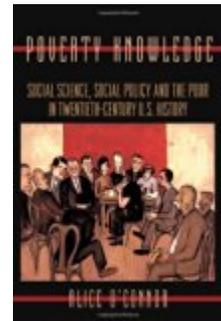


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Alice O'Connor. *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U S History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xi + 373 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-00917-9.

Reviewed by Ed Berkowitz (Department of History, George Washington University)
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A Wealth of Knowledge about Poverty

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The Office of Economic Opportunity may have died a bureaucratic death and had its parts distributed to other agencies, but the research effort it spawned survived to influence the next round of poverty politics. Instead of the poverty warriors who headed one branch of the Office and engaged in community action, the true winners of the poverty wars were economists who wanted to test the results of social action on the poor. It was, after all, the economists who planned the initial stages of the war on poverty and gained presidential approval of poverty legislation. Only at the last minute did these economists lose control over the legislative agenda to an eclectic group of foundation officers and veterans of social action who advocated what came to be known as community action. The economists had always seen poverty legislation as an avenue for policy evaluation and research. Hence, it seemed natural to them to test what had become their ultimate policy proposal: a guaranteed income that would be paid both to the working and the non-working poor, to families headed by women and to “intact” families that contained both a father and a mother living at home. In a remarkable development, the economists secured approval to conduct one of the largest social experiments in the nation’s history, the negative income tax experiments.

The results were, at best, ambiguous, but, as an exercise in microeconomics, they reinforced the idea that the problem of poverty was one of labor supply. If one

could remove the barriers to labor force participation on the part of the poor, then the labor market would do its benevolent work and lift people out of poverty. This rational view of poverty complemented, rather than contradicted, another view that had been developed in post-war academia that focused on the psychological dynamics of families. Families trapped in a culture of poverty needed personal services to break the debilitating cycle.

In the end, the poor got neither a guaranteed annual income or much in the way of social services. Instead they received an open-ended invitation to pull themselves out of poverty and join the middle-class, a result to be achieved not through government action but rather through government inaction.

For Alice O’Connor the story of postwar poverty knowledge is therefore a mournful one in which, at base, poverty researchers found the poor themselves – rather than the larger society that surrounded the poor – to be at fault. They believed that the true causes of poverty lay in the deficiencies of poor families, poor communities, or poor individuals, rather than in the institutionalized systems of patriarchy, racism, or capitalism itself. Despite the sophistication of econometric and psychological research, the poverty industry succeeded, at base, in repaupering the poor. It was nineteenth century morality with better numbers. Politically it was easier to end welfare and throw the poor on the mercy of the labor market than to end the pernicious, deeply rooted practices that kept the poor in poverty.

To be sure, the author tells her story with considerably more nuance, style, and historical range than I can impart here. The book consists of an intellectual history survey of research on poverty from the progressive era to the present. It begins with the researchers associated with Hull House combing the streets of the neighborhood around Halstead Street and codifying the results in a series of maps and essays that showed just how impersonal and unforgiving the factors causing poverty were. These were amateurs in an age before academic specialization, women rather than men, and these were people who had a Victorian sense of optimism that facts would lead irresistibly to action. In the 1920s and 1930s academics, credentialed by doctorates rather than social standing and who tended to be men rather than women, turned social action of the Hull House type into sociology. As the point of view in policy studies expanded from the neighborhood to the city, researchers tended to distance themselves from the poor. What before was a matter of moral outrage became at the hands of the sociologists a more biological and hence immutable phenomenon, as suggested by the use of the term “ecology” as an organizational scheme for the city.

Sociologists gave way to anthropologists who studied the poor in a city as they might a group of natives on a remote South Sea island. Although many of these researchers brought a sense of compassion with them to places like Muncie, Indiana, they produced work that was better read as a chronicle of change over time rather than as a critique of the institutions that impoverished the residents. To be sure, the Lynds returned to Middletown and worried about the relief arrangements being made for the victims of the depression, but many of their colleagues maintained their distance from the social phenomena under study. To do otherwise would contaminate the results.

In the postwar era, it became a matter of national obligation, at least in elite circles, to celebrate the munificence of the capitalist system and the appropriateness of the nuclear family. As a consequence, those who were immune to the social uplift of capitalism or who lived outside of a nuclear arrangement were somehow deficient. Anthropology joined with psychology to explain how it was that such people lived in a self-reinforcing culture of poverty. In the literature of the 1950s, poverty was often portrayed as an isolated phenomenon, an island of dysfunction in a supremely functioning society that brought plenty to those that followed the rules. In a return to the optimism of the progressive era, poverty became a source of national waste that inhibited societal productivity and

showed America off to bad advantage in the cold war. A view developed that poverty, like the diseases that were succumbing to medical research, could be cured, if only social policy experts were accorded the dignity of doctors and allowed to operate on the poor. The prescriptions made by these experts were soon written into the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

Complications quickly ensued. The political system could translate the ideas of experts only imperfectly. The ideas of the human capital economists, for example, that the nation needed to invest more in education and training, led to the Job Corps, but as an institutional arrangement the Job Corps left much to be desired. It was difficult to reprise the Civilian Conservation Corps and bring young urban residents to isolated locations and prepare them for the world of work. The line between imparting human capital and simply maintaining discipline was a difficult one to draw. Furthermore, the war on poverty, planned largely outside of the concern for civil rights, quickly became caught up in the civil rights battles of the era. The link between race and poverty was always a politically contentious one, particularly since the national ideology did not include racism as an important component. In the absence of racism as a cause, the association of race and poverty was difficult to explain without attributing some sort of deficit to African-Americans. When flamboyant academics like Daniel Patrick Moynihan identified this deficit as a deficiency in family structure, contentious culture wars developed that threatened to upend the whole anti-poverty enterprise. Politicians turned to racially neutral schemes—a logical impossibility in O’Connor’s view—which left many African-Americans impoverished.

The war on poverty, reinforced by its own sophisticated research, all too easily became a war on the poor. Instead of facing up to the nation’s shortcomings or attempting deep structural changes in the nature of the system, policymakers instead turned to superficial remedies that were reinforced by the results of poverty research.

I emphasize again that the author adds much to this story that I cannot detail here. The book includes, for example, insightful readings of rural sociological studies produced at the University of North Carolina, William E. B. DuBois’s landmark study of conditions in Philadelphia, and the econometric research of the Urban Institute and the Institute for Research on Poverty at Wisconsin. As Michael Katz, a historian who has written on these matters, notes on the dustjacket blurb, “Alice O’Connor knows more about the social science literature

on poverty than any other historian in America.” It is difficult to disagree.

Inevitably, despite her considerable skepticism about the efficacy of poverty research, the author gets swept up in her sources. As an exercise in intellectual history, the book occasionally loses track of political developments. I found it somewhat difficult to follow O’Connor’s accounts of the launching of the war on poverty, the Moynihan report, or the recent Clinton welfare reform legislation, largely because the author simply assumes that the reader has a political narrative in mind that can be brought to bear on the more esoteric knowledge that she presents. It leads to a number of missteps, as in the statement (p. 152) that, “By early 1963 the poverty issue was becoming hard for the administration to ignore.” On the contrary, it figured little in the politics of the moment and could easily have been ignored. A striking fact about the war on poverty was how little demand for political action preceded it. In discussing the welfare reforms of the Carter era, the author notes the animosity between the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the Department of Labor. More of a political history perspective might have enabled her to observe that this inter-departmental rivalry did not begin there; it could be traced back to the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. As companions to this book, therefore, I suggest works that fill in the political back-story, such as James Patterson’s *America’s Struggle Against Poverty* or Michael Katz’s *The Undeserving Poor*. Readers might also want to take a look at a basic history of welfare, such as Gilbert Steiner’s *The State of Welfare* before attempting to read this book.

There is also a level of abstraction and of qualification and nuance in the book that makes for difficult reading. Part of the problem for the reader is that abstract ideas often serve as the subjects of sentences. “The new poverty knowledge was not without moral judgment,” the author writes (p. 26), making it hard for the reader to keep track of the narrative, if not the argument. Sometimes, too, the author just tries to pack too much meaning into a sentence that is already hard to understand: “But equally important to the argument was a commitment to a largely unquestioned cultural ideal that even at the time had come under criticism for being overly individualistic, achievement-oriented, mired in the materialism of consumer capitalism, and, although couched in terms of a color-blind society, essentially white” (p. 202). Sometimes the prose is so nuanced, the clauses so serpentine, that the result reads like the prose of Henry James: “Underlying this struggle was an artificial, unspo-

ken yet deeply institutionalized hierarchy of knowledge that made the SSRC keeper of what was the ‘basic’ or ‘scientific’ as distinct from MDRC and Urban Institute-style ‘applied’ or ‘policy-relevant’ research on the one hand, and on the other from what could be learned from living and/or working in urban neighborhoods—which academic social science had no way of recognizing as knowledge at all” (p. 281). The editor did not help the author by including so many long sentences and in editing the book so that it contains a series of long paragraphs. The reader needs more of a break from the book’s intellectual intensity than the editor provides.

If this criticism can be dismissed as a matter of preference, so, too, can another more fundamental objection that might be raised. The author simply assumes that America is a racist and sexist society that lacks the necessary political will to end poverty. As a consequence, the research that the book describes does not challenge these conditions so much as it frames or validates schemes for understanding poverty that ignore America’s bedrock inequalities. The tone of this critique is similar to that found in Linda Gordon’s influential *Pitied But Not Entitled*.

Both this book and Gordon’s book can be read as critiques of liberalism and in particular as critiques of America’s welfare state. O’Connor notes, for example, that knowledge about poverty is segmented, just as America’s social welfare programs are segmented between programs for “men and women, white and nonwhite, and especially poor and nonpoor.” Such programs are divided between “universalistic, relatively more generous, non-stigmatized programs” and “means-tested, ungenerous ‘welfare’ programs for the poor” (p. 57). Later we learn that America’s social welfare programs “routinely” (p. 102) left farmers and other displaced workers without protection against life’s hardships. Single, nonwidowed mothers found themselves at the mercy of an ungenerous, capricious Aid to Dependent Children program at least until the 1960s. Even the more generous programs, such as Social Security, failed to provide the same level of benefits to non-whites as to whites. In short, America’s welfare state is deeply flawed along the fault lines that divide whites and blacks, men and women, and the rich and poor.

All of that may be true and is certainly true of particular programs at particular points in time. Still, it consigns liberal reform to the category of failure that should be jettisoned when the opportunity for real reform comes along. I wonder if such a view does justice to the achieve-

ments of a program such as Social Security which even O'Connor admits has been America's most effective anti-poverty program. Here is a program that struggled in its first fifteen years and failed to pay higher benefits or reach more people than welfare but that grew to become one of the largest social welfare programs in the world. It is a program that covers nearly everyone in the labor force with a progressive benefit formula in which, to use the rhetoric of political conservatives, the poor receive a far higher return on their social security "investments" than do the non-poor. It also includes a disability program and a survivors program that disproportionately benefit non-whites, women, and the poor. To be sure, it is not a panacea and perhaps we have relied on it to solve too many of our social problems, but it does show the efficacy of liberal reform. (That's why it is such a target of conservative reformers like the present President Bush). Maybe it is time to bring liberal reform back into the narrative of America's welfare state.

I guess I am questioning the political wisdom of O'Connor's analysis. In pointing out the flaws of America's welfare state, the author, who is certainly not a conservative, only makes the work of the conservatives in dismantling the welfare state easier. That makes me uncomfortable, particularly when the development of America's welfare state can be read in such a different way.

Of course, I am taking the book in a direction that the author does not intend. It is about ideas, not programs, and by painting such a bleak picture of the research that supports our anti-poverty enterprise, the author, it

could be argued, is only following the evidence where it leads her. But there are other streams of evidence, other poverty researchers than the ones she chronicles. One group, for example, saw a vital link between ill health and poverty and tried to develop evidence to show a connection between access to health care and poverty. This group fought for things like national health insurance and Medicare, with at least partial success. Analysts in the Social Security Administration did research in the 1940s to demonstrate the poverty of groups like sharecroppers in order to argue that they required Social Security protection. Such researchers are largely missing in this book.

Nonetheless, Michael Katz's point on the cover stands. This is the definitive book on social science and poverty. This book contains some strikingly original research and some provocative findings on the development of poverty knowledge. A work of great erudition, it represents a very impressive achievement. It remains for those in the political history community to fill in some of the links between the intellectual history presented here and the more conventional narrative of twentieth century political history and perhaps to tease out the political and policy implications of this highly original work.

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