

## THE POOR

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### 1. Introduction

For traditional society, the words of Scripture, that the poor will always be with us, seem an adequate observation. Modern society, however, no longer describes itself in these terms. Indeed, the very expression welfare state signifies that the poor have been functionally integrated into society. This process took quite some time, when one considers that the poor in early modern England were first hung as vagabonds and then shunted into poorhouses. It was only with the emergence of an industrial proletariat and its political self-organization that the plight of the poor came to be thought as a social indictment and hence as a problem in need of redress. The classical nineteenth century novels were the literary representation of what sociological monographs described as the squalid conditions of the laboring poor; and it was the cause of the poor which could be said to have made the question of inequality the focus of class conflict and political reform that haunted modern society until the end of World War Two.

Subsequent developments, both the increasing internal differentiation of modern society and its extension to more and more areas of the globe, resulted in a historic transformation of this question. Stratification shifted from class to occupation, the lines of social division became fluid, social disadvantages were no longer cumulative and reproduced from generation to generation. Today, it can reasonably be asserted, the poor in modern societies are heterogeneous and mobile, much like the rest of the population. The sources of poverty are multiple, the forces at work are complex, and the results of policies designed to overcome it paradoxical. But the overall logic of modern society with respect to the poor, as in regard to other groups hitherto marginalized in one way or another, is one of inclusion. People still argue about the extent to which individuals or the state are responsible for the poor being poor, but this debate camouflages the most significant characteristic of welfare state societies, namely the fact that the poor now have to be solvent. Pluralist, differentiated societies require that, and it would seem that this functional requirement is now becoming a global one. This does not mean it will inevitably happen. Chance still plays a prominent role in the course of human developments, and in some ways more than ever. At least, we are more conscious that

the best of intentions may prove powerless indeed while bad decisions can also be made, even as the long-term logic of modernity points to steady, if uneven improvement in the lot of the poor.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Stephen Schecter** did my undergraduate studies at McGill University, graduating in 1967 with a B.A. Honours in sociology and political science. I then went on to get my doctoral degree from the London School of Economics in political sociology in 1972. Since 1975 I have taught sociology at the Université du Québec à Montréal where I am now a full professor.

I have written books on the city, on AIDS, and on Canada's constitutional imbroglio, but my main focus now is sociological theory. The theory I currently use is quite different from the one that inspired my previous books. I now am a partisan of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and apply it to the analysis of different aspects of contemporary social life.

In a nutshell, this approach holds that modern society can best be understood as a functionally differentiated, highly pluralist and complex society, which makes it at once rich, flexible, adaptive and highly problematic, not to mention conflict-ridden. Since social life is highly paradoxical, it elicits from the sociological observer and the citizen a wry, ironic and comic outlook on life.