

## INTRODUCTION

AT THE BEGINNING OF 2015, NEARLY FIFTY MILLION PEOPLE—15 percent of the American population—still face high levels of actual or near destitution. In a country with a \$16.6 trillion economy and durable traditions of opportunity and democracy, countless individuals live in conditions marked by the paucity of resources and insufficient means to attain social and economic advancement. Why does entrenched deprivation persist in the United States? Why do so many people continue to face economic and social marginalization fifty years after President Lyndon B. Johnson famously declared a “War on Poverty”?

This book, the result of long-term observations in Baltimore’s western neighborhoods, offers answers to that question by concentrating on the specific relationship between the American State and the urban poor. On the basis of historical and ethnographic research, I argue that poverty, of the kind found in American inner cities, encompasses more than material scarcity; it also entails exceptional and systematic interactions between government officials and vulnerable people, a disproportionate number of whom are racial minorities.

Under normal circumstances, exchanges between the American State and ordinary persons have been shaped by the government’s corporate coherence and its capacity to act on behalf of groups with varying interests—what the sociologist Peter Evans (1997) calls *embedded autonomy*. In that setup, public servants enjoy a salutary measure of distance from *and* connection to social segments endowed with divergent power and influence. Agents of the state typically view individuals as consumers and citizens regulated by market competition and large-scale narratives of individual achievement through hard work.

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As a result, most Americans have a limited relationship with the government, and that relationship, when it arises, customarily involves the interchange of information and monetary assets. As long as they observe established laws and regulations, people expect to be left alone by the government. It is the state's relative independence as well as its civic involvement that have largely accounted for America's developmental success.

In the case of the urban poor, the delicate balance between detachment and connection has been suspended; the poor are perceived and treated differently by the state. Whether explicitly or not, government agencies mandated to address the needs of impoverished individuals and families define them as potential felons and social burdens. Populations so viewed face overwhelming and atypical intrusions on the part of agencies whose procedures are based on ambivalent benevolence and a penchant for retribution. Regular contact between the American State and impoverished Americans may thus be described as a form of *distorted engagement* marked by suspicion, surveillance, containment, and penalization. Against the backdrop of *quantitative* disparities in wealth, such treatment produces *qualitative* differences in the experiences of ordinary and destitute Americans. A major purpose of this book is to account for such differences as they are lived through by actual people.

Hovering relentlessly over the inner city are the police and a multitude of social workers, administrators of correctional facilities, teachers and counselors in public schools, the penal system, halfway houses, group homes, dispensers of food vouchers, shelters, personnel in training programs and community-based organizations, therapeutic centers, and those ubiquitous publicly funded researchers conducting yet another costly study about the causes and consequences of poverty. The totalizing presence of the state in those environments illustrates the unique relationship between government agents and vulnerable social sectors, one that deviates from standard norms of social interaction and deportment.

Central to this argument are the ways in which the unique relationship between the state and the urban poor affects life at the local level. Children growing up in deprived, racially segregated neighborhoods have a diminished sense of what it is like to move up and muster material resources through education—they have seldom met anyone who

has succeeded by staying in school, but they are prompt to tap public agencies as a means to gain a measure of control and self-sufficiency. A youngster's call to 911 can render a mother powerless even when she believes her attempts at discipline are legitimate. Departments of child protection, installed in the name of impeccable liberal principles, can thus contribute to the subversion and erosion of the already weakened authority of low-income parents. The overrepresentation of the poor among alleged child abusers is, in many cases, an effect of the zeal with which public officials suspect impoverished parents of ill behavior.

Something similar may be said about programs that place security guards and "school resource officers" in educational facilities to monitor the activities of students, a matter that has led to the criminalization of minor offenses, formerly managed by teachers and principals but now grounds for expulsion and jail time even among the very young. Representing another example are attempts at monitoring crime that rely on intensified police surveillance and interdiction rather than collaboration with local residents. Finally, the comparatively large number of young, single mothers in poor neighborhoods is not only the effect of personal ignorance or bad judgment but also the result of economic stagnation in tandem with government omnipresence, a combination that leads poor girls to see motherhood as the only path to signify adult status.

A common feature connects the examples above: in the absence of alternative resources for economic progress and self-expression, government agencies become critical sites of encounter between the urban poor and the outside world. Bureaucratic interference is to life in poverty what marketing bombardment is to the society at large.

Investigating the exceptional relationship between the American State and the urban poor paradoxically sheds light on government actions that have increased the capacity of ordinary Americans to achieve prosperity. In the United States, policies aimed at increasing education and wealth largely explain the emergence of a successful middle class, that is, a thriving contingent of working people endowed with property rights, personal mobility, and access to a variety of material and educational assets. Where incentives to the accumulation of human and material capital have been absent, the result has been marginalization, unnecessary suffering, and the persistence of entrenched poverty. Palliation, as embodied in multiple and costly programs for

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low-income populations, has been a sad parody of capitalist provisos that, despite flaws, have always worked in the American context. In other words, the solution to poverty in the United States cannot continue to depend on attempts to mitigate the effects of dispossession or modify personal behaviors; it should rely instead on the deployment of significant resources to produce genuine gains in formal education and property accumulation.

That recommendation exposes the limits of prevalent ideological trends. For more than a century, conservative writers have bloviated against government programs, contending that they bolster dependence, lassitude, and deviance. Such rants, however, have been indifferent to the effects of racial discrimination and class bias and have not recognized the state's powerful and constructive role in forging the American Dream. Liberals and progressives, on the other hand, have viewed the government as part of the solution to problems confronted by impoverished people, but they have been reluctant to investigate the ways in which public service agencies perpetuate anomalous conditions in poor neighborhoods. As a result, they have turned a blind eye to the deleterious effects of ineffective, politically compromised, and woefully underfunded programs. Conservative accounts have been amply denounced but the unintended consequences of liberal presumptions about the poor have been left virtually untouched (O'Connor 2001). While conservative interpretations *demonize* disadvantaged populations, liberal positions *infantilize* them. The content of this book suggests that we should cast a less approving, graver glance at the liberal premises underlying government approaches to poverty (see also Menjivar and Kil 2002).

By doing that, I hope to reopen a long overdue project—a progressive critique of the American State. For too long, assailing the role and size of government has been the mission of conservatives and libertarians, a way for them to assert their ideological authenticity. By contrast, liberals and progressives have taken a defensive position that has often led to compromise and capitulation. Even the abandonment and circumvention of the term *liberal* during the Bush years illustrates that sort of cowardice (Massey 2005). The stories told in this book call for a more aggressive defense of liberal principles *and* a more trenchant review of existing government programs. It should be a top responsibility of the

state to own up to and review premises that may be hampering the ability of public servants to address with integrity the needs of vulnerable groups, many of whose constituents are children.

## REDISCOVERING THE URBAN POOR

I first made incursions into the neighborhoods of Upton, Sandtown-Winchester, and Liberty Heights in 1989, seeking to interview men affected by deindustrialization. Two years earlier, William J. Wilson had published the now classic book *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (1987), one of the main themes of which was the devastating effect of industrial decline on the employment prospects of African Americans. Last to be hired and last to join labor unions, Black workers had been first to be dismissed when jobs in the manufacturing sector were relocated to other parts of the world as globalization accelerated in the 1970s.

Ejection from well-paying employment, Wilson argued, had contributed to the formation of an underclass consisting primarily of men detached from the labor force and families whose main income was in the form of public assistance. The importance of his findings was demonstrated by an avalanche of studies that followed the publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (e.g., Gans 1995; Jencks 1993; Massey and Denton 1993; Sharkey 2013; Sampson 2013). Wilson developed his argument in two subsequent volumes, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (1997) and *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (2010).

Baltimore was an ideal location to further investigate the effects of industrial recomposition on urban dwellers. Situated at the point of encounter between northern and southern states, along the Mason-Dixon Line, that city had been a vibrant industrial mecca whose prosperity, for a good portion of the twentieth century, was anchored in the activities of the Bethlehem Steel Company. At its peak, in the 1970s, the firm employed more than 180,000 people throughout the Northeast. Thirty thousand worked at its Sparrows Point, Baltimore, plant alone. By 1986, when I first arrived in that city, fewer than 15,000 people worked for Bethlehem Steel, and by 2009 the number had plummeted to 2,500.

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Such a precipitous reduction of industrial jobs called for a systematic inquiry into the effects of economic change upon inner-city residents.

Armed with a battery of questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of thirty African American men who had held jobs in manufacturing and manufacturing-related sectors—welders, pipe fitters, assemblers, packers, couriers, and office clerks. Through them I met others, including fifteen women who had worked in industry at some point in their lives. Altogether, I interviewed fifty-three persons for that early project. Their stories offered a glimpse into events that had led from aspiring youth and seemingly secure employment to displacement.

My exploratory study confirmed what Wilson had documented in Chicago: men and women who had held humble but decent positions in factories and other workplaces providing input and services to manufacturing now languished without stable employment. Some, like Donald B. Wilson, whose story I relate in chapter 1, had been able to save and purchase a home, thus gaining a footing in the upper echelons of the working class. Most of them, however, now held itinerant jobs or dabbled perilously at the margins of the law. For their children, the outlook was even worse.

Industrial decline, I discovered, was only part of a larger, more disturbing picture marked by the impact of residential segregation, long-term poverty, and government intrusion on a new generation born even as narrow channels for upward mobility were closing down. My initial interest had been industrial recomposition, but as I carried out my research, I found myself surrounded by youngsters of all ages, children filled with vitality, beauty, and ambition; children who wanted to be athletes, doctors, teachers, and police officers; children who, at the same time, knew by the age of four or five that the texture of their hair and the color of their skin were flaws in need of apology and correction. They were sons and daughters who, long before adolescence, had faced dislocation and assumed responsibilities that even adults would have met with great trouble; children older than their chronological age, sometimes wise, often difficult, and always captivating. It was mostly from those children that I obtained the lessons contained in this book.

I knew those children well and for enough time to watch them change from vessels of promise to shattered casualties in a war they had

not initiated. By the age of twelve or thirteen, many of those I had met only five years earlier as giggling boys and girls seeking approval, their eyes fiercely engaging other eyes, were now withdrawn and distant, their gaze averted, hiding in a place within that no one could easily reach. Teenagers whose hands I had held when they were youngsters, during visits to the zoo and the aquarium, were now single mothers living on public assistance or drug kingpins standing on corners waiting for the next client to arrive. Some were in prison. At least two were dead.

It was the story of children growing up in West Baltimore that riveted my attention. I witnessed their efforts to make sense of conditions that were barely comprehensible. I heard them explain the logic behind their actions, while their mothers, and sometimes fathers, despaired of their behavior. For nearly ten years, many of those children and their families were an integral part of my life.

As I progressed in my investigation, harrowing questions arose: How to portray the behind-the-scenes struggles of people who are permanently viewed as misfits? How to account for lives diminished by scarcity, drug addiction, and violence, not solely as a result of individual choices gone awry but also as the outcome of collective indifference and misguided policies? How to recover the biographical dimensions of those represented by the popular media mostly as a pretext to review disturbing statistical facts? Those questions constituted the challenge. Years later, the answers are laid out in this book.

The stories told in these pages are American stories. Roughly between 1990 and 1997, I cultivated relationships with members of fifty families living in West Baltimore. For six of those years I sponsored four of the children in those families to attend a parochial school in Baltimore's Waverly district. I saw myself as backup, another pair of hands and another mind in the service of youngsters who had very few resources. Beyond all that is known about racial discord and the gulfs created by class inequality, it was hard to accept that the richest country in the world—a nation with a comparatively benign colonial past, a history of consistent development, and a bountiful spirit—had turned away from the descendants of slaves who had contributed to its prosperity. It is one thing to learn about race and inequality from books; it is an altogether different matter to learn about those subjects through the direct observation of young lives being destroyed before reaching

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full bloom. I was moved not by charity but by solidarity. As an immigrant in awe of the values that sustain America, I could not passively accept the extreme conditions of abandonment that I witnessed in West Baltimore.

My involvement ran against prevailing trends and attitudes. Families like those I knew in Baltimore do not elicit compassion; investing in them has not been part of the national impulse. Data about charitable contributions, indicators of the country's generosity, support that claim. In 2012, Americans spent \$316.23 billion in philanthropic giving—about 2 percent of GDP, and an increase of 3.5 percent from 2011. About 32 percent of those contributions went to religious organizations that often channel funds to help the poor (Giving USA 2013). Yet only a fraction of those resources reached impoverished urban families, whose members numbered nearly twenty million (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012).

Government programs do not fare better. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), since 1996 the successor to Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), allocates about \$8.00 per day to minors living in poverty (McGuire and Merriman 2005). From the mid-1970s until its rescission, AFDC served one in twenty Americans, but its spending did not surpass 1 percent of the federal budget. When added to the Supplemental Income for the Disabled and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (food stamp) Programs, it did not reach beyond 5 percent of federal outlays (Page and Larner 1997). In 2013, total federal spending on TANF benefits was \$16.5 billion (Falk 2013). For a single point of comparison, that year Americans spent nearly \$343 billion in entertainment and more than \$217 billion in apparel and services (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013a).

Americans who see it as a moral imperative to support the poor in less advanced countries plagued by corruption, economic distress, or natural disaster do not feel the same toward their fellow citizens living in distressed neighborhoods. Mostly we blame the domestic poor for their afflictions. We find it difficult to grow a sense of connection toward unemployed men, women on welfare, girls toting babies on inner-city streets, or boys in handcuffs passing like shadows before our eyes as we watch the evening news. Yet such people—the central concern of this book—are as American as the descendants of immigrants

from Europe and other parts of the world whose judgmental gaze often defines the public image of impoverished Blacks.

Throughout the period of my involvement in West Baltimore, a wide chasm separated my experience from that of my colleagues at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) where I worked as a research scientist. There, the poor constituted a social category in need of modification through social engineering. My colleagues had impressive credentials. Among them were scholars and researchers, as well as former public servants and politicians. They administered projects aimed at understanding or mitigating indigence and its discontents, including crime, imprisonment, drug addiction, unemployment, school abandonment, domestic violence, child maltreatment, and premature motherhood. No social pathology was left untouched at the IPS.

Despite their complexity and high cost, projects addressing such dysfunctions circled mostly around one objective: compelling the poor to adhere to middle-class standards of conduct—incentives to promote marriage as a solution to poverty are an enduring example; the federal government still allocates \$150 million to the pursuit of that goal. Undergirding such efforts is a simple idea: if only the poor would behave like affluent people, their problems might disappear (O'Connor 2001). The emphasis in policy circles was, and continues to be, on changing individuals, not on modifying the circumstances that have caused deviant behaviors in the first place—high levels of residential segregation, large inequalities in the distribution of social and financial resources, and punitive government programs that stifle constructive action.

One summer morning in the mid-1990s, a former housing commissioner for the city of Baltimore, and a senior fellow at the IPS, stopped me on my way to my office to ask about Clarise, the young girl whom I had mentored for nearly five years and whose life is recounted in chapter 9 of this book. Clarise, who was thirteen at the time, was receiving high grades at her parochial school, swam proficiently, and had just completed an acting course at the Bryn Mawr School, a well-regarded educational institution in Baltimore. That stint had culminated in a performance at the Peabody Center for the Performing Arts attended by members of her family. She had glowed and taken a bow on that day, when promise about her future was fresh and untainted. Yes, I had much to report about Clarise but, as I began to answer my colleague's

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question, she interrupted me; what she *truly* wanted to understand were the reasons behind my attentiveness to the girl for such an extended period of time. I shifted my reply, but she cut me short again with her own, memorable response: “It’s because you don’t want her to get pregnant, right? She’s an experiment. Good luck with that!” Our conversation had ended before it began.

The ring of skepticism in the woman’s last syllable made a lasting impression on me, but more disturbing was the intimation that Clarise’s story was important only as the expression of a social problem, not as the unfolding of a real life. Rare only in their honesty, my colleague’s remarks mirror common perceptions about the urban poor and must be compared with the conversations we regularly entertain about our own sons and daughters. We would deem it insulting to characterize the care we bestow upon our own children solely as an attempt to prevent them from becoming social burdens. In our minds, we bracket that possibility and celebrate their achievements as evidence of our parental skill or manifestations of their intellectual and moral acumen. It is different for the poor—they have no biography. Impoverished people in general and African Americans in particular have been reduced to flattened representations of social problems. Individuals have been rendered insignificant, the rationale behind their actions buried beneath harsh judgment and simplification.

It is mostly for this reason that I interweave seven biographical accounts with analytical chapters in this book. They serve as anchors for my narrative and ground my theoretical formulations. My hope is to shine a light on events that are hidden behind statistical accounts and bureaucratic and academic jargon. The neighborhoods I studied are not exceptions; they represent typical outcomes in the evolution of American cities. Each biographical sketch reflects the normative experience of larger populations in dejected urban districts throughout the United States. Although I use synonyms, the biographies are of real people, not composites.

By taking this approach, I endeavor to highlight the significance of including personal stories as part of the ethnographic mission, not as a way to tell colorful anecdotes but as a means to affirm a fundamental tenet of the social sciences: when seen and compared as part of a larger universe of observations, biographical narratives reveal patterns that

can only be explained through attention to social context. Whether it is the higher likelihood of imprisonment, out-of-wedlock motherhood, or dependence on public assistance, events characteristic of a specific population may be interpreted as the by-products of individual choices but also as the statistically probable effects of invisible yet real forces in the society. In this book, biography is meant to complement structural analysis (Ragin 2008; Ragin and Amoroso 2010).<sup>1</sup>

### CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Questions about poverty in the United States are not new. Numerous writings over the last five decades highlight the paradox of destitution in the planet's wealthiest country. Some draw attention to cultural traditions inherited from nineteenth-century England that hold the poor responsible for their own afflictions and require that they lift themselves and each other through diligence and virtuous living. Classic works like Michael Katz's *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*—first published in 1990 and reissued in 2013—provide brilliant historical accounts of public views that cast impoverished people as defective outsiders. Other authors, Herbert Gans (1995), for example, note the extent to which powerless groups are often used as scapegoats to shift attention away from corporate abuses and political failures or to codify social ills, like gross income inequalities and racial discrimination. In that voluminous literature, however, there are few attempts to investigate the relationship between agents of the state and people living in poverty. The part played by bureaucratic intrusion in shaping identity among the urban poor has been assumed rather than investigated. It exists in academic narratives as a backdrop, not as an active force shaping existential realities.<sup>2</sup>

That is surprising because studies of the state have been central to sociological research. From Max Weber (1919) and Emile Durkheim (1893/1997) to Charles Tilly (1975, 2006) and Theda Skocpol (1979, 1995), authors have investigated the origin and function of governing apparatuses. There is also a large literature on public service agencies, but its goals are narrow and pragmatic, focusing on directives to improve personnel performance and procedural quality (Berman et

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al. 2012). Notable writings, like *Regulating the Poor* by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1971/1993) or Jill Quadagno's *The Color of Welfare* (1996), explore aspects of the relationship between the state and the urban subproletariat—the first by providing an explanation of welfare policies as safety valves for the economic system, the second by investigating the role of race in the configuration of social policies. Despite their lasting importance, such analyses do not seek to clarify in any detail the effect of sustained contact between individuals and families and state agencies.

Especially relevant to the content of this book are works by David Garland (1990, 2010), David Harvey (2007), and Loïc Wacquant (2008, 2009), who offer absorbing analyses of changes undergone by the state in the latter part of the twentieth century. Garland's influential tract *Punishment and Society: A Study in Social Theory* (1990) articulates an innovative approach to the study of imprisonment, shedding light on the interactions between the state and inner-city residents. Similarly, David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007) provides an inspired account of the way market deregulation has resulted in the rearrangement of state functions, some of them now explicitly directed at the containment of populations made superfluous by industrial recomposition. Like Garland, Harvey focuses on systemic changes occurring during the latter part of the twentieth century. Neither author, however, investigates those structural transformations from the perspective of social agents directly affected by them.

In contrast, Loïc Wacquant (2008, 2009) lucidly describes the relationship between the postindustrial state and marginal groups. His objective is to understand the effect of neoliberalism and globalization upon the working and nonworking classes, the urban poor, in particular. He contends that the masculine hand of the state, offering punishment and confinement, has supplanted the feminine hand of the nanny state that paralleled Keynesian economic reform during the 1960s. He also notes that a consequence of hardening policies over time has been a steep increase in the number of people living behind bars. Although they represent less than 13 percent of the American population, impoverished Blacks constitute 60 percent of those who are incarcerated. According to Wacquant, that astonishing fact is not a coincidence; in the age of economic globalization, imprisonment has become a means

to contain and control a surplus population of discarded workers (see also Pager 2009; Western 2007; Alexander 2010). As with Garland and Harvey, Wacquant's intent is not, for the most part, to clarify the responses of individuals and families to measures implemented by segments of the state. This book complements analyses by such authors.

### **Rethinking Ethnography**

Central to my effort is the ethnographic tradition and ways in which it can be pushed further in the twenty-first century. Ethnography still holds the promise of depth and moral suasion at a time when dazzling inventions are reshaping the way we transmit and receive information, often to the detriment of serious understanding. A short electronic text can prompt action; postings in social media can multiply our capacity to interact with others, but stories of consequence necessary to accrue deep knowledge can only be obtained through painstaking research and one-to-one interaction. This book is partly an attempt at testing the limits of ethnographic narratives while honoring theoretical analysis.

Ethnographic research came of age during the first decades of the twentieth century as a means to memorialize cultures at risk of being absorbed or eliminated by Western expansion and the advent of modernity. Early anthropologists believed that steep divides existed between the world of the ethnographer and the world populated by informants, whether located in New Guinea (Malinowski 1922), Samoa (Mead 1928), Polynesia (Firth 1925), the Andaman Islands (Radcliffe-Brown 1922), Southern Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1940), or Ghana (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940).

Later in the twentieth century, the availability of rapid transportation and the improvement of communications technology made it possible to undertake ethnographic research in urban settings. Exemplary of this trend were scholars from the Chicago school of sociology who developed ethnography as a centerpiece of their studies. The boundaries between observers and people once regarded as different or foreign began to dissolve. Ethnography became a tool to understand not only those living in exotic locations but also those in modern societies.

New questions then emerged about the use of the interview method as a means to advance scientific goals. Authors shifted attention to the evolving relationship between the observer and the observed as they interact with one another trying to clarify meanings and significance, establish cognitive boundaries, and develop internally plausible narratives about specific areas of experience. Fading memories, the imprecision of language, and the play of emotions diminish the self-evident character of spoken accounts. For that reason, the goal of in-depth interviews is not to take the statements of informants at face value, as if they revealed *truth*, but to identify *experiential patterns* in the testimonies of individuals sharing common characteristics (Fernández-Kelly 2012).

When seen in counterpoint to other interviews displaying common characteristics, personal accounts can become part of a virtual totality reflecting the structural factors that explain collective behavior (Burawoy et al. 1992; 2000). Theoretical propositions can then be *rubbed* against empirical findings to later re-construct and refine theory (see also Knorr Zetina 1982). As Arthur Conan Doyle once remarked, “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts” (Conan Doyle 1891/2012: 93). Ethnography without theory is mere anecdote but theory without ethnographic research often leads to vacuous speculation.<sup>3</sup>

Although ethnography has been yielding valuable insights for more than one hundred years—longer if early attempts starting in the sixteenth century are included—it has also been criticized for various reasons. Some scholars argue that because ethnographers depend on small numbers, their methodology yields idiosyncratic, not scientific, knowledge. Others assert that the interview method contradicts objectivity because of its dependence on the spoken word, known to be ambiguous and susceptible to contradictory interpretations. Yet others maintain that ethnography *samples on the dependent variable* and, therefore, betrays principles of scientific integrity.

Such criticisms tend to impose the language and logic of *quantitative* methodologies upon procedures whose justification lies elsewhere (Ragin and Amoroso 2010). Unlike that of quantitative methods, the logic behind ethnographic research, including interviews and participant observation, is not mainly to generalize findings to large universes

but to obtain a deep understanding of the factors accounting for social action. It is, in fact, the purpose of ethnographic projects to sample on the dependent variable as a way to gain further knowledge of social processes. There is nothing anecdotal about narratives based on systematic research resulting from sustained observation over extended periods of time.

In other words, ethnographic research aims to create internally plausible explanations about specific areas of experience, explore meanings and the *sui generis* logic behind events, and raise questions that can be subsequently pursued through a plurality of methods. Triangulation—the iteration between theoretical propositions and quantitative and qualitative analyses—constitutes the mainstay of science both as a process and as a result.<sup>4</sup>

### **A Word about Methodology**

My intent in this book is to flesh out C. Wright Mills's memorable dictum that sociology should be anchored at the intersection of biography and history (Mills 1959/2000: 3). Toward that purpose I mesh ethnographic research, theory, and analysis. Each of the seven biographical sketches that anchor my account represents a prism through which broader structural forces may be appreciated. I selected each portrait as a reflection of normative experiences in the lives of children, adolescents, and adults living in West Baltimore. Each one offers insight into the progression of events that leads to typical outcomes in distressed neighborhoods. I aim not at embellishment but at explanation from the point of view of the observer, as well as from the perspective of social actors responsible for behaviors that may seem incomprehensible or even reproachable to outsiders. Every biographical narrative in this book re-presents the life of a real individual.

I followed an exploratory study about deindustrialization in Baltimore, described at the beginning of this introduction, with a two-tiered methodology. A first level consisted of open-ended interviews and sustained interaction with more than two hundred and sixty individuals distributed in approximately sixty families over the course of nearly ten years.

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Several of the families in the sample were related and resided in close proximity to one another. Their boundaries were indeterminate and fluid. Fictive kinship often affected how individuals saw their membership in larger units—godparents and foster parents are common in West Baltimore. Interviews and casual exchanges were sometimes short, while others extended over weeks. Some were interrupted, only to be resumed months later. In a few cases, original conversations were followed by efforts at clarification years later.

I supplemented interviews with participant observation and community mapping. Participant observation involved sustained contact with scores of individuals over the period of my research. Community mapping, an underrated technique in ethnographic research, consisted of exploring urban spaces in the company of people at the center of my investigation.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of those explorations was to obtain information about key elements in physical spaces from the point of view of the social actors whose behavior and perceptions I was attempting to understand.

Community mapping is an invaluable vehicle to obtain factual information and, more importantly, knowledge about how a neighborhood is felt and perceived by those who live within its boundaries. Without community mapping, elements shaping the life of residents—from playgrounds as a turf for negotiation and economic interaction to imaginary borders separating gang territories—would be invisible to an outsider.

Results from those methodologies are used in this book as a backdrop against which I view the character of patterned behaviors and lived denouements. They provide context and allow me to distinguish between unique events unfolding in the lives of individuals and normative developments affecting the collectivity, in this case, low-income African American families in West Baltimore.

The second tier in my approach encompassed biographical testimonies collected from the members of ten families most prominently featured in this book. Here, the challenge was to accurately represent their experience. Because I was more than a distant observer, many of the events described in these pages happened to West Baltimore dwellers as much as they happened to me. The lessons I derived from my interactions were not the result of dispassionate study—as much as that can

ever happen in ethnographic research—but the consequence of deliberate and deep involvement. My goal was not to attain a false sense of objectivity or clinical expertise but to make empathy work as a springboard for understanding (Ortner 2006).<sup>6</sup>

I use life narratives as texts that express people's interpretation of their own circumstances. Case histories and personal narratives require that we view the statements of informants as constructions emerging from singular social, economic, and political conditions. Such constructions give voice to subjects in their own terms, allowing them to reflect upon personal and collective culture. Accounting for the meanings that individuals and collectivities impose upon their own actions is critical to the development of theory and the crafting of policy. In consonance with John Van Maanen's (2011) retelling of Clifford Geertz's classic proposition, I contend that it is not enough to observe how social actors behave but also necessary to understand what *they* think they are doing.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book comprises eight sections, each formed by two chapters; seven chapters include ethnographic accounts and are complemented by analytical chapters. Chapter dyads stand independently and can be read as self-contained efforts to address specific dimensions of poverty in American cities.

I begin with the story of Donald B. Wilson whose life reflects Baltimore's transition from vital industrial hub to urban setting in permanent decline. That chapter is paired with an account of Baltimore's evolution, with a focus on Upton, Sandtown-Winchester, and Lower Park Heights, the neighborhoods where I conducted most of my research.

The second section begins with the biography of Big Floyd (chapter 3), a man of lesser gifts than D. B. Wilson but who cultivated similar ambitions while confronting a dearth of employment opportunities and an abundance of bureaucratic interference, two features of life in the postindustrial city. I close with a discussion of the effects of economic dispossession and state intrusiveness on gender relations in inner-city neighborhoods (chapter 4).

In section three, I present a historical account (chapter 5) and theoretical framework (chapter 6) based on ideas put forth by Peter Evans (1995). I argue that America represents a mature developmental state whose policies account for much of the country's prosperity. Nevertheless, government's approach to impoverished and racially distinct populations substantially deviates from a developmental stance. I discuss *distorted engagement* as a way to gain a better grasp of the distinctive relationship between the American State and the urban poor.

Subsequently I investigate specific features of distorted engagement, first by reviewing the life of Little Floyd (chapter 7) and then (chapter 8) through an exploration of child protection agencies as an example of the mechanics integral to institutions addressing the needs of impoverished populations. The ambiguous character of public assistance ushers in unexpected consequences: on the one hand, having limited capacity to protect children from extreme abuse and neglect; on the other hand, fracturing the authority of parents and dividing families.

The fifth section begins with the story of Clarise Twigg (chapter 9) supplemented by a discussion of social capital under conditions of isolation and reduced access to resources (chapter 10). Social capital has been portrayed as a palliative for poverty and downward mobility, but the ethnographic evidence presented here suggests that a strong base of material and human resources is a precondition for social capital to result in qualitative improvements.

I then explore other dimensions of social and cultural capital, leading with the story of Towanda Forrest (chapter 11) to illustrate typical developments in the trajectory of girls growing up in inner-city neighborhoods. In chapter 12, I develop a complementary argument, claiming that early motherhood is partly the result of compressed time protocols and the absence of material and social assets to mark the transition to adulthood. In lieu of other means to affirm maturity, youngsters turn to their bodies to establish their adult status.

In chapter 13, I review the life of Lydia Forrest, a woman who struggled for the better part of two decades to live in dignity while receiving public assistance and who imposed a higher meaning on her actions through religious conversion. Her story is one of agency in the face of factors undermining the capacity for individual advancement. I follow with a study of the relationship between poverty and religion in chapter 14.

In the last section of the book I present the story of Emmanuel Travis Williams—Manny Man, as he was known in the streets (chapter 15). I use that story to show the workings of neighborhood effects and two kinds of entrepreneurship, one that often fails in poor residential areas—because of the paucity of investment, purchasing power, adequate training, and institutional connections—and one that tragically succeeds through reliance on the drug trade (chapter 16). In urban environments like West Baltimore, drug peddling has acquired normative status as a means to make a living. Countless young men have yielded to its lure. Many have ended up behind bars serving sentences disproportionate to their transgressions. Others, like Manny Man have lived intense lives punctuated by turmoil and violence. They represent squandered energy and talent.

The conclusion revisits the book's argument in relation to the liberal-conservative divide.

I now turn to the story of Donald B. Wilson, a man of honor in the Baltimore that once was.