmation, the engagement of universities and private organizations to help train volunteers for overseas assignments, and the voluntary participation of host countries.⁴⁷ Positions in the Peace Corps were open to men and women, of any race or religion, from the ages of eighteen and up. While this made the organization an essentially inclusive one, in spirit, Kennedy and the Peace Corps

⁴⁵ Roy Hoopes, *The Complete Peace Corps Guide*, Third ed. (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), 81.

⁴⁶ The Peace Corps was referred to as "Kennedy's Kiddie Corps" by an early detractor. See Sargent Shriver, *The Point of the Lance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 13.

⁴⁷ A detailed account of the Congressional approval of the Peace Corps legislation can be found in Gerald T. Rice, *The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

administration would only accept “men and women with the capacity to cope with the demands of swiftly evolving economies, and with the dedication to put that capacity to work in the villages, and perform a hundred other tasks for training and advanced technology.”⁴⁸ Peace Corps volunteers would be emissaries from the modern world to the one that modernity had left behind.

Anticipating the demands of coping with a challenging new environment and the profound problems of the people to whose aid they would be sent, Peace Corps volunteers were carefully selected for certain personality characteristics. Shriver consulted with Harvard psychologist Nicholas Hobbes early in the planning stages of the organization to ensure that the program selected the most viable candidates for service and Hobbs, in turn, placed enormous emphasis on an individual’s flexibility and sense of personal independence. After meeting the most basic criteria, applicants took a one hundred and twenty three question test to determine their suitability for the kinds of jobs they would face abroad. Historian Fritz Fischer has written extensively about psychological testing in the first years of the Peace Corps. “Self assertion,” Fischer explains, “became the dominant focus for the Peace Corps psychiatrists.”⁴⁹ Unlike the apathetic poor, Peace Corps volunteers had to demonstrate an unflinching will to try despite overwhelming odds; they had to demonstrate the spirit of reform that anthropologist Robert Redfield and others identified as the key element of a modern personality.

To that end, the specific “tasks of training” that the Peace Corps volunteers were urged to perform were not limited to teaching practical skills. From the earliest days of the program, it was clear to Shriver and his people that volunteers would also be required to

⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy, Special Message to Congress on the Peace Corps, March 1, 1961. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.phd?pid=8515>.

⁴⁹ See Fritz Fischer, *Making Them Like Us: Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s* (Washington/London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 71-76.

transmit a positive vision of the future and an enthusiasm for change to the poor in the developing world. Shriver attributed this mission to the demands of people in developing countries themselves when, in his own book on the Peace Corps and War on Poverty initiatives, *The Point of the Lance*, he quoted an associate of Mahatma Gandhi's as personally asking him to ensure that the Peace Corps volunteers would share more than technical knowledge. "Yours was the first revolution," Shriver recalled being told by Ashavedi Aryanayakam. "Do you think young Americans possess the spiritual values they must have to bring the spirit of that revolution to our country?"⁵⁰ Deputy Director Bill Moyers further explained, "the Peace Corps is not attempting to transplant a culture to the millions of people in the world's underdeveloped nations who are only now beginning to realize and ask what can be theirs in terms of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Instead, Moyers continued, "What Peace Corps volunteers can carry with them beyond their skills is a spirit, a concept, an attitude, a frame of mind that says to these people: 'We know what you are up against... We know your aspirations and your determinations and we want to share what we know and what we have if it will help you to grow and prosper.'⁵¹ Besides their very presence in the villages and towns of the developing world, Peace Corps volunteers also sought to achieve these lofty goals through the mechanism of community development.⁵²

Despite the fact that the majority of foreign countries that invited Peace Corps volunteers in the early years of the program requested the services of skilled professionals (Ghana asked for secondary school teachers and Tanzania asked for surveyors and geologists, for example), much of the energy of Peace Corps administrators went into

⁵⁰ Ashadevi quoted in Sargent Shriver, *The Point of the Lance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 16.

⁵¹ Bill Moyers, Remarks at the Convention of Young Democrats, Indianapolis, Indiana, July 28, 1961, Office Files of Bill Moyers, Box 77, LBJ Library.

⁵² As Michael Latham notes, during this period, nearly thirty percent of Peace Corps volunteers worked explicitly in community development projects. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*, 123.

devising recruitment and training programs to prepare volunteers for the task of community development. “Community development,” a Peace Corps manual explained, was “based on the simple idea that the best way to improve the conditions of life in any environment is to devise a program that the people themselves can carry forward by their own efforts, after participating with others in its initiation.”⁵³ Reflecting the importance of community development as an alternative to traditional forms of aid, journalist Glenn Kittler wrote in his 1964 book on the Peace Corps that “it would be easy enough for a rich country, like America, to send in the machinery and men to do the work which could raise the standards of living in these countries, but this would merely be a stopgap with limited effects.” Instead, Kittler wrote, “for permanent and penetrating effects, the people of the country must themselves participate in the progress.”⁵⁴

The Peace Corps’s emphasis on community development was a direct result of the hegemony of modernization theory and its focus on the individual. Also, in keeping with Oscar Lewis’s theories about the fatalism and lack of initiative among poor people, community development was built around an ideological commitment to the idea of self-help and a fundamental assumption that self-help for poor people would require outside intervention. This intervention could be affected, the Peace Corps’s architects believed, by caring men and women who came equipped with modern attitudes, modern empathy, and a willingness to teach by example.

The “concept of the doer,” the Complete Peace Corps Guide explained, “as opposed to the adviser or teacher is the distinguishing feature of the Peace Corps.”⁵⁵ Indeed, whether by active efforts to change a community’s circumstances or by merely acting as a human model, Peace Corps volunteers were expected to promote change by example. In

⁵³ Hoopes, *The Complete Peace Corps Guide*, 101.

⁵⁴ Glenn D. Kittler, *The Peace Corps*, (New York: The Paperback Library, 1963), 10.

⁵⁵ Hoopes, *The Complete Peace Corps Guide*, 100.

addition to education and direct community organizing, volunteers made an impact on their host communities by demonstrating how modern people handled the daily challenges of terrible poverty. This had a tangible benefit in promoting development, as Shriver explained. “What role does a PC Volunteer play in [the process of development]?” Shriver asked. “He is not the provider of money or equipment or supplies.” Instead, “he lives with the villagers. He shares their lot. He demonstrates by example how they can use the resources available to them to improve their situation. He’s a catalyst in group action.”⁵⁶

Reports of the activities and experiences of Peace Corps volunteers are scattered with individual stories about how volunteers understood this catalytic role, often emphasizing the sheer power of leading by personal example. Describing the impact of a Peace Corps volunteer who began a farmer’s collective in a mountain village in Chile, Glenn Dittmer wrote a sweeping assessment. “Thus the pathetic economic cycle in the Chilean Andes ended,” Dittmer explained, “and the people knew this would not have happened if the men and women of the Peace Corps had not been there to show them how it could be done.”⁵⁷ Another volunteer was said to have improved the health of an entire village simply by example. Sue Ellen Fisher of Coconut Grove, Florida, was sent to a village in the Ivory Coast, and found, upon her arrival, that she, like the villagers, would be living in huts made of mud. While Sue Ellen acknowledged the practicality of these structures for the people of the village, she was troubled by the potential health problems caused by living in such conditions. She struggled with how to change this situation, fearing that an out-and-out complaint about the housing might be taken as condescending, or worse, chauvinistic. Instead, Kittler reported, Sue Ellen ordered whitewash, bought cloth for curtains, and made a broom with which to sweep her floors.

⁵⁶ Sargent Shriver, “Remarks Prepared for Delivery at the Ohio State Bar Association, May 15, 1964,” Akron, Ohio, RSS Papers, Box 21, JFK Library.

⁵⁷ Kittler, *The Peace Corps*, 14.

“The women of the village noticed the change in Sue Ellen’s hut and were impressed by it—not so much by the cleanliness as the attractiveness—and they asked if she would help them make their own huts equally pretty,” Kittler wrote. Sue Ellen, he concluded, “subtly achieved her primary aim of introducing a clean-up campaign that would result in healthier living conditions.”⁵⁸ Whether they were overtly involved in changing the community’s traditional ways or attempted to do so by demonstrating the way that modern people addressed the problems caused by poverty, Shriver’s Peace Corps volunteers were engaged in a program of development at the ground level.

Economist and social psychologist Samuel Hayes was one of the experts that John Kennedy had originally turned to when he was exploring the feasibility of creating a peace corps and Hayes was one the first to suggest, in the fall of 1960, that the Peace Corps model be established at home as well as in the developing world. In one of the Peace Corps’ founding documents, *An International Peace Corps: The Promise and Problems*, Hayes explained, “economic growth is a manifestation of a social process.” Echoing modernization theory, he added, “certain psychological and social changes are key factors in the emergence of a self-sustaining process of economic development.” Young volunteers, imbued with a spirit of activism, could help produce these kinds of changes—changes that were also needed in certain parts of American society. “There is much in the United States,” Hayes concluded, “which [a Peace Corps] could properly do.”⁵⁹

Although Shriver and his team did pay heed to Hayes’s proposal that Peace Corps volunteers train in poor communities in the United States, training was not all that Hayes was suggesting. It took Eunice Kennedy Shriver, her brother Robert F. Kennedy, and the community action advocates who surrounded him at the Department of Justice to finally

⁵⁸ Kittler, *The Peace Corps*, 16.

⁵⁹ Samuel P. Hayes, *An International Peace Corps: The Promise and Problems* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Institute, 1961), 53-54.

bring the idea of domestic Peace Corps under the purview of presidential leadership.⁶⁰ That proposal, though stymied in Congress before John Kennedy's assassination, eventually became one of the first programs to be included in the omnibus Economic Opportunity Act, otherwise known as the War on Poverty. Through the formation of Volunteers in Service to America, policymakers demonstrated the extent to which their war on poverty was truly global in scope.

Bringing the Peace Corps Home: Kennedy's National Service Corps Becomes VISTA

Sargent Shriver had been familiar with the idea for a domestic peace corps long before he had become director of the War on Poverty. Indeed, Shriver's wife, Eunice Kennedy, had brought it up with her brother, the President, in the summer of 1962. Having seen the efficacy of her husband's overseas peace Corps program firsthand and stemming from her decade of work on the problems of youth crime in urban communities, Mrs. Shriver suggested that the nation's poor and neglected inner cities needed a domestic peace corps as much as did the remote towns and villages of the Third World to which her husband's program attended. As she later recalled, "many people must have probably had the idea because it was a logical thing with all of the social problems to meet." She continued, matter-of-factly, "It was a logical development to the overseas [Peace Corps]."⁶¹

To President Kennedy, Shriver argued that a domestic peace corps "would be a great boon for all these underprivileged kids." Always sensitive to the politics of any policy, Shriver made the potential benefits clear. "It would be wonderful for the young people, it would be wonderful for you," she told her brother. Kennedy, distracted by Cuba, Vietnam, and the saber rattling of Nikita Khrushchev, suggested that his sister speak with the

⁶⁰ Michael Latham discusses Peace Corps training in poor communities throughout the U.S. in his treatment of community development and the Peace Corps. See Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*, 146-147.

⁶¹ Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Recorded interview by John Steward, May 7, 1968. John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, JFK Library, 21.

Director of the overseas Peace Corps. Preoccupied with obtaining invitations from foreign governments for Peace Corps volunteers, Sarge demurred, citing his already long list of existing responsibilities. That unsatisfactory response sent Eunice back to the President who pleaded, “Are you ever going to get off my back on it?”⁶²

Knowing how unlikely it was that his sister would let him alone, Kennedy sent Eunice to the Attorney General’s office. “See if Bobby could get it going,” the President punted. “It’s not a bad idea. Why don’t you see what he’s got.”⁶³ What Robert Kennedy had was an institutional home for his sister’s idea. Established in May of 1961, the President’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency had become the Administration’s clearinghouse for proposals to help alleviate urban poverty, an objective for which John Kennedy had expressed some interest as far back as the campaign. With a staff (albeit small) focused on the problem of juvenile delinquency, the Attorney General had personnel and resources to spend on his sister’s proposal. RFK promised Mrs. Shriver that his aide, David Hackett, would look into it.

Satisfied but aware that a little public attention could only help her cause, Mrs. Shriver took advantage of an invitation she had received from the University of Santa Clara to deliver the commencement address. In her oration, delivered on a warm and bright day on the main green of the University’s palm-lined campus, Shriver announced (somewhat prematurely) the creation of a domestic peace corps. “I thought that many of the problems of southeast Chicago were the same as those in the Philippine Islands,” she explained. In both places, she continued, children who “were illiterate and needed the fundamentals” lived meager existences with “very few stimulating opportunities.” The proverbial light bulb went off, she continued, when she “wondered why the Peace Corps

⁶² Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Recorded interview by John Steward, May 7, 1968. John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, JFK Library, 21.

⁶³ Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Recorded interview by John Steward, May 7, 1968. John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, JFK Library, 21.

couldn't help" these poor children at home.⁶⁴ "Build Peace Corps at Home Too" was the headline from local coverage of Mrs. Shriver's speech.⁶⁵

When Eunice Kennedy called her brother at the Justice Department to suggest that he begin to think about the possibility of creating a domestic peace corps, she was handing her idea off to someone already mired in some of the debates that were percolating up to the government on the subject of poverty in the United States. Appointed, somewhat controversially, to the post of Attorney General, Robert Kennedy had developed an early interest in the problem of juvenile delinquency, a problem that historian Allen Matusow called "one of the few social problems of widespread concern in the 1950s."⁶⁶ Thanks to a well-publicized 1960 report by the Children's Bureau of the National Institute of Mental Health—a report whose authorship was shared by one of the leading figures in the circles of modernization theory, psychologist Leonard Cottrell—the problem of juvenile delinquency was, in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's words "waiting for the Kennedy administration when it took office."⁶⁷ During the 1960 campaign, Democrats identified juvenile delinquency as a symptom of the worsening crisis of America's cities, one that had been exacerbated by eight years of Republican neglect. As a presidential candidate, John Kennedy initiated a conference about the plight of urban America, bringing some five hundred experts and political figures together to talk about the problems of an increasingly urban nation. Assigning the task of fact-finding to David Hackett, a childhood friend and campaign aide, the Attorney General began to make the issue of juvenile delinquency a hallmark of his administration of the Justice Department.

⁶⁴ Betty Barnacle, "JFK's Home," *San Jose Mercury News*, June 3, 1962.

⁶⁵ Betty Barnacle, "Build Peace Corps at Home Too, JFK's Sister Asks," *San Jose Mercury News*, June 2, 1962.

⁶⁶ Allen J. Matusow, *The Unravelling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: HarperTorchbooks, Inc., 1984), 107.

⁶⁷ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 61.

Just as Sargent Shriver had turned to a panel of experts to design the blueprint for the Peace Corps, Hackett gathered a dynamic team together to brainstorm about the problems of urban crime and juvenile delinquency. Several prominent psychologists and sociologists who had been engaged in work—both theoretical and applied—on questions of youth behavior and cultural “deprivation” participated in these meetings, providing expert advice. By May of 1961, Hackett was able to make a compelling enough case for further study that President Kennedy authorized the formation of the President’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime (PCJD) and obtained, from Congress, an appropriation of \$30 million over three years to give its work teeth. The Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Act provided Hackett with the power to put federal dollars into pilot programs designed by his social scientist advisers. One of these programs, Mobilization for Youth (MFY) in Harlem, was directed by sociologist Lloyd Ohlin and eventually became a persuasive model for the architects of the domestic peace corps.

MFY focused on comprehensive community change through job training, psychological treatment for “maladjusted” youths, and smaller community projects—establishing Neighborhood Centers, for example—that could provide young people with access to education. Another Ford Foundation-funded community action program, the Gray Areas Project, targeted the sources of “cultural deprivation” that plagued poor people in urban slums. In New Haven, Connecticut, community planner Paul Ylvisaker implemented the Gray Areas project, operating programs to provide therapeutic intervention for young people in rural and urban poverty communities. By the fall of 1962, just a few months after Eunice Shriver had first approached the Attorney General with her idea, Hackett and Kennedy had secured the support of the President to name a Cabinet-level committee to study the creation of a National Service Corps. Money from

Congress and authority from the President had empowered David Hackett to start down the road that would lead to the War on Poverty writ large and the domestic peace corps in particular.

The problems at the root of juvenile delinquency, experts and policymakers agreed, were essentially psychological and cultural ones, endemic to communities inhabited by men and women who possessed self-defeating personalities borne of poverty. These “Other Americans” could neither organize nor implement an effective program of reform without outside assistance. The inability of the poor to improve their own lives came to be explained by many of these experts as a handicap, a challenge as real as a physical incapacity. As the Attorney General explained “There are thirty-two million persons in the United States living at a lower level than America is capable of providing for its citizens...The majority are unable to remedy these conditions by themselves; they are largely dependent Americans.”⁶⁸ The kind of volunteer program that Eunice Shriver suggested to her brother seemed to be one very effective way of providing these “dependent Americans” with the kind of help they needed to become part of mainstream American society. *New York Times* reporter Gertrude Samuels wrote that “Peace Corps volunteers might work miracles with these forgotten Americans.”⁶⁹

In much the same spirit as policymakers had created the overseas Peace Corps as an experimental new approach to foreign aid, the National Service Corps was an experiment too. As a way to absorb excess supply in the labor market during the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps had employed young men to build and maintain public facilities, particularly recreational areas, throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The establishment of a Youth Conservation Corps, championed by Senator Hubert

⁶⁸ Memorandum, Robert F. Kennedy, “In Consideration of a National Service Corps,” November 15, 1962. Robert Francis Kennedy Papers (*hereafter* RFK Papers), Box 41, JFK Library.

⁶⁹ Gertrude Samuels, “A Peace Corps for Our Own Bleak Areas,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 1962.

Humphrey in the late 1950s, argued for a similar strategy to address the problem of youth unemployment. By taking jobless young men out of their slum neighborhoods and engaging them in the virtuous undertaking of hard physical labor, the federal government would occupy boys who might otherwise become ne'er do well's. As part of its support for MFY's pilot project, the PCJD supported the creation of a Youth Corps that would employ at-risk youth in the rehabilitation of their neighborhoods. The National Service Corps, however, was a different breed of volunteer program.

Reflecting the spreading influence of modernization theory and ideas about the psychological effects of a culture of poverty, the National Service Corps was therefore based not on the principle of employing poor people to provide them with the emotional and monetary sustenance that might help them escape poverty but instead used the Peace Corps model of deploying outside "agents of change" to help the poor learn how to help themselves out of their own poverty. In the process, the program also sought to nurture a new kind of middle-class reformer, the domestic analog to the new generation of culturally-sensitive foreign service officers that policymakers hoped the overseas Peace Corps would produce.⁷⁰

Much like it had been in the Peace Corps, the question of what exactly these volunteers might actually do to help the "forgotten Americans" was largely answered, in practical terms, by determining where they would be sent. By November of 1962, Robert Kennedy and Dave Hackett had reached out to several state and local governments seeking advice about where National Service Corps pilot projects might best be undertaken. People who had experience with the overseas Peace Corps and supported the creation of a domestic counterpart also approached Kennedy and Hackett. Two of the original pilot

⁷⁰ Robert F. Kennedy, "In Consideration of a National Service Corps (Some Initial Staff Observations)," November 15, 1962; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

proposals for the National Service Corps grew directly out of training programs that had been designed to offer overseas Peace Corps volunteers real-life experience with the kinds of human and technical challenges they would find in the developing world. Columbia University's School of Social Work—with which Lloyd Ohlin and MFY were affiliated—had run a training program for the third group of Peace Corps volunteers being dispatched to Colombia.

In October of 1962, Timothy Adams of the Peace Corps internal evaluation office wrote a report assessing the success of the training program. The fieldwork for the eighty Peace Corps trainees was carried out in Spanish Harlem and, Adams reported, acquainted this “bright, cohesive group” of volunteers with the “fetid realities of New York slum life and the frustrations of dealing with its victims.” In preparation for their experiences in the barrios of Colombia, Adams continued, “these 80 trainees came to know the cockroach, the rat, the brutal cop, and the glue-sniffing gangs that might soon move on to marijuana and heroin. They had to face suspicion, apathy, and hostility.” Finally, he added, “They had the chance to puzzle out, both in their own and in searching discussions with experiences faculty members, solutions to problems they had hardly imagined before.” Adams concluded “It would be impossible to cover the variety of field assignments in this report without writing a whole book about them.”⁷¹ Clearly, there was much for these volunteers to do.

Just as the overseas Peace Corps volunteers were readying to leave for Colombia, MFY requested that Hackett and Kennedy provide the organization with a contingent of National Service Corps volunteers who could help the overall community action program by tutoring and mentoring young men on the East Side. MFY's Director of Action

⁷¹ Timothy Adams, “Evaluation Report, Colombia III, New York School of Social Work of Columbia University,” October 22-24, 1962; Folder Columbia 3 NY School of Social Work; General Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490; National Archives Building, College Park.

Programs, George Brager was enthusiastic about the potential of a group of new helpers. “Almost any place you touch on our program,” Brager told the *New York Times*, “you can find a use for peace corpsmen.” Unlike social workers, peace corps volunteers, like their overseas counterparts, would live in the communities to which they were assigned. “This way,” Brager said, “they would establish their own contacts and attachments—each within a different pocket of the neighborhood.” In keeping with this new approach to development, Brager added “We want them to root themselves in the community to understand and become part of its culture and climate.”⁷² Only by becoming a part of a community in poverty could volunteers really begin to transform it.

Not unlike the applied anthropology programs administered by the Inter-American Indian Institute some twenty years earlier, another National Service Corps pilot proposal sought to bring volunteers to Indian reservations in the southwest to participate in community development projects much like those initiated by their counterparts overseas. One of the directors of the training programs believed that in just a week, the attention of Peace Corps volunteers had been “a very beneficial experience” for the Indians. Volunteers, he explained, played a significant role in attacking the Indian’s problems of “insufficient education, under capitalization, and a lack of motivation almost approaching complete apathy.” He added “when the Peace Corps was being formulated, it...became apparent that young, enthusiastic people who possessed certain skills might be able to provide a spark of motivation for the Indian People.”⁷³

Through a pilot project at the Pima and Maricopa reservations, the domestic peace corps could participate in community development for a sorely needy population. The peoples of these communities could benefit from the help of “sympathetic and helpful

⁷² “New Peace Corps May be Used Here,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1962.

⁷³ Dr. L. Mayland Parker, “Proposed Pilot Project for a Domestic Peace Corps,” fall 1962. Tax, Sol. Papers, Box 136, Folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

friends,” who could be both culturally sensitive and help the two tribes “improve their economic and social well-being within the framework of their cultural and social institutions.”⁷⁴ The ideal volunteers for such a project would be able to provide substantive assistance to improve the standard-of-living in the community and to offer “dedicated and sincere enthusiasm which will motivate the people to individual and cooperative community initiative and action.”⁷⁵ Unlike social workers, who might not possess the cultural sensitivity that would engender trust among the Indians, domestic peace corps volunteers would be chosen for precisely those qualities.

In addition to pilot proposals based on existing Peace Corps training programs, state and local leaders throughout the nation made overtures to Kennedy and Hackett, excited by the possibility of highlighting their own efforts to solve pressing social problems. Activist governors in the Appalachian states were quick to show interest in inviting domestic peace corps volunteers to their states to help alleviate the terrible deprivation in “depressed” rural communities. Kentucky’s Governor was one of the most enthusiastic state leaders about bringing in outside help to bolster the efforts of what a staffer called “one of the most complete and aggressive self-help development programs” in the country. In Appalachia, Kentucky’s Area Redevelopment Coordinator explained, “the Volunteer will find challenges in human need which can only be characterized as a standing emergency.”⁷⁶ Governor Edmund Brown of California proposed that the domestic Peace Corps assist in the state’s efforts to aid migrant workers as they adjusted to American life. State policymakers in Florida suggested that volunteers might be help settle the thousands of Cuban refugees that were entering the state. Finally, reflecting Eunice Kennedy’s

⁷⁴ Dr. L. Mayland Parker, “Proposed Pilot Project for a Domestic Peace Corps,” fall 1962. Tax, Sol. Papers, Box 136, Folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁷⁵ Dr. L. Mayland Parker, “Proposed Pilot Project for a Domestic Peace Corps,” fall 1962. Tax, Sol. Papers, Box 136, Folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁷⁶ Memorandum from John D. Whisman to Robert Kennedy, November 1962. RFK Papers, Box 41, JFK Library.

advocacy for the mentally ill and the Kennedy family's connections to the mental health community in New England, a proposal to send volunteers to an existing student volunteer program to serve the mentally ill in the Boston area was included in the final draft of the program that Kennedy and Hackett sent to the President.

The consistent feature of all of these proposals was the extent to which volunteers would serve, as they did in the Peace Corps, as "agents of change." Regardless of what they built or who they taught, volunteers were supposed to give a shot of energy and an example of self-motivation to the poor. Director of the AFL-CIO's Community Service Activities Leo Perlis, who passionately supported the idea of what he called a "homefront Peace Corps" explained that volunteers "should teach and till, hold hands and heal wounds, but, above all, motivate, encourage, and inspire their less fortunate fellow citizens to help themselves."⁷⁷ To be able to achieve this goal, volunteers had to be carefully selected, as they were in the overseas Peace Corps. In the report that the Attorney General made to the President in January of 1963, he explained the criteria for selection. The list read like a veritable recipe for an ideal representative of liberal modernity as social scientists like Daniel Lerner described him. A volunteer should possess specific qualities, including: "flexibility; emotional stability and maturity; natural warmth and sincere interest in people; a desire to give his talents and training to serve those in need; obvious qualities of leadership; [and] an ability to identify with those served by his project."⁷⁸ The program's architects followed the overseas Peace Corps criteria for choosing volunteers, worrying much less about what volunteers could do than what kind of people they were.

No personal characteristic was as essential in a volunteer as empathy and genuine concern. The poor had been abandoned to their own misery for too long. The investment

⁷⁷ Leo Perlis, "AFL-CIO Community Services Director Supports Home Front Peace Corps," November 29, 1962. RFK Papers, Box 41, JFK Library.

⁷⁸ "A Report to the President from the President's Study Group on National Voluntary Services," January 14, 1963. RFK Papers, Box 41, JFK Library.

of human interest by able and engaged citizens was a necessary weapon against poverty. To ensure that the volunteers learned how to translate their empathy into action, the program's training included courses in "ways of working with people" as well as supervised field work. Exactly as they did in the overseas Peace Corps, volunteers would live in the communities they were sent to help. They would work to gain the trust of community members and in so doing gain essential insight into the problems of the community. With this perspective—and with sensitivity to the culture of the poor themselves—volunteers could both help community members deal with their problems explicitly and lead by example to inspire the apathetic poor. Of many commentators who addressed this aspect of the program, psychologist Kenneth Clark spoke of the human connection, the compassion, and the guidance that volunteers could provide, particularly to black youth. "The need is as great in many of our communities and cities as in places overseas for overt evidence of concern—of commitment without the usual patronizing, condescending air of the do-gooder." Clark continued, "This is the spirit of the Peace Corps. It provides human contact—something that is desperately needed in Harlem. Our deprived youth need the evidence that somebody cares enough to...take them seriously as human beings."⁷⁹ Only through this investment of interest and energy could the poor lift their eyes from the drudgery and hopelessness of their daily lives.

By January of 1963, the details of the program had become clear. The Study Group had determined how long volunteers would serve, what standard requirements all volunteers had to meet, what remuneration they would receive, and how many volunteers the program would try to recruit. In matters relating to the organization of the National Service Corps, the program was modeled almost entirely on the Peace Corps. Kennedy and

⁷⁹ Dr. Kenneth Clark quoted in Gertrude Samuels, "A Peace Corps for Our Own Bleak Areas," *The New York Times*, November 25, 1962.

Hackett even hoped to find a Director for the program whose visibility and charisma might rival Sarge Shriver's. In two important ways, however, the National Service Corps proposal veered away from the Peace Corps model. First, the program would not include the creation of an independent agency. Second, it would not receive a honeymoon period courtesy of an executive order.⁸⁰ Fearing a backlash among southern senators in particular John Kennedy was unwilling to antagonize Congress by doing an end-run around its authority.

Despite the President's enthusiastic approval of the final report that the Study Group submitted to him, the political climate was far different from the one into which he launched the overseas Peace Corps. Although the President had begun to nibble at the idea of a major government attack on poverty in the United States, his most pressing budget concern in the spring of 1963 was the passage of the centerpiece of his economic agenda, an immense tax cut proposed by his Keynesian economic advisers to pull the country out of the recession JFK had accused Eisenhower of ignoring. The demands of getting the tax bill through both houses diminished the Administration's willingness to push for the domestic peace corps that had, because of a lack of glamour many believed, failed to garner the same cache on the Hill that Sarge Shriver had managed to curry for the overseas Peace Corps. Southern congressmen began to suspect that the Administration sought to use the Corps—which its planners thought should actively seek the participation of African-American volunteers—to integrate their districts.⁸¹

A minority of voices in Congress also resented the parallels between the domestic and overseas peace corps. "Opponents of the plan," a staff writer for the Editorial Research Reports wrote, "were said to suspect that, as the original Peace Corps was aimed at making

⁸⁰ See Memorandum from William Josephson to William Cannon, February 19, 1963; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

⁸¹ William H. Crook and Ross Thomas, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1969), 43.

friends for the United States in newly independent countries, the domestic corps would be expected to ‘sell the New Frontier’ to U.S. voters.”⁸² Despite this opposition, the program’s proponents fleshed out more fully the liberal development ethos at the heart of the National Service Corps as they girded for battle on the Hill. Although a lack of consensus on a new name for the program resulted in their loyalty to the “National Service Corps,” Kennedy, Hackett and others on the President’s Study Group experimented with names that made even more explicit the goals of the organization. The list of candidates included phrases that emphasized the potential of the volunteers to provoke modernization in the pockets of poverty that economic growth had left behind. The “National Progress Corps,” “Trailblazers,” “Pathfinders,” the “Agency for Human Advancement,” and, finally, the rather amusing “Futurama” were all contenders.⁸³ These choices highlight the extent to which the program’s planners saw theirs as an undertaking geared towards making a future free of poverty a reality—but also to the instrumental part that social development played in realizing that future. Volunteers were not just agents of change—they were representatives of the liberal vision of modernity itself.

In material written for supporters of the legislation, the Study Group directly addressed the relationship between poverty and underdevelopment by asserting that the National Service Corps would be facing the same problems as Peace Corps volunteers working to eliminate poverty in the Third World. In fact, one background paper explained, “the problems of some of our people living in deprivation are, in some respects, harder to deal with than the conditions in underdeveloped nations.”⁸⁴ Written in a question-and-answer format, a long mock testimony provided to witnesses before their

⁸² Helen B. Shaffer, “Domestic Peace Corps,” *Editorial Research Reports*, 1:253-5, April 3, 1963.

⁸³ “Suggested Names for National Service Corps,” n.d.; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

⁸⁴ “Draft List of Questions and Answers about the Program,” May 10, 1963; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

appearances addressed head on the parallels between underdevelopment at home and abroad. “The Peace Corps has succeeded because it has superior know-how to ‘export’ but how could a national service program export American know-how to America?” one bullet point asks. “We have our own ‘underdeveloped areas,’” the response explained. “Our program would hope to illuminate areas which haven’t benefited by the advance of technology,” the guidance continued. “We would hope to ‘export’ people to those areas to help bring the residents back into the mainstream of American life by encouraging self-help.”⁸⁵ A follow-up question posed the concern of whether Americans would resent being “uplifted as if they were ignorant and primitive people in backwards lands?” The Study Group answered that their research had “found no such feelings.” Instead, “all of our investigations show that people want to be helped.” Poverty was not proof of incapacity, the report continued. “People in need are considered ignorant or primitive. That misses the whole idea of self-help. The National Service Corps would work and live with those it serves and would not treat them as inferiors.”⁸⁶ Like its overseas counterpart, the program would send caring people with relevant knowledge to help the poor help themselves.

When congressional consideration of S. 1321 and H.R. 5625 began, testimony from Cabinet members explained the problems of underdevelopment that Americans faced at home. The growth of the nation’s economy, Administration witnesses explained, was leaving people behind in the “pockets” of poverty at home just as global economic change was leaving people behind in the Third World. References to the overseas Peace Corps were frequent. In keeping with the social scientific literature of figures like Oscar Lewis and Daniel Lerner and the popular literature of Michael Harrington and John Kenneth Galbraith, people suffering from economic disadvantage at home were identified

⁸⁵ “Draft List of Questions and Answers about the Program,” May 10, 1963; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

⁸⁶ “Draft List of Questions and Answers about the Program,” May 10, 1963; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

as victims of psychological obstacles to self-sufficiency. Among many dignitaries invited to address the Senate Committee on Labor and Welfare, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall told the senators gathered “I see this program as an opportunity to do for our own people who have the greatest need what we are doing abroad. That is, helping people to help themselves to take care of their social needs.”⁸⁷

The Peace Corps’s strategy was almost universal in its applicability to the problems of poverty. “It is applicable to so many of the human problems, human shortcomings, social shortcomings in this country,” Udall insisted.⁸⁸ Speaking as the ultimate authority for the management of Indian Affairs, Udall addressed his comments to ways in which volunteers could help combat poverty on reservations. “Our Indian people represent, it seems to me,” Udall explained, “a very special opportunity for a program of this kind. They have the problem, with as much help as we can give them, of lifting themselves by their bootstraps.” Udall added to the list of people with special problems the residents of Guam, Samoa, and the Virgin Islands. The trust territories in the Pacific provided another avenue for volunteer assistance. “These are people” Udall said, “many of them who had only a few years ago a most primitive background.” Domestic volunteers could—like overseas Peace Corps trainees before them—provide help to these diverse groups.⁸⁹ With the National Service Corps, as in the Peace Corps, “we are selectively trying to provide wise people and

⁸⁷ Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior, testimony, May 29, 1963, to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 35.

⁸⁸ Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior, testimony, May 29, 1963, to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 33.

⁸⁹ Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior, testimony, May 29, 1963, to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 35.

creative people who can help...provide a special stimulus” to the poor, he concluded.⁹⁰ Udall emphasized the difference between technical assistance and community development. “The corpsmen would be instructors or organizers, not actually workmen, to try to stimulate and get the best out of the Indian people,” he explained.⁹¹ It was this belief in the catalytic capacities of volunteers that made the question of the potential impact of such a small number of volunteers moot.

Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Anthony Celebrezze presented the awful truth about the conditions of the poor to the Senators, explaining the extent to which welfare had become an irrelevant strategy to fight poverty. As public officials, he explained, “We begin to see that while we are still a great Nation and the standard of living is higher than any other country, you can go down into the rural sections, the mountain areas, the slum areas and you will hang your head in shame.” Asserting the inadequacy of existing strategies for improving the lives of people in these communities, Celebrezze called for a new approach to meet the real causes of poverty. “These people have to be helped,” he began. “They have to be brought into the mainstream of economic flow.” The government, Celebrezze continued, “had to try to get them into the mainstream of life.”⁹²

Sargent Shriver also went to the Hill in support of the National Service Corps and the fundamental ideas it represented. Speaking from his experience with the Peace Corps, Shriver, more than any of the other witnesses, explained in detail the way that community development worked on the ground. Asked a pointed question about the real impact so

⁹⁰ Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior, testimony, May 29, 1963, to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 35.

⁹¹ Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior, testimony, May 29, 1963, to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 39.

⁹² Anthony J. Celebrezze, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, testimony, June 4, 1963, to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 96-97.

few volunteers could have in the face of overwhelming need, Shriver explained the impact of the agent of change. “It is sort of like yeast in a loaf of bread,” he said. “You don’t put much yeast in there but the bread rises and becomes a loaf because of a very small amount of yeast. You won’t have the loaf of bread if you didn’t have that little bit of yeast.”⁹³

As Shriver explained, the volunteer “is the catalyst. It is the inspiration, which becomes a symbol for all the other people in the community to live up to.” He offered another anecdote about the arrival of volunteers in the Philippines who created a free day care camp for poor children. “Most of the work there has been done by the Filipinos,” he explained, “but if there had not been twenty or thirty Peace Corps volunteers, free and imaginative enough to get it going, it would never have been started.”⁹⁴ Just like their counterparts abroad, Shriver believed that the poor at home needed the boost of energy and self-motivation that concerned, modern, and middle-class Americans could provide. Asking about the extent to which overseas Peace Corps volunteers were really representatives of the nation abroad and whether that was a viable function for domestic volunteers, Shriver added “That is exactly what you get in [the National Service Corps],” The volunteers “are in a certain sense, in a modern sense, representatives of the nation. When they go to do this work, they become just that in the local community.” When pressed to explain why volunteers from local communities themselves might not be better able to inspire their neighbors, Shriver explained that local people would not be as useful as outside volunteers. Motivated, carefully selected, humanitarian outsiders had “the chance of being more inspirational.” Their lack of familiarity with the drudgery of poverty and

⁹³ Sargent Shriver, Director of the Peace Corps, testimony, June 5, 1963 to the to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 105.

⁹⁴ Sargent Shriver, Director of the Peace Corps, testimony, June 5, 1963 to the to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 105.

strife and their imaginative and caring problem-solving made them “more catalytic agents than if they were...the local people.”⁹⁵

In his testimony in support of the legislation for the creation of the Corps, even Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz—the most faithful apostle of the New Deal in the Kennedy Administration—used language that placed poverty in the context of liberal development. There are “human problems,” Wirtz told members of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, “that come along in the wake of or along with the economic development which we are pressing so hard. These are problems which require the person-to-person, individualized kind of approach the National Service Corps can take.”⁹⁶

Enumerating the various areas of need in which National Service volunteers might be dispatched, Wirtz admitted that localities had to play a large part in finding solutions to their own problems but added, in the parlance of the overseas Peace Corps, that communities mired in poverty lacked one essential ingredient for change: “a very significant role—a role of catalyst, a role of coordinator, a role of distributor of information.” Volunteers who “identified themselves with something larger than their own concerns” could serve those vital purposes.⁹⁷ When asked specifically about the problem of chronic unemployment in communities in Appalachia—communities to which volunteers would be sent—Wirtz conveyed his belief that the problem had gone beyond simple questions of labor supply and demand. “I know that unemployment there,” Wirtz explained, “has reached the point of human poignancy, of human denial of

⁹⁵ Sargent Shriver, Director of the Peace Corps, testimony, June 5, 1963 to the to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 181-191 *Emphasis added*.

⁹⁶ W. Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Labor, testimony, May 29, 1963 to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 20.

⁹⁷ W. Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Labor, testimony, May 29, 1963 to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 21.

opportunity, of human want, human poverty that requires an approach to it in human terms rather than overall terms.”⁹⁸

In keeping with his stewardship of the National Service Corps from its most embryonic stages, the Attorney General provided the most compelling links between the National Service Corps and the imperative for Cold War poverty fighting. The men and women who served in the Peace Corps, Kennedy told the House Subcommittee, have given the world a “true picture of the American of the Sixties.” The same spirit that animated the efforts of volunteers abroad, Kennedy explained, was needed at home. “Corpsmen would not be technical assistance experts,” Kennedy added. “The program would not be service to people, but working with people.” He concluded by adding that only by addressing the “almost unbelievable squalor” in which millions of American lived could the United States hope to win the global struggle with communism. “It is well to remember that we can talk about democracy, about the free enterprise system, about how effective our economic programs have been in the United States, and about the prosperity of our citizens” he explained. “In the last analysis, people in our own country and across the world are going to be less impressed with what we say than what we do.”⁹⁹

Despite vast support from an ample number of advocates in both houses of Congress and the endorsement of business leaders such as Malcolm Forbes, the Congress did not approve the creation of a National Service Corps. As later VISTA director William Crook later wrote, “the approach to Congress had smacked too much of Madison Avenue and too little of the grass roots. It had all been just a trifle too glossy, a trifle too slick, a trifle too arrogant for the preponderantly conservative representatives of the people who

⁹⁸ W. Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Labor, testimony, May 29, 1963 to the Subcommittee on the National Service Corps of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 23.

⁹⁹ Robert F. Kennedy, written testimony, May 22, 1963 to the Special Subcommittee on Labor of the Committee on Labor and Welfare, United States House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., 88th Cong., 1st sess., Department of Justice Press Release; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

composed the first session of the 88th Congress.”¹⁰⁰ Whether or not Crook’s analysis of the National Service Corps’s failure was accurate, two events were about to turn the fate of the domestic Peace Corps upside down, breathing new life into the idea and inspiring a level of support that was, in 1963, largely unimaginable.

New VISTAs for the National Service Corps: The Johnson Years

The real weakness of the proposal for a domestic Peace Corps was that it had been an idea just slightly ahead of its time. In the winter of 1963, Lyndon Johnson seized the overwhelming political support he commanded after John Kennedy’s assassination to stake his own claim for the legacy of the New Frontier and restore to the Democratic Party the luster of bold and decisive action. Conceptually, the domestic peace corps was one of the least controversial ideas thrown out on the table at Shriver’s hastily organized strategy sessions. Relying on staff brought over from the Peace Corps, Shriver really did see the problems faced by the War on Poverty as just another iteration of the challenges faced by the Peace Corps. As Frank Mankiewicz, one of Shriver’s most trusted advisers at the Peace Corps, explained “We thought about the poor in the United States at least in many ways as an underdeveloped society.”¹⁰¹

Senator Hubert Humphrey—soon to become Johnson’s Vice President—and also an avid supporter of the domestic peace corps was one of the many liberals in Washington who also saw real promise in the community action model. Discussing a community action pilot program he had a chance to study, Humphrey wrote that “Community Progress found that knocking down old buildings and putting up new ones was not enough. The poverty-stricken were so steeped in misfortune that they locked the inner resources to recover by themselves.” Humphrey then quoted one of the country’s leading

¹⁰⁰ Crook and Thomas, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America*, 43.

¹⁰¹ Frank Mankiewicz in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 86.

figures in pioneering new methods of urban renewal. “You can’t win the war against poverty with stirring slogans. You have got to have earthy people willing to take on the dirty work.”¹⁰² The Peace Corps was full of earthy people.

Thus, the domestic Peace Corps became community action’s helpmate. Indeed, David Hackett, who was a proponent of community action was also the most vocal spokesperson for the inclusion of the domestic Peace Corps as part of the War on Poverty. “The proposed National Service Corps can be an integral part of the ‘war on poverty,’” he explained to Robert Kennedy.¹⁰³ Even more explicitly, Hackett wrote, “a primary goal of the poverty program is to help the poor become self-sufficient.” To that end, “the development of self-help requires engaging the interest, imagination, and participation of the poor. The National Service Corps could help to develop this involvement by providing people to live and work directly with the poor.”¹⁰⁴

By April of 1964, Robert F. Kennedy’s renewed involvement and the support of key figures on the War on Poverty Task Force resulted in the introduction of a domestic Peace Corps program as Title VI of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. In his State of the Union address, Johnson placed special emphasis on the domestic peace corps. “We must create a National Service Corps to help the economically handicapped of our own country as the Peace Corps now helps those abroad,” Johnson told the rapt audience.¹⁰⁵ The domestic peace corps now achieved wide support as part of Johnson’s overall plan of assault on poverty in America. The provision passed both houses of Congress with no major opposition. Indeed, as the agency’s administration history recounts the domestic

¹⁰² Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, *War on Poverty* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 56-57.

¹⁰³ David Hackett, “The National Service Corps and the War on Poverty,” February 12, 1964. RFK Papers, Box 41, JFK Library.

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum from David Hackett to Robert F. Kennedy, February 13, 1964. RFK Papers, Box 41, JFK Library.

¹⁰⁵ Lyndon Baines Johnson, Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union, January 8, 1964. LBJ Library. <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640108.asp>

peace corps was incorporated into the War on Poverty legislation “with so little friction that it could serve as a model to illustrate how congenial the legislative process can be.”¹⁰⁶

Even after the domestic peace corps had finally become a reality, practical problems posed a real challenge to the staff of the newly minted Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program and how it would be set up was still up in the air. Owing to the immense public enthusiasm for the Peace Corps idea, applications started already pouring in.¹⁰⁷

Glenn Ferguson, the Peace Corps’s Associate Director for Selection, Training, and Volunteer Support, was given the job of organizing the program. In November of 1964, Ferguson recruited another Peace Corps veteran, Padraic Kennedy, to serve as a consultant with VISTA. Together, they used their Peace Corps experience as a guide. “Because we were doing the same functions,” Ferguson later recalled, “many of the procedures we used in the Peace Corps were appropriate for VISTA.”¹⁰⁸

Public interest in the program rose. A *New York Times* reporter visited a VISTA training facility early on in the program seeking to discover why “the young and old have put aside middle-class comforts to give Appalachia and Harlem the kind of help that Peace Corpsmen have given Afghanistan and Kenya.”¹⁰⁹ At one training center, trainees were introduced to the concepts of “the culture of poverty” and the challenges of daily life for poor people. At training centers around the country—most often associated with universities that possessed social work programs—trainees were given weeks of lectures and readings about poverty.¹¹⁰ These curricula focused on “assisting the trainee in gaining a better understanding of himself and his attitude towards poverty” as well as introducing

¹⁰⁶ “Volunteers in Service to America,” Office of Economic Opportunity Administrative History, Vol. I, Part II, 412, Special Files 1927-1973, Box 1, LBJ Library.

¹⁰⁷ “Volunteers in Service to America,” Office of Economic Opportunity Administrative History, Vol. I, Part II, 417, Special Files 1927-1973, Box 1, LBJ Library.

¹⁰⁸ Glenn Ferguson in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 243.

¹⁰⁹ Marjorie Hunter, “Young and Old Drawn to VISTA: First Volunteers to Fight Poverty Begin Training,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 1965.

¹¹⁰ “A Day With VISTA: Shock and Toil,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 1965.

trainees to the “agencies, institutions, and social legislation that are concerned with the problems of the poor.”¹¹¹ Trainees were then sent into the field under the guidance of social welfare groups. Even in these brief programs, the impact of the volunteers’ presence was celebrated. At one training program in Florida—one whose conclusion Lady Bird Johnson had come to celebrate—an African-American mother of six who had interacted with the VISTAs in her “semi-rural slum,” pleaded with the First Lady to keep the volunteers in her community. “We hate to see them go so bad,” Mrs. Louise Lee said. “We wish they’d stay on. There’s so much yet to be done. I’ve known these people just a little while but I feel that we are losing something very dear to us.”¹¹² The same emphasis that Peace Corps training placed on connecting with local people provided the basis of VISTA training programs¹¹³

By the winter of 1964, VISTA had received four thousand applications from around the country.¹¹⁴ A year later, the agency had two thousand volunteers in the field—a figure that amounted to more than double the highest number for which any of the original founders of National Service Corps had dared to hope. Like its overseas cousin, VISTA attracted middle-class, mostly white volunteers.¹¹⁵ Seventy-five percent of the VISTA volunteers were, in the first years of the program’s existence, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five and three-quarters of them had either completed or attended college. Nearly one quarter of all volunteers in the first two years of the program had training in the social sciences at the university level. Although special expertise was not a requirement for admittance into the program, VISTA did manage to recruit lawyers, doctors, and registered nurses as well as volunteers with at least limited experience in agriculture and

¹¹¹ Crook and Thomas, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America*, 64.

¹¹² Nan Robertson, “First Lady Gives VISTA Diplomas,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 1965.

¹¹³ Ferguson in Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*, 243.

¹¹⁴ “Volunteers in Service to America,” Office of Economic Opportunity Administrative History, Vol. I, Part II, 417, Special Files 1927-1973, Box 1, LBJ Library.

¹¹⁵ Crook and Thomas, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America*, 61.

construction. Psychologists played a key role in selecting volunteers. In addition to psychological tests that were given to applicants after they have expressed interest, clinical psychologists were integral to training programs.¹¹⁶

The most important facet of the volunteer's work was achieving a level of trust and friendship with the members of the poor community to which they had been sent. This was not just seen as a means to an end but as an end in itself because it counter-acted some of the negative social tendencies of those who lived in the culture of poverty. "One case upon another," VISTA's administrative history reads, "illustrated that it was the ability of the Volunteer—through his or her living-working relationship with the people served—that had been the link between the poor and their newfound ability to solve their own problems."¹¹⁷ VISTAs were given only a subsistence wage so that they could share the realities of life in poverty. The administrative history touched upon the impact of this shared experience, relying on one of the central assumptions of the culture of poverty theory. "Persons long acclimated by sometimes bitter experience to suspect the motives of newcomers, particularly those promising 'help,' came to recognize in the VISTA volunteer a new kind of person, remarkable for his sincerity."¹¹⁸

As it had been with Peace Corps volunteers, the ability to demonstrate "self-help" and ingenuity despite meager resources was one of the most important lessons VISTAs could provide to their poor neighbors. A book about VISTA that was geared towards high school students explained that "VISTAs are trying to break a few links out of [the] chain [of poverty], by helping the poor find new ways of seeing themselves and the world around

¹¹⁶ Crook and Thomas, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America*, 68.

¹¹⁷ "Volunteers in Service to America," Office of Economic Opportunity Administrative History, Vol. I, Part II, 427, Special Files 1927-1973, Box 1, LBJ Library.

¹¹⁸ "Volunteers in Service to America," Office of Economic Opportunity Administrative History, Vol. I, Part II, 428, Special Files 1927-1973, Box 1, LBJ Library.

them.”¹¹⁹ Countless examples of the impact of this aspect of the program, from the voices of poor people aided by VISTA volunteers, were published in the VISTA Volunteer, the agency’s newsletter for volunteers. In one such article, a Mexican-American teenager named Vicente Trevino recounted the impact of the VISTA volunteer who came into his hometown near Fresno, California. “She came to Parlier, she came into our lives. You know it was like a light. I mean, this was really pushing us forward now.”¹²⁰

In community after community, VISTA volunteers were heralded by the Johnson Administration and a rather admiring press corps for their ability to push the poor “forward” into mainstream, modern American life, permeating the thick walls that kept poor people locked into their hopeless lives. Their activities spanned a gamut of projects that were meant to both help poor people prepare for entrance into mainstream society and identify and overcome existing obstacles to change. In every case, VISTA activities focused on making poor people more familiar with and empowered by the accoutrements of modern American life. These activities included the organization and administration of day-care facilities on Indian tribes in the southwest and in urban slums in the Northeast, so that women could work and VISTAs could promote “healthy development” among poor children. VISTAs showed poor mothers techniques of “modern homemaking, nutrition, child-care, health, budgeting, and planning.” VISTAs taught the residents of a New York City slum to make wiser consumer choices. In Baltimore, VISTA volunteers proposed the creation of a cooperative buying club among the poor. VISTAs working among migrant workers in Texas encouraged the workers to build homes for a living instead of following harvests, providing more stability for their families.

¹¹⁹ Susan Whittlessey, *VISTA: Challenge to Poverty* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1970), 15.

¹²⁰ Vicente Trevino, “There Goes Somebody Who’s Trying,” *VISTA Volunteer* 1, no. 3 (October 1965), 5.

Throughout these activities, VISTAs were encouraged to look for ways in which they could celebrate the cultural differences of poor communities, providing poor people with a sense of self-esteem and personal worth. In one example that bears great resemblance to some of John Collier's proposals, VISTAs were encouraged to teach Indian arts and crafts to Indians on reservations in the Midwest to promote self-confidence and a sense of dignity and history among native peoples.¹²¹ In another, VISTAs in an Appalachian town helped the women of the community promote and sell their homespun in other parts of the country. "Quilting is one of the hidden resources of Appalachia and until recently it has proved about as profitable as the ability to tell a good tale or whistle through your teeth," an article in the *VISTA Volunteer* newsletter explained.¹²² The modern entrepreneurial spirit of VISTA volunteers was the missing link between the poor and the outside world. Connecting poor people to that world without requiring them to give up their "culture" was one of the primary goals of the VISTA program, as it had been in the Peace Corps.

VISTA focused on providing aid to Indian reservations in particular. As if they were following the policy suggestions of Collier and Laura Thompson verbatim, VISTAs sought to make the difficult transition to modern American life easier for people who had suffered under inadequate and often cruel government management. Of the thirteen per cent of VISTAs who were sent to reservations in the program's early years, VISTA's second director, William Crook, wrote that "they are not going to solve the 'Indian problem.' They are not going to come up with the magic needed to provide the Indians with the knowledge and skills necessary to earn a living in contemporary America." Nor, he continued, "can they arrive on the reservations, bearing a quick cure for the poverty,

¹²¹ "VISTA Volunteers," January 18, 1965; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

¹²² "A Tradition Pays Off," *VISTA Volunteer* 3, no. 7 (July 1967), 25.

dependence, apathy, and aimlessness that seems to engulf the majority of reservation-bound Indians.” Volunteers could give the encouragement that Indians needed and guidance from which they might benefit. As a balm for the mental and emotional toll of modernization, Crook concluded, these young, mostly middle-class men and women could “make the transition a little less excruciating” for reservation Indians.¹²³

Some of the more radical proponents of community action resented the similarities of the VISTA and the overseas Peace Corps because of the extent to which they encouraged the poor to conform to existing power structures instead of fomenting rebellion against them. Recognizing the extent to which the Peace Corps model was being used in the War on Poverty, Saul Alinsky—one of the architects of community action as a strategy for social revolution—complained, writing in *Harper's* that “Our slums are not foreign nations to be worked with in such a manner as never to constitute a challenge to the status quo. The Peace Corps mentality does not apply to America's dispossessed.”¹²⁴ While some individual VISTA volunteers worked to break down the “status quo” in which structural inequalities were identified as the real root cause of poverty, the program's planners by and large hewed close to the line that the revolution could only stem from the transforming of poor people's hearts and minds.

In fact, instead of pulling the Peace Corps and VISTA apart from one another as Alinsky advocated, the program's planners forged even stronger linkages between the two organizations. The Peace Corps and VISTA conducted their first “coordinated effort” in the Summer of 1967 with the establishment of the VISTA Associates program. The initiative brought five hundred Peace Corps applicants into ongoing VISTA projects throughout the country. Three hundred of these first VISTA Associates were sent to

¹²³ Crook and Thomas, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America*, 91.

¹²⁴ Saul Alinsky, “The Professional Radical: Conversation with Saul Alinsky,” *Harper's* 231, no. 1382 (June 1965), 37.

Appalachia and the remaining two hundred were dispatched to Indian reservations in the American southwest. Planned in late 1966, the program also offered an opportunity for summer volunteering in VISTA projects for college juniors who could only devote a few months to public service. In these programs, the Peace Corps trainees were given a chance to demonstrate their skills in community development projects and, at the end of the summer, those whose service was approved were invited to join the Peace Corps abroad.¹²⁵

In addition to working directly with VISTA, returned Peace Corps volunteers were also aggressively recruited to work in the War on Poverty at home. As early as April of 1964, before the Office of Economic Opportunity was even created, Peace Corps officials were beginning to explore the potential role returned volunteers might play in anti-poverty efforts at home. The Peace Corps Division of Volunteer Support contracted with a pollster to gauge interest among volunteers. Of 230 volunteers, eighty-two percent were either interested or very interested in serving in the poverty program.¹²⁶ President Johnson showed great interest in this initiative, circulating a letter to Federal agencies urging them to consider the employment of returned Peace Corps volunteers in similar lines of work at home.¹²⁷ Within less than a year, the Peace Corps administration planned and executed a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Conference to discuss the contribution returned volunteers might make to national life.

The conference brought together government officials, business leaders, academics, community organizers, school principals, and returned volunteers—some one thousand of whom attended personally—to meet for three days of workshops, speeches, and

¹²⁵ "Peace Corps/VISTA Joint Statement," 1967, Agency Reports, Folder: Peace Corps 1966-1968, Box 129, WHCF, LBJ Library.

¹²⁶ Memorandum to Sargent Shriver from Robert Calvert, Jr., April 13, 1964; Records of the Community Services Administration, Record Group 381; National Archives Building, College Park.

¹²⁷ Memorandum for Bill Moyers, from Padraic Kennedy, June 8, 1964, Folder: FG 105-6 1/5/64-8/19/64, FG 105-6 EX, Box 144, WHCF, LBJ Library.

roundtables.¹²⁸ Over half of the returning volunteers declared their interest in serving in the War on Poverty. By July of the same year, seventy-five returning Peace Corps volunteers took up full-time jobs in the War on Poverty programs.¹²⁹ To Shriver and staff members of both agencies, the two years of hard work and on-the-job training that returned Peace Corps volunteers possessed was deemed a real asset in providing the same kinds of services at home. By 1968, a third of returned Peace Corps volunteers were working in the War on Poverty's multiple branches. By recruiting returned Peace Corps volunteers for service in the War on Poverty, planners believed that they had finally launched a truly global assault on every front of the transnational culture of poverty.

Having identified the cause of the problem of poverty as fundamentally universal, Shriver and the Peace Corps and War on Poverty planners were able to apply the same weapon against it around the world. In the first few months of his tenure at the helm of the War on Poverty, Shriver clearly stated the outlook that undergirded the approach of both organizations. "The remaining poverty in this country is every bit as urgent as the remaining poverty in the underdeveloped world," Shriver explained in an address to the Catholic Press Association. "In the Peace Corps, and now, in President Johnson's War on Poverty, I have been concerned with...these problems. And they can be solved in my judgment, only by adopting the same procedures, the same theories, the same psychological attitudes we have used abroad." Shriver unequivocally stated the core assumption of the anti-poverty programs and the community development programs undertaken abroad that poverty was first and foremost a psychological condition. "The poor are the same everywhere—and they need the same things everywhere. They need help—but before they

¹²⁸ Appendix, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Conference Booklet, October 8, 1965, Folder: FG 105-6-1 National Advisory Council, FG 106-6 Gen. 10/1/65, Box 147, WHCF, LBJ Library. See also Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 300-309.

¹²⁹ "Memorandum for the President from Sargent Shriver," July 20, 1965; President's Reports; Records of the Office of the Director; Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490; National Archives Building, College Park.

need help, they need hope. And before they can have hope, they need self-respect. And before they can have self-respect, they must enjoy the same opportunities the rest of us have had.” Shriver candidly admitted that “this is why helping is not easy. It is not just a matter of handing out things like money, jobs, or materials. Helping the poor is a sequence of things.” This, Shriver had learned in his first Washington job. “This is the lesson our Volunteers have learned in the Peace Corps. They have learned that the real problem was how to help people without alienating them, without seeming to tell them, ‘We want to elevate you poor, backward people to our own superior level!’ Such an approach only inspires resentment, bitterness, mistrust—as so many foreign aid programs have learned!”¹³⁰ Instead of serving as bureaucrats hired to offer insufficient public assistance to a permanently poor population, Shriver’s poverty-warriors would bring their empathy, their ingenuity, and their persistence to the task of eliminating what one VISTA official called the “enclaves of despair.”¹³¹

An International Army: The Reverse Peace Corps

No aspect of the global war on poverty—of which VISTA and the Peace Corps were a vital part—demonstrates the extent to which policymakers believed that middle-class values were as universal among modern people as the culture of the poverty was among the underdeveloped as conclusively as the Reverse Peace Corps program. While the rhetoric of the Peace Corps and War on Poverty’s boosters certainly did articulate liberal humanitarianism and the “the volunteer spirit” as part of a uniquely American tradition, men and women from across the U.S. who signed up for Peace Corps or VISTA service were not the only people who possessed the mentality that volunteers needed to change the attitudes of the poor. On that basis, Sargent Shriver (with President Johnson’s

¹³⁰ Sargent Shriver, “Address to Catholic Press Association, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,” May 28, 1964. RSS Papers, Box 21, JFK Library.

¹³¹ Crook and Thomas, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America*, 125.

enthusiastic *imprimatur*) proposed a Reverse Peace Corps in which educated, elite volunteers from the Third World would come to the United States to work alongside anti-poverty workers in slums, barrios, and Indian reservations. To say it was all Shriver's idea would be an exaggeration, however. Instead, the Ghanaian nationalist Kwame Nkrumah first floated the notion, albeit somewhat coyly. On Shriver's first visit to Accra, in 1961, to offer the first group of Peace Corps volunteers to Ghana, Nkrumah asked why the U.S. didn't want the newly-independent Africa country to return the favor. In his memoir, Harris Wofford—who accompanied Shriver on the trip—recalled the exchange. “Nkrumah teasingly pressed Shriver: Why the one-way traffic? Did he want some young Ghanaians to volunteer for service to America?” Unprepared to consider such a proposal and desirous to not offend his host, Shriver struggled to answer. “In the same half-serious spirit,” Wofford recalled, “Shriver said yes.” It certainly wasn't an idea that contradicted the spirit of the Peace Corps mission to promote brotherhood among peoples. Wofford concluded that the exchange made “clear that some kind of reciprocity would help counteract the immodest benevolence and condescension in the name Peace Corps.”¹³²

Wofford and Shriver kept the idea alive as the Peace Corps grew and after the War on Poverty programs began. In the autumn of 1965, a working paper was circulating among senior White House staff about the wisdom of such an undertaking. The program, one backgrounder explained, “would accomplish the three original objectives of the Peace Corps Act, with a reverse twist.” The twist was, of course, the utilization of foreign volunteers to “help America meet some of its needs.” At the same time, these foreign volunteers would gain firsthand experience that they could take home. “As with the Peace

¹³²Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties*, 270.

Corps, a real working contribution and mutual education go together,” the report added.¹³³ As community workers, these foreign nationals could make, in the United States, the same impact that Americans in the Peace Corps had made abroad. The plan indicated that volunteers would be selected abroad, sent to the U.S. by their own governments, or chosen from the foreign students already living in the U.S. One of the unofficial criteria for selection was an applicant’s experience in a national service program in his or her own country or a willingness to commit to a career in national service at home. Volunteers could also serve as teachers in American schools. In March of 1966, after much wrangling with the Bureau of the Budget over where they would serve and what they would do President Johnson and Congress set an initial recruitment goal of a thousand volunteers.

Although they harbored some concerns that developing countries would be hesitant to send their best young talent to volunteer in the United States and that people in poor communities in the U.S. might resent the appearance of “foreigners” coming to help them, Wofford and Shriver were excited by the possibilities of the Exchange Corps.¹³⁴ Congress was, initially, much less excited. Congressmen were wary, one White House staffer guessed, “to welcome foreign volunteers into our slums, mental hospitals, and Indian reservations. Some of those who did understand the proposal are not yet resigned to having American volunteers enter their districts or states.”¹³⁵ Indeed, many in Congress during those long, hot summers of increasing urban unrest and political radicalism over were growing downright afraid of the kind of impact the mobilization of the poor might have in their backyards.

¹³³ “Working Paper on an Exchange Peace Corps of Volunteers to America,” October 1965, WHCF PC 5, Box 5, LBJ Library.

¹³⁴ Task Force Proposal, “Exchange Education Corps/Volunteers to America,” June 15, 1966, Box 5, WHCF, LBJ Library.

¹³⁵ Memorandum for Bill Moyers and Douglass Cater from Tom Cronin, November 7, 1966, Box 5, WHCF, LBJ Library.

Undeterred, the program's boosters moved ahead. At VISTA, Bill Crook sent a memo to the White House to describe the efforts of two of these volunteers. One of the volunteers was a physical education teacher from Chile, aged 51, who read about the VISTA program while on vacation in the U.S. and decided to offer her services. She moved into the Arenal district of Albuquerque, New Mexico after her training where she found surprising poverty. "People are poorer in Chile," she admitted, "but for the United States, these people are very poor." Working side by side with VISTA volunteers from the U.S., Rifo identified the community's need for a child-care center. In between her activities, Rifo invited neighbors and welfare officials to a "coffee klatch" in her house. Another volunteer served on an Indian reservation in the Midwest. Nineteen years old, Shirley Baker wanted to work instead of get married, as most of her classmates were doing. Among the Winnebago Indians in Wisconsin, Baker became a "one-woman public information office" for a beautification project and, in what time she had left over, "launched" a preschool program for the children of the tribe.¹³⁶ Just like American VISTAs, these foreign volunteers were demonstrating just how much could be done to help the poor help themselves by offering an example of ingenuity.

Much as they picked volunteers for the Peace Corps and VISTA who possessed the kind of personalities and values that enabled them to serving as agents of change among the poor, the proponents of the Reverse Peace Corps consistently emphasized the extent to which they were bringing the cream of the crop of reformers from overseas to work with the poor of America. A report in the *National Observer* in January of 1967 quoted Harris Wofford as describing the foreign volunteers as "young leaders from developing nations."¹³⁷ A *TIME Magazine* article profiled another of the first batch of volunteers, making a

¹³⁶ Memorandum from Douglass Cater to William H. Crook, Acting Director, VISTA, January 11, 1967. WE9 (ES WE9 9/1/66-3/23/67), Folder: WE9 1/1/67-2/8/67, Box 28, WHCF, LBJ Library.

¹³⁷ Carole Shifrin, "What the U.S. Hopes to Achieve in a 'Reverse Peace Corps' Project," *National Observer*, January 1, 1967, 9.

significant point out of her upbringing lest any readers doubt what kind of contribution a person from the Third World could make. Estele Devoto, the article noted, was the twenty-two year old daughter of a “wealthy Buenos Aires architect, who has worked as a welfare volunteer and is eager to fight poverty in the rural U.S.” The only exposure to poverty Devoto had already had was “on her father’s eight-thousand acre *estancia*...where she rides a *caballo criollo*—an Argentine equivalent of the American cow pony.”¹³⁸ In June of 1968, the *New York Times* shared the story of a Filipino volunteer, noting his eight years of experience in community development at home. This articulate, thirty-year old man was serving as a block worker in East Harlem. In words that echoed Shriver’s, Rene explained to the *Times* reporter, that “the poverty, the apathy and the attitudes are the same.”¹³⁹ And the same methods he had used as a community development worker at home were useful to him on West 111th Street. Throughout the summer of 1967, nearly seventy more foreign volunteers, representing some twelve countries, were in training in the U.S. at sites in Boston, Brattleboro, Vermont, and Los Angeles, preparing to volunteer for a year of community work with the poor. “First reports from training programs,” a presidential aide wrote in August, “indicate that these young volunteers are adapting quite well and show great promise for a year in service in urban and rural poverty centers.”¹⁴⁰

Although the Reverse Peace Corps never moved beyond the confines of a pilot project, its significance in the story of America’s global war on poverty is immense. The development discourse had permeated the minds of the men and women of the New Frontier and Great Society so deeply that instead of seeing poverty as an economic condition, they understood it primarily as a function of attitudes and emotional despair. The antidote was not just an injection of Americanism, as some critics of the Peace Corps

¹³⁸ “Reverse Peace Corps,” *TIME* Magazine, June 16, 1967, 21.

¹³⁹ “Filipino Striving to Help Harlem,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1968.

¹⁴⁰ Memorandum for Douglass Cater from Tom Cronin, August 7, 1967, PC 5 8/27/66-9/30/67, PC 5, Box 8, WHCF, LBJ Library.

carped, but was instead the introduction of agents of change—no matter where they came from—who could provide active encouragement and stand as personal examples. Forced to live under the same material circumstances, these caring volunteers offered living proof that with modern attitudes, the harsh realities of life in the ghetto, the migrant worker camp, and the Indian reservation could be overcome. By inviting foreign elites to come and help the backward poor, Shriver and his team affirmed the universalism that undergirded the liberalism of the Great Society. Liberals like Shriver trusted that large-scale development assistance to the nation-states of the Third World and the education and employment that the federal government and a growing economy offered to American citizens created opportunities that were waiting for the poor to grab onto. Developing the poor at home and abroad, then, was the contribution that American liberals asked thousands of volunteers from the modern world to make in the struggle for a better future.

Retreat in the Global War on Poverty

The apotheosis of the Johnson's Administration's global war on poverty came in the form of an administrative proposal to merge the anti-poverty programs of the federal government—international and domestic—into one Cabinet-level "Department of Development." In June of 1965, a discussion about the wisdom of combining the Peace Corps and War on Poverty activities into one such agency had reached the level of senior staff in the White House. In a memorandum to Johnson aide Hayes Redmon, Harris Wofford, who had been one of Shriver's most influential assistants during the creation of the Peace Corps, enumerated the reasons why the Peace Corps, O.E.O., the Food for Peace Program, and all technical assistance aspects of the Agency for International Development's programming would be better organized under one agency. "It was not by accident," Wofford explained, "that the Director of the Peace Corps was asked to organize the War on Poverty. The Peace Corps was a successful war on poverty. Its operating

principles were what a successful domestic war on poverty required: the tapping of the volunteer spirit, the mobilization of human resources, the provision of technical change, the introduction of outside agents of change.” Wofford continued, “As the domestic poverty programs have developed, it is clear that they and AID and the Peace Corps are following and should continue to follow similar lines. The problems and policies of VISTA and the Peace Corps are strikingly parallel. Urban and rural community action or development, whether in Appalachia or the Peruvian mountains, in Harlem or Calcutta, is becoming an art.” Wofford added one more reason to consider the merger. “By bringing all these programs together into one global war on poverty—one department for human technical assistance and development—the President would bring them all into better focus for people here and abroad...Doing this...would tie the President’s well-established concern for people at home with a clear new manifestation of concern for people everywhere.” “The idea is in the air,” Wofford concluded. “Maybe this is the time to bring it down to earth.”¹⁴¹

The proposal that Wofford hoped to make terrestrial was obscured by the clouds of Agent Orange rising from the devastated jungles of Southeast Asia. In March of 1965, Johnson ordered American ground troops into North Vietnamese territory, further escalating the war. By the end of the year, some 185,000 Americans were serving on the ground in Vietnam. Liberal allies in Congress were beginning to question the President’s priorities. Also in 1965, the first teach-ins sprang up on college greens throughout the country. Young people across the United States, more and more agitated with Johnson’s support of the war, were growing suspicious of his “concern for people everywhere.” And, they weren’t the only ones. The social scientists who had been such enthusiastic allies in

¹⁴¹ Memorandum from Harris Wofford to Hayes Redmon, June 11, 1965, Office Files of Bill Moyers, Box 15, LBJ Library.

the War on Poverty were losing heart with Johnson's "bitch of a war" in Vietnam. Liberal economist Robert Eisner shared his concerns in a letter written to one of Johnson's senior aides. "The war has contributed to a profound alienation from this Administration of intellectuals and social scientists whose efforts would be essential to the domestic revolution required," Eisner wrote of the War on Poverty's fate. "Many of us who were most enthusiastic in our support of the New Frontier and the Great Society now see the words of progress being drowned in the deeds of war."¹⁴² Another ally in the Academy concurred, writing on an only slightly less doleful note. Knowing full well how unlikely such an event was, Chauncy Harris wrote that "With the removal of South Vietnam as a focus of conflict, the stage would be cleared for more effective American leadership of the International Great Society in all parts of the world."¹⁴³

Arguably, no social scientist or public intellectual had been as instrumental in forging the ideological foundations of the global war on poverty as Oscar Lewis, yet by 1966 Lewis too had lost faith in the Administration. The once-enthusiastic proponent of the Peace Corps and VISTA now expressed an unmistakable bitterness at Johnson's abandonment of the Great Society. A vocal opponent of the war, Lewis became less willing to participate in government-sponsored anti-poverty activities. In the spring of 1967, Lewis responded with his characteristic candor to a request from the Agency for International Development for advice on expanding community development programs abroad in a tone that put to rest any glimmer of hope for victory in the war on poverty. "It seems to me," Lewis wrote, "that every social scientist must make a personal decision as to the moral issues involved in a matter of this sort. If peace were to come tomorrow, I would be much more inclined to take seriously the efforts to really get something positive done.

¹⁴² Robert Eisner to Joseph Califano, July 25, 1966, Folder: WE 9 8/2/66, WE 9 (3/12/66-8/31/66), Box 27, WHCF, LBJ Library.

¹⁴³ Chauncy Harris to Joseph Califano, July 25, 1966, Folder: WE 9 8/2/66, WE 9 (3/12/66-8/31/66), Box 27, WHCF, LBJ Library.

However, to try to accomplish something within the negative context you are working in seems to me to be a contradiction in terms.” He concluded simply, speaking for many liberal intellectuals who had been strong supporters of the President’s War on Poverty at home and abroad. “To napalm villages and to try to improve welfare services in the same breath is too much for me to take.”¹⁴⁴

Although the ambitious proposal floated by Harris Wofford about a new American commitment to fighting poverty on a global scale did not come to pass, by the end of 1966, Peace Corps Director Jack Vaughn proposed that at least VISTA and the Peace Corps be merged into one organization. “Several strong arguments have been made for the amalgamation of Peace Corps and VISTA,” he wrote to the President. “1. Major economies could be affected in recruiting, selection, training and staff. 2. The role and importance of voluntary service at home and abroad would be highlighted and reaffirmed. 3. The concept of the Great Society would in effect be internationalized.” Vaughn continued on a gloomy note, “With the future alignment of Office of Economic Opportunity agencies in doubt, I feel now is an opportune time to look again at the foregoing possibility. I believe that a merger would strengthen both agencies...I think now would be the right time to bring it off.” Johnson’s interest was piqued, “This appeals to me some,” he scrawled at the bottom of the page. “Let’s discuss it.”¹⁴⁵

Johnson never made the time for that discussion. The war consumed his energies and his commitment to continue funding the War on Poverty continued to wane. Only through Sargent Shriver’s dogged efforts to save the Office of Economic Opportunity did the agency obtain enough funding to carry on for another year. 1968 brought the death knell of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society at home and abroad. Ever-rising casualty figures

¹⁴⁴ Oscar Lewis to Edgar Owens, Chief, Planning Division, Bureau for Latin America, Agency for International Development, April 13, 1967, Oscar Lewis Papers, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 59, University of Illinois Archives.

¹⁴⁵ Memorandum from Jack Vaughn to President Lyndon Johnson, November 12, 1966, Folder: FG 105-6 Peace Corps, CF FG 105-4 (1963-1965), Box 25, WHCF, LBJ Library.

in Vietnam and the now-virulent discontent with the President's leadership—or lack thereof—forced Johnson to withdraw from the presidential campaign. The anti-war candidacies of Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy—whose own visibility as a spokesperson for the poor had now far out shadowed Johnson's—only further disheartened the once implacable president.

The merger of the two agencies—the Peace Corps and VISTA—was finally accomplished by Richard Nixon, Johnson's successor and no friend to the War on Poverty. Far from undertaking the merger to strengthen the agencies, Nixon began the systematic dismantling of many of the instruments of Johnson's War on Poverty. To streamline the federal government, VISTA and the Peace Corps were amalgamated in 1971 under a new agency called ACTION, the direction of which Nixon gave to a young Donald Rumsfeld. The conservative backlash against the War on Poverty and a more *realpolitik* approach towards fighting the Cold War in the Third World prevailed.

A liberal backlash against modernization theory also began to take shape in the years after the War on Poverty's demise. Sparked by the immense disillusionment many on the Left felt over the Vietnam War and the failure of American liberals to see the civil rights movement through to a broader movement for social justice, a variety of intellectuals searched for new answers to the question of why people were poor and what could be done about it. Many of the liberals who were so committed to the development model now looked to the post-colonial critiques of Frantz Fanon, the economic theories of Andre Gunder Frank and Celso Furtado, and the political platform of the Black Panthers in search of answers about poverty. While they did not give up their dreams of a better future, some on the left, Sargent Shriver, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Michael Harrington among them did, at least, begin to question the vision of Progress that had for so long animated their cause.

CONCLUSION

Having documented the rise of the development discourse and the means by which it drastically altered the definition of poverty as a social problem, I conclude with some extended thoughts on the significance of the story I tell. In broad strokes, the four chapters of *"A Different Kind of People"* seek to shed light on the strange career of American liberalism in the twentieth century. In a provocative essay, historian Gary Gerstle notes that while liberalism has shown remarkable ideological flexibility, it has consistently displayed fealty to three core principles: emancipation, rationality, and progress.¹ In regard to poverty as one of the issues most closely associated with liberal concern, we know that Progressive thinkers, responding to the excesses of the Gilded Age, began to define poverty as an obstacle to emancipation and as a dangerous by-product of progress. They believed that the state, guided by rational experts, bore a responsibility to manage these tensions. The Great Depression, a crisis of modernity, only heightened concerns about progress among American liberals, prompting a move toward what Ira Katznelson calls a "proto-social democracy" during Franklin Roosevelt's Second New Deal.² For New Dealers, the "free hand" of the market produced neither emancipation for the individual nor progress for the society. Thus, in the lexicon of the New Deal, the words "insecurity" and "inequality" replaced "poverty."

By the 1960s, however, a time of unprecedented concern about the plight of poor people, not even American socialists talked about inequality or insecurity. Instead, they talked about poverty. Discussions about class which had reached their apogee during the New Deal were replaced by discussions about "culture." Three decades later, the

¹ Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (October 1994): 1043.

² Ira Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?" in ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 189.

Democratic Party that had once fought against the tyranny of laissez-faire economics embraced the principles of neoliberalism. How, keeping Gerstle's formula in mind, do we explain this remarkable transformation? I suggest here that the ascendance of the liberal development project sheds real light on this shift.

Returning to the place where we began, no text encapsulates this shift as well as the one that resulted from John Kenneth Galbraith's journey to India. Just a few weeks after its release, *The Affluent Society* rocketed up the New York Times bestseller list, where it stayed for nearly a year. It was translated into two-dozen languages and, in the fifty years since its publication, has never gone out of print. At the time of its arrival, critics and admirers alike hailed Galbraith's achievement as insightful and important.³ Part economic history, part social critique, the book served as a rather concise statement of the central tenets of what we know as modern American liberalism. In it, Galbraith famously eschewed the fatuous pleasures of consumer capitalism and advocated greater investment in public goods such as education and infrastructure. He talked about the need to conserve our natural resources and make the provision of health care more just. Galbraith also addressed what he called the "New Position of Poverty." Although it earned only ten pages of real estate in an otherwise substantial tome, Galbraith's characterization of poverty in the affluent society was widely hailed as provoking the rediscovery of poverty in the United States. Befitting the title of that chapter, however, it was the way that Galbraith defined poverty and its place in economic thought that makes the book so central to my story.

The *Affluent Society* pivoted upon the concept of what Galbraith labeled the "conventional wisdom" of political economy. In the case of modern economic thought (whose origins Galbraith dated to the late eighteenth century), he explained that the

³ Sales statistics found in Richard Parker, *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005), 292; 720n46.

conventional wisdom was the enduring notion that “poverty had always been man’s normal lot.”⁴ Economic theory, he suggested, was fundamentally based on the assumption of scarcity. In the middle of the twentieth century, however, in the richest country on earth at the richest period in its history, poverty was not “the all pervasive fact” of our world. Ultimately, Galbraith hoped to plant the seeds of a new conventional wisdom, one more appropriate to the conditions of an “affluent society.”⁵

In his characteristically breezy prose, Galbraith spent the first half of the book charting the grim history of the conventional wisdom that still reigned supreme. From the dawn of economic thought, Galbraith wrote, theorists believed that the production of wealth under capitalism created inequality. Indeed, economic theorists assumed that inequality was inherent to any system by which such wealth was efficiently produced. In his catalog of thinkers, Galbraith began with Adam Smith, whose *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) laid the intellectual foundations of modern capitalism. As the owners of capital built aggregate wealth by navigating the free market, Galbraith explained, Smith expected working people to be “pressed down and down” into further poverty.⁶ In the early nineteenth century, David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus elaborated upon this theme. Malthus’s theories on population control and Ricardo’s Iron Law of Wages condemned the vast majority of working people to a dismal fate even as the society at large was experiencing unprecedented economic growth. The owner’s profits and the workers’ wages, Ricardo suggested, would always be in tension with one another in a capitalist economy. And, in such a battle, the owners of land and capital would perennially have the upper hand. The laws of political economy that Ricardo formulated worked with

⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 1.

⁵ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 2-3.

⁶ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 25.

what Galbraith called a “ferocious inequality.”⁷ “Moreover,” Galbraith concluded, “as with Malthus, nothing could be done about it.”⁸ By asserting the inevitability of want despite growing wealth, Ricardo and Malthus earned for themselves an abiding intellectual relevance. For their discipline, they earned the moniker of “the dismal science.”

After asserting the origins of the conventional wisdom, Galbraith explained how the relationship between inequality and wealth that Smith, Ricardo, and Malthus first articulated became the intellectual obsession of a subsequent generation of radical thinkers. On what Galbraith identified as the political left were those who railed against the human cost of this Progress. With the discernable pride of a self-imagined héritier, Galbraith gave special consideration to the men who conjured what he called “the American mood,” Henry George and Thorstein Veblen. In his *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depression and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth* (1879), George quarreled with the widespread acceptance of inequality as ‘natural’ fact. To break the Ricardian cycle, George proposed public intervention to redistribute wealth (most notably, the nationalization of land). Like George, Veblen worried over the consequences of Progress, though his eye focused more clearly on the impact of inequality upon American culture. Industrialization, Veblen argued, undermined the social institutions that bound communities together. Veblen warned that the response of workers to this disparity, the drive to organize themselves and oppose capital, would bring America to the “threshold of anarchy.”⁹ Also radical, though radically conservative, was the tradition of Social Darwinism that emerged with particular vigor in the United States in the late nineteenth century. This philosophy was based on what Galbraith saw as deeply troubling notions of biological determinism that suggested that the human suffering

⁷ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 29

⁸ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 30.

⁹ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 53.

wrought by Progress was both natural and necessary. “Misery and misfortune,” Galbraith wrote of this doctrine, “are not misery and misfortune alone but rungs of the ladder up which man makes his ascent.”¹⁰ Despite these distinctions, however, all of these thinkers agreed on one immutable reality: Progress made and was made by inequality.

For Galbraith, no one had articulated the centrality of inequality to political economy as clearly as Karl Marx. Although Galbraith was writing in the context of the Cold War (the Soviets had launched Sputnik less than six months before the release of *The Affluent Society*) and in a political culture still infected with virulent strains of anti-communism, he lavished praise on the “breath-taking grandeur of Marx’s achievement as an exercise in social theory.”¹¹ Marx’s insistence on the interconnectedness of social class, state power, imperialism, and war were profoundly insightful. “Had Marx been mostly wrong,” Galbraith noted, “his influence would have quickly evaporated...but on much he was notably right.”¹² Marx’s influence also well exceeded the circles of professional economics—his was a worldview. Years later, Galbraith explained that “The great dichotomy ...extending far beyond Marx’s view, was between capital and labor, the industrialist and the working mass...Widely speaking, it came close to being the accepted view of the modern society.”¹³

Although he paid heed to the premise that inequality and Progress were inextricably linked, Galbraith had a very different purpose in mind for his own contribution to the canon of economic thought. Indeed, *The Affluent Society* sought to dethrone the conventional wisdom altogether. This worldview, Galbraith argued, had become irrelevant. His insight was rooted in the fact that Galbraith had come of intellectual age in a time of ideological revolution in the field of economics. As a young man in the mid-1930s,

¹⁰ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 58.

¹¹ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 69.

¹² Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 69.

¹³ John Kenneth Galbraith, interviewed by Brian Lamb, *Booknotes*, November 13, 1994.

Galbraith had become a disciple of that revolution's leader, John Maynard Keynes. To the vexing problem of inequality, Keynes had proposed a rather simple solution. An activist state, Keynes suggested, possessed the ability to temper the instability of the business cycle by ensuring full employment in times of economic distress. Keynesianism had been the basis of the latter-New Deal initiatives in which Galbraith had been a participant.¹⁴ Thus, in *The Affluent Society*, Galbraith wrote that the crucial insights of Keynesianism and the social safety net that had been built during the New Deal had obviated the tension between inequality and Progress. "While taxes have restrained the concentration of income at the top," Galbraith wrote, "full employment and upward pressure on wages have increased well-being at the bottom."¹⁵ As Galbraith simply stated, inequality of the sort that had occupied the attention of the generations of economic thinkers before him had "faded as an issue."¹⁶

Poverty, however, had not disappeared. "Islands" of despair still dotted the sea of affluence.¹⁷ Yet, poverty, which in the orthodox tradition of economic thought had once been the norm, had now become the exception. Through the gains accrued from growing economic productivity and the distributive measures of Keynesianism, poverty, in the United States at least, "ceased to be a general case and became a special case." In one of the more controversial passages of the book, Galbraith added that poverty was now an "afterthought."¹⁸ As such, he continued, the root of poverty could not be inequality in the

¹⁴ Galbraith served in government in several capacities throughout the New Deal, culminating with his position as the chief economist at the Office of Price Administration during the Second World War. Galbraith is considered to have introduced academic Keynesianism (Keynes's monumental work, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, was published in 1936) to the New Deal with his 1938 review of federal public works programs. See Parker, *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics*, 105-133.

¹⁵ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 85.

¹⁶ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 85.

¹⁷ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 327.

¹⁸ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 323. Interestingly, Galbraith was so troubled by way in which this line had been mistaken as an excuse for political inaction on the issue of poverty that he removed it from subsequent editions of the book. See Parker, *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics*, 291.

economic sense, as it had been for so long. The point was proved by the fact that the time-honored remedies for inequality—economic growth and the redistribution of wealth—were not effective weapons against this remaining deprivation. “The most certain thing about modern poverty,” Galbraith wrote, “is that it is not sufficiently remedied by a general and tolerably well-distributed advance in income.”¹⁹ What readers of Galbraith’s book were witnessing as they turned the pages was a concise and radically transformed answer to the enduring question of why people were poor. Rather than experiencing the grinding injustice endemic to laissez-faire capitalism, the “new” poor were men and women who lived outside of the mainstream of the American economy, and by extension, American culture altogether. They were, as activist-intellectual Michael Harrington explained, “a different kind of people.”²⁰



By decoupling mass deprivation from the economic system that produced it—industrial capitalism and imperialism—a generation of reformers discerned a phenomenon that has come to be called *global poverty*. They believed, in stark contrast to their predecessors, that poverty was a product of “backwardness” rather than a product of Progress. This diagnosis pointed to a very particular set of prescriptions that focused on integrating poor people into “mainstream,” modern life by changing their attitudes and values. Many of these prescriptions still proliferate in contemporary debates about how to “make poverty history.”²¹

¹⁹ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 327.

²⁰ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1962; Harmondsworth, UK/New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1977), 146. Citations are to the Penguin edition.

²¹ “Make Poverty History” is the slogan for an organization associated with activist-musician Bono and economist Jeffrey Sachs. In addition to debt relief, which is essentially a redistributive measure, Sachs focuses on more traditional facets of development, including disease prevention, nutritional training, and primary education. See Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).

As a historian, I am neither glibly critiquing programs that seek to educate poor people and improve their material conditions nor am I proposing a turn towards radical relativism. To be sure, food in the belly and shelter from the storm are absolute goods. What I *am* suggesting, however, is that by understanding the relationship between ideas about poverty and ideas about development, we can better discern the ways in which the remedies we still seek are intimately bound up with a hegemonic vision of modernity that we might discover to be undemocratic, not to mention unsustainable. At a moment in which the ideological infrastructure of “modern” American life shows real signs of decay and poverty’s victims are growing in number, perhaps this is a timely conversation to have.

That conversation would benefit by beginning with the questions posed by an American sage some five decades ago, questions I quote earlier in this book. Reviewing an article by the then-unknown Oscar Lewis about poverty in a Mexican village, W.E.B. Du Bois asked “What is wrong with this civilization? With our work, with our technique, with our distribution of wealth? Why is it that the great majority of the people of the world, in this heyday of civilization, in this day of mounting wealth, luxury, and power—why is it that the vast majority of the people of the world are desperately, and as it seems to most of us, inexcusably poor?”²² Although they marked the emergence of a new conception of poverty that cast the poor as lacking modernity rather than suffering under its inequities, Du Bois’s questions were about fundamental inequality and the imperative to do something about it. In our own time, one in which we are engaged in what future historians might label a third discovery of poverty, few voices are asking Du Bois’s questions. At its most ambitious, this book has sought to explain why that is the case.



²² W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Winds of Time: Poverty,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1947, 15.