

Book Review

Towards a New Poverty Knowledge

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

Poverty continues to plague the United States in the 21st century. Many scholars have attempted to address the poverty issue. The book *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* by historian Alice O'Connor examines the historical discourse on the poverty problem. She begins her discussion with the history of the creation of poverty knowledge. She posits that some of the accountability for the continued poverty in America can be traced to the very scholars who study the issue. Beginning in the era of the Progressive "poverty warriors," O'Connor plots the journey toward the current state of the poor; with the assumption that only a reconfiguration of the methods used to gather poverty research will adequately explain poverty and lead to the formation of poverty solutions.

O'Connor believes that the current state of the poverty discourse is diametrically opposed to the key to understanding poverty and the means toward alleviating it, namely a paradigm shift from the micro level analysis of poverty to one based on macro level analysis. O'Connor argues that the core focus of poverty scholars remains on those who seek help. She sees the history of the poverty debate as an exercise in creating a profile of who is getting welfare and how welfare impacts the lives of those who receive it, instead of a body of knowledge that seeks to understand what causes the continued poverty in the

United States. Instead of assessing how welfare programs affect poverty, most poverty scholars have allowed the debate to single out the poor as the root of their own poverty.

O'Connor's work is compelling for many reasons. First, by articulating the process by which policy and populace construct the "deserving poor," that is, by acknowledging that the meting out of social resources is not a mere exercise in altruism, but a highly bureaucratic process that is beholden to the shifting sands of public opinion and regime changes in the political arena. Secondly, she identifies the greatest challenge in addressing poverty is convincing the scholars who study it to stop assuming that the poor need to bear the lion's share of both blame and redress. Finally, she offers a multidiscipline approach to working toward eliminating the poverty problem, calling upon the economic, social sciences, and political scholars to approach poverty solutions as a team, rather than as the sum of parts.

One of the most daunting aspects of addressing the poverty question lies in how the policies aimed at poverty are formed. This default validity given to the current poverty knowledge, O'Connor states, continues to be used as a foundation for determining who is deserving of help and who does not deserve assistance. Her argument hinges on her belief that the current poverty knowledge research paradigm serves to quantify the poverty problem in terms of the latent functions of antipoverty programs. Current research remains mindful of making sure programs are not inducing dreaded dependency and moral slide into the realm of "undeserving poor."

O'Connor concludes that a new poverty knowledge that focuses on possible explanations for poverty external to the poor themselves needs to be gathered. This new knowledge should be one that incorporates a study of the industrial and postindustrial

market forces and employment opportunities in high poverty areas in the United States. O'Connor's conclusions are compelling, but with such a sweeping paradigm shift, the blueprint offered is missing some details. She offers very little guidance beyond her general statements as to how this will be implemented. In addition, there is the challenge of *undoing* what previous poverty knowledge has done, namely to stigmatize the poor and the programs that serve them. As noble as O'Connor is in her goals, the decades of poverty research have created warrants upon warrants about the poor. These embedded beliefs will have to be addressed in the quest for new poverty knowledge. While perhaps not insurmountable, the challenges facing any scholar wishing to create a new poverty paradigm should not be underestimated. This book may help the idealist begin their journey toward a new poverty knowledge.