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Laboring Below the Line: The New Ethnography of Poverty, Low-Wage Work, and Survival in the Global Economy (2002)

Frank W. Munger

LABORING

BELOW THE LINE

The New Ethnography of Poverty,
Low-Wage Work, and Survival
in the Global Economy

Frank Munger
Editor

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RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION
112 East 64th Street, New York, New York 10021
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Preface

Since 1980, inequality of economic opportunity in the United States has grown catastrophically. We know that the wealthiest 20 percent of Americans own a greater proportion of the nation's wealth than ever before, and that the poorest 20 percent own less of that wealth. We know too that the labor market for the poor is organized differently from the higher-wage labor market: jobs are impermanent and inadequately compensated, and attachment to the workforce is marginal for those at the bottom of the income distribution scale. Yet even as they fall further and further behind, many of the poor *are working*. In New York State, for example, more than half of poor families include a wage earner, and more than one third have someone working full-time year round. Failure of the poor to find and keep jobs has fueled arguments that social welfare supports "unearned benefits"—according to those who advocate slashing them—constitute "moral hazards," and undermine "discipline" among low-wage earners and the unemployed. These arguments, along with counterarguments that point to institutional and historical causes of economic and social inequality, rage on within the academy and in national discourse about welfare and welfare reform, as politics makes examples (and stereotypes) of a few poor persons. Unfortunately, policy makers and the public never see more than a glimpse of life below the poverty line, and we hear very little from Americans who are fighting for survival there.

Over the past twenty years, however, scholars have amassed an extraordinary body of ethnographic research that gives voice to the poor and maps the contours of their daily lives. In September 1997, the Russell Sage Foundation funded a workshop at the State University of New York at Buffalo to explore the promise of this new literature on poverty. Together, researchers who pursue ethnography, oral history, qualitative sociology, and narrative analysis shared data about the experiences of poor persons as they struggle—out of the spotlight of public attention—to work in the new low-wage economy, raise families, carry on from one day to the next, and get ahead; and this core group discussed these data with other scholars who use noninterpretive or quantitative strategies for documenting and examining poverty. The energy of workshop participants comes from their belief that acquaintance with the life experiences of the poor enriches our understanding of poverty as personal plight and social phenomenon. At this moment of governmental retrenchment, ethnography's complex, nonstereotypical portraits of individual persons are especially important. Although these studies cannot always offer clear answers to questions about poverty programs or the effects of isolated economic and social factors on the income and behavior of poor

persons, they reveal the ambiguities of real lives, the potential of individuals to change in unexpected ways, and the even greater intricacy of the collective life of a community.

Workshop participants talked at length about the challenges ethnographers face as they examine the implications of the experiences of their subjects and frame those experiences for an audience. Their discussions drew on many fields and disciplines to place ethnography in a larger context of scholarship on poverty and low-wage work. The cross-disciplinary investigation brought into focus the perennial criticism of interpretive or qualitative research by noninterpretive or quantitative researchers: that its objectivity and clarity are limited, and that it fails to illuminate *structural* inequality in the organization of institutions, communities, and the low-wage labor market. This book—which explores the role of interpretive research in understanding the causes and effects of poverty, examines global and local patterns of poverty, and evaluates recent policy making by the welfare state—continues the conversation and represents many of the disagreements among these scholars.

At the core of ethnographic research is an open-ended interpretive process. The interaction between researcher and subject does not proceed within fixed categories, but seeks to create and nurture a shared understanding of the meaning of thought and action. This book invites the reader to become a part of that dialogue between researchers and their subjects, consider the process by which such experiences are presented to others, learn more about poverty, and speculate about what comes next. By revealing a vast human potential, ethnography proves that it may educate us about poverty and serve as a catalyst for social change.

Drawing on the perspectives of the working poor, welfare recipients, and marginally employed men and women, the following chapters anatomize life-course circumstances and experiences that affect personal outlook, ability to work, and expectations for the future—the foundations on which survival and self-sufficiency are based. A picture of the unique social organization of the low-wage labor market emerges from points of contact between the characteristics of individuals and economic conditions and institutions: this helps us understand how and why many low-wage workers find themselves trapped in a low-wage ghetto. In counterpoint to the interpretive research presented herein, commentary by other workshop participants reflects on the role of ethnographic research and provides alternative viewpoints on the goals and methods of studies of poverty.

The authors offer their collective thanks to the Russell Sage Foundation, the Christopher Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, and the Law School of the State University of New York at Buffalo for generous support of the 1997 Workshop on Poverty, Low-Wage Labor, and Social Retrenchment. The contributors also benefited greatly from engagement with colleagues who participated in the workshop, with special thanks to Harry Arthurs, Fadila Boughanemi, Megan

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Frank Munger
Buffalo, New York