In our era, planning has evolved into a more catholic and eclectic discipline. As a result, it has become hospitable to concepts and terms from other disciplines and professions. At times, planners also use the buzzwords that show up in the public discourse of these disciplines and professions, as well as in the news media, official reports, and other informational material targeted at elite and college-educated Americans.

One of the concepts planners—along with other public and social policy makers—have begun to pay attention to most recently is the underclass. While this word can be used as a graphic technical term for the growing number of persistently poor and jobless Americans, it is also a value-laden, increasingly pejorative term that seems to be becoming the newest buzzword for the undeserving poor. Consequently, underclass needs badly to be taken apart analytically and critically—to be deconstructed in the so-called postmodernist terminology. Although the term itself is less dangerous than the attitudes underlying it, its general usage, and the effects of that usage, these effects make it into one of those words that ultimately become sticks and stones. The deconstruction to follow describes ten major dangers of the term, not just for the poor but for planners and social policy makers.

**A Matter of Definition?**

Buzzwords for the undeserving poor are hardly new, for in the past the poor have been termed paupers, rabble, white trash, and the dangerous classes. Today, however, Americans do not use such harsh terms in their public discourse, whatever people may say to each other in private. Where possible, euphemisms are employed, and if they are from the academy, so much the better. A string of these became popular in the 1960s; the most famous is Oscar Lewis’s anthropological concept culture of poverty, a term that became his generation’s equivalent of underclass.

When Gunnar Myrdal invented or reinvented the term underclass in his 1962 book *Challenge to Affluence*, he used the word as a purely economic concept, to describe the chronically unemployed, underemployed, and underemployables being created by what we now call the post-industrial economy. He was thinking of people being driven to the margins, or entirely out, of the modern economy, here and elsewhere; but his intellectual and policy concern was with reforming that economy, not with changing or punishing the people who were its victims.

Some other academics, this author included, used the term with Myrdal’s definition in the 1960s and 1970s. However, gradually the users shifted from Myrdal’s concern with unemployment to poverty, so that by the late 1970s social scientists had begun to identify the underclass with acute or persistent poverty rather than joblessness. Around the same time a very different definition of the underclass also emerged that has become the most widely used, and is also the most dangerous.

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That definition has two novel elements. The first is racial, for users of this definition see the underclass as being almost entirely black and Hispanic. Second, it adds a number of behavioral patterns to an economic definition—and almost always these patterns involve behavior thought to be undeserving by the definers.

Different definers concentrate on somewhat different behavior patterns, but most include antisocial or otherwise harmful behavior, such as crime. Many definers also focus on various patterns that are deviant or aberrant from what they consider middle class norms, but that in fact are not automatically or always harmful, such as common law marriage. Some definers even measure membership in the underclass by deviant answers to public opinion poll questions.

Many of the researchers initially making up or using these new definitions were actually engaged in another enterprise—that of estimating the size of the underclass in the nation. Several of these studies have included attempts to isolate “underclass neighborhoods.” These attempts generally define such neighborhoods by census tracts or zip codes and by an unusually high amount of antisocial and deviant behavior within the area boundaries, as if neighborhoods were demarcated by such behavior. Moreover, the researchers tend to assume that the behavior patterns they report are caused by norm violations on the part of area residents and not by the conditions under which they are living, or the behavioral choices open to them as a result of these conditions.

The search for estimates of the size of the national underclass has been funded not only by government agencies but also by major foundations and other semi-public research bodies. Moreover, the research has rarely been a purely academic exercise, for presumably some funders and researchers have been trying to estimate the size of the threat to the public peace and the dominant American norms, while others have been calling attention to an allegedly new population that needs various forms of new public help. Whatever the researchers’ explicit and implicit aims, and however they define the underclass, they agree that it has grown dramatically since the 1960s.

In the past five years the term’s diverse definitions have remained basically unchanged, although the defining attempt itself has occasioned a very lively, often angry, debate among scholars. Many researchers have accepted much or all of the now-dominant behavioral definition; some have argued for a purely economic one, like Myrdal’s; and some—this author included—have felt that the term has taken on so many connotations of undeservingness and blameworthiness that it has become hopelessly polluted in meaning, ideological overtone and implications, and should be dropped—with the issues involved studied via other concepts. Basically the debate has involved positions usually associated with the Right and the Left, partisans of the former arguing that the underclass is the product of the unwillingness of the black poor to adhere to the American work ethic, among other cultural deficiencies, and the latter claiming that the underclass is a consequence of the development of the post-industrial economy, which no longer needs the unskilled poor.

The debate has swirled in part around William J. Wilson, the University of Chicago sociologist and author of The Truly Disadvantaged (1987), who is arguably the most prominent analyst of the underclass in the 1980s. He focuses entirely on the black underclass and insists that this underclass exists mainly because of large-scale and harmful changes in the labor market, and its resulting spatial concentration as well as the isolation of such areas from the more affluent parts of the black community. One of his early definitions also included a reference to aberrant behavior patterns, although his most recent one, offered in November 1989, centers around the notion of “weak attachment to the labor force,” an idea that seems nearly to coincide with Myrdal’s, especially since Wilson attributes that weakness to faults in the economy rather than in the jobless.

Wilson’s work has inspired a lot of new research, not only about the underclass but about poverty in general, and has made poverty research funding, public and private, available again after a long drought. Meanwhile, various scholars have tried to resolve or reorient the political debate, but without much luck, for eventually the issue always boils down to whether the fault for being poor and the responsibility for change should be assigned more to poor people or more to the economy and the state. At the same time, journalistic use of the so-called behavioral definition of the underclass has increased—and so much so that there is a danger of researchers and policy analysts being carried along by the popularity of this definition of the term in the public discourse.

The only really notable innovation in underclass definitions has been the increasing flexibility of the term and its cancer-like tendency to expand in meaning, so that journalists and others add new people or groups who are thought to be acting in harmful or deviant ways. For example, when crack use became widespread, drug users and even drug dealers were included in the underclass. The latter were usually mentioned with the notation that they were often not poor—in which case one might add nonpoor stock swindlers, embezzlers, and corrupt politicians to the underclass. In the past year, I have also seen the term applied to public housing tenants sui generis, and to Russian immigrants being victimized by the lack of opportunities to learn English so they could continue their professional or other careers. It even came up in a news feature about Mexican iguanas, which referred to those at the bottom of the iguana pecking order as underclass iguanas.

The Power of Buzzwords and Labels

The behavioral definition of the underclass, which in essence proposes that some very poor people are somehow to be selected for separation from the rest of society and henceforth treated as especially undeserving, harbors many dangers—for their civil liberties and ours, for ex-
ample, for democracy, and for the integration of society. But the rest of this essay will concentrate on what seem to me to be the major dangers for planners. The first danger of the term is its unusual power as a buzzword. It is a handy euphemism; while it seems inoffensively technical on the surface, it hides within it all the moral opprobrium Americans have long felt toward those poor people who have been judged to be undeserving. Even when it is being used by journalists, scholars, and others as a technical term, it carries with it this judgmental baggage. Once planners resort to the term, they are touched by all of its connotations too, many of which of course have policy implications. Unless planners make very clear how they define it, they also run the risk that their clients, whether politicians or citizens, will define it another way. This creates more policy problems, especially since the planning constituency is always ideologically diverse. Planners are best off by avoiding such problems, the term, and, since they are not hired to be moral judges, the very notion of undeserving people per se.

A second and related danger of the term is its use as a racial codeword that subtly hides anti-black and anti-Hispanic feelings. A codeword of this kind fits in with the tolerant public discourse of our time, but it also submerges and may further repress racial—and class—antagonisms that continue to exist, yet are sometimes not expressed until socio-political boiling points are reached. Racial and class codewords—and codewords of any kind—get in the way of planners, however, because the citizenry may read codewords even though planners are writing analytical concepts.

A third danger of the term is its flexible character. Given the freedom of definition available in a democracy, anyone can decide, or try to persuade others, that yet additional people should be included in the underclass. For example, it is conceivable that in a city, region, or country with a high unemployment rate, powerless competitors for jobs, such as illegal immigrants or even legal but recently arrived workers, might be added to the list of undeserving people. The supply of potential candidates for the underclass is very large; Oscar Lewis identified 65 traits for his culture of poverty.

The fourth danger of the term, a particularly serious one, is that it is a synthesizing notion—or what William Kornblum has more aptly called a lumping one—that covers a number of different people. Like other synthesizing notions that have moved far beyond the researchers’ journals, it has also become a stereotype. Stereotypes are lay generalizations that are necessary in a very diversified society, and are useful when they are more or less accurate. When they are not, however, or when they
are also judgmental terms, they turn into labels, to be used by some people to judge, and usually to stigmatize, other people, often those with less power or prestige.

Surely neither the researchers who added behavioral patterns to Myrdal's original definition nor the funding agencies that supported these researchers were trying to develop a new label. But once the term underclass took on the characteristics of a label, the researchers legitimized it because they were viewed to be social scientists, and the research funders gave it further legitimation simply because their prestige as well as their money were behind the work.

Insofar as poor people keep up with the labels the rest of society sticks on them, they are aware of the latest one. We do not all know the "street-level" consequences of stigmatizing labels, but they cannot be good. One of the likely, and most dangerous, consequences of labels is that they can become self-fulfilling prophecies. People publicly described as members of the underclass may begin to feel that they are members of such a class and are therefore unworthy in a new way. At the least, they now have to fight against yet another threat to their self-respect, not to mention another reason for feeling that society would just as soon have them disappear.

More important perhaps, people included in the underclass are quickly treated accordingly in their relations with the private and public agencies in which, like the rest of us, they are embedded—from workplaces, welfare agencies, and schools to the police and the courts. We know from social research that teachers with negative images of their pupils do not expect them to succeed and thus make sure, often unconsciously, that they do not; likewise, boys from single parent families who are picked up by the police are often thought to be wild and therefore guilty because they are assumed to lack male parental control. We know also that areas associated with the underclass do not get the same level of services as more affluent areas. After all, these populations are not likely to protest.

While planners may not mean to stigmatize anyone, the danger that they do so implicitly always exists, and so does the danger that their constituents may do the labeling and stigmatizing. To be sure, we are not responsible for our readers' misinterpretations of what we write and say, but nonetheless, the use of terms that can be easily misinterpreted is professionally irresponsible, whether the users are planners, sociologists, doctors, or politicians.

Social Policy Implications

The remaining dangers are more directly relevant for planners, other policy researchers, and policy makers. The most general one, and the fifth on my list, is the term's interference with antipoverty policy and other kinds of planning. This results in part from the fact that underclass is a quite distinctive synthesizing term that lumps together a variety of highly diverse people who need different kinds of help. Categorizing them all with one term, and a buzzword at that, can be disastrous, especially if the political climate should demand that planners formulate a single "underclass policy." Whether one thinks of the poorest of the poor as having problems or as making problems for others, or both, they cannot be planned for with a single policy. For example, educational policies to prevent young people from dropping out of school, especially the few good ones in poor areas, have nothing to do with housing policies for dealing with various kinds of homelessness and the lack of affordable dwellings. Such policies are in turn different from programs to reduce street crime, and from methods of discouraging the very poor from escaping into the addictions of drugs, alcohol, mental illness, or pentecostal religion—which has its own harmful side effects. To be sure, policies relevant to one problem may have positive overlaps for another, but no single policy works for all the problems of the different poverty-stricken populations. Experts who claim one policy can do it all, like education, are simply wrong.

This conclusion applies even to jobs and income grant policies. Although it is certain that all of the problems blamed on the people assigned to the underclass would be helped considerably by policies to reduce sharply persistent joblessness and poverty, and generally before other programs are implemented, these policies also have limits. While all poor people need economic help, such help will not alone solve other problems some of them have or make for others. Although the middle class does not mug, neither do the poor; only a small number of poor male youngsters and young adults do so. Other causal factors are also involved, and effective antipoverty planning has to be based on some understanding of these factors and how to overcome them. Lumping concepts like the underclass can only hurt this effort.

A related or sixth danger stems from the persuasive capacity of concepts or buzzwords. These terms may become so reified through their use that people think they represent actual groups or aggregates, and may also begin to believe that being in what is, after all, an imaginary group is a cause of the characteristics included in its definition. Sometimes journalists and even scholars—especially those of conservative bent—appear to think that becoming very poor and acting in antisocial or deviant ways is an effect of being in the underclass. When the underclass becomes a causal term, however, especially on a widespread basis, planners, as well as politicians and citizens, are in trouble; sooner or later, someone will argue that the only policy solution is to lock up everyone described as an underclass member.

Similar planning problems develop if and when the reification of a term leads to its being assigned moral causality. Using notions that blame victims may help the blamers to feel better by blowing off the steam of righteous indignation, but it does not eliminate the problems very poor people have or make. Indeed, those who argue that all people are entirely responsible for what they do sidestep the morally and otherwise crucial issue of determining how much responsibility should be assigned.
to people who lack resources, who are therefore under unusual stress, and who lack effective choices in many areas of life in which even moderate income people can choose relatively freely.

The ideal is of course to give people as much public aid, and of the right kind, as they need to exercise the same responsibilities that other Americans do. Even the most persistently poor have to be law-abiding; beyond that, we have not yet figured out what resources will maximize other forms of responsibility and self- or group-help. For example, we do not even know yet how to persuade very poor teenagers to stop making babies of their own. Finding answers will not be easy, but neither blaming the poor nor romanticizing them as helpless victims of societal inequities is very helpful.

The seventh danger of the term, and one also particularly salient for planners, stems from the way the underclass has been analyzed. As already noted, some researchers have tried to identify underclass neighborhoods. Planners must be especially sensitive to the dangers of the underclass neighborhood notion, because, once statistically defined “neighborhoods,” or even sets of adjacent census tracts, are marked with the underclass label, the politicians who make the basic land use decisions in the community may propose a variety of harmful policies, such as moving all of a city’s homeless into such areas, or declaring them ripe for urban renewal because of the undeservingness of the population. Recall that this is how much of the federal urban renewal of the 1950s and 1960s was justified. In addition, neighborhood policies generally rest on the assumption that people inside the boundaries of such areas are more homogeneous than they in fact are, and that they remain inside boundaries that are more often nothing but lines on a map. Since very poor people tend to suffer more from public policies than they benefit, and since they have fewer defenses than more affluent people against harmful policies, “neighborhood policies” may hurt more often than they will help.

A related danger—and my eighth—stems from William J. Wilson’s “concentration and isolation” hypotheses. Wilson argues that the economic difficulties of the very poorest blacks are compounded by the fact that as the better-off blacks move out, the poorest are more and more concentrated, having only other very poor people, and the few institutions that minister to them, as neighbors. This concentration causes social isolation, among other things, Wilson suggests, because the very poor are now isolated from access to the people, job networks, role models, institutions, and other connections that might help them escape poverty.

Wilson’s hypotheses, summarized all too briefly here, are now being accepted as dogma by many outside the research community. Fortunately, they are also being tested in a number of places, but until they are shown to be valid, planners should probably go slowly with designing action programs—especially programs to reduce concentration. In the minimal-vacancy housing markets in which virtually all poor people live, such a policy might mean having to find a new, and surely more costly, dwelling unit, or having to double up with relatives, or in some cases being driven into shelters or into the streets. Even if working- and middle-class areas were willing to accept relocatees from deconcentrated areas, a response that seems unlikely, the relocatees could not afford to live in such areas—although many would flourish if they had the money to do so. Meanwhile, the dysfunctions of dispersal may be as bad as those of overconcentration, not because the latter has any virtues, but because, until an effective jobs-and-income-grants program has gone into operation, requiring very poor people to move away from the neighborly support structures they do have may deprive them of their only resources.

While it may be risky to attempt deconcentration at this stage, it is worth trying to reduce isolation. One form of isolation, the so-called urban-suburban mismatch between jobless workers residing in cities and available suburban jobs, is already being attacked again, which is all to the good. Perhaps something has been learned from the failures of the 1960s to reduce the mismatch. We must bear in mind, however, that in some or perhaps many cases the physical mismatch is only a cover for class and racial discrimination, and the widespread unwillingness of white suburban employers—and white workers—to have black coworkers.

We do not yet know how many of the very poor are actually isolated, as Wilson suggests, from job networks, role models, and other material and social resources that might help them escape poverty. Some of the very poor remain connected to extended kin networks that usually include a few moderate and even middle income relatives living in better city and suburban neighborhoods who can help with job contacts. Still, Wilson’s fear of the oversisolation of the very poor must be taken seriously. If it is shown to be reasonably accurate, planners must try to figure out what spatial and other policies can be developed. This will be especially critical in communities where elected politicians are unwilling or unable to stand up to area and other interest groups raising the “NIMBY” cry to keep the very poor isolated from the rest of the community.

The ninth danger is inherent in the concept of an underclass. While it assumes that the people assigned to the underclass are poor, the term itself sidesteps issues of poverty. It also permits analysts to ignore the dramatic recent increases in certain kinds of poverty, or persisting poverty, and hence the need for resuming effective antipoverty programs. For example, terms like underclass make it easier for conservative researchers to look at the homeless mainly as mentally ill or the victims of rent control, and frees them of any need to discuss the disappearance of jobs, SROs, and other low income housing.

Indeed, to the extent that the underclass notion is turned into a synonym for the undeserving poor, the political conditions for reinstituting effective antipoverty policy are removed. If the underclass is undeserving, then the government’s responsibility is limited to beefing up the courts and other punitive agencies and institutions.
that try to isolate the underclass and protect the rest of society from it. Conversely, the moral imperative to help the poor through the provision of jobs and income grants is reduced. Describing the poor as undeserving has long been an effective if immoral short-term approach to tax reduction.

Tenth and last, there is the danger of inventing new but not really necessary words—a danger that develops only because no one can predict how they will be used. In the case of the underclass, the current use is in many ways diametrically opposed to what Myrdal had in mind. I assume that when he coined the word, he thought there was a need for a dramatic new term that would attract more attention to and therefore more help for the poorest of the poor. I was one of several people who used the term with that strategy in mind, and with hindsight, it is clear we made a strategic mistake in not considering that the term could also turn into the newest label for the undeserving poor.

A More Direct Approach to Poverty

Hindsight also suggests that the term underclass creates far more costs than benefits. Even William J. Wilson's neo-Myrdalian conception of the underclass adds little; if the main problem is joblessness, as Wilson has always insisted, then why not call the people involved the jobless and figure out politically feasible ways of moving toward full employment? If future research should show that some of the very poor are so isolated that they are literally separated from the rest of society and could therefore be called an underclass in an analytic sense, the term would still not serve a useful policy function, since, as I have suggested, the very notion of underclass policy has all kinds of dangers for planners and the poor. If one of the problems of the persistently jobless is isolation, then policies to reduce isolation are needed in addition to policies of full employment.

Those who use underclass as a euphemism for the undeserving poor should instead talk and write about the undeserving poor, so that their political stand is explicit. The rest of us ought to analyze joblessness and poverty—particularly the persistent varieties—and then study their causes and effects.

The cause-and-effect studies ought also to concentrate on the social and emotional problems jobless and poor people have. Other studies ought to examine the problems they make: the antisocial acts, as well as the behavior patterns thought deviant by large numbers of other Americans. After all, these large numbers of other Americans may disapprove. Evading the fact that poor people commit most of the street crime seems as irresponsible as assigning them the label underclass, although exaggerating the proportion of antisocial acts among the very poor so as to scare the nonpoor citizenry is equally irresponsible.

Researchers ought also to try to establish a way in which secure and decent jobs and/or income grants can reduce people's problems, as well as their antisocial acts and the "deviant" behavior patterns they resort to because they are very poor (but which they are ready to give up when their economic condition permits). We also need to know how long the process of problem-reduction will take, so that impatient politicians and citizens can be persuaded not to demand immediate behavior change; how much the poor people involved can and will be able to help themselves; and what else, if anything, needs to be done to make sure the process of behavior change proceeds on a widespread basis and as quickly as possible.

Deeper Trouble Ahead?

The greatest danger of all is not caused by the underclass concept; indeed, the concept is only yet another symptom of the problem. That danger is the familiar possibility that we are moving toward a new form of post-industrial economy in which there may not be enough decent jobs for all, either because the jobs are moving to newly industrializing countries or are being performed by ever more efficient machines.

Although America's official unemployment rate is higher today than most of the past half century, it is still lower than that of some West European welfare states. However, the way we count the jobless has worked effectively to hide the actual unemployment rate. Poverty researchers in the 1960s learned that this actual rate was always close to double the official one, once the discouraged, the involuntarily at-home or school-going, the totally unreachable, and the involuntary part-timers were counted. Consequently, at the start of 1990, the actual rate was about 11 percent.

Both the official and the actual rate report a sizeable racial difference in unemployment, for in the United States, as in too many other countries, the people condemned to persistent joblessness and poverty are not just those already low on the class ladder and low in skills, but also those with a darker skin. None of this is automatic or natural. Even if there are not enough jobs in the society for everyone who wants to work, the people to go jobless could be children of inherited wealth, the best educated, anyone under 25 or over 55, those who will give up their right to a job for a minimal lifetime income—or anyone else. Nonetheless, majorities and their leaders somehow "select" minorities, and, for race and class reasons, the selected have often been the darkest-skinned.

The past and present do not completely determine the future, and if there is indeed a labor shortage in the 1990s, additional workers may be drawn from the persistently jobless and poor—even if their skins are dark. Unfortunately, there are other possible scenarios, including
the encouragement of yet another wave of low-wage immi-
igrants, or the re-employment of military and defense
industry personnel left jobless by the end of the Cold War.

In that case, the underclass notion may turn out to be
what I fear it is, a signal that the economy, the society,
and the language are preparing to adapt to a future in
which some people are more or less permanently jobless.
To put it more baldly, we may be entering a time when,
with the general public’s concurrence, those who make
the decisions, big and small, in the economy and the
polity are beginning to establish a new class of the jobless,
who, as so often before in American history, are blamed
for their joblessness and forced to behave in ways that
enable the nonpoor to describe them as undeserving and
write them off. Worse still, the word underclass and the
imagery describing those being labeled with it suggest
the possibility that many of its “members” may never
get out again, for economic or moral reasons. In short,
the people now assigned to the underclass may be as-
signed to what could someday become an American type
of caste. It is of course conceivable that long before such
tendencies become significant, Americans will find new
sources of work, including those created through a mod-
ernized New Deal. They may also begin to think seriously
about ways of sharing the work, such as the work-time
reduction schemes already being practiced successfully
in Sweden; everyone works fewer hours or weeks, but
as a result, virtually no one goes jobless. Nor should I
exclude what has always saved the United States in the
past—new forms of economic growth that cannot even
be imagined now. Still, it is also conceivable that all the
techniques of modern zoning will be applied in order to
create and put in place physical barriers to supplement
the political and economic boundaries that wall off the
jobless caste from the rest of America. Unfortunately,
such a solution is in many ways easier to implement in
our political system than deliberate planning for job cre-
ation.

Obviously, an America with a jobless caste would be
socially dangerous, for crime, addiction, mental illness,
as well as various forms of covert and overt protest, some
of it violent, would be sure to increase sharply. In the
long run, such a solution would also be politically dan-
gerous, because, however much the term seems to imply
the opposite, the people assigned to an underclass would
remain an integral part of the larger society. Indeed, there
has always been a relation, albeit complex, between rising
joblessness and the emergence of fascist movements, of
the Right or the Left. If such movements start to appear,
the source of the danger will not be the underclass but
the overclasses (a term that curiously enough has not yet
surfaced) who would permit the evolution of such a dan-
gerous—and fundamentally immoral—society.

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