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Hell on Earth: The Politics of Analyzing Poverty in Engels and Du Bois

“A knowledge of proletarian conditions is absolutely necessary to be able to provide solid ground for socialist theories, on the one hand, and for judgments about their rights to exist, on the other.” – Friedrich Engels, “Preface to the First German Edition” of *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*

“I do not come to you as a prophet of doom; I come to you as one who has accepted the challenge of our urban ghettos. This is a more difficult challenge than the one we face in the South, for we will not be dealing with constitutional rights; we will be dealing with fundamental human rights.” – MLK, Jr. “Speech at Illinois State AFL-CIO Convention” in *“All Labor Has Dignity”*, 119

In no small measure because of its central themes—Marxism and poverty—the aims of this paper are expressly modest. My hope, especially in thinking with decorated scholars of Engels and Marxism, is to offer a provocation about the methods of Marxian social and political analysis on one side and political theory more generally on the other. The provocation comes from a place of deep sympathy: in the history of political thought, Marx and Engels have attended more to understanding the causes and structural dynamics of poverty (particularly poverty in a modern industrial world) than anyone else. And in terms of thinking politically about empowering those who live in or close enough to poverty, the working class, their contributions go without saying. Conversely, a few political theorists and philosophers have helpfully illuminated the question of poverty in the history of political thought.¹

This paper argues, however, that minus a few exceptions, neither Marxism nor political theory have adequately grappled with the social and political importance of the *conditions* of poverty. We will see later how addressing the question of working-class conditions animated

¹ See Sarah Vaughan, *Poverty, Justice, and Western Political Thought*; Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice*; Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*; Gianna Englert, “The Idea of Rights’: Tocqueville on the Social Question”; and Andreas Kalyvas, “Democracy and the poor: Prolegomena to a Radical Theory of Democracy.”

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Engels's early thinking, but as far as I can tell, it has hardly received attention since. This may have to do with Engels's own vaguely dismissive assessment of his junior scholarship, but in his case and Du Bois's their later, more explicitly dialectical-historical work overshadows the detailed examinations of poverty conditions represented by *The Condition of the Working Class of England* and *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Separated by over fifty years, the latter does not draw directly on the former as a model, but in reading them together this paper offers three claims. First, while dialectical materialism may be mostly absent in these texts, they, indeed *in this way*, point to a different discipline of scholarship critical for understanding revolutionary class theory. For my purposes—that is, thinking about the revolutionary potential of “the truly disadvantaged,” or the “underclass”—it points to scholarship in sociology typified by the work of St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Clayton Jr.; Kenneth Clarke; Douglas G. Glasgow; and William Julius Wilson.

These authors were not Marxists in any obvious sense (although Drake and Clayton's *The Black Metropolis* provides an interesting exception). Indeed, Wilson has often been accused of a kind of cryptoconservatism that puts him in league with black neo-conservatives like Thomas Sowell and Glenn Loury. But what these authors make clear, and this is my second claim, is that the sociological analysis of poverty renders acute critical questions of Marxian *and* non-Marxian political theory. For the Marxist, it demands a confrontation with vanguardism, perceptions of the lumpenproletariat, and the contemporary notion of “neighborhood effects.” For the non-Marxist, it forces one to ask, more fundamentally, just what kind of problem—normative, moral, theodical—the persistence of poverty's worst trappings present. For while political theorists have fixated on poverty as a normative issue of distributive justice (how best to order society in the interest of the least well off), Engels and Du Bois suggest that poverty's offensiveness lies not so

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much in the unjust distributions of wealth and opportunity it supposes, but the basic fact that substantial amounts of people live in what many of them would describe, painfully, as “hell on Earth.”

Throughout this piece I will draw on promising recent scholarship that fits well with the approach to the study of poverty this paper outlines—chiefly the work of Tommie Shelby, Brandon Terry, and Shatema Threadcraft. In the final instance, brief attention will be afforded to the thinking of Richard Wright, whom I think provides essential counsel on the sorts of questions and provocations this paper hopes to raise.

I. The “Conditions of England” Question

Images of the conditions of industrial poverty in nineteenth-century Europe, particularly England, are by now quite familiar. The veracity of their harshness is confirmed in the novels of Charles Dickens, as Marx once highlighted, and even those reformers who found the poor disgusting acknowledged the extent of the horrors and deprivation of industrial slums.² There is a reason the term “slums” is used in the first place. If in an earlier period poverty was considered either virtuous (if chosen voluntarily, as in the case of Franciscan monks) or simply the natural condition of those who, spiritually, are closest to God, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution it represented the culmination of nearly three hundred years of social and moral degradation. Poverty, or perhaps more accurately, pauperism, was first seen as a “problem which agitates modern societies especially” in the middle parts of the sixteenth century.³ Due to a combination of factors, chiefly the dissolution of monastery-based poor relief and enclosure, “hordes” of now masterless men, women, and children purportedly began to roam the English countryside,

² See Karl Marx, “The English Middle Class.” He saw Dickens as part of that “present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together.”

³ GWF Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 267. (Cambridge University Press)

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eventually making their way to major cities.⁴ Poverty was thus treated as a problem of national significance and various legislation was passed in the interest of managing it (most notably the Elizabethan Poor Laws).⁵

Curiously, although poverty and pauperism were increasingly viewed as a pressing issue, prompting commentary from canonical authors such as Montesquieu, Defoe, Locke, and Mandeville, the *conditions* of the impoverished life were occasionally acknowledged as invisible to the non-poor's eye. The Scottish historian and philosopher John Millar writes, for example, that in the modern commercial societies of the eighteenth century, "in which the bulk of the people must work hard for their livelihood, many individuals are, by a variety of accidents, reduced to indigence; while at the same time, from their numbers, as well as from the prevailing spirit of the age, their misery is little regarded by their fellow-creatures."⁶ For Millar's contemporary and colleague, Adam Smith, the modern individual's tendency to render the poor invisible or otherwise express contempt toward them evidenced the corruption of modern commercial society.⁷ Smith was deeply troubled by the invisibility he believed central to the phenomenology of poverty and thought urban environments housed its harshest manifestations. In a memorable passage of the *Wealth of Nations*, he remarks: "A man of low condition, on the contrary, is far from being a distinguished member of any great society ... as soon as he comes into a great city, he is sunk in obscurity and darkness."⁸

In the version of this passage that appears in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith asserts that our tendency to render the poor invisible, and, conversely, exalt the rich, is necessary to

⁴ Joyce Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England*, 129.

⁵ The most helpful account of early modern English poor relief is Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England*.

⁶ John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, 274. (Liberty Fund)

⁷ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 61. (Liberty Fund)

⁸ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 795. (Liberty Fund)

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preserve order and the distinction of ranks in society. However, for modern society to overcome the prevailing spirit of the age Millar spoke of, a spirit variously characterized as selfish and hardhearted, witness would have to be borne to the scenes of deprivation inside and surrounding England’s major cities. For these authors, reversing the trend of overlooking the poor was an important feature of restoring the morality and social stability perceived lost with the collapse of traditional feudal hierarchies. On the one hand, appeals to Christian and Stoic moral philosophy were made to claim that people—that is, the well-mannered rich—possess sociability naturally and could thus, through the exercise of sympathy and benevolence, reincorporate the dispossessed back into society. On the other hand, the desire for stability came from their observations of the tumult and discontent that comes with poverty, that the poor would not always sit by and experience their obscured existence idly, even if idleness was, and remains, regularly posited as inherent to their nature. Where most supposedly wasted their time at the alehouse or begging in the street, a host of late eighteenth-century riots and mob revolts made clear that subjection to the whims of the market and corrupt practices of the mercantile rich would not be taken quietly.⁹

In the intervening years between the publication of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) and the Poor Law Commission of 1834, significant changes in the geopolitical and economic situation of Europe and growing imperialized world shape emergent discourses surrounding and the concrete treatment of the English poor. I won’t pretend to have the ability to both adequately and succinctly canvas these developments (nor do I think you should have to deal with more boring history!)—but suffice it to say that considering the simultaneously developments of the modern

⁹ For more on popular revolts in this period see George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* and E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.”

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industrial cities and colonies in Europe and abroad, along with a certain revolution across the Channel and a homegrown reform movement, pauperism hardly could be ignored anymore.

And yet, when Dickens wrote his famed novels throughout the nineteenth century it was not least because he thought light needed to be shed on the lived experiences of the poor—experiences the deluge of literature on poverty and the poor somehow failed to acknowledge. Dickens believed that in his time, the cold Utilitarian reasoning of influential political economists like Jeremy Bentham did little to improve the poor's condition precisely because their condition mattered less than the moral and social depravity they were thought to represent. His sharp opinion of Utilitarianism—depicted most powerfully in *Oliver Twist*—is not a simple matter of philosophical disagreement, however, for along with Thomas Malthus's *Essay on Population*, Bentham's Utilitarianism supplied the theoretical basis of the 1834 New Poor Law. The coldhearted view of the poor Utilitarianism entailed thus had political consequences. Indeed, for Dickens and fellow critics, the new legislation did little to disclose the harsh realities of poverty from the standpoint of those within it, and more than anything harkened England back to the hateful disciplinary attitudes of mercantilist poor relief.¹⁰

These concerns point to deep affinities between Dickens and Thomas Carlyle. When the latter posed the so-called “Conditions-of-England” Question in *Chartism*—the question to which Engels's *Condition of the Working Class* would respond—it was for similar reasons as Dickens. Even though the Poor Law Commission had implemented its reforms three years prior to the publication of *Chartism*, Carlyle contended that they, and Parliament more generally, had failed to confront what England's proletariat and lumpenproletariat were actually living through. Akin

¹⁰ For more on mercantilists attitudes toward the poor see Edgar Furniss, *The Position of the Laborer in a System of Nationalism: A Study in the Labor Theory of the Later English Mercantilists* and Cosma Orsi, “Poverty and Subsistence: The Mercantilist Point of View.”

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to Dickens's criticisms of Utilitarianism, Carlyle accused the laissez-faire, statistics-focused principles of the Commission's reforms of a cold, hard-heartedness which blinded social reformers and politicians from what they otherwise "can ascertain by [their] own eyes, looking at the concrete phenomenon for [themselves]."¹¹ He also writes with respect to these elites: "We lead them here to the shore of a boundless continent; ask them, Whether they do not with their own eyes see it, the strange symptoms of it, lying huge, dark, unexplored, inevitable; full of hope, but also full of difficulty, savagery, almost of despair."¹² Beyond the paradox of poverty and plenty that vexed bourgeois political economists such as J.A. Blanqui (the older, decidedly less radical brother of Louis Auguste Blanqui) and Alexis de Tocqueville, Carlyle suggests that a paradox of hope and despair can be found in the conditions of the poor and overcome, but only if we first bear witness to them.¹³ (We will see how this hope versus despair paradox informs Engels and, further down the line, ghetto-oriented sociology).

In other words, there is a sort of phenomenological encounter with the conditions of poverty Carlyle asserts as necessary for understanding the poor's discontent. Carlyle rightly highlights how understanding the conditions of the working class is no easy matter (the impreciseness of "conditions" is not lost on this writer) and chastised "Statistic Inquiry" for muddying investigations into the poor's situation even further. This is not to say that gathering and evaluating empirical data on poverty is valueless: "statistics, one may hope, will improve gradually, and become good for something."¹⁴ Measuring absolute rates of poverty over time *à la*

¹¹ Thomas Carlyle, "Chartism" in *Selected Writings*, 158. (Penguin Classics)

¹² Carlyle, 197.

¹³ See J.A. Blanqui, *History of Political Economy in Europe*, 389-90 (G.P. Putnam's Sons) and Alexis de Tocqueville, "Memoir on Pauperism" in *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings*, 1-2.

¹⁴ Carlyle, 157. In crucial respects we are still caught in this dynamic: ever more data has been collected on poverty, especially in relation to absolute versus relative measures, and yet the alienation, isolation, trauma, and violence characteristic of its many sites remain all around us.

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Steven Pinker certainly matters today, since they help us determine trends of mobility across significant periods of time and with significant populations of people in mind.¹⁵

But Carlyle, like Dickens, believes a more involved investigation of the actual day-to-day of impoverished life is a precondition for any legislation implemented to manage it. Among other things, this would mean turning one’s attention rhetorically to the *depiction* of poverty: in Dickens’s case via imaginative literature, in Carlyle’s prophetic diatribe.¹⁶ With either genre, the point is to disclose the unseen severity of poor life, thus helping to clarify what needs to be addressed to depressurize the circumstances poverty forces its residents into (whether hunger, crime, dilapidated housing, or so on). Carlyle placed particular emphasis on the precariousness of employment the English poor—especially its Irish poor—had to contend with. “Economy does not exist among them,” Carlyle laments, “their trade now in plethoric prosperity, anon extenuated into inanition and ‘short-time’, is of the nature of gambling; they live by it like gamblers, now in luxurious superfluity, now in starvation. Black mutinous discontent devours them; simply the miserablest feeling that can inhabit the heart of man.”¹⁷ And as he stresses repeatedly throughout the essay, outbreaks like Chartism are spurred to mob violence and rioting precisely because of the sense of injustice they feel at their seemingly impossible situation.¹⁸

Yet, despite his commitment to bringing attention to the conditions of England’s poor, for communists like Engels and Marx, Carlyle’s brand of poverty analysis has important limitations. While he does well to underscore the connection between the conditions of poverty and popular discontent, Carlyle’s moralistic attitude toward the extent to which poverty degrades its subjects

¹⁵ See Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, 79-96.

¹⁶ For more on Dickens and Carlyle’s relationship see Gertrud Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, 474-5.

¹⁷ Carlyle, 175.

¹⁸ For more on the notion of senses of injustice, see Judith Shklar, *Face of Injustice*, 83-5. She also notes that the injustices felt by poor persons have been a common catalyst of popular unrest.

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pushed him to adopt an excessively elitist and, eventually, rather reactionary conception of politics, specifically of political leadership. Although he certainly chastised the ruling aristocracy, it was not because he thought the multitude should rule for themselves. Carlyle instead insists that self-government is a contradiction in terms, arguing that what the beast-like, clamoring people need is “a true leader, not a false sham-leader; a true leader, that he may guide [them] on the true way.”¹⁹ This leader would be found among a reformed aristocracy. To be sure, Marx and Engels would be beset by their own issues of vanguardism and elitist snobbery, but in abandoning much of Carlyle’s moralism and centering their scientific praxis on the critique of political economy, they attempted a surer theory of poverty analysis and revolutionary mass politics.

II. Engels’s Response

I argue that Engels’s *Condition of the Working-Class of England* should be read as a response to Carlyle’s provocation, the “Conditions-of-England” question. As Stedman Jones points out, the former was “deeply impressed by Carlyle’s depiction of the ‘Conditions of England’ problem,” agreeing with his assessment that Chartism should be understood less as a political movement than a social phenomenon of poverty conditions.²⁰ This matters not simply for understanding the intellectual context of Engels, whatever value knowing his context provides. My purpose here is not to write an intellectual history of poverty analysis. Instead, by situating Engels in this manner, I draw attention to the significance of the methodological choices *Condition* evince. Between the moralism of Dickens and Carlyle and the bourgeois cold-heartedness of classical political economy, Engels found in sociology the best of both worlds. Without losing sight of the moral and humanistic issues at play in examining working class

¹⁹ Carlyle, 191.

²⁰ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982*, 91.

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conditions, *Condition* sought to analyze these conditions empirically but in a way that supports the revolutionary analysis of history Engels began developing in *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* and later in tandem with Marx.

This method enables Engels to center moral considerations otherwise orthogonal to the dialectical-materialist interpretation of capitalism's development, but of utmost importance in understanding how the proletariat in its many forms (industrial, agricultural, lumpen) can be transformed into a revolutionary collective. These moral considerations are tied inextricably to a clear sense of working-class conditions, which at the time of *Condition*'s original publication Engels believed even his comrade socialists lacked. In the 1840s, Engels thought his compatriots in German Socialism and Communism, being so captivated by Feuerbachian philosophy, had forgotten to pay attention to the poor's concrete situation. "The real conditions of the life of the proletariat," he contends, "are so little known among us that even the well-meaning 'societies for the uplift of the working-classes', in which our bourgeoisie is now mistreating the social question, constantly start out from the most ridiculous and preposterous judgments concerning the condition of the workers."²¹

Responding to Carlyle, Engels aims in *Condition* appear two-fold: (I) to supply the knowledge of proletarian conditions he accused his comrades of lacking; and (II), as he notes in a letter to Marx in 1844, to present "the English with a long list of sins committed" and to indict their bourgeoisie "before the entire world of murder, robbery, and all sorts of other crimes on a mass scale."²²

Thinking with the second aim first, *Condition* developed criticisms that began with Engels's critique of the bourgeoisie's political economy. For Engels, bourgeois political economy is a

²¹ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, 14. (Progress Publishers)

²² Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, 21. (Progress Publishers)

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thoroughly *Smithian* political economy—that is, it is an understanding of political economy predicated on key principles of Smith’s moral philosophy.²³ In contrast to the immoral, reason-of-state mindset of “The Mercantile System,” Smith (supposedly) “humanized” economics, building on a shift in attitude toward trade that increasingly saw self-interest as conducive to peaceable ties, bonds “of union and friendship.”²⁴ Hidden beneath the veneer of peaceable trade, however, is a realm of economic relationships Engels claims are utterly immoral. He denigrates them as immoral for a very specific reason: the bourgeois political economist’s rosy image of trade hides the pervasiveness of competition that in fact exists.

As Engels writes, in this essay he was mainly “concerned in demonstrating the extension of competition into the moral sphere, and in showing to what deep degradation private property has brought man.”²⁵ Whereas bourgeois liberals like Smith simply exalted the commercial advancement spurred by competition, Engels is quick to point out that with this growth deleteriously affected the social world. In particular, he argues it causes “misery, poverty, and crime” insofar it is the actual explanation of surplus populations—who he would later term the “reserve army of workers”—rather than, say, Malthusian ideas of population.²⁶ This is because excess competition breeds excess production, which means that in times when “demand and supply, consumption and production, are almost equal, a state must be reached in the

²³ For more on the origins of political economy see William Letwin, *The Origins of Scientific Economics*; Margaret Schabas, *The Natural Origins of Economics*; and Donald Winch, “The Emergence of Economics as a Science 1750-1870” in Carlo M. Cipolla ed. *The Industrial Revolution, 1700-1914*.

²⁴ Friedrich Engels, “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” 5. (Marxists.org) For more on this shift in attitude, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*. Karl Polanyi also argued that Smith humanized political economy, claiming he established it “on humanistic foundations.” See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 128.

²⁵ Engels, “Outlines,” 22.

²⁶ Engels, *Condition*, 111. For more on Marx and Engels’s views of Malthus, see Ronald L. Meek ed. *Marx and Engels on the Population Bomb*.

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development of production where there is so much superfluous productive power that the great mass of the nation has nothing to live on, that the people starve from sheer abundance.”²⁷

By showing that competition, not sociable self-interest, structures modern commercial society, Engels hoped to expose the hypocrisy and deception of bourgeois political economy. And in articulating the simultaneous failures and necessity of Smithian economic thought, he also offered early contributions to the notion of dialectical materialism by which we chiefly know Marx and Engels. But in terms of the concrete experiences of the working poor, Engels stops here at explaining the *cause* of misery, poverty, and crime. While telling this causal (and critical) story is of unquestionable importance, it doesn’t capture the social experiences that come with living in the worlds created by the competitive spirit of the age. Getting to the heart of these experiences matters for Engels because the revolutionary potential of the masses is at stake.

To my mind, Engels identifies three features of working-class conditions of significance for how we evaluate the poor’s revolutionary potential: social warfare, social murder, and demoralization. These social phenomena are no doubt the consequences of industrial capitalism—in a moment we’ll address competition’s relationship to social warfare—but none are simply reducible to its deeper structures. Theorizing and discussing the origins of urban ghettos, rural low-income housing, and Indigenous reservation poverty is one thing; investigating and, in a crucial respect, *confronting* the conditions of life therein is another. Engels asks us to do the latter.

He uses the term “social warfare” to describe the Hobbesian conditions self-interest and competition produce. Describing the great cities of England in language reminiscent of Smith, Engels details the profound isolation and atomization of industrialized society. In its large,

²⁷ Engels, “Outlines,” 16.

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overcrowded cities we find “the dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle and a separate purpose, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme.” These conditions were as true of London as they were of Birmingham, Manchester as much as Leeds: in all of England’s major cities there was, “barbarous indifference, hard egotism on one hand, and nameless misery on the other.”²⁸

As we well know, Hobbes describes the state of nature, a state absent sovereign authority (and presumably civil society in the Hegelian sense)²⁹, as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” It is a veritable war of all against all. For Engels, these conditions don’t exist prior to or in the absence of civil authority and society—they are the very conditions of modern commercial society. As he bluntly puts it: “Hence it comes, too, that the social war, the war of each against all, is here openly declared.”³⁰

Engels makes it clear that capital, insofar as directly or indirectly controls production, is the “weapon with which this social warfare is carried on.” But in terms of the experience of social warfare, he again stresses the effects of competition. In the chapter on competition, Engels repeats the causal account of competition and the creation of a surplus population articulated in *Outlines*. Contrary to Smith and Malthus, he insists that the “surplus population is engendered rather by the competition of the workers among themselves, which forces each separate [atomized] work to labour as much each day as his strength can possibly admit.”³¹ Here, however, he clarifies who this surplus population consists of and their relationship to society. This surplus population consists primarily of “hucksters” and “peddlers”, but also includes

²⁸ Engels, *Condition*, 60.

²⁹ For a classic statement on the ambiguous status of civil society in Hobbes see C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*.

³⁰ Engels, *Condition*, 60.

³¹ Engels, *Condition*, 108.

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“jobbers.” These categories are all forms of casual labor and Engels notes that when work is absent, they either rebel against society or take to begging.

As Marx would elaborate in the *Grundrisse*, these categories of poor persons comprise “the honest and working lumpenproletariat,” not to be confused with the criminal classes denoted by “the rabble.”³² According to Engels, they experience the social warfare of modern commercial society in a distinctly harsh manner. Beyond the indifference to their condition expressed by elites, they also endure the fact that “the police [carry] on perpetual war” against them. We need only recall here how severe punishments of begging, vagrancy, and idleness have been, and authors such as Michel Foucault and Loïc Wacquant have highlighted how the state polices and regulates the bodies of the poor, especially the poorest among us.³³ And more recently, we might think here of Kimberly Jones and Trevor Noah’s powerful remarks during the Black Lives Matters protests of 2020, that in constantly inflicting violence against black communities, the police and the American state had broken our social contract.³⁴ But Engels argues that this warfare is constitutive of the lumpenproletariat’s experience of civil society.

Moreover, he claims this warfare obtains not only between different classes or the police and lumpenproletarians, but “also between the individual members of these classes.”³⁵ Warfare exists between various strata of the poor for straightforward reasons: given the scarcity of jobs, all of which are in the hands of capitalists, they must compete with one another for employment. But he thinks this also has effects on the psychological state of the English poor. In competing over

³² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, 272.

³³ For instance, before being sent to a workhouse, the Beggars Act of 1598 required that poor persons deemed “vagabonds” or “sturdy beggars” should be whipped in public until bloody. Other punishments range from forced hard labor, branding, cutting off ears, and hanging. See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, 38-65 and Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*.

³⁴ The important bits are at 5:30-5:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llci8MVh8J4>

³⁵ Engels, *Condition*, 103.

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menial jobs, Engels thinks that the poor feel “helpless” before the economic power of the bourgeoisie, not least because they are forced into a rock-and-hard place situation in which they either accept demeaning, effectively starvation wages or simply starve.³⁶ Of course, this sentiment may not be felt by all poor persons, but as we will see in full when we discuss “demoralization,” it has profound consequences for the transformation of the working (and nonworking) classes into a revolutionary class.

Engels highlights the forms of warfare the poor experience in various aspects of their public life. But Threadcraft gives us reason to extend this image to the home. As she argues, when discussing the lumpenproletariat and their experiences of poverty conditions, we typically assume the poor person in mind to be a male breadwinner. Even important recent scholarship such as Shelby’s *Dark Ghettos* “envisions life on dark-ghetto streets without women.”³⁷ In doing so, the violence—*warfare*—women (for her purposes, black women specifically) face both on ghetto streets and in the privacy of the home are presumed illegible or irrelevant. This matters for how we understand the justice claims of residents of the ghetto and what obligations they are held to precisely because of the effects of “social climate” on individuals. In conjunction with racism, the conditions of poverty fosters have “a critical impact on the psychological and emotional development of the male (and female) subjects dwelling in the dark ghetto.”³⁸ Whether certain climates inhibit development matters for how we imagine subjects surviving, let alone escaping or radically transforming the economic and political isolation which marks dark ghettos.

³⁶ Ibid., 104.

³⁷ Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic*, 121. Shelby’s argument can be found in *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*.

³⁸ Ibid.

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Along with the various manifestations of warfare, Engels thinks working class conditions are distinguished by “social murder.” In the wake of the growing conversations about food deserts, the Flint, Michigan debacle, and the popularization of the notion of “environmental racism,” Engels’s idea of “social murder” has attained new currency in contemporary political discourse. For him it indexes the sense in which the poor disproportionately deal with adverse environmental conditions, such as pollution, street filth, and crowding. He makes pains to describe the severity of degradation in England’s poorest neighborhoods, particularly its predominantly Irish neighborhoods, in part to clarify who is at fault for the poor’s difficulties with health care. The poor are not the ones who neglect their neighborhoods, nor is it their fault that they have such unreliable access to medical assistance.³⁹ Beyond simply exposing the bourgeoisie for their hypocrisy, Engels also offers a stronger normative claim about their responsibilities. After all, as he avers early in the text, the English ruling class, instead of “ignoring this poverty ... must bear the moral responsibility for this distress.”⁴⁰

Engels thus posits “social murder,” emphasizing that bourgeois society, not any particular individual, “places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet.”⁴¹ With this idea in mind, Engels affords considerable attention to how it and social warfare concretely impact the “moral characteristics of our workers.” This is the most important consideration for Engels’s sense of revolutionary politics, as investigating the worker’s moral condition gets to the heart of mobilization and class consciousness.

³⁹ Engels, *Condition*, 125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

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Engels's diagnosis of the moral situation of the poor is decidedly bleak. He repeatedly describes their conditions as dehumanizing, which he suggests *demoralizes* the poor. We will see when we get to Du Bois why caution ought to be exercised when describing any group as "demoralized", but Engels is quite clear in his usage of the term. It has two senses. Engels believed the English poor were demoralized because poverty conditions literally caused them to lose sight of their moral compass. Echoing Hegel's comments about the inward rebellion felt by the rabble, Engels thought the bourgeoisie shouldn't be surprised that workers, if "treated as brutes, actually become such, or if they can maintain their consciousness of manhood only by cherishing the most glowing hatred, the most unbroken inward rebellion against the bourgeoisie in power."⁴² Put simply, we shouldn't be surprised if poverty encourages people to commit crimes. I think Richard Wright's major novels, mainly *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, push us to confront similar considerations *vis-à-vis* revolutionary politics, but in the contexts of racialized ghettos.

However, drawing on Carlyle, Engels argues that a more profound demoralization stems from the precariousness of employment industrial capitalism forces the English poor to deal with. He doesn't mince words here: the situation in which a proletarian "has not the slightest guarantee for being able to earn the barest necessities of life" is "the most revolting, inhuman position conceivable for a human being."⁴³ Strikingly, Engels asserts that this condition is even worse than that of the slave or feudal serf because unlike these similarly-oppressed groups, the poor Englishman (and he clearly means men here) is rendered a passive subject and must bear

⁴² Ibid., 137. Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of Right*, "Poverty in itself does not reduce people to a rabble; a rabble is created only by the disposition associated with poverty, by inward rebellion against the rich, against society, the government, etc." Hegel, 266.

⁴³ Engels, *Condition*, 138.

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his precariousness alone (insofar as slaves and serfs are dominated by structured, hierarchical relationships they aren’t atomized like the modern poor).

Engels certainly does not think all the poor remain passive, but he believes demoralization leaves the poor in one of two states. Either that inward rebellion mentioned above drives them toward crime, or he “gives up the struggle against his fate as hopeless and strives to profit, so far as he can, by the most favorable moment.”⁴⁴ Moreover, the harshness of this situation is compounded by the fact that the poor are *also* demoralized by the mental debilitation they suffer from monotonous industrial labor. And so, with minds dampened by menial labor, in precarious labor markets, and, overwhelmingly, with little hope of ever escaping poverty, Engels is not surprised that some of the lumpenproletariat may feel utterly despondent—the conditions themselves crush one’s soul. Thus, he writes: “His unnerved, uncomfortable, hypochondriac state of mind and body arising from his unhealthy condition, and especially from indigestion, is aggravated beyond endurance by the general conditions of his life, the uncertainty of his existence, his dependence upon all possible accidents and chances, and his inability to do anything towards gaining an assured position.”⁴⁵

The life of an atomized laborer. But as with all my interlocutors, Engels saw in the conditions of England’s working-class despair *and* hope. Although the crowding of major cities entails serious health issues, it also creates the right atmosphere within which individuated poor persons can see themselves instead as a unified class: “The workers begin to feel as a class, as a whole; they begin to perceive that, though feeble as individuals, they form a power united.”⁴⁶ Perceiving how fundamental the social warfare between themselves and the rich truly is, the poor thus see

⁴⁴ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 143.

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themselves as belonging to a world apart, in which a separate, non-bourgeois consciousness can be fostered.

Engels documents with impressive breadth the various strikes, riots, and movements the English poor participated in during this time. Left ambiguous in this text, however, is the question of leadership. Recall that despite Carlyle's enthusiasm for Chartism, he thought a reformed aristocracy purged of frauds—something like a “natural aristocracy”—should be the ones to lead the people. To my knowledge, the question isn't really picked up again by Engels until *The Communist Manifesto*, where vanguardism is infamously introduced. It is also worth recalling that this text contains another piece of infamy - their hateful description of the lumpenproletariat, whom Marx would afterwards dismiss as a sack of potatoes (perhaps to recall Engels's vicious, rather exaggerated depictions of the Irish poor). “The ‘dangerous class’, the social scum,” they assert, “that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”⁴⁷ He already announces his worry about their deficient political judgment in *Condition*, remarking that if the urban poor are not educated “they may view matters one-sidedly, from the standpoint of a sinister selfishness, and may readily permit themselves to be hoodwinked by sly demagogues.”⁴⁸ The self-generating power of class consciousness can go a long way, but if the knowledge of proletarian conditions is to be put to use, then the practical question to be solved is how to reach the lumpenproletariat such that they don't fall prey to reactionary demagoguery.

III. Du Bois, Dark Ghettos, and the Problem of Leadership

⁴⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 231. (Penguin Classics)

⁴⁸ Engels, *Condition*, 143. Smith also makes this point in the *Wealth of Nations*.

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Anticipating the tour of northern cities that, in conjunction with reading Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, would inspire Martin Luther King Jr. to center poverty at the end of his career, Engels’s tours of England’s major cities showed him with abundant clarity the issues he and his comrades would have to contend with. The conditions England’s poor lived in were not simply bad—Engels describes their “frightful condition” as “Hell on Earth.”⁴⁹ Engels and King both understood that these impoverished neighborhoods presented discrete challenges to political organizers, whose task would be to discipline riots where they exist and inspire those who poverty has demoralized. Engels recognized this would be especially difficult in the case of the lumpenproletariat, and, as Terry points out, King was acutely aware of this as well.⁵⁰ In the latter’s case, he understood that organizing the lumpenproletariat of northern cities like Chicago meant trying to mend ties between another set of victims of the war of all against all, gang members.⁵¹ But given his vocation and untimely passing, King did not supply us with a sociological study of a piece with *Condition*.

Of course, I would never suggest that King is lacking because he doesn’t have a comparable study of poverty conditions. But in a certain respect, he didn’t *have to*, since prior to his Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 there was already a robust tradition of scholarship whose express purpose was shedding light on the conditions of the black poor.⁵² In the twentieth century, this tradition is represented chiefly by Drake and Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* (1945), Franklin’s *Black*

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84. Fans of hip-hop might be thinking of Mobb Deep’s classic 1996 album *Hell on Earth*. I was thinking about it as well, and though I won’t speak in any detail about this here, I think taking seriously the conditions of Queens in the 1990s points to another form of social warfare that we must confront, not least because, as Baldwin and Giovanni discuss in their *Soul!* exchange, the violence that black men face in the world, particularly in the ghetto, too often is brought back and reproduced at home. Of course, these latter concerns also inform Threadcraft’s *Intimate Justice*.

⁵⁰ See Brandon Terry, “Requiem for a Dream: The Problem-Space of Black Power” in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry eds. *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 318-23.

⁵¹ Ibid., 322.

⁵² For more on the Poor People’s Campaign see Sylvie Laurent, *King and the Other America: The Poor People’s Campaign and the Quest for Economic Equality*.

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Bourgeoisie (1955), Kenneth Clarke’s *Dark Ghettos* (1965). As Richard Wright suggests in his introduction to the first, the deeper aims of these studies appear analogous to Engels’s—he writes, “How can any individual, group, or political party, after reading *Black Metropolis*, bring forth an organizational or ideological program for Negroes without taking into account the durable and sturdy foundation of fact presented here?”⁵³ If purported leaders of the masses, socialist or otherwise, wanted to marshal their power they first had to gain intimate knowledge of their conditions.

The forebearer of these studies, however, is Du Bois’s *Philadelphia Negro* of 1899. Like his successors, Du Bois was intensely interested in the conditions of Black folks, especially as large swaths of them were pauperized after Emancipation and began making their way to northern cities.⁵⁴ Although black paupers faced conditions akin to their English counterparts—Du Bois would address their similarities and differences at length in *Black Reconstruction*—they were forced to bear what I’ll simply call the double-whammy of poverty and prejudice. As he notes throughout the text, the cause of the poor black’s miserable condition is unambiguously two-fold: capitalism on the one hand, and white supremacy on the other.

But in terms of depiction, diagnosis, and even practical response, Du Bois’s views of the poor Black’s condition significantly parallel Engels’s interrogation of English conditions. He too was concerned with the poor’s visibility: the obscured lonesomeness experienced by poor women in the great northern cities, and the general sense that the conditions of dark ghettos hitherto remained insufficiently examined.⁵⁵ In moving to the northern cities in great waves, poor

⁵³ Richard Wright, “Introduction” in St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, lxxii.

⁵⁴ For more on the post-Emancipation pauperization of freed Blacks see W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of the Dawn of Freedom” in *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches*, 14-9. (University of Massachusetts Press)

⁵⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, 46. (Oxford University Press)

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Blacks, alongside European immigrants, caused slum areas to swell, increasing competition and, because of the many losers produced by this system, crime. To be sure, Du Bois thought rates of crime had been exaggerated in the white press, but he recognized its scope and understood that it contributed to “the frightful condition of the Negro slums.”⁵⁶ He agrees with Engels that crime should be thought of as constitutive of poverty conditions and also interprets it as “the open rebellion of an individual against his social environment.”⁵⁷

Du Bois insists repeatedly that these social problems are not unique to dark ghettos. *Contra* the neo-conservatives his successors would later argue at length against, things are not so simple (nor so racist) as Black people’s supposed lack of culture or inborn bad habits. But he also emphasizes that the social environment these trends produce “must have an immense effect on his thought and life, his work and crime, his wealth and pauperism.”⁵⁸ Though certainly not true of all poor Blacks—Du Bois was more than familiar with the black revolts of his time—he makes a similar, gendered observation as Engels, that the condition of racialized poverty cause Black men to lose their “sense of manhood” and make it difficult for them to maintain ambition and self-respect.⁵⁹

In everyday life, this is felt primarily in the poor Black’s experience with employment. Due primarily to white supremacy, Black folks were denied access to gainful employment, meaning they’d typically have to accept the casual forms of labor or “underground economies” characteristic of lumpenproletariat living.⁶⁰ In many cases relegating poor workers and their families to the poverty trap, Du Bois therefore observes that the black workforce is “filled to an

⁵⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 203.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 204.

⁶⁰ For more on the notion of an underground economy, See Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*.

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unusual extent with disappointed men, with men who have lost the incentive to excel, and have become chronic grumblers and complainers.”⁶¹

[If I had more space and time I would flesh out social murder in Du Bois's analysis of poor Black's environmental conditions.]

In terms of improvement, Du Bois thought a range of efforts would do well to depressurize the black poor's conditions. He thought all lessons about the importance of hard work and the dangers of crime should be reinforced, and, with remarkable prescience, recognized that the young poor might be less inclined toward crime if “some rational means of amusement” (say, a YMCA) was furnished for them.⁶² However, Du Bois thought that a special role was to be played by the so-called “Talented Tenth”—that is, those Blacks who managed to achieve middle- and upper-class status, especially in cities like Philadelphia. His ideas about the Talented Tenth are elaborated in his eponymous essay, but here he stresses the duty “the better classes of the Negroes” have “toward uplifting the rabble.”⁶³ In other words, the Talented Tenth were to be the vanguards of the poor Black masses, leading them to the shores of “humanity and civilization.”

As Robinson notes, Du Bois in this way joined a range of black intellectuals and leaders in articulating “uplift politics.” Contemporaries such as Alexander Crummell indeed argued that the agents responsible for raising and elevating black folks “to a higher plane of being” would be “superior men.”⁶⁴ But as Gooding-Williams points out, Du Bois's conception of black leadership, even in his early period, should not be confused with Crummell's, much less Booker T. Washington. In thinking themselves so far above the black masses, they failed to see that the masses should be seen as *folks*, whom a black leader would have to authentically represent. This

⁶¹ Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 92.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶⁴ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 192.

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isn’t to say that Du Bois didn’t perceive a “problem of the masses”—like Engels, he was troubled that the poor hadn’t satisfied “modern standards of development.”⁶⁵ But his model of leadership is predicated on what Gooding-Williams terms a “politics of expressive self-realization”: a black leader is authoritative if and only if they simultaneously uplift the black poor while heeding to “the ethos of the black folk.”⁶⁶

Du Bois’s allegiance to this perspective gives Gooding-Williams reason to doubt his politics. In the final instance, Gooding-Williams thinks we should abandon the whole idea of a “problem of the masses.” On the one hand, the non-elite led slave movements of the South and discontent throughout the North demonstrate that the leadership of the bourgeoisie is superfluous. On the other hand, emphasizing the degrading effects of poverty, claiming that it damages the humanity of the poor, equally lends itself to liberal and conservative perspectives on welfare and the poor’s character.⁶⁷ As we see in the work of Edward Banfield, friend of Daniel P. Moynihan and influential conservative scholar of the so-called “urban crisis”, the sorts of language Engels uses to describe English workers can be marshaled to justify claims about the flawed, maladaptive character of the poor.⁶⁸ Gooding-Williams thus adopts significant aspects of Du Bois’s political philosophy, but leaves to the dustbin the idea that “the political organization, let alone the survival of ordinary blacks ... [requires] that they obey the educated elites held to be the ‘best’ Negroes.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, 158.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁷ Daryl Michael Scott is critical of Du Bois’s *Philadelphia Negro* for this reason. See Daryl Michael Scott, *Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996*, 2-11.

⁶⁸ Edward C. Banfield, “Present Orientedness and Crime” in *Here the People Rule: Selected Essays*, 318. For more on his relationship with Moynihan and relationship to the “culture of poverty” debates, see Brandon M. Terry, “Conscription and the Color Line: Rawls, Race and Vietnam,” 972-4.

⁶⁹ Gooding-Williams, 161.

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By the early 1930s, Du Bois underwent a significant change of attitude about the poor Black masses. When participating at the Rosenwald Fund conference held at Howard University, he “seemed mildly distressed with the ‘vanguardism’ with which he had been earlier identified.”⁷⁰ By *Black Reconstruction* he seemed to accept the view that residents of the black ghetto could, and would, take steps toward their own liberation. But while Du Bois appears to abandon the theory of leadership expressed in *The Philadelphia Negro*, he leaves us with a profound ambiguity as to the responsibilities of bourgeois Blacks to their impoverished counterparts. As he notes, the Black petty bourgeoisie exists in a peculiar place: “they are not the chief or even large investors in Negro labor and therefore exploit it only here and there; and they bear the brunt of color prejudice because they express in word and work all the aspirations of all black folk for emancipation.”⁷¹ As recently as the 90s, scholars of black politics have still puzzled over the efficacy and deeper philosophical justification of “uplift politics.”⁷²

Also left unaddressed is what should we make of those poor, especially the poorest among us, who do seem to have been defeated by poverty, even if we acknowledge those moments of riot, revolt, and organizing? Richard Wright knew that in depicting the debilitating horrors of black poverty, rural and ghetto, and all the violence produced therein between different races and the same, he would be denigrated as an overly dramatic, self-hating race traitor (many thought this was confirmed by his decision to exile himself in Paris). He knew this even if *Black Boy* is autobiographical. But as he boldly declares in his Introduction to *Black Metropolis*, “If, in reading my novel *Native Son*, you doubted the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in this book; if, in reading my autobiography, you doubted the picture of

⁷⁰ Robinson, 197.

⁷¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” 27. (<http://www.webdubois.org/dbMNP.html>)

⁷² See Bill E. Lawson, “Uplifting the Race: Middle-Class Blacks and the Truly Disadvantaged” in *The Underclass Question*.

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family life shown there, then study the figures on family disorganization given here.” But the point is not to posture as some prophet of doom but reckon with the fact that “out of these mucky slums can come ideas quickening life or hastening death, giving us peace or carrying us toward another war.”⁷³

And so, does Du Bois’s turn toward a thoroughgoing Marxism simply invalidate the empirical findings of *Philadelphia Negro*? Was his analytical eye too blinded by the elitist politics of the Black petty bourgeoisie in his early career? If any of this is true, but the comparison of Engels and Du Bois stands—what do we think of Engels’s *Condition*? Have our socialist theories benefited by fixating on the philosophies of Hegel, Marx, and their countless acolytes instead of life in those neighborhoods we all live at various distances from?

IV. Final Remarks

In terms of revolutionary politics, the most important question is: if there is something to the idea that poverty conditions negatively impact the human subject, however we cash that out precisely, does any of it have bearing on popular politics? I think when read together, Engels and Du Bois’s texts give us ample reason to believe so. Today, the features of urban life they conceive in terms of social warfare, social murder, and demobilization are described as “neighborhood effects.” The extant literature resides in sociology and mostly pertains to health (broadly construed), crime, and education. The most relevant paper in political science on the topic is Cathy Cohen and Michael C. Dawson’s 1993 article “Neighborhood poverty and African American politics.” Building on the insights of sociologist William Julius Wilson, they find that residents of the most impoverished urban areas—areas with a poverty rate of 28% or higher—

⁷³ Wright, lxii.

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exhibited weaker ties to traditional black institutions, hence less interaction with the Black middle- and upper-class and lower political participation.

And what, normatively, do the conditions of poverty present anyway? I have purposefully avoided the language of justice because I think it tends to be distracting, but if not simply unjust, then what? I'm still not sure, but it stands out that comparisons between the slave, the serf, and the poor laborer's conditions are often made; that they are regularly described as instances of barbarism amid civilization; that "hell on Earth" is for so many a perfectly apt metaphor. Maybe it is just a justice thing, but I think something deeper about our human condition is at stake.

Whatever we make of the conditions of the working class, these authors, including the sociologist Kenneth Clarke, believed that hope and despair exist together in poverty conditions. My focus has drifted toward the dark ghetto, but I do think these questions extend easily to other racialized contexts of poverty. Indeed, my intuition is if we were to start here with the interracial experience of poverty, as MLK Jr. did in his Poor People's Campaign, we might make better traction on the problems of organizing the poor. Perhaps it wouldn't feel like so much of a gap exists between bourgeois activists and "the truly disadvantaged"; perhaps we wouldn't be so surprised when significant populations of poor people feel as if they've been ignored—rendered invisible—and lose themselves to demagoguery.