Declining City, Born-Again Citadel: Faith-Based Organizations and the Reconstitution of Inequality in Postindustrial America

Michael J. Boyle

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DECLINING CITY, BORN-AGAIN CITADEL: FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND
THE RECONSTITUTION OF INEQUALITY IN POSTINDUSTRIAL AMERICA

by

MICHAEL J. BOYLE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

DECLINING CITY, BORN-AGAIN CITADEL: FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND THE RECONSTITUTION OF INEQUALITY IN POSTINDUSTRIAL AMERICA

by

Michael J. Boyle

Advisor: Dr. Donald Robotham

In the context of the hegemonic neoliberalism of recent decades, faith-based organizations (FBOs) have flourished as mechanisms for addressing poverty and other varieties of social need. For all of the contributions of contemporary anthropological research to the study of FBOs, however, most analyses have stressed the potency of FBOs and elided the agency of recipients. The present dissertation aims, through a multisited study of Evangelical FBOs in the postindustrial American city of Plainfield, to focus on the latter theme. Owing to the traditional behaviorism of American culture and also its Evangelical reproduction in FBO settings, the pursuit of charity thrusts a dilemma onto recipients: Risk accepting the stigma and shame typically associated with poverty or contest those meanings and risk alienating oneself from a valuable source of much-needed household assistance. Rather than accepting the terms of this invidious dilemma, however, charitable subjects in Plainfield transcend them with performances of worthiness—that is, demonstrations of respectfulness, a work ethic, and more that mark them as, despite their poverty, people who qualify as worthy according to the standards of liberal society. By interpreting these dynamics through the lens of Marxian praxis theory, however, it is apparent that, despite their status as acts of contestation, these performances and related recipient behaviors have the contradictory consequence of facilitating the reproduction of capitalist social
relations, particularly the relationship of working-class dependence. The data also demonstrate that the faith-based sphere of Plainfield has developed in a geographically uneven fashion, such that some working-class neighborhoods are far better served by the local groundswell of charitable flows than others. As a consequence of this unevenness, faith-based redistributive flows in Plainfield actually exacerbate racial inequality and constitute a form of eleemosynary white privilege among the city’s working class. In addition to supporting these political economic conclusions, the ethnographic evidence from Plainfield also exposes the disjuncture between behaviorist interpretations of poverty and its experience as lived in the context of postindustrial austerity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DEDICATION

Completing this dissertation turned out to be a much more difficult task than I initially imagined. Without the help of a great many generous and patient people, I would not have been able to complete it at all.

I would like to thank, first of all, my committee members Don Robotham, David Harvey, and Jeff Maskovsky for their guidance throughout the writing process and also through, critically, years of mentoring and instruction even before that. Beyond even the reading of their published works, it was an enormous privilege to be able to take classes and converse informally with these three. Much of what is good in the present thesis can be traced to their influence. What is less so, I own as mine alone. It has also been an honor to have had Jason Hackworth of the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto serve as external reader for this thesis.

Many other people in the Anthropology department at the CUNY Graduate Center have earned my lasting thanks as well. From the very outset of my graduate school career, Louise Lennihan, then the Department of Anthropology Executive Officer, believed in me and my work, and she saw to it that I received the support and encouragement necessary to carry me through coursework. Her successor Gerald Creed has also provided, from the time of the admissions committee forward, unstinting support. Other members of the GC faculty whom I thank for their instruction and scholarly example are Talal Asad, Michael Blim, Leith Mullings, Jane Schneider, Neil Smith, and Ida Susser, I would also like to express my sincerest gratitude to Ellen DeRiso, Assistant Program Officer in Anthropology, for the incalculable number of times over the years that she has provided essential advice and assistance. My receiving a Ph.D. from the Department of Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center is a great honor, and I thank these people and all others within the program who have helped to make that possible.
Generous grants from both The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. and The Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy enabled me to conduct the year of uninterrupted fieldwork upon which the present thesis is based. For the spring 2016 semester, I was serendipitously awarded the May Ebihara Memorial Tuition Fellowship from the Department of Anthropology, a fund that was originally established by Anthropology program graduate Elizabeth Brusco in honor of her advisor. Owing to this fellowship, I was able to make the final push toward dissertation completion, and I am immensely thankful for it.

Among others in the CUNY universe to whom I owe a debt of gratitude are those who chose to provide me with employment and additional funding along the way: Vincent DeLuca, Senior Registrar at the CUNY Graduate Center; Glenn Petersen, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Baruch College, CUNY; Matthew Cotter, Director of College Now, Bronx Community College, CUNY; Lynne Ticke, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, Bronx Community College, CUNY; and also, again, David Harvey, Director of the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics, CUNY Graduate Center. I would also like to extend a special thanks to Carmen Walters of the Office of the Registrar for keeping an office wherein I have always been welcome to sit, share, laugh, and even practice a little Spanish from time to time.

Beyond the academy, the help that I have received from family members has been absolutely essential more times than I can count: my parents, Jim and Ricki Boyle; my brothers and sister-in-law, Joe, Matt, and Niki Boyle; my parents-in-law Mike Freshwater and Deann Buffington and Bill and Cris Longcore; my sister-in-law Jaime Freshwater and soon-to-be brother-in-law Mike Spangler. Also many others in the wider Freshwater and Cumpson circles: Loren “Doc” and Jackie Freshwater; Jim and Daryl Cumpson; David, Diana, and Fernando Freshwater; Tom and Cathy Cumpson; Matt and Amanda Wentzel; and Jeff and Nanci Cumpson.
I would also like to acknowledge my nieces and nephews for all the good times and joy that they have provided throughout this often trying process: Joel Fernandez; Courtlynn Boyle; Carly Boyle; Evan Boyle; Madison Boyle; Finleigh Wentzel; and Nicholas Cumpson.

I would also like to thank, of course, the many men and women in Plainfield who were kind and generous enough to share their lives and their perspectives with me. Not one of them was under any kind of obligation to me, and yet the Plainfielders with whom I interacted were overwhelmingly welcoming and eager to be of help. I have tried to present their stories with all of the honesty and compassion that they deserve, and I can think of no greater praise than to be told by them that they approve of this work.

My most sincere and heartfelt gratitude, however, is reserved for my wife, Alison Boyle. She has been there—untiringly, unconditionally, and unfailingly—every step of the way. I believe that the dissertation writing process has sometimes been as hard on her as it has been on me, but I can only speculate as much because she never, not once in all the years, breathed a single word of complaint. She is loyal, loving, compassionate, and kind, and I am a blessed man accordingly.

And there is, lastly, the issue of a dedication. On December 25, 2014, Alison and I both met and lost our first-born child, a beautiful baby boy, holy and perfect in every way, a son, James Michael. I read many sections of this dissertation to him while he grew in the womb. He knew my voice, and he used to roll and kick excitedly at the sound of it. I intended to dedicate this finished dissertation to him, but now he has a sister, Eleanor Loren, born healthy and strong on February 20, 2016. It does not seem right to separate brother and sister on these pages as they have already been so inexplicably separated in life. And so, for that reason, I dedicate this
dissertation to our children, James and Eleanor—equally wanted, equally loved, and equally present in the longings and the bonds that constitute our innermost hearts.
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I. Introduction

a. Thesis Overview

Over the course of the past several decades, neoliberal policies and discourses have been hegemonic in shaping the development of global capitalist society (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Glyn 2006; Harvey 2005). In this historical context, private charity, particularly as manifested through the non-governmental organization (NGO), has flourished as a mechanism for addressing poverty and other varieties of social need, sometimes as a supplement to state welfare provisioning and other times as its replacement (Fisher 1997). These trends have led many anthropologists—as well as scholars in related disciplines—to focus their attention on issues that arise at the intersection of private charity and neoliberal capitalism (Richard 2009; Schuller 2009). A portion of this scholarship has been devoted specifically to the subject of private faith-based charity, typically as that activity has appeared through the lens of the faith-based organization (FBO) (Hefferan et al. 2009; Kemper and Adkins 2005). The present dissertation—a multisited ethnographic study of Protestant Evangelical faith-based charity in a small Midwestern city referred to here as Plainfield—contributes to this growing literature with arguments that examine the significance of FBO activities for both class and race relations in postindustrial America.

Contemporary research has done a great deal to illuminate many of the ways in which the characteristic discourses and policies of neoliberalism have shaped the recent upsurge in faith-based activity (Brondo and Hefferan 2010; Hefferan et al. 2009). For all of this research, however, a certain kind of uniformity has taken root in the analysis of charity-receiving subjects. With some exceptions, most contemporary analyses that address this issue focus overwhelmingly
on the ways in which the actions of FBOs alter the lives and subjectivities of the people whom they serve (e.g., Bornstein 2005; Greenfield 2010). Most analyses, in other words, accent the potency of FBOs but elide the agency of poor recipients. What is lacking in the literature is robust coverage of the fact that faith-based efforts are mutually constitutive processes, processes that charity recipients also shape through strategies of negotiation, accommodation, contestation, and resistance. While anthropologists have been at the forefront of researching and describing similar dynamics in secular settings—both welfare-related and not (Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Susser 1996)—a comparable literature is only just beginning to emerge regarding neoliberal faith-based operations (Brondo and Hefferan 2010; Adkins et al. 2010).

The present dissertation therefore aims first of all to highlight and analyze the creativity, industry, and agency of poor recipients of Evangelical faith-based charity in Plainfield. The approach taken toward this end is one which revolves around what is characterized here as the recipients’ dilemma. The recipients’ dilemma manifests in societies, such as America, where behaviorist interpretations of poverty reign—where, in other words, poverty is typically attributed to deficiencies, flaws, and dysfunctions among the poor themselves (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:327). Where these behaviorist notions predominate, charitable environments impose an acute dilemma on recipients: If, on the one hand, recipients accept assistance in a passive manner, they risk being invidiously identified as undeserving or unworthy. If, on the other hand, they openly contest such labels in the process of receiving assistance, then they risk jeopardizing much-needed assistance. The central research question of this dissertation is thus: How do poor men and women negotiate the recipients’ dilemma in the context of Protestant Evangelical charities in the city of Plainfield?
The evidence from Plainfield supports a number of conclusions related to the production and negotiation of the recipients’ dilemma. First off, the Evangelical charities of Plainfield do—through their insistence that a person’s principal need is salvation through faith in Jesus Christ—reproduce the recipients’ dilemma by echoing the wider culture’s equation of poverty and personal deficiency. In response, though, the poor men and women of Plainfield negotiate and in fact transcend the recipients’ dilemma by *performing worthiness* in the context of receiving charitable assistance. Through such strategies as volunteering their labor power, demonstrating respectfulness, and much more, Plainfield recipients contest the validity of the recipients’ dilemma by demonstrating the possibility of a third way: that of the person who, despite needing assistance, nevertheless possesses the traits esteemed by liberal culture—that is, those traits that the poor are usually faulted for supposedly lacking.

Many Plainfield FBOs, it turns out, actually attract two distinct recipient classes, the *worker* and the *conventional*. Worker recipients comprise the small percentage of men and women who, in addition to receiving vital assistance from an FBO, also volunteer considerable time and labor power to the same organization. Conventional recipients, by contrast, are those who queue up in the standard way and receive without making any significant personal sacrifices. The practices of these two populations, described at length in chapters three through eight, are in chapter nine analyzed according to the Marxist theory of praxis. This analysis yields the following two conclusions: First, the performance of worthiness on the part of conventional recipients serves to reproduce a form of subjectivity in which capitalist social relations—particularly the relationship of dependency that forms the essence of the propertied versus unpropertied class divide—are naturalized. Second, participation in FBOs on the part of worker recipients has the contradictory effect of both fostering and stifling values and imaginaries that
are antithetical to neoliberal norms. In both instances, FBO operations play a critical role in reproducing capitalist social relations by preempting opposition among the people who have the most to gain by neoliberal capitalism’s transcendence.

During the early stages of fieldwork, the encounter with Plainfield compelled me to supplement my primary research agenda—that pertaining to the recipients’ dilemma and its corollaries—with a secondary research agenda examining the intersection of race and the uneven geographical distribution of faith-based resources in the city. In Plainfield, as in other American cities, a groundswell of private charitable support that includes donated material goods, financial resources, labor power, and much more rises up day in and day out to reproduce the organizations and undertakings of the faith-based sphere. Of particular importance for this thesis is the way in which the flows of the groundswell consistently reproduce the uneven development of the nutritional subsector of Plainfield’s faith-based sphere—that is, the totality of faith-based institutions in the city that provide hot meals, distribute groceries, or do both without charge.

As is made clear throughout chapters three through eight, however, the nutritional subsector in Plainfield has developed in a geographically uneven way such that some city neighborhoods with high concentrations of poor residents are far better served than others. The cause for this lies ultimately with the uneven geographical development of faith-based social capital throughout the city. Viewed at the scale of the city, it is evident that the uneven development of the nutritional subsector reproduces a form of faith-based white privilege within Plainfield, especially through the dramatic neglect of Daletown, the city’s poorest and most heavily African-American neighborhood. The concluding chapter of the dissertation extrapolates from these data to develop a more general hypothesis about the propensity of faith-
based philanthropy to reproduce the inequities of the preexisting social matrix from which they issue.

b. The Meaning of Neoliberalism

In the aftermath of World War Two, with Europe and Japan in ruins, American industries dominated world markets for manufactured goods (Branson et al. 1980:183; Glyn 2006:8). The next two and a half decades represented what is commonly called the *Golden Age* of American capitalism (Marglin and Schor 1991). This era was golden in the sense that robust corporate profits created a climate in which numerous other trends were able to unfold and lift average American living standards to previously unimagined heights (Glyn 2006:1-3). For one thing, working-class activism drove rates of union density to historic highs, and average wage and benefit levels soared as a result (Bowles et al. 2005:167-69; Smith 2006). During the 1960s, activism outside of the workplace also produced the *Great Society* programs and thus the creation of the modern American welfare state (Katz 1996:259-281; Piven and Cloward 1977:264-359). This expansion of public welfare was partly made possible by the fact that tax rates on corporations and the wealthy were at their historic zenith during the Golden Age (Swanson 2012:327). In addition to high tax rates, many other encumbrances on business freedom either continued or arose during the Golden Age, including tariffs, capital controls, and a host of laws governing such as things as labor relations, environmental considerations, equity in hiring, and health and safety provisions (Bowles et al. 2005:162-63).

The political economic configuration of high levels of union density, high rates of taxation on corporations and the wealthy, generous levels of public spending, and public-interested restrictions on private enterprise is sometimes referred to as *embedded liberalism*
The industrial countries of Western Europe and Japan each developed their own unique patterns of embedded liberalism during the postwar period (Harvey 1989:135-37). As a rule, however, the embedded liberalisms of these countries differed from the American form in a number of typical ways. The political economies of these countries tended to encroach even more forcefully than the American variety upon business freedoms, including through such measures as exerting greater social control over private investment, supporting more robust public welfare benefits through higher tax rates, and by offering greater protections to organized labor. As such, the embedded liberalisms of Japan and Western Europe qualified as social democracy rather than the mere welfare statism of America.

As early as the late 1950s, the reconstructed industries of Germany and Japan had begun to introduce competitive pressure into worldwide markets for industrial goods (Brenner 2006:67-93; Hall 1997:40-45). This pressure continued to mount throughout the 1960s, in part because these reconstructed industries had been able to incorporate more efficient technologies than those that were embedded in older American plants (Brenner 2006:57-58). In the early 1970s, still-escalating international competition and a battery of related problems—including inflation, labor militancy, soaring fuel prices, trade imbalances, and more—precipitated the most severe international economic crisis since the Great Depression (Glyn 2006; Harvey 2005). This crisis represented a historic watershed out of which flowed an array of political economic trends that, while persisting down to the present, have forged a global economy and thereby eroded the conditions upon which overwhelming American manufacturing dominance rested in the postwar era. By eroding American manufacturing supremacy, the growth of international competition also undermined the conditions upon which the widespread economic security of the postwar working class rested (Bowles et al. 2005:169; Glyn 2006:104-128).
Since the crisis of the early 1970s, Western elites and their allies have worked to restore capitalist class power and rehabilitate economic growth through such strategies as weakening organized labor, lowering tax rates on corporations and the wealthy, retrenching public welfare functions, deregulating capital, liberalizing markets, and generally securing the prerogatives of property (Glyn 2006; Harvey 2005). Technological advances, as in communications and shipping (Harvey 1989:165), and political developments, as in the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (Greider 1997:138), have been instrumental in expanding international market relationships. Global foreign direct investment (FDI) has exploded as a consequence of these trends (Brenner 2006:326; Singh 2000:5), particularly as capital has been liberated to seek out areas of low-cost production in the developing world. Owing to various factors, then—including FDI, the growth of internal markets, and careful management of export-oriented industries—numerous countries outside of the advanced West have either industrialized or expanded their industrial capacity during the neoliberal period, notably the Tiger economies of East Asia and more recently the behemoth of China (Brenner 2006:323-30; Glyn 2006:86-87; Harvey 2005:88-89).

Yet the liberalism of the postwar era was embedded in more than mere policy. It was also embedded in the hearts and minds of the people, including the hearts and minds of some elites as well (Harvey 2005:9). To be effective, then, the rollback and retrenchment of embedded liberalism demanded ideological and discursive counters as well (Sites 2007:118). The arguments and discourses marshaled by opponents of embedded liberalism—many of which were honed by Austrian school economists decades before the crises of the early 1970s (Hackworth 2012:11-13; Harvey 2005:19-22)—were many. Business and political groups have played a proactive role in disseminating these arguments and discourses since the early 1970s.
Chief among these arguments was the claim that free markets, by ensuring maximum economic efficiency, were the surest route toward economic growth and thus the best guarantor of overall social welfare (Goode and Maskovsky 2001b:7-8).

Widespread Western cultural values such as individualism, democracy, and freedom were also enlisted to critique embedded liberalism. David Harvey has argued, for example, that opponents of embedded liberalism made advances by invoking individual freedom as a justification for market relationships and property rights after the prestige of said individualism had been elevated by the cultural, racial, and gender victories of the 1960s (2005:40-43). In a similar vein, Thomas Frank has described how market populism—the doctrine that markets are actually more democratic than elected governments—has been critical in eroding support for state regulation of the economy (2000). Taken altogether, the aforementioned polices and discourses that have been marshaled against embedded liberalism and in favor of free markets and individualistic property rights constitute the meaning of neoliberalism. The neoliberal order is the political economic regime that has been realized—albeit unevenly across diverse geographic scales (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Harvey 2005:87-119)—through the ascendance of neoliberalism.

i. Neoliberal Opposition to Public Welfare

Attacks on the public welfare systems of embedded liberalism have been among the more prominent and enduring features of neoliberal policy and discourse (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; Brenner and Theodore 2002). As a consequence, a distinctive constellation of neoliberal arguments has coalesced around the principle of public welfare retrenchment (Goode and Maskovsky 2001b; Somers and Block 2005). To a significant extent, these neoliberal arguments
draw upon a lineage of anti-welfare discourses that stretch at least as far back as early nineteenth century England (Bigelow 2005; Somers and Block 2005). Those laws—which governed the administration of public relief in a society attempting to cope with the earth-shattering dislocations of nascent capitalism—drew a pivotal and enduring distinction between the *deserving* or *worthy* and the *undeserving* or *unworthy* poor (Barusch 2008:149-150).

Poor people who were regarded as unfit for work according to the categories of the epoch—such as the elderly, the disabled, the infirmed, and young children—were classed as the *deserving* or *worthy* poor. It was, according to the regnant thinking, through no fault of their own that such people were poor, for they were not able to work themselves out of poverty. They were seen as victims of their poverty rather than its authors. The *undeserving* or *unworthy*, by contrast, were the able-bodied poor of working age. Because members of the latter group were poor despite being able to work, it was assumed that characterological and behavioral defects such as intemperance, indolence, criminality, wantonness, and so on were the cause of their poverty (Doob 2015:217-218; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:325). In recent years, a number of scholars have characterized the view that poverty is typically due to the personal failings of poor people as *behaviorism* or the *behaviorist interpretation* of poverty (Kittay 1998:125-26; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:326-27), terminology that is followed here.

Defenders of the behaviorist interpretation of poverty naturally argue that what the poor need is reformation and change. Only by undergoing a radical process of personal

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1 Scholars differ over which of these classificatory dyads they prefer. Barusch (2008:149-150) and many others prefer *deserving and undeserving*, while Trattner (2007:54) opts for the less common formulation of *worthy* and *unworthy*. The present thesis draws attention to the validity of the latter option, which is the categorical nomenclature that yields the *performing worthiness* conceptual terminology.

2 Whatever their other differences, many prominent schools of poverty interpretation in modern America have embraced this behaviorist core. The list includes Social Darwinism (Hofstadter 1992), the Culture of Poverty thesis (Lewis 1966), the meritocracy ideology (McNamee and Miller 2013), libertarianism (Rothbard 2006), and also the Objectivism of Ayn Rand and her acolytes (Burns 2009).
transformation, a process that replaces their flaws and defects with more salubrious character traits, will such people be able to permanently escape poverty (Kemper and Adkins 2005:98-99; Noll 1992:295). On these grounds, behaviorists oppose public welfare entitlements. According to Somers and Block’s (2005) summary of this position, behaviorists regard entitlement programs as actually *perverse* in the sense that they encourage the dysfunctional traits and behaviors that cause poverty in the first place. For this reason, behaviorists tend to champion market-based solutions to poverty, for market discipline is applauded as a mechanism capable of producing personal transformation among the poor (Hilton 1992; Hofstadter 1996:209-210).

Though centuries old, these critiques of welfare entitlement have been discursive commonplaces in the neoliberal era (Bigelow 2005; Somers and Block 2005).

Also frequently heard has been the criticism that, because public welfare incomes for the poor derive from tax receipts, the idle poor live by expropriating wealth from the hard-working, tax-paying members of society. Welfare is, according to this line of thinking, a form of theft (Lienesch 1993:120-21). Critics have also seized upon the neoliberal valorization of agency and individualism to argue that welfare retrenchment, rather than having a straitening effect, actually liberates and empowers the poor to join the ranks of the self-sufficient citizenry (Goode and Maskovsky 2003b:7-8). Many scholars in anthropology and related fields have interrogated the racialized (Mullings 2005) and gendered (Kingfisher 2001) meanings—some more overt than others—that so often inform the anti-entitlement discourses of neoliberalism.

**ii. The Behaviorism of Marvin Olasky**

One of the more prominent and influential champions of the behaviorist interpretation of poverty in neoliberal America has been former journalism professor Marvin Olasky (Hackworth 2012:20). Olasky’s 1992 *magnum opus, The Tragedy of American Compassion*, argued that, for
most of American history, philanthropic and welfare institutions in the United States demanded behavioral accountability from the poor as a condition of assistance (1992:7-24). Moreover, the volunteers and workers that ran these institutions typically provided upstanding behavioral models for the poor to emulate (Olasky 1992:107-122). As such, according to Olasky, these institutions therefore took aim at the root causes of poverty rather than merely providing the salve of handouts.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, public support for these more demanding traditions began to gradually wane. By the conclusion of the 1960s, with the Great Society revolution completed, the American system of welfare had, according to Olasky, effectively ceased to hold the poor accountable for their defects and misbehavior (1992:168-69). According to Olasky, then, the post-1960s system of American charity actually encourages the reproduction of dysfunctional character traits and behavioral patterns, an outcome that transmits poverty and welfare dependence from one generation to the next (1992:185-192). In a word, then, according to Olasky, the contemporary system of American welfare is tragic. The alternative system that he advocated in his 1992 text was based upon a return to private benevolent institutions operated by models of upright behavior that demanded genuine accountability from the poor recipients (Olasky 1992:199-220).

iii. Neoliberal Welfare Restructuring in the United States

It is unsurprising that Marvin Olasky self-identifies as a Protestant Evangelical (Oppenheimer 2014), for Evangelical faith has long been a close correlate of support for the behaviorist interpretation of poverty in the United States (Garvey 1993:31; Hicks 2006; Hilton 1992; Hofstadter 1996; Noll 1992:295). The historian Randall Balmer defines an Evangelical Christian as one who assents to each of the following three propositions: one, that the Bible is
truly “God’s revelation to humanity”; two, that one must be “born again” through faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God in order to be saved in the hereafter; and, three, that those who have been saved have a personal responsibility to evangelize or share the faith with nonbelievers (2007:xviii-xix). As this definition indicates, the Evangelical community is large and—the common embrace of these three points notwithstanding—very diverse. That wider community includes anti-Pentecostal Fundamentalists and anti-Fundamentalist Pentecostals, nondenominational Protestants, mainline Protestants, and members of other Christian traditions as well (Hunter 1983; Martin 2005; Robbins 2004). A recent studied employing a definition similar to Balmer’s estimated that approximately one-third of the American population, more than one hundred million people, are Evangelicals (Bader et al. 2006:8).

The neoliberalization of American welfare policy between the 1990s and early 2000s was a complex and protracted process that entailed, among other things, a dramatic increase in the scale of FBO-state interrelationships (Hackworth 2012). After more than a decade of vigorous anti-welfare rhetoric and agitation from the right, including by many who had embraced Olasky’s interpretation of American welfare, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was elected to the Presidency in 1992 after having pledged to “end welfare as we know it” (Sigerman 2003:544). After having been reelected in 1996, President Clinton made good on that promise by signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), a piece of legislation that famously “ended the federal entitlement for welfare, devolved the program more completely to the states, and imposed a more restrictive set of time-limited policies designed to move welfare recipients rapidly, though not necessarily decisively, beyond “dependency” and into the workforce” (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:316).
Also included in the PRWORA was an unprecedented “Charitable Choice” provision that permitted FBOs, including ones that embraced “pervasive sectarianism,” to compete on a level playing field with secular NGOs for government social service contracts (Hackworth 2012:18; Sider 2005). After his 2000 election, President George W. Bush, himself an Evangelical, greatly expanded upon Charitable Choice by establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives by Executive Order in 2001 (Hackworth 2012:21-23; Sider 2005). This controversial “Faith-Based Initiative”—which imagined that “Armies of Compassion” would materialize in the wake of the President’s order (Kennedy and Bielefeld 2006:25)—owed a great deal to the teachings of Marvin Olasky (Hackworth 2012:21-22; Olasky 2000). The official White House publication announcing the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives touted the “unique capacity of local faith-based and other community programs to serve people in need, not just by providing services but also by transforming lives” (The White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives 2001:6).

iv. Worldwide Growth of Neoliberal Era FBOs

The expansion of faith-based social service provisioning evident in recent United States history has in fact been but one instance of a much more widespread phenomenon. All over the globe, FBO activity has surged in recent decades, both as a replacement for government action and as an adjunct to it (Brondo and Hefferan 2010; Clark 2007; Hefferan 2007:887). In the contemporary world, FBOs do much more than feed the hungry and shelter the homeless, two practices with which they have been traditionally associated. Today’s FBOs also undertake development projects (Bornstein 2005; DeTemple 2006; King 2011), operate in post-disaster settings and resettle refugees (Phillips and Jenkins 2010), provide for medical care and other aspects of public health (Chambré 2001; Fitzgibbon et al. 2005; Kline 2010; Pelto and
Santiviago 2010), repair and build houses (Hackworth 2012:63-85), support environmental protection efforts (Feldman and Moseley 2003), combat adult illiteracy (Prins 2008), offer employment training (Kennedy and Bielefeld 2006), and much more.

A variety of factors have contributed to the making of this FBO upsurge. Foremost among them, in recent decades many governments and international organizations have transferred more and more of their social welfare responsibilities to FBOs and other private providers (Clarke 2007; Hefferan 2007). These maneuvers have opened up significant funding streams for NGOs, both faith-based and secular (Hefferan 2007:887). In the sphere of development, where institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and USAID have pivoted toward private providers, this trend has been especially pronounced (Belshaw et al. 2001; Hefferan 2010). A number of scholars have noted that, in practice, these trends have often led to situations in which NGOs, faith-based and secular, have been required to fill gaps and meet exigencies left unattended in countries where state fragmentation rather than cohesion is the norm (Beaumont 2008b:378; Laird 2010; Milligan 2007:4-5; Schuller 2009).

Supporters of these trends frequently tout the supposedly unrivaled effectiveness of FBOs in securing positive social outcomes (Hefferan et al. 2009:6; Kemper and Adkins 2005:73). There is, in fact, some evidence that faith-based organizations are less likely to misuse funds than secular ones (Bornstein 2005; Dicklitch and Rice 2004). Others doubt or at least qualify these statements, such as Paul Peters who argues that greater efficiency among FBOs stems from the organizational legitimacy that follows from religious affiliation rather than religious conviction per se (2009). Other factors driving the growth, capabilities, and legitimacy of FBOs in recent decades have included myriad technological advances (Tyndale 2006), political victories on the part of the New Right (Zehavi 2008), and certainly the worldwide resurgence of
conservative religion that is sometimes characterized as *the desecularization of the world* (Casanova 1994; Berger 1999).

c. The Anthropology of FBOs and Voluntarism

FBO growth has, of course, been only a part of the wider NGO upsurge within global civil society in recent decades (Fisher 1997). Within anthropology, however, while considerable amounts of research have been devoted to the study of secular NGOs, FBOs have been largely neglected (Brondo and Hefferan 2010:161; Freidus 2010:51-52; Huff 2010:105). Scholars of religion have, for their part, tended to focus on questions of religious symbolism, discourse, and practice outside of the faith-based service context (Kemper 2006:141). In the past decade, however, a small but exciting body of anthropological literature on the subject of FBOs has rapidly emerged (Adkins et al. 2010; Hefferan et al. 2009). Being young, this body of literature still evinces some inner unevenness, particularly in its overwhelming focus on the efforts of Western Christian FBOs at the expense of other faith traditions. Studies of FBOs that have diverged from a Western Christian focus include Bornholdt’s account of Buddhist Soka Gakkai operations in Brazil (2009) and Laird’s account of Muslim voluntarism in the United States (2010).

The unifying thread within this nascent literature is the use of sensitive ethnographic techniques to draw careful and nuanced conclusions about the state of FBOs worldwide. In doing so, these ethnographers have illuminated patterns of difference and differentiation that have often been elided in non-ethnographic literatures. Several anthropologists have worked their findings into useful taxonomies of FBO difference, including Hefferan and her colleagues who distinguish between *faith-permeated, faith-centered, faith-affiliated, faith-background*

i. FBO Imaginaries

The work done by anthropologists to probe the unique imaginaries animating diverse FBOs has been among their principal contributions. A number of studies, for example, from both the Global North and South have examined the influence of liberation theology—with its preferential option for the poor—on Roman Catholic FBOs. In Brazil, a Roman Catholic priest joins that theology with Paolo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed (2014[1968]) in an effort to empower rural migrants in their new urban surroundings (Greenfield 2010). Half a world away in Chicago, a Roman Catholic FBO named the Southwest Organizing Project responds to the upheaval of geographic reconfigurations in the city by advocating a “theology of neighborhood” that enables work across traditional parish boundaries (Wedam 2005).

Several analogous studies on the subject of guiding imaginaries have been conducted among Protestants. In his monograph on Emerging Evangelicals in the American Midwest, James Bielo documents how the goal of being missional—a key criterion of what is considered authentic faith within this community—impels believers to plant churches and offer social services in impoverished urban neighborhoods, neighborhoods that emerging Evangelicals believe have been too long neglected by their coreligionists in suburbia (2011). Describing a different tradition within American Protestantism, Connolly and Brondo (2010) have shown how Episcopalian missionaries working among indigenous groups in Panama attempt to practice an incarnational theology that calls them to bear witness to faith in Christ by aspiring to live, however imperfectly, as He would live, rather than by proselytizing in the traditional sense.
Researching developments in Christchurch, New Zealand, David Conradson (2008) has described how Christian FBOs in that city have recently regrouped in defense of social justice after having spent much of the 1990s reeling from the neoliberal onslaught.

ii. FBOs and Identity Promotion

The fact that FBOs are frequently harnessed as vehicles for identity promotion and advocacy, often in the face of contestation and resistance, represents another prominent theme in the current literature. Laird (2010), for example, argues that Islamic FBOs negotiate ambivalence in the United States through charity work. By enacting their faith in a way that conforms to traditional American expectations of what public religiosity should look like, they subtly challenge the stereotypes and stigmas of the wider Islamophobic culture in which they are embedded (2010). Conducting research with several Christian FBOs in small town and rural Mississippi, John Bartkowski and Helen Regis argue that through “benevolence work and community outreach” these organizations both constitute their identities and draw boundaries that separate them from other communities (2003:2). As a last example, Laurie Occhipinti shows how developmental assistance from Roman Catholic FBOs in Argentina empowers marginalized indigenous groups to maintain their cultural identity despite the pressures of market encroachment (2005).

iii. Faith-Based Subjectivities and their Contradictions

In addition to examining the imaginaries structuring FBO efforts and the value of FBOs in the work of identity promotion, a number of anthropologists have also focused on interrogating the subjectivities of FBO operatives. Despite diversity across research settings, the findings of these scholars demonstrate that such subjectivities are frequently marked by inner
tensions and contradictions that impact the everyday practice of FBOs. In a recent monograph, Omri Elisha has sought to probe the ethical dilemmas and existential conflicts that confront suburban white Evangelicals involved with FBOs in the city of Knoxville, Tennessee (2011). What he discovered is that FBO operatives model their understanding of charity after their Evangelical understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. Just as nonbelievers should respond to the inestimable gift of God’s saving grace by converting to a belief in Christ as one’s personal Savior, so too should charity recipients always respond to compassion with accountability. That recipients do not, however, frequently strains the commitment to unconditional compassion on the part of socially engaged Evangelicals, thus producing the aforesaid dilemmas and conflicts.

Andrea Muehlebach, in her study of Italian voluntarism, makes similar observations regarding how the inner tensions of FBO subjectivities can yield contradictions in practice (2012). According to her, voluntarism among her Italian informants in the context of state retrenchment serves to constitute a form of subjectivity that elevates positive affect through charitable assistance as an ideal. Her name for this form of subjectivity is the moral neoliberal. Displaced by the valorization of affect, however, is the notion that because people have rights that the state is obliged to meet, the state’s neoliberal retreat from social democracy is therefore objectionable. Drawing upon his work with FBOs in Nicaragua, Timothy Fogarty similarly argues that the tensions between altruism and solidarity impel both volunteers and beneficiaries alike to reproduce, both intentionally and unintentionally, neoliberal development discourses (2009:91-93). These works, by documenting the role of FBOs in constituting forms of subjectivity consonant with the imperatives of capital accumulation, also join a wider anthropological literature on the synergistic connections between Christianity religiosity and

iv. FBOs and their Cultural Articulations

Similar research sensitivities have been brought to bear in several studies that examine the complex ways in which FBOs articulate with the wider social environments within which they are embedded. In her account of Protestant FBOs in El Salvador, for example, Huff (2010) argues that these organizations create *associational contexts* that allow for ordinary Salvadorans to have input over the direction of development projects affecting them. As such, then, these FBOs contribute to the vital work of forming publics in Salvadoran civil society. Studying Christian FBOs that seek to minister to the needs of orphans in Malawi, Freidus (2010) documents the many challenges that arise for organizations insufficiently knowledgeable about their host culture. In addition to structuring policies in ways that encourage ineffective programming and the misuse of funds, these FBOs define orphans in a way that conflicts with traditional Malawian meanings. With Western FBOs ignoring the relevant extended family kin networks, distribution of resources to children whose parents have died can stoke conflict and exacerbate inequality. For many of the same reasons, FBO policies in Malawi tend to exacerbate gender inequalities by granting disproportionate control over resources to men, a fact that allows these men to act in self-interested rather than community-interested ways. Lastly, a number of anthropologists have examined the many ways in which postindustrial austerity shapes FBO community development efforts in the United States (Adkins and Kemper 2006; Bielo 2011; Lambert-Pennington 2010).
v. FBOs and Subjectivation among Recipients

Crucially, the FBO literature has also grappled with the relationship between FBOs and one of the more prominent themes in contemporary anthropology: that of subjectivation (Lambek 2002b). In short, many anthropologists have found that FBOs are, in addition to performing service and development work, helping to constitute and shape subjectivities worldwide. In her monograph on two Christian development FBOs operating in Zimbabwe, Erica Bornstein (2005) has demonstrated how these efforts set in motion an array of factors that actually encourage the growth of one of Christianity’s great others: witchcraft. This outcome notwithstanding, the capaciousness of Christian doctrine also creates the discursive space within which the tension between Christianity and witchcraft can be productively negotiated.

Other works that interrogate the role of FBOs in processes of subjectivation include Greenfield’s ethnography among urban migrants doing “community therapy” work in Brazil (2010). Through a form of community therapy that is led by a Roman Catholic priest and based upon a fusion of liberation theology and Paolo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed (2014[1968]), these urban migrants are encouraged to conceptualize, reflect upon, and share their experiences. This process, it turns out, is extremely effective in helping participants understand the overarching power of structural forces on their own lives and to thus orient their social action accordingly. By contrast, DeTemple, Edienshink, and Josephson’s research with an Evangelical FBO operating among indigenous communities in Bolivia documents how, by valorizing materialism, Western dress, and speaking Spanish, that organization equated the success of development with the erosion of indigenous lifeways (2009). And providing a feminist critique of one of the globe’s more renowned Evangelical FBOs, Hogue (2009) has documented how the
efforts of World Vision in Peru have reoriented behavior there in ways that have, among other things, shifted gender roles to the disadvantage of women.

vi. FBOs and the Neglect of Recipient Agency

For all of the above work, however, the anthropological literature on FBOs is relatively young (Brondo and Hefferan 2010). Much remains to be done. Among the themes treated by the existing literature and described above, for example, are these two: forms of subjectivity among FBO personnel on the one hand (Elisha 2011; Fogarty 2009; Muehlebach 2012) and, on the other, the tendency of FBO programs to effect, intentionally or not, the constitution and reconstitution of recipient subjectivities (Bornstein 2005; DeTemple et al. 2009; Greenfield 2010; Hogue 2009). The former of these themes tends to suggest potency, deliberateness, and agency on the part of FBO personnel. While the latter, by contrast, tends to evoke a picture of beneficiaries as passive and malleable in the face of FBO power. What is missing in the present literature is corrective research—research, that is, that attends seriously to signs and patterns of creativity, power, and agency among beneficiaries, for these qualities ensure that faith-based activity is mutually constituted rather than unilaterally imposed.

The sort of treatments that are lacking in the FBO literature—that is, ones accenting subaltern agency—are a staple of parallel anthropological accounts of neoliberalism and its effects outside of the context of FBOs (Goode and Maskovsky 2001a; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:328-29; Susser 1982; Susser 1996). Among other agentive patterns, anthropologists have documented people resisting capital flight (Weinbaum 2003), contesting the terms of job loss (Pappas 1989), defying conventions that demand their marginalization (Bourgois 2003), invoking collective identity in the fight against urban redevelopment (Gregory 1999),
reproducing long-distance nationalism as a means for critiquing oppression (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001), struggling to forge globalization from below (Edelman 2003), and much more. For their part, many scholars of religion in anthropology and other fields have documented analogous instances in which faith has been marshaled to oppose the degradation and suffering of neoliberal discipline and austerity (Brodwin 2003; Burdick 1998; Fuechtmann 1989; Lopez 2000; Ong 1987; Pfeiffer et al. 2007).

The principal goal of this thesis, then, is to provide an account of faith-based charity in the postindustrial Midwest that takes seriously the creativity and agency of poor recipients. Doing so requires first of all understanding the contours of the recipients’ dilemma, a social phenomenon that derives from hegemonic behaviorism. The behaviorist interpretation of poverty perpetuates one of the signal meanings of Elizabethan Poor Law discourse: that those who are poor despite being able to work are the authors of their own poverty. It is, in other words, from character defects and dysfunctional behavior patterns that their poverty flows. The Elizabethan Poor Law and successor ideologies have traditionally stigmatized the able-bodied poor as undeserving, unworthy, and inferior (Doob 2015:217-218; Hilton 1992; Somers and Block 2005). While originating in a discourse that defined worthy and unworthy in relation to charitable entitlements, these labels are now customarily used in more global terms, such that the able-bodied poor are undeserving, unworthy, and inferior as people (Kennedy and Bielefeld 2006:8; Ryan 2010). Note critically that it is not poverty per se that makes them so, but the supposed possession of disreputable traits and habits.

From these discourses and meanings, the practical social predicament of the recipients’ dilemma arises as follows: To need charitable assistance is a sign of one’s poverty, and to be poor is, in most circumstances, deemed by the behaviorist interpretation to be proof of one’s
inferior and dysfunctional status. Where these meanings reign, the person seeking charity risks inhabiting the social category of one who is unworthy and inferior. Herein lies the recipients’ dilemma: the recipient can accept assistance passively and risk being classed as one who is inferior, or the recipient can contest those meanings in the context of receiving assistance, although this course of action has the potential to jeopardize his or her access to much-needed assistance. Neither scenario is ideal from the point of view of the recipient. What is one to do?

Do these people find a way to both receive charity and avoid stigmatization? Are they, in other words, able to benefit from assistance without also inhabiting the scorned social identity of one who is undeserving or unworthy?³

The account below answers these questions in the affirmative. Despite the apparently rigid precepts of behaviorism, the poor people attending Evangelical FBOs in Plainfield are able to receive assistance without inhabiting the social identity of one who is unworthy and inferior. They negotiate and actually transcend the recipients’ dilemma in this way by performing worthiness in the context of receiving charitable assistance. To perform worthiness is to demonstrate, through one’s conduct, that one possesses the character traits esteemed by liberal culture—traits such as sobriety, willingness to work, respectfulness, patience, and so on. These are of course the very traits that, according to behaviorism, the poor fatefuly lack. In the Evangelical charities of Plainfield, however, poor recipients perform worthiness day in and day out. While each performs worthiness in his or her own way, almost all strive to show their

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³ In a similar vein, the theologian and sociologist Tex Sample argues that one of the central dilemmas for members of the American working class lies in reconciling the “religion of winning” promoted by the culture at large with the “reality of losing” as an individual according to the same standards of that culture (1984). “The experience of failure,” he writes, “pervasive in an achievement-oriented culture and compounded for the poor and the near poor, stalks blue-collar working people. It looms in people’s fears and contemplation of the future. To be defined as a loser and to accept that definition for oneself is as close to hell as anything that there is in a winner culture” (1984:56).
possession of estimable character traits on a regular basis. What these recipients do, in other words, is organize their public actions so as to contradict the behaviorist equation of poverty and dysfunction. Through practice, they assert that they are poor despite their personality traits and behavioral patterns rather than because of them.

In analyzing these patterns for their deeper social significance, however, it becomes evident that performances of worthiness—however much they represent recipient creativity and agency—actually contribute to the reproduction of neoliberal social relationships, the very social relationships, in other words, that produce widespread poverty and disempowerment in the first place. There is a contradiction of significant import at work here. Among conventional recipients, the performance of worthiness draws them into a form of praxis that reinforces the naturalization of capitalist social relations and the property-based dependency that those relations entail for working-class people.

Interestingly, however, among the small subset of recipients who also serve as volunteers—worker recipients—the performance of worthiness encourages practices and imaginaries antithetical to the tenets of neoliberal capitalism. Having emerged within the confines of neoliberal institutions, however, the socially meaningful development of these practices and imaginaries is stymied by power inequities. The energies of some of the more talented and insightful among the poor are thus prevented from flowing in radical directions. The power of property relationships, in other words, hinders the formation and advance of dissident identities among the unpropertied. Through these subtle mechanisms, the social relations of neoliberal capitalism are reproduced by some of the people most disserved by it.
vii. FBOs and the Political Economic Tradition

By drawing political economic implications from the everyday performance of worthiness in Plainfield charities, this thesis also intersects with the work of several contemporary scholars who explore the articulations between faith-based activities and the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism. Arguing from ethnographic data collected with one Philadelphia organization, for example, Judith Goode (2006) has documented the power of neoliberal pressures to shape FBO worldviews and operations, even to the extent of supplanting a traditional focus on community activism in favor of a mission that stresses personal reformation and market-based solutions. Examining the faith-based issue from the national scale, Jason Hackworth (2012) has organized his recent monograph around the question of how neoliberal policies, especially the Charitable Choice and Faith-Based policies of 1996 and 2001, have succeeded in winning widespread support in America. The answer, he argues, lies in the fact that Christians—and Evangelicals in particular—have consistently been willing to join with the secular right in defense of neoliberal policies when those policies have been framed for them in a religious idiom. As another example, Francis Fox Piven has argued that the PRWORA, which included the landmark Charitable Choice provision, served as a boon to private enterprise by eroding the social safety net and thus placing downward pressure on working-class wages (2001).

d. The Geography of FBOs and Voluntarism

In the course of researching the production and negotiation of the recipients’ dilemma, however, it became evident that race relations play a profound role in the making of Plainfield’s faith-based sphere. Being unable to credibly ignore this issue, I took it on as a secondary
research agenda. This initiative led me to investigate why it is that the nutritional subsector of Plainfield’s faith-based sphere—that is, the totality of faith-based institutions in the city that provide hot meals, distribute groceries, or do both free of charge—has developed in a geographically uneven way. Taking up this secondary research agenda established points of contact between this thesis and the rapidly growing literature within the discipline of geography sometimes called the geographies of voluntarism (Milligan 2007). Although more and more geographers have begun to examine FBOs of late (Beaumont and Cloke 2012; Farnell 2001), most research within the geographies of voluntarism subfield has thus far been confined to secular voluntarism and secular NGOs (Beaumont 2008:377).

As in the anthropological scholarship on FBOs, a number of key themes have risen to prominence among geographers of voluntarism. Many researchers, for example, have conducted comparative studies in an attempt to understand why rates of voluntarism differ across locales (e.g., Bielefeld and Murdoch 2004; Milligan 2001; Milligan and Fyfe 2004). Among their other findings, this group of researchers has demonstrated the influence of historical and cultural traditions on rates of voluntarism, particularly traditions that flourish at the subregional scale (Bryson et al. 2002; Mohan and Gorsky 2001; Nowicki 2000; Regulska 1999). Geographers have also made prominent contributions to the cross-disciplinary literature that examines the role of voluntary organizations in generating social capital within communities (Lockhart 2005; Putnam 2000), particularly communities that suffer from patterns of social marginalization and exclusion (Beaumont 2008b; Lalich 2006; Milligan and Conradson 2006b).

Some geographers have also traced the impact of neoliberal pressures on voluntary sector activity, paying special attention to determining whether and how reconfigurations of state policy might alternately stimulate or dampen voluntarism (Barnett and Barnett 2006; Creese 2006;
Edwards and Woods 2006). A number of others have empirically explored the influential shadow state thesis of Jennifer Wolch (1990), who argues that, through the increased influence of state policies over the nonprofit sector, the expansion of nonprofit activity is tantamount to an intensified penetration of state logics into everyday life (Beaumont and Dias 2008:390; Milligan 2007:4-5; Mitchell 2001). The geographers who have investigated FBOs to this point have been mostly preoccupied with the capacity of such organizations to fight for social justice and against exclusion in Europe (Beaumont and Cloke 2012; Cloke et al. 2013; Farnell 2001), an approach that has been inspired by a postsecularist reading of David Harvey’s classic text, Social Justice and the City (2009[1973]) (McLennan 2011).

The segment of the geographies of voluntarism literature most relevant to the present thesis, however, is that which focuses upon the constitution and implications of uneven development in the voluntary sector (Bielefeld and Murdoch 2004; Joseph and Hallman 1998; Milligan 2007; Milligan and Fyfe 2006). Examining geographical phenomena through the conceptual lens of uneven development is a rich and well-established tradition within the discipline of geography (Harvey 2009[1973]; Smith 1974). In addition to its prominent use in analyzing the built environment as an outgrowth of the capital accumulation process (Harvey 2006; Smith 2008), the uneven development concept has been deployed to scrutinize such diverse phenomena as the distribution of public services (Earickson 1971; Hamnett and Butler 2011), the layout of bus routes (Soja 2010:vii-xviii), the geography of job opportunities (Chu et al. 2001), the spread of grocery stores (Walker et al. 2010), and much more. Analyses rooted in this concept often document how the uneven development of urban resources both constitute and exacerbate existing social inequalities along one or more dimensions.
A few works within the geographies of voluntarism have adopted a similar approach. In her seminal work on elderly care services in Scotland, for example, Christine Milligan demonstrates that voluntary activity is mediated by place and thus, in the context of neoliberal policy transformations, the impact of state retrenchment is more damaging in some areas than in others (2001). In similar manner, Vincent Del Casino shows how geographical distance affects access to health care for people living with HIV and AIDs in Thailand (2001). And on the basis of her research with the voluntary sector in Vancouver, Canada, Gillian Creese (2006) has documented how neoliberal welfare restructuring has, by producing an uneven geographical landscape of voluntary welfare support for migrants to the city, also created the conditions that inspired activism against marginalization.

Through its secondary research agenda then, the present thesis also makes contributions in this direction by describing and analyzing the uneven geographical development of Plainfield’s nutritional subsector in ways that favor residents of heavily poor white neighborhoods over residents of heavily poor African-American neighborhoods. In this way, a form of faith-based white privilege is inscribed into the built environment. In the concluding chapter, these observations are developed into theoretical insights regarding the propensity of unregulated voluntarism to reproduce the inequities of preexisting social matrix. These remarks respond to the call put out by Justin Beaumont for a greater theorization of the “geo-political-economy” of FBOs (2008b:380).

e. Research Methodology

In initially casting about for a research site where I might pursue a study of the recipients’ dilemma, I sought a locale where postindustrial poverty and a large, vibrant Evangelical
community existed side by side. I hypothesized that in such a place the structural violence of large-scale disinvestment would create productive tensions between the experiences of poor men and women and the behaviorist interpretation of poverty so often espoused by Evangelicals. After seeking advice from several scholars of American religion, I chose Plainfield as a provisional field site. Following two reconnaissance trips between summer 2007 and spring 2008, I settled definitively on Plainfield. The contacts and connections I made through this preparatory work formed the starting point of my research when I took up residence in Plainfield in September 2008. The twelve continuous months of fieldwork following that date were generously funded by both the Wenner-Gren and the Horowitz Foundations.

As will be described much more extensively in chapter two, contemporary Plainfield exists as a paragon of deindustrialization and decline. In summer 2008, in fact, a nationally recognized publication designated Plainfield as one of the *fastest dying* cities in America. Between 1950 and 2008, the city lost more than eighty percent of its manufacturing jobs and more than one-third of its overall population. Nearly a third of all city residents and half of all city children live below the poverty line. With scant in-migration to Plainfield in recent decades, about sixty-five percent of city residents are white, twenty to twenty-five percent are African-American, and most of the remainder are of mixed race descent. Dramatic geographic segregation reigns along both class and race dimensions. Due also to the unique history of the city, Evangelical Protestants represent a large and especially vibrant element of the local faith scene. In conjunction with a strong tradition of philanthropic commitment on the part of local elites, the Plainfield faith community helps to underwrite what many qualified observers have characterized as an exceptionally vigorous sphere of private social service providers in the area, both faith-based and secular.
As to the character of the research itself, several different factors encouraged me to conduct fieldwork with multiple FBOs rather than just one alone. One of these was pragmatic: having multiple fieldwork sites in play allowed me to keep my calendar full of research opportunities day in and day out. Studying one organization alone, even a busy one, would have left an inordinate amount of slack time, and I preferred to stay busy on the assumption that being on the scene more often than not was the surest way to identify the deep patterns that underlay a wealth of individualized and particular encounters.

It also seemed to me that, for the same reason, data from multiple FBOs would enable a better-informed response to the dissertation’s primary research question. Data on recipients’ dilemma negotiations from only one FBO might be anomalous, unrepresentative of city-wide patterns. Conducting research at multiple diverse fieldwork sites concurrently would control for this problem and thus allow for a more generalized conclusion about the ways in which charity recipients negotiate the recipients’ dilemma in postindustrial America. I therefore began my research stay by conducting fieldwork with four FBOs, all of them Protestant and Evangelical in their theological orientation. Among the many services they provided were shelter for the homeless, neighborhood clean-ups, job interview preparation, home repair and rehabilitation, and hot meal and grocery giveaways.

Within a few months of having begun my research, however, I had become sensitized to the long history of racial inequality in the city and particularly to the ways in which that history had been inscribed into the built environment. Having become aware of these factors, I began to observe the significance of racial inequality on the development of Plainfield’s faith-based sphere, its nutritional subsector in particular. These considerations evolved into the secondary
research agenda in which I sought to describe and explain the uneven geographical development of Plainfield’s nutritional subsector.

After adopting this secondary research agenda, I elected to focus my energies almost exclusively on two of the four FBOs I had been working with, both of them members of the nutritional subsector. These were Staff of Life Ministries (SLM) and the Haven of Hope (HOH). The former is a large Evangelical food ministry dominated by a white leadership and operating in Plainfield’s overwhelmingly white Swing neighborhood. The latter is a Pentecostal ministry that hosts a diverse slate of programs, including grocery distribution, and is based in Plainfield’s Daletown neighborhood, the historic heart of African-American Plainfield. The Haven of Hope is staffed almost exclusively by African-Americans.

In conducting fieldwork with the SLM and the HOH, I focused heavily—but not exclusively—on the myriad ways in which the recipients’ dilemma was both produced and negotiated within the halls of these FBOs. In order to track the production of the recipients’ dilemma, I attended to any expression or statement that espoused or even implied a behaviorist explanation of poverty. To this end, I paid careful attention to the worldviews and statements of FBO elites, for the actions of these people dominate the ideological and discursive climate within which recipients must operate. And in order to document negotiations of the recipients’ dilemma while functioning as a participant-observer in this climate, I spent considerable time studying the actions and inactions, the statements and the silences, of poor charity recipients.

In order to advance the secondary research agenda regarding the unevenness of the nutritional subsector, I sought out data along these three dimensions as well: data that quantified the level of nutritional subsector support enjoyed by each city neighborhood; data describing the socioeconomic characteristics of residents in each city neighborhood; and data—much of it
ethnographic—describing the patterns and relationships that account for why some neighborhoods are better supported by the nutritional subsector than others.

By the end of nine months of research, I could discern the dissertation’s main arguments and also the data still needed at that point to solidify them. The final three months of my time in Plainfield was devoted to collecting data of the latter sort. During that time I conducted more than thirty semi-structured interviews with relevant people from all sorts of backgrounds: public officials, local philanthropic elites, clergy, FBO managers, and also many charity recipients. Many of these people are quoted, some of them at length, in chapters three through eight. Even the insights and experiences of those who are not cited directly are embedded below, usually as the background information that justifies my making of generalizations about the distinctive patterns of urban life in Plainfield. All information I collected is supportive of or consonant with the assertions and conclusions below. Had I learned otherwise at any time, the conclusions of this thesis would have been modified accordingly.

f. A Preview of Chapters Two through Nine

The remaining eight chapters of this thesis unfold in the following manner. Chapter two is dedicated to providing a detailed account of the political economic history of Plainfield. Given the two research agendas structuring this ethnography, the historical account presented in chapter two gives special weight to the factors that have contributed most to the making of class and racial inequalities in contemporary Plainfield. These include the rise and decline of industrial capitalism in the city, the evolution of the city’s built environment, and especially the historic patterns by which the proceeds of growth and the costs of decline have been distributed unevenly across the diverse social landscape. The policies that have systematically dispossessed
African-Americans for more than a century receive special attention in this regard. Also receiving detailed coverage is the evolution of Plainfield’s faith community, a factor of some significance in this analysis.

Chapters three through eight constitute the ethnographic core of the thesis. Owing to the way they have been written, chapters three through five constitute one extended narrative regarding the people and the goings-on of the SLM, while six through eight offer comparable narrative coverage of the HOH. A few different factors led to the choice of this mode of presentation. For one thing, an extended narrative format seemed to offer the best strategy available for providing fair and nuanced depictions of the people who were kind enough to share their lives with me. Also, a diachronically oriented narrative of poor people struggling against poverty made possible a more vivid rendering of precarity in postindustrial America. Most important of all, perhaps, the narrative below, by striving for detail and realism, hopefully provides an empirical yardstick against which readers might measure the validity of the behaviorist interpretation of poverty (cf. Goode 2009).

None of this is to suggest, however, that chapters three through eight are organized in a loose or disjointed fashion. On the contrary, the main themes of the two research agendas serve as a sort of conceptual armature within which the narratives of people and faith-based operations are embedded. Put another way, systematic evidence regarding both the recipients’ dilemma and the uneven development of the nutritional subsector are carefully and coherently woven throughout chapters three through eight. In chapter nine, all of this evidence is brought forth and organized in such a way as to provide support for the dissertation’s principal arguments: First, through interactions with both conventional and worker recipients alike, FBOs that operate in the context of hegemonic behaviorism make critical contributions to the reproduction of capitalist
social relations in postindustrial America. And, two, the uneven geographical development of
Plainfield’s faith-based sector ultimately exacerbates racial inequality and establishes a form of
eleemosynary white privilege within the city’s working class. Judging from the Plainfield
evidence and the dynamics at work there, the final chapter also develops the hypothesis that,
under certain widespread conditions, the unequal racial outcomes visible in Plainfield are
probably duplicated by the faith-based spheres of many other American cities as well.
II. A Political Economic History of Plainfield

a. Historical Overview

The city of Plainfield, Charles County was originally founded as a village of three hundred lots in the early nineteenth century by a politically-connected entrepreneur from the East who sought to enlarge his fortune by speculating in Western lands. As the movement of peoples and the redrawing of boundaries has repeatedly altered the relationship between Plainfield and the rest of the United States, the patch of earth upon which the city sits has successively belonged to the Northwest Territory, the West, the Middle West, and now, more specifically, the Upper Midwest.

The conditions present in and around Plainfield during the earliest years of settlement—natural, demographic, and otherwise—helped to spur the town’s development as a nationally important manufacturing center by the time of the Civil War. When manufacturing ultimately declined in the late nineteenth century, however, the conditions bequeathed by past successes helped to facilitate Plainfield’s transformation into a twentieth century center of heavy industry. This legacy of industrial prowess has, in turn, shaped the pace and character of postindustrial decline in Plainfield, a decline that, despite having begun in the 1950s, has accelerated markedly in the new millennium.

b. From Agricultural Hinterland to Manufacturing City

Families of farmers drawn to the broad and fertile plains of Charles County—most of them ethnic Germans from Europe or “Pennsylvania Dutch” Germans from the agricultural

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4 In order to conceal the identity of Plainfield and thus preserve the anonymity of my informants, citations that could easily disclose the city’s true name are omitted from this chapter, but they are available upon request.
region spanning south-central Pennsylvania and northern Maryland—comprised the majority of
the area’s first settlers. In the early years, the village of Plainfield served as an adjunct to the
surrounding agricultural economy—as a hub of commerce, government, worship, sociability, and
artisanal production. While ethnic Germans also predominated in the village, New England
Yankees and Scots-Irish made up significant portions of the Plainfield population as well. With
Plainfield founded inland, far from a navigable waterway and before the construction of adequate
roads, prohibitive transportation costs stunted economic growth in the region until one of the
Midwest’s leading canal systems penetrated the county in the 1820s. With access to the great
markets of the urban Midwest and the Eastern seaboard secured, however, Charles County
erupted into one of the foremost wheat-growing regions of the country. Commercial
opportunities abounded, while capital and migrants deluged the region.

As crop yields soared, so too did demand for agricultural implements such as plows,
mowers, reapers, and threshers. In this environment, a handful of Charles County artisans
made—each independently of one another—breakthrough technological advances in the design
of mowers, reapers, and other agricultural implement lines. Situated amidst booming markets,
near to significant deposits of coal and iron ore, and armed with exclusive government patents on
their technologies, the workshops of these men grew into the first factories of the county in the
1830s and 40s.

About midcentury—as technological developments foretold the imminent supremacy of
railroads over canals—a group of prominent Plainfield residents succeeded in making their town
the first in the county to attract a major trunk line. Even before the steam of the first engine
billowed over local rooftops, however, a number of manufacturers relocated to Plainfield from
elsewhere in the county in expectation of the comparative advantage promised by the railroad.
Several became important engines of manufacturing growth in nineteenth century Plainfield. One of them, an agricultural implements maker, would go on to become the most dynamic and profitable firm of Plainfield’s manufacturing era. Over the course of the 1870s and 80s, the city’s capitalist class—eventually operating through the Board of Trade—induced many more manufacturing firms to relocate to Plainfield, often through gifts of money, land, or both.

While agricultural implement firms represented the undisputed core of the city’s manufacturing base throughout the 1850 to 1890 period, the city was hardly a one sector town. The long history of iron production in the area also helped to stimulate the manufacture of wrought iron bridges, safes and vaults, iron roofing, steam engines, boilers, printing presses, cutlery, bells, stoves, and more in the city before 1890. Bountiful timber in the forests surrounding Plainfield supported lumber and furniture production for decades, while choice deposits of clay and shale in the hills south of town stimulated some of the more successful paving brick firms in American history. The prodigious demand that drove manufacturing growth in Plainfield year after year with only periodic interruptions stemmed largely from the burgeoning Midwest itself (Meyer 1989), although some of the larger city firms, leaders in their respective fields, were exporting goods overseas as early as the 1870s.

On the strength of these successes, the manufacturing sector of Plainfield grew to more than four hundred firms and seven thousand employees by 1890. Overall city population at the same time approached thirty thousand, which was a more than ten-fold increase from the 1850 figure. Parallel rates of growth in neighboring towns made Charles a predominantly urban county by 1890. Regarding the evolution of the built environment during this period, the manufacturing sector of Plainfield took root to the south and southwest of the city’s original downtown core. The first large and overwhelmingly working-class neighborhoods of the city
sprung up here within convenient walking distance of the area’s factories. The neighborhood that serves as the backdrop of chapters three, four, and five of this dissertation—the Swing—dates from this period of development.

With industrial revolution and thus widespread deskilling an early twentieth century phenomenon in Plainfield, skilled and semi-skilled labor continued to represent significant portions of the labor force as of 1890. Throughout the 1870s and 80s, skilled laborers had organized craft unions such as the Iron Moulders, Cigar Makers, Bricklayers, and others. In every respect, however, the working class of manufacturing Plainfield was conservative—stratified by skill level, craft conscious, concerned primarily with the wage issue, averse to strikes, and, in national politics, backers of the Republican Party for its unstinting support for protective tariffs on manufactured goods.

Despite the remarkable population growth wrought by manufacturing success, however, the ethnic composition of the county, Plainfield included, changed little over the course of the 19th century. As of 1890, for example, nearly ninety-six percent of foreign-born Charles County residents still hailed from either Northwestern Europe or Canada, sixty percent of them from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria alone. The African-Americans, Jews, and Italians who had trickled into the city by the 1880s represented only a miniscule portion of the overall population at this time. The composition of the Plainfield faith community reflected the imbalances of this ethnic mosaic, with the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches claiming the bulk of the city’s communicants. The lone African-American church recorded in Plainfield by the 1890 Religious Census claimed fewer than twenty members.

5 Unlike East Coast cities which had been heavily populated by Irish long before 1900, the great majority of Roman Catholics in nineteenth century Plainfield were of German descent.
By the late 1880s, however, epochal changes in the wider economic environment had forced Plainfield’s manufacturing sector into a state of protracted decline. Most importantly, as the breadbasket of America moved westward following the Civil War, a new generation of implement manufacturers, more technologically advanced and closer to the leading markets, undercut the Old Guard firms in Plainfield and elsewhere. As a rule, the manufacturing firms of Plainfield circa 1885 produced for markets that were rapidly dwindling with technologies that were rapidly becoming obsolete. Only one of the many sizeable manufacturing firms in 19th century Plainfield succeeded in becoming a profitable 20th century industrial corporation. The rest were either dissolved or moribund by 1920.

c. The Rise of the Industrial Order

The two decades following 1890 therefore represented a period of profound transformation for the city of Plainfield, a period during which the manufacturing sector of the 19th century faded into memory and the industrial sector of the 20th—distinguished from its predecessor by the dominance of machines over labor (Matthewman 2011:32-33)—rose to maturity. The depression of the middle 1890s, by devaluing unproductive capital and forcing investment flows into new channels, helped to effect this transition in Plainfield and also parallel transitions in other cities. By the time World War I erupted in 1914, large and successful industrial enterprises, most of them between a few and fifteen years old, dominated the Plainfield economy. The rise of this new economic order transformed every aspect of life in the city. Just as the making of agricultural implements had been the leading driver of growth in 19th century Plainfield, so too did one industrial product eclipse all others in importance during the 20th: steel.
A variety of historical and geographical factors combined to render Plainfield an attractive site for industrial investment during the 1890 to 1910 period. For one thing, manufacturing success had already established in the city such assets as a skilled workforce, pools of financial capital in local banks, and infrastructural prerequisites like railroad lines, factory buildings, warehouses, and more. Another factor, one that bore specifically upon Plainfield’s suitability as a site for steel production, was the city’s advantageous geographical location between the coal of Appalachia to the south and the iron ore of the Upper Great Lakes to the north. This same advantageous location also ensured that Plainfield was surrounded on all sides by the burgeoning markets of the Midwest. Indeed, the demand generated by the Detroit-centered auto industry—peacetime and wartime demand inclusive—stimulated industrial growth in Plainfield more than any other factor.

Yet these conditions, essential as they were, only served to render Plainfield a viable contender for industrial investment at a time and in a region where many manufacturing cities were comparably situated. What made the difference in Plainfield, the force that converted potential into actual investment, was the largesse of the city’s capitalist class. Just as it had done during the manufacturing era, the capitalist class of Plainfield repeatedly deployed gifts of land and money to secure industrial investment in a context where intercity competition was the norm. With Plainfield’s having none of the outstanding advantages that all but guaranteed investment in cities like Chicago or Cincinnati—natural, transportation, or otherwise—this strategy of pecuniary boosterism was pivotal in drawing substantial quantities of industrial investment into Plainfield between about 1890 and 1914. On the strength of these early successes, the capitalist class of Plainfield established a foundation from which twentieth century
industrial prowess and all its corollaries flowed. The development of the steel industry in Plainfield shows this most clearly.

In 1885, there was one steel mill in Plainfield. One of the city’s legendary artisan-inventors, a man who had amassed a fortune in the agricultural implement business, was one of the principal investors in this first mill. Between 1886 and 1899, six additional mills—all of them specializing in processing semi-finished steel through rolling, stamping, and finishing rather than producing steel from raw inputs of iron ore and coal—were founded in the city. A full three of these six were founded by investors who had been lured to Plainfield by land giveaways arranged by the Board of Trade. In one of these three cases, investors chose Plainfield in a field of fourteen competing cities after having been granted a fifty-two and a half acre tract of land gratis. Within five years of its arrival, this one firm founded an additional two steel mills in Plainfield. In sum, then, Board of Trade largesse directly accounted for five of the first nine steel mills in the city.

This pattern of largesse extended to other industries as well. The largest employer in the city following World War One—a roller bearing manufacturer—had chosen Plainfield over numerous competitors twenty years earlier after having been gifted land by the Board of Trade. After a little more than a decade of successful operations within the city, the owners of this roller bearing company established an independent engine manufacturing firm in the city before WWI and then built their own steel mill a few years after that. Local banking resources supported the early development of the industrial economy by providing both funds for expansion and funds for surviving slack periods. As Board of Trade resources, bank coffers, and family wealth at this time derived in large part from the successes of the manufacturing era, it is therefore accurate to
say that between about 1890 and 1910 the capitalist class of Plainfield parlayed past manufacturing profits into industrial investment and thus shaped the entire future of the city.

Given the devastating quality of the 1890s depression and the gradual pace of early industrial development, the size of the Plainfield workforce devoted to making things in 1904 was still fifteen percent smaller than in 1890. By 1914, however, the industrial investments of the preceding fifteen years had matured. Between 1904 and 1914 alone, the number of industrial workers in Plainfield had climbed to more than twelve thousand, a rise of over one hundred percent. Over the same span of time, the total value of all industrial products made by city first jumped by more than three hundred percent. The considerable growth of the 1904 to 1910 period notwithstanding, the jolt given to Plainfield’s economy by WWI demand for industrial products was even more profound. At the end of four years of wartime production, more than twenty thousand people were employed by Plainfield’s industrial sector. The six largest steel plants in the city alone employed nearly half of this total. At the time of the 1920 Census, nearly ninety thousand people called Plainfield home.

With machine production representing one of the hallmarks of the industrial order, unskilled labor grew as a share of the overall Plainfield workforce as the twentieth century progressed. Skilled and semi-skilled work of the sort that had predominated during the nineteenth century waned by comparison. As was true in the United States generally during this period, waves of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe satisfied the need of Plainfield’s industries for unskilled labor. When WWI halted emigration from Europe but redoubled industrial demand in America, large numbers of poor whites from Appalachia and African-Americans from the Deep South who were being dislocated from their traditional occupations by mechanization migrated to the city in search of work (Obermiller, Wagner, and Tucker
When the Great Steel Strike of 1919 broke out in Plainfield and other steel cities, overlapping divisions of skill stratification and ethnic diversity fragmented the strikers. In the prevailing climate of national reaction, employers and their influential supporters in the media, the pulpit, public office, and elsewhere inflamed hostility against the “foreign,” “syndicalist,” and “un-American” elements purportedly behind the strike. Native-born workers in Plainfield and other cities led the march back across picket lines and thus decisively undercut the strike effort.

The patterns of ethnic and racial division that were embedded in the workplace also crystallized in the form of residential segregation during this time. As a matter of simple acreage, Plainfield expanded enormously between 1890 and 1920. At the borders of the still heavily German Swing, for instance, large numbers of Polish, Czech, and Romanian immigrants, as well as some Appalachians, began to settle communities. One of the more important neighborhoods settled during this period was Daletown, which was established across the railroad tracks and in the low-lying ground to the southeast of Plainfield’s downtown core. Regarded locally as the original ghetto of Plainfield, Daletown serves as the backdrop for the events described in chapters six through eight of this dissertation. Italians, Greeks, and Jews comprised the majority of early Daletown residents. When significant numbers of African-Americans began to arrive from the South during WWI, residential segregation ensured that the great majority had no choice but to settle in Daletown.

The enormous population growth wrought by industrialization effected profound changes within the city’s religious sphere as well. More than merely increasing the number of religious adherents in the city, however, the population influx of 1890 to 1920 precipitated a dramatic and two-fold diversification within Plainfield’s faith community. On the one hand, immigrants
carrying their ancestral faiths with them from Southern and Eastern Europe quickly established houses of worship that had almost no precedent in city history: two Jewish temples and a synagogue, several Orthodox Christian churches, and numerous ethnic parishes for different factions of the Roman Catholic community.

On the other hand, within the universe of Plainfield Protestantism, Evangelicals rose rapidly as a share of the total Protestant community at the expense of the non-Evangelical pillars of 19th century Plainfield—the Lutheran, Reformed, and Presbyterian churches. While local conversions no doubt accounted for some of this growth, in-migration of Evangelicals played the more important part. Meteoric growth within some of Plainfield’s mainline Evangelical communities—including the Methodist Episcopal, the Christian, Baptist, and United Brethren—was the single most important factor in this respect. Also making an impact, however, were the diverse Evangelical churches founded in the city by Appalachians and African-Americans. Planting Independent, Pentecostal, Holiness, and Baptist churches throughout the city, these people also established traditions that had few precedents in Plainfield history. By the time of WWI, Plainfield was a bona fide center of American Evangelicalism. When the country’s leading revivalist, Billy Sunday, concluded a wildly successful six-week campaign in the city a few years before WWI, he exulted to the local press that “The name of ‘Plainfield’ is at the top of my roll of honor.”

d. The Interwar Years

While industrial revolution prior to 1920 had effected a profound restructuring of life within Plainfield, the changes of the interwar years, sometimes mild and sometimes tumultuous, occurred within the boundaries and the patterns that had been established by the end of World
War I. Economic growth, led by industrial expansion, continued throughout most of the 1920s, yet it was an uneven and unequal growth to be sure. In fact, so much industrial investment was channeled into productivity-enhancing technology that the industrial workforce of Plainfield actually declined throughout the 1920s despite great increases in factory output. With labor weak and the industrial workforce shrinking, the city’s affluent classes—overwhelmingly people of Northwestern European descent—claimed a disproportionate share of Roaring ‘20s growth. With some of these rewards, members of the ownership and managerial classes built the county’s first suburbs to the north and northwest of Plainfield. These countertrends notwithstanding, the population of Plainfield nevertheless climbed beyond the one hundred thousand mark by the end of the 1920s.

At the opposite end of the city—both socially and geographically—lay the African-American community. The ongoing disparities between America’s North and South continued to push black migrants into Plainfield, so many in fact that the size of the African-American community more than doubled over the course of the 1920s. Although there were differences from the South that African-Americans had left, formalized segregation remained the norm in many spheres of Plainfield life—in theatres, hotels, restaurants, public pools, public schools, and, crucially, housing. A 1924 resolution by the Plainfield Real Estate Board “forbade the sale of houses to colored families in all-white neighborhoods” and thus codified the informal yet widespread practice of residential segregation that confined African-Americans overwhelmingly to the city’s Daletown neighborhood. At the same time, many white ethnic immigrant families, having seized upon the economic opportunities presented by their new homeland, moved out of Daletown throughout the late teens and early 1920s. Though many whites remained in the
neighborhood throughout World War Two, African-Americans accounted for an ever-greater share of the Daletown population as the interwar period wore on.

In the labor market too, segregation and discrimination reigned. No factories hired large numbers of African-Americans. Some hired a token number, others none at all. The same was true for access to craft unions. Work as a unionized craftsman was widely considered “a white man’s job.” The small number of African-Americans who did manage to get hired by city industries were invariably shunted into the positions of lowest status and lowest pay within the factory. They worked as sweepers, janitors, and general laborers rather than as better-paid operatives, machinists, or foreman. Many Southern and Eastern Europeans also started out on the bottom rungs as well. Unlike them, however, African-Americans were locked into the lowest positions—denied an opportunity to climb the workplace hierarchy, regardless of merit, ability, or experience.

African-Americans also occupied the lowest rungs of the labor market outside of the factory as well. Many men worked doing hard, unskilled labor, often on a seasonal or temporary basis. On construction sites, they dug ditches, hauled lumber, and assisted craftsmen. Filling a niche later monopolized by modern sanitation departments, some enterprising black men collected and hauled trash to the dump by horse-drawn cart. Many were employed in the hotel and service industries as porters, servants, cooks, dishwashers, bellhops, waiters, elevator operators, and busboys. A great many African-American women worked in service, both for businesses and families. They cooked meals, cleaned houses, washed walls, scrubbed porches, and, of course, tended to the children of their employers.

The interwar years were also a time of great institution building within the African-American community. A small cadre of black middle-class families—many of who lived outside
of Daletown—spearheaded these efforts. One especially prominent figure was the city’s first black doctor. Others were preachers, small business owners, and the wives of all of the above. The organizations they founded—including the Plainfield branch of the national Urban League—aimed to improve conditions within the African-American community by directly addressing needs as they arose and generally preparing individual community members, youths included, to succeed in a world where white middle-class norms and expectations were hegemonic. To these ends, local African-American organizations sought to “build character,” promote education and “culture,” provide vocational training, and also serve as a jobs bureau that matched capable African-Americans with potential employers.

Throughout the Great Depression, the economy of Plainfield charted the same basic course of ups and downs and downs and ups as the national economy: catastrophic decline between Black Friday 1929 and the 1932 nadir; steady economic growth between 1933 and 1937; the reversals of the 1937-38 “Roosevelt Recession”; and then the great explosion of growth brought about by war preparations that finally succeeded in lifting the country out of Depression. Being an industrial city, however, the Great Depression hit Plainfield with exceptional severity. Between 1929 and 1932, approximately fifty-six percent of the industrial jobs in Plainfield evaporated. Then, with the industrial workforce finally having been reconstituted by 1937, the Roosevelt Recession eliminated one-third of those jobs all over again. One scholarly analysis, utilizing 1938 data and published in 1940, identified Plainfield as a city with “unusually high relief case rates.” Also, in parsing industrial cities according to a “level of living” criterion, the author placed Plainfield in the “lowest level of living” category.

The hardship and want of Great Depression conditions—along with the Wagner Act of 1935—also stoked a resurgence of labor organizing and strike activity in city industries,
particularly in steel. Some companies acceded to worker demands and recognized independent unions as legitimate representatives of workers in the collective bargaining process. Other employers resisted, and the lines of struggle broke down much as they did in the strikes that followed World War One. Eastern and Southern European immigrants were consistently more militant than their native-born counterparts. Largely excluded from the industrial workforce up to that time, few African-Americans were found among strikers. Many, in fact, seized the opportunity presented by the longest and most violent strike in city history to gain a toehold in the industrial workforce by serving as strikebreakers. “Negro Plainfield has not seen such prosperity in a long time,” reported the correspondent for one African-American newspaper from the scene. Companies that held fast against strikes relied upon a “law-and-order” alliance of businesses, media outlets, civic leaders, and even, in some cases, the state National Guard to protect strikebreakers and turn public opinion against strikers. In several important instances, back-to-work movements broke strikes before a larger Plainfield employer was compelled to recognize an independent union among its workforce.

e. World War Two

Along with the rest of the industrialized world, the economy of Plainfield was pulled out of Depression by the outbreak of war in Europe following the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939. Between that time and America’s formal entry into the war in December 1941, employment in Plainfield climbed to twice 1938 levels. America’s entry into the war as a belligerent on the side of the Allies greatly accelerated an industrial growth process that was already underway in the city. Outfitted for the manufacture of wartime materiel, the factories of Plainfield produced myriad goods, including gun barrels, armor plates, bombs, engines, bearings,
shells, detonating fuses, plastic helmet liners, and much more. On the strength of this demand, wartime industrial employment peaked in 1944 at more than forty-five thousand, a more than three hundred percent rise from 1938. In this context, after having been temporarily disrupted by the Great Depression, the flow of migrants from Appalachia and the Deep South into Plainfield also resumed. More than a third of wartime workers were women.

Wartime government contracts spurred industrial growth in Plainfield in two general ways: first, by stimulating growth, including plant expansions, among firms that had existed in Plainfield before 1939 and, second, by contracting for the construction of altogether new plants in the city. Plainfield’s success at being awarded the latter sort of government contract in a field that included many competing cities owed much to the activism of its business and civic elite, a tradition that had by that time been drawing valuable sources of investment to the city for more than a century. These wartime developments—and particularly the construction of altogether new industrial plants in the city—would have a profound effect on the direction of postwar Plainfield.

Wartime conditions also facilitated one of the more important Civil Rights advances in American history when, in 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 which, among other things, banned discriminatory hiring on the part of any company contracting for defense purposes with the Federal government (Brooks, Carrasco, and Selmi 2000:398-99). As a consequence of this legislation, the Plainfield chapter of a Greater Midwestern civil rights organization named the Future Outlook League (FOL) was empowered vis-à-vis city industries (cf. Phillips 1999:190-225). The local chapter of the FOL had been established in the late 1930s to protest segregation and employment discrimination among Plainfield businesses, especially businesses with large African-American customer bases. Through militant picketing, the FOL
self-consciously contrasted itself with the non-confrontational style of the Urban League and other organizations dominated by middle class African-Americans. Following Executive Order 8802, then, the FOL took its picketing to the industries of Plainfield in order to secure jobs for many of the wives and children of African-American former workers who had joined the military. Owing to these and related changes, segregation and discrimination in Plainfield lessened somewhat between 1939 and 1945. According to one African-American woman who had lived through it, “Hitler opened up Plainfield for the black man.”

f. The Postwar Era

As the war wound to a close throughout 1944 and 1945, the pace of wartime orders began to slacken. For the first time in years, firms in Plainfield and other industrial cities began to lay off significant numbers of workers. By the end of 1945, four months after the conclusion of the war, industrial employment in Plainfield had fallen to about seventy percent of its wartime peak. While these figures were twice 1938 employment levels, the drop alarmed local leaders, and the Plainfield Development Corporation (PDC) was assigned the urgent task of drawing new industrial investment to the city. In its efforts, the PDC touted Plainfield’s large pool of skilled and semi-skilled labor, its low tax rates, and its auspicious proximity to natural resources, industrial suppliers, transportation corridors, as well as some of the country’s largest markets and population centers. On top of these valuable assets, Plainfield also possessed a large stock of idle industrial capacity, much of which had been built from the ground up by federal contracts during the war.

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6 Due to the unprecedented prosperity of the late war years, however, African-American interest in the FOL dwindled, and the Plainfield chapter folded for good before VJ day.
As an indication of its postwar success at drawing investment to Plainfield, the PDC published a self-congratulatory pamphlet in 1955 which celebrated “ten years of progress.” According to the document, more than forty-five new firms accounting for nearly six thousand workers had established themselves in Plainfield in the ten years after 1944. Two of these forty-five were among Plainfield’s largest postwar employers. One was a forging plant that employed 1,600 people by 1948 and the other was a manufacturer of sheet metal fabricating machinery that employed 2,200 by 1955. Both operated out of plant complexes that had been constructed during the war. Though no one could have foreseen it at the time, this postwar economic rebound marked the last sustained expansion of Plainfield’s industrial workforce in city history.

In accordance with widespread historical memory, the period between the end of WWII and the late 1960s truly was a Golden Era for many Plainfield area residents. Throughout this period, the dynamic industrial firms of Plainfield—many of them worldwide leaders in their respective industries—churned out such products as alloyed steel, steel presses, roller bearings, bank vaults, electric vacuums, engines, and forgings of all kinds. So powerful were these firms on the local landscape that—although this figure began to slip by the mid-1960s—the percentage of the Plainfield workforce employed in industry hovered near the forty-five percent mark throughout the 1950s. Even before the war had ended, all of the city’s leading industrial plants had been unionized. That development, in turn, greatly increased the capacity of working-class people to secure for themselves and their families larger shares of the economic growth pie than ever before. On the strength of these and related factors, the population of Plainfield held at well over one hundred thousand throughout the Golden Era.

Over the course of this same period, however, important shifts in the ethnic composition of the local workforce were taking place. In short, the ethnic groups that had been fully
integrated into Plainfield life by the time of WWI—that is, people whose ancestors hailed from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, England, or one of the countries of Eastern or Southern Europe—began to decline as a share of the city’s working-class population. On the one hand, Appalachian whites and Deep South African-Americans fleeing poverty and seeking industrial work continued to surge into the Plainfield working class throughout the 1950s, with considerable numbers of Appalachians arriving well into the 1970s. On the other hand, members of Plainfield’s older ethnic groups began to rise into the expanding managerial and professional ranks of the postwar economy. Far fewer Appalachians and African-Americans experienced upward mobility during the postwar era than did those who belonged to the older white ethnicities. Among other reasons, those two underprivileged groups—African-Americans even more intensely than Appalachians—lacked access to the better industrial jobs and accumulated family wealth that allowed Plainfield’s older white ethnicities to launch their children toward middle-class stability by the time decline commenced in earnest in the 1970s.7

Also during the Golden Era, cities all over the United States were being transformed by mass suburbanization, a process that was enabled by, among other things, high rates of overall economic growth, the affordability of automobile travel, and government financing of home loans and highway construction (Jackson 1987). In Plainfield—as in other American cities—members of the older white ethnic groups who were still living within the city boundaries after WWII possessed the financial wherewithal to seize upon these opportunities and relocate to the

7 The dean of Plainfield historians covered this issue in the several volumes of local history he published during the 1940s and 1950s. A number of chapters in these books deal with the various ethnic groups in the Plainfield area. Topical descriptions of older white ethnic upward mobility are common throughout. Regarding the Romanian community he says, “The younger generation is turning away from the steel mills and going into such lines as the internal revenue service [sic], accounting, teaching, mechanical and electrical engineering and chemistry. Many of those remaining in the shops are becoming foreman and superintendents.” The second generation of Poles, he says elsewhere, are increasingly “preparing for the professions.” And among the Spanish, those who have remained “in the industrial field are moving up in responsibilities and positions.”
burgeoning suburbs. Moving to the suburbs was, in fact, just one more aspect of the
c multifaceted process of upward mobility these whites enjoyed during the postwar era. In class
terms, the upwardly mobile breadwinners driving mass suburbanization in Plainfield during this
period were the likes of small business owners, craft laborers, many kinds of unionized industrial
workers, managers and myriad other professionals. Only a miniscule portion of these
suburbanizing families were nonwhite. In geographic terms, Plainfield’s principal suburbs grew
to form a quarter moon shaped band stretching roughly from the northwestern to the northeastern
corners of the city limits. In this general location, they were situated just to the north of the
city’s northernmost neighborhoods, these latter having been the original affluent suburbs of the
1920s.

The economic and demographic changes of the postwar era naturally had many
corollaries in the Plainfield faith community. For one thing, the movement of people to the
suburbs caused the formation of scores of new houses of worship outside of the city limits. As a
result, downtown Plainfield churches quickly lost their traditional status as the center of area
religious life. Also, as had happened due to WWI, the surge of Appalachian whites and African-
Americans into Plainfield following 1939 caused another round of Protestant Evangelical growth
within the city. The second time around, however, the scale of Evangelical growth was much
more significant. Owing to the Appalachian influence, fervent and “stylistically Southern”
(Shibley 1996:25) Evangelical churches from Holiness, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal
traditions made the greatest gains. Average attendance at the Plainfield’s flagship white
independent Baptist church, for instance, rose from 168 in 1945 to a jaw-dropping 2,300 by
1963. By the early 1970s, this church was home to one of the five largest Sunday schools in
America. Its dynamic pastor was a prominent figure within American Fundamentalism and a close personal friend of the Reverend Jerry Falwell.

While wartime conditions did cause a modest lessening of segregation and discrimination against African-Americans in Plainfield, many forms of deep racial inequality persisted into the postwar era. In the labor market, African-Americans continued to be disproportionately concentrated in menial and low-wage work. Those who did secure employment in the industrial sector tended to be shunted permanently into low-pay, low-status positions such as janitors, sweepers, and heavy lifters. While many entry-level whites also began in these bottom rung positions, they had a tendency to rise up and out while African-Americans did not. The persistence of racial inequality was most glaring in the case of residential segregation. Due to informal patterns of discrimination in real estate, postwar African-Americans remained largely confined to Daletown and the heavily nonwhite areas on its perimeter. Even those with the means to do so were often unable to move outside of these limits. One young African-American woman expressed her frustration at these conditions in a 1956 letter to the editor of the city paper:

“My fiancé and I, both college students and he a veteran will be married in three months. We have been trying for the past seven months to buy a home. Although we have sufficient income to purchase a good home, we are being forced to buy a lower quality because of our color. Local realtors list some of the homes as “Ideal for Colored Folks”—“Mr. Colored Man”—“Just right for Colored.”...Sometimes I feel it’s necessary to find Plainfield on a map to make sure whether it is located across the Mason-Dixon Line.”

The effectiveness with which residential segregation was reproduced in postwar Plainfield meant that African-Americans in the city were forced to operate within conditions of artificial scarcity. Their options thus truncated, these men and women were exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation by landlords, home sellers, and others. All too often such potential for exploitation was realized. A high percentage of Daletown landlords were, for example, white
ethnics whose families had been early settlers of the neighborhood, and more than a few of these people charged African-Americans exorbitant monthly rental rates. Moreover, since their tenants were largely captive, many landlords saved on expenses by habitually delaying repairs and foregoing improvements. A National Urban League study from the period documented that more than eighty-five percent of all homes occupied by African-Americans in Plainfield were “substandard.” Derelict conditions being the norm, African-Americans could not secure mortgages to purchase in Daletown or adjacent neighborhoods. As one defender of this policy put it during the period, “building and loan companies do not invest in slum areas.” With no other recourse, many African-Americans purchased or attempted to purchase homes on the hyper-exploitative “contract” system (cf. Satter 2009:4-5).

As an unintended consequence of racial segregation, however, a cohesive and mutually supportive African-American community flourished in and around the Daletown neighborhood. Daletown’s main thoroughfare, for instance, became locally renowned as home to the city’s “black business district.” Along that street, there were pharmacies, record stores, gas stations, beauty shops, dry cleaners, dance halls, funeral homes, a hotel, a skating rink, and more—all of them black-owned and operated. There were churches and reverends galore. Neighborhood residents also built and sustained a large number of diverse clubs and leagues and associations. Many were devoted to recreational purposes, but several were consciously designed to help facilitate the upward mobility of talented and intelligent youths within the African-American community. Daletown leaders envisioned community improvement as the byproduct of widespread success on the part of African-American individuals. When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke in Plainfield in 1964, he expressed the outlook of these people, common as it was at the time: “We must set out to do a good job—not just a good “Negro job.” If you are only
concerned with being a good Negro teacher, a good Negro lawyer, a good Negro barber, you have already flunked your matriculation exam into the University of Integration.”

During the postwar era, a modest number of the African-American families moved out of Daletown, and many settled a nearby city neighborhood known as Edgewood. These were largely families headed by men with incomes above the community mean, usually through industrial employment or small business ownership. Despite the considerable obstacles in their path, some of the many African-Americans remaining in Daletown did manage to purchase homes of their own. It was typical for such people to both put enormous sweat equity into their properties and attend to them with meticulous care. White picket fences, white-washed brick, gardens, and flower beds were common throughout Daletown in the 1950s and early 1960s. People with long enough memories today remember that period as Daletown’s heyday, a time during which elders were respected, streets were safe, and children were watched over by legions of relatives and friends. One African-American woman who lived in the neighborhood as a girl in the 1950s shared her recollection with me that, in Daletown at that time, “Everything was so…beautiful.”

Such roseate recollections, however, have their detractors. Even in the supposed heyday of Daletown, critics drowned out defenders in public discourse, especially among white establishment interests in business, politics, and civic life. These critics and others regarded Daletown as a local disgrace, a blot on Plainfield’s pretensions to be model modern city poised for robust future growth. They especially deplored the “blight” and overcrowding. According to contemporaneous accounts, Daletown regularly scored high on all of the wrong metrics: welfare and dropout rates, crime, infant mortality, infectious disease, and on and on. One scandalized observer described Daletown conditions as “men and women drinking on the street, others
walking up to the cars and asking for money, bottles laying around, drunks staggerining about.”
A city newspaper reporter claimed to speak for public opinion when he wrote that “many” in the area regard Daletown as “Plainfield’s cancer.” This judgment played a pivotal role in shaping urban policy in Plainfield between the 1950s and 1970s.

g. Urban Renewal

As early as the second half of the 1950s, Plainfield elites recognized a number of serious problems bearing down upon their city. Any one of them individually would have been problematic and worrisome. Taken together, however, they threatened to deal a catastrophic blow to Plainfield’s long-term health. The foremost of these problems stemmed from decline in the city’s industrial base. Already by that time, low-wage, non-unionized plants based in the American South had begun to impose competitive pressure on Northern factories (Friedman 2003). These pressures, by forcing both the adoption of labor-saving technologies and also some plant closures, caused a slow but steady decline in the size of Plainfield’s industrial workforce. Compounding the deleterious effects of these changes, the shift of residents and commercial activity to the suburbs further eroded the city’s municipal tax base.

To make matters worse, a host of other factors militated against the city’s ability to attract fresh inflows of industrial investment. For one thing, more than a century of laissez-faire attitudes among the Plainfield elite had discouraged much in the way of serious public and infrastructural investment. Among its many problems, 1950s Plainfield was plagued by inadequate transportation links to outside markets, poorly maintained streets and inadequate parking internally, zero institutions of higher education, and a notorious vice problem. What infrastructure did exist in the city was aging and inadequate for postwar needs. A report
commissioned by city elites to assess the prospects for Plainfield’s future growth somberly declared the city to be in “a state of hopeless disrepair.”

In a policy context defined by these considerations, Plainfield elites formulated an Urban Renewal plan that was intended to revitalize the city’s industrial base and thus ensure healthy overall growth throughout the second half of the twentieth century. After voters rejected a municipal bond measure designed to raise the requisite Urban Renewal funds, however, elite policymakers were left with few options. Despite their laissez-faire ideals, they began the process of pursuing Urban Renewal funds under Title I of the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 (Scott 2013:214).

In the early stages of this process, two distinct plans were in competition to serve as the blueprint for Plainfield’s Urban Renewal. Dubbed the “inner alignment” and “outer alignment,” these two plans shared many features in common. Both centered on proposals to clear and rezone portions of city land for future industrial investment, and both also included provisions for constructing an interlocking system of highways and wide local thoroughfares that would ease congestion and serve the needs of local businesses and commuters. As their names suggested, however, the chief difference between the plans was geographical. The outer alignment plan proposed that a future industrial zone be located in largely uninhabited land beyond the southernmost border of the city. The inner alignment plan proposed, however, that Daletown be razed in order to clear way for a new industrial zone within the city limits.

For several years after first being proposed, different factions debated the relative merits of the two competing plans. The Charles County Regional Planning Commission and a team of private engineering consultants hired by the State Highway Department endorsed the more affordable and less disruptive outer alignment. All of the main players in the Plainfield power
structure—industry, city hall, the Chamber of Commerce, organized labor, and local media—endorsed the inner alignment plan, however. With remarkable candor, these actors defended their preference on the grounds that inner alignment possessed three key virtues its competition lacked. Although costing significantly more, inner alignment would do more to ease traffic congestion within the city, do more to revitalize downtown’s flagging commercial district and real estate values, and it alone would eliminate the “slum” of Daletown.

After years of wrangling and controversy, in 1963 the Plainfield City Planning Commission formally approved the inner alignment plan as the “most desirable alignment for the new highway to serve residents, business, and industry in the Plainfield area.” The following year, the State Director of Highways journalized the plan. According a 1963 planning survey, 97.5 percent of the residents in the fifty-eight acre area destined for clearance were racial minorities, and 93 percent of all structures were devoted to residential use. Ninety-nine percent of all structures were classified as “deteriorated,” and 80 percent were classified as “substandard.” One city councilman at the time spoke of Daletown’s imminent destruction as “a face lifting which is long overdue.”

As a condition of receiving Urban Renewal funds under federal law, cities were required to provide low-cost housing for displaced residents. In order to meet this requirement, in 1963 Charles County Metropolitan Housing (CCMH) began construction of the city’s first public housing complex. This Reinert Homes complex was built in a remote corner of the city to the south of the Urban Renewal clearance zone. To the south and east of the Reinert Homes were sparsely populated rural areas. To their north and west were outlying fragments of the Daletown neighborhood that lay outside of the Urban Renewal perimeter. By the close of a three-phase
construction project that ended in 1972, the Reinert Homes complex contained 320 individual housing units.

Also in the later 1960s, a private company using federal funds constructed in the area an even larger Federal Housing Authority low-income apartment complex, Memorial Court. These three elements—Reinert Homes, Memorial Court, and original Daletown fragments—constituted a new city neighborhood to the south of the Urban Renewal zone. Although distinct from its forebear, this neighborhood—the setting for chapters five through eight below—is also called by the Daletown name. In the 1970s and 80s, highway construction projects on the western and northern borders of reconstituted Daletown representing the final stages of Urban Renewal displaced another several thousand residents and effectively walled off that neighborhood from the rest of the city.

In the mid-1960s, with the first batch of Reinert Homes units completed, the removal of residents from the Urban Renewal zone began. In September 1967 the first of many bulldozers lurched into Daletown. Using the occasion as a celebratory photo op, Plainfield’s mayor and the President of the Greater Plainfield AFL-CIO together donned hardhats and stood atop that bulldozer as it symbolically demolished the first structure of Urban Renewal—a rickety, forlorn wooden shed. Many displaced Daletown residents were eligible for relocation into the newly constructed Reinert Homes. Others received assistance from the city in securing private rental units. A great many, however, were cast into a local real estate market where racial discrimination and segregation were still matters of course, the Fair Housing of Act of 1968 notwithstanding. As a consequence of entrenched discrimination in housing, most displaced

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8 According to a 1978 nationwide housing survey published by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, potential African-American home buyers in the Plainfield area still faced discrimination more than ninety percent of the time as of that date.
residents moved into one of the neighborhoods adjacent to the original Daletown, an outcome that kept African-Americans concentrated in clearly defined pockets of the city. In fact, the reconstituted Daletown of the early 1970s was more segregated and more isolated than even the pre-Urban Renewal Daletown had been.

Many African-Americans—including many of the community’s more prominent middle-class leaders—supported inner alignment Urban Renewal. These people, many of who resided outside of the clearance zone, agreed with the judgment that Daletown was a slum, and they believed that its destruction would bring lasting benefits to the African-American community as a whole. Among working-class African-Americans, however, there was considerable opposition and even, in some instances, open resistance. Some of the more prominent resisters were among the minority of homeowners who refused to sell. Not only were these people indignant at the prospect of being driven from their homes, they charged that city compensation packages flagrantly underestimated the value of their properties. They also claimed that city officials had responded to homeowner resistance by making such threats as, “If you don’t sign, you will go to court and get less.”

Defiant homeowners were supported by a small but vocal coalition of radical African-American activists that had rallied in Plainfield against Urban Renewal. Black Nationalist in their thinking, these activists regarded an intact Daletown as the foundation of African-American solidarity and power in the city. According to Norman Taylor, one of the movement’s leaders, their actions were fundamentally defensive: “We didn’t chose to be militant,” he stressed four decades after the fact. “They came and took neighborhoods. They came into our neighborhood and took our stuff—and literally destroyed years of social organization.”

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9 Mr. Taylor’s biography and outlook are covered extensively in chapter six below.
the power of the opposition paled next to the might of the forces arrayed behind Urban Renewal. In April 1968, the city of Plainfield secured possession of all remaining contested land by court order. In 2009, one of the men who had been one of the city’s leading African-American activists in the 1960s, remarked that Urban Renewal had “made us a wandering people once again.”

In the early 1970s, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released a follow-up study declaring that Plainfield’s relocation program had been a “massive failure.” Among the roster of violations committed by the Plainfield city government, HUD highlighted these: displacing families in half the time originally proposed and while the dwelling space needed to accommodate them was not yet available in the city; failing to provide families with relocation funds that they were entitled to under the law; allowing nearly half of all families to relocate to substandard housing; and creating delays in relocating households and in administering relocation payments. A full half of all families displaced by Urban Renewal had not yet acquired suitable replacement housing within two years of their removal. Although the city was not fined for these violations, HUD informed public officials that future Urban Renewal funds would be withheld from Plainfield until the report’s concerns had been satisfactorily addressed. As early as 1970, a mere three years after the destruction of Daletown’s first structure, the congressman representing Plainfield in Washington conceded that, “I think everyone admits that there were mistakes and hardships connected with the first Urban Renewal project, but I do not know of any way to go back now and make everything right.”

The Rise and Reign of Postindustrialism

As judged against the original objectives of inner alignment proponents, Plainfield’s Urban Renewal program produced mixed results. On only two points—the easing of traffic
congestion and the destruction of Daletown—did Urban Renewal hit its mark. Despite the
construction of an interlocking network of highways and local thoroughfares, however, Urban
Renewal did not reclaim even remotely enough business from the suburbs to revitalize
downtown. And while an industrial park was built atop the remains of Daletown, the growth that
this represented hardly reversed the overall decline of city industry. The heyday of industry and
commerce in Plainfield passed many years before Urban Renewal ever commenced, and it was
not to be recovered. In truth, the problems that prompted city elites to develop revitalization
plans in the first place represented the early stages of Plainfield’s transition from an industrial to
a postindustrial city, a transformation ultimately driven by political economic forces infinitely
more powerful than those embodied in Urban Renewal.

According to a commonplace narrative, cities in the American Midwest deindustrialized
because competition from low-cost industrial producers—which particularly those based in the Global
South—forced plant closure after plant closure throughout the region. There is both truth and
distortion in this narrative. It is certainly true, for instance, that competitive pressure drove the
transformation of the Midwestern industrial landscape, although that pressure has emanated from
diverse parts of the world over time, including the American South, Western Europe, Japan, and,
more recently, the emerging economies of the Global South (Bluestone and Harrison 1982).

What the conventional narrative elides, however, is the fact that the American Midwest
remains a globally important center of industrial production. Plainfield itself continues to have a
significant industrial sector. More than effecting some ambiguous process known as “the
destruction of Midwestern industry,” then, the long-term intensification of global industrial
competition has caused the elimination of millions upon millions of industrial jobs in that region
(Bluestone 2003). This hemorrhaging of industrial jobs has been the hallmark of Midwestern
deindustrialization. Very often industrial job loss has been produced by plant closures, but not always. Far less often discussed or appreciated has been the role of labor-saving technological innovations—designed to cut production costs and thus secure competition advantage—in eliminating jobs. The postindustrial economy of the Midwest, Plainfield included, is not one without industry, but it is one in which industrial workers comprise a modest share of the total workforce, especially when measured against their proportions during the postwar period.

The scale and pace of industrial job loss in Midwestern cities, rather than being a uniform phenomenon, has everywhere been shaped by local conditions. Although the long-term decline in industrial employment in Plainfield is indisputable, two countervailing forces have acted to slow the pace of industrial job loss in the city since the 1970s. First off, a number of Plainfield’s largest postwar industrial firms were founded by local families and headquartered in the city. For generations these families have practiced a sort of civic capitalism in which loyalty to Plainfield has been a factor in business decision-making, a character trait that more than once has confounded the national business press. As many members of these families continue to serve as owners and executives, they have worked hard to preserve industrial jobs in Plainfield when that has been possible. As a second factor, the technologically advanced state of many Plainfield industries has put barriers in front of potential competitors, particularly those from the Global South. Whether in the making of specialty steel or some other high-tech industrial markets, the emergence of credible global competitors has required more time than in low-tech products.

The unique pace of the process notwithstanding, Plainfield has suffered catastrophic industrial job loss since the late 1960s. As late as 1970, industry still employed more than forty percent of the entire city’s workforce. With plants from Germany, Japan, and the American South ramping up pressure throughout the 1970s, however, Plainfield lost a full twenty-five
percent of its industrial jobs between 1970 and 1980. On the eve of the 1982 steel crisis, the city possessed fewer than thirteen thousand industrial jobs, a figure that represented only slightly more than half of the industrial jobs in late 1940s Plainfield. The steel crisis wallop the city and sent the official unemployment rate soaring above fourteen percent. As a result, another twenty-five percent of the city’s industrial jobs disappeared during the 1980s, bringing the 1990 figure to well below ten thousand. Although Plainfield’s industries experienced a relatively strong late-1990s—particularly thanks to overseas demand—the global recession following 2001 and the cutthroat competitive environment it unleashed devastated what remained of the steel industry in the city. By 2008, Plainfield’s industrial workforce numbered below six thousand, an eighty percent decline from 1950. Over the same period of time, the population of the city dropped by a third, from nearly one hundred twenty thousand to fewer than eighty thousand.

These trends have naturally decimated the ranks of private sector organized labor in Plainfield, a once-mighty union town. Although comprehensive data are unavailable, numbers from city locals show these losses to dramatic and pervasive. Membership in one of the city’s legendary steel worker locals, for example, plummeted from a high of approximately 5,500 in the 1950s to a mere 350 in 2003. In even more dramatic fashion, the city’s leading Electrical Workers local collapsed from 2,000 to only 100 members over roughly the same period. As a last example, the departure of one Plainfield factory for a production facility just over the Mexican-American border erased an 800-member local from the city’s landscape for good. Also in this climate, employers have invoked the specter of layoffs and plant closures to win bargaining concessions—including wage and benefit cutbacks—from workers who remain unionized. Also a factor in reducing rates of union density in the area, a fair amount of manufacturing job growth in recent decades has been among smaller, non-union facilities.
The shift from an industrial to postindustrial economy, however, involves more than merely the widespread loss of industrial jobs. What it also requires is the development of an alternative economic foundation rooted in service sector employment. The elements of the service sector economy that have developed most robustly in Plainfield are health care, education, government, retail, and food and drink services. As were their forebears in the context of manufacturing and industrial development before them, Plainfield’s postindustrial elite have been proactive in trying to stimulate growth in the service sector. Two of the largest employers in the area are, for example, expansive health care systems that have long enjoyed significant support from the local elite establishment. The current generation of city leaders has also embraced the idea that the arts can play a vital role in urban revitalization, by both stimulating innovation and creating an attractive cultural climate for young professionals. As such, many important local institutions—both public and private—have worked to foster the growth of an arts community in Plainfield. Local leaders have also had some success at bringing jobs to Plainfield by growing the tourism industry and also expanding public employment by having state and Federal facilities constructed in the city. Looking beyond even these boundaries, city leaders are now also active in seeking out Foreign Direct Investment for Plainfield. An aggressive policy of annexing suburban areas with significant tax bases has proven to be one of the more controversial growth strategies of Plainfield’s city hall.  

These and other growth initiatives notwithstanding, times are tough for working people in the Plainfield area. The majority of city residents today are either formally unemployed or employed in precarious, low-wage work. Food service, retail, education, health, and government work provide the lion’s share of formal economy jobs for working-class people. The categories

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10 Between 1950 and 2008, the geographic size of Plainfield as measured by square miles grew by more than fifty percent.
of cashier and waiter and waitress constituted the first and third most common occupations among city residents in 2008. The median family income in the city in 2008 was just above thirty-six thousand dollars, a mere fifty-eight percent of the national average. By 2009, more than thirty percent of all city residents and more than fifty percent of all city children lived in poverty. African-Americans and whites of Appalachian descent comprise especially large segments of this poor population. Twenty-four percent of city residents rely on food stamps in 2008. In this context, a great many people—including many who are formally employed—have no choice but to supplement their household resources with informal economic strategies, some of them legal and some of them not. When neither formal nor informal strategies are sufficient to make ends meet, many Plainfield residents turn to pawn shops and payday lenders. The number of the latter in Charles County rose from two to sixty-seven between 1996 and 2007.

The transition to postindustrial conditions has also wrought profound shifts in the residential and economic geographies of the Plainfield area. Although the era of explosive suburban growth in Charles County lasted from about 1945 to 1970, the suburbs have continued to grow since that time, albeit more modestly. Although all but a few pockets of suburban Plainfield are overwhelmingly white, the different segments of suburbia exhibit clear-cut class stratification, with some areas being more affluent than others. With the exception of the extreme northernmost neighborhoods of the city, people who are upper middle class and above have left Plainfield. Middle and lower middle class people continue to be distributed throughout the suburbs and the city’s higher median income neighborhoods. Although there are a few stretches of Plainfield suburbia that qualify as working-class, the vast majority of working-class people continue to live in the city. The more economically privileged elements of the working
class—such as industrial workers, craft labor, or government employees—gravitate toward the more stable of Plainfield’s neighborhoods.

In addition to pulling commercial activity toward the suburbs and away from downtown, the postindustrial turn has hollowed out large swathes of city real estate. Despite being fifty percent larger than in 1950 as measured by square miles, contemporary Plainfield possesses just sixty-five percent of the population. As a consequence, thousands and thousands of Plainfield homes have been razed in the past several decades. There are many blocks in the city on which vacant lots outnumber houses. The restructuring and closure of factories have had the same effect on a much larger scale. The highest concentrations of urban decay—both industrial and residential—are in the neighborhoods that radiate off of Plainfield’s downtown core. These are the poorest neighborhoods in the city and also the most heavily African-American. While many sections of these neighborhoods are majority African-American, a great many poor and working-class whites live in these areas as well. In addition to being the most heavily African-American then, these are also the most racially integrated sections of the Plainfield area.

Owing to its protracted economic decline, Plainfield has not attracted significant levels of in-migration in recent decades. As such, the city retains the sort of racially dichotomous cast that was long ago disrupted in large American cities by successive waves of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, South Asia, and other reaches of the Global South. About sixty-five percent of city residents are white, and between twenty and twenty-five percent are African-American, a figure that was pushed dramatically upward by white flight to the suburbs. Most of the remainder are of mixed race descent. As is true throughout America, most social intercourse in Plainfield takes place within the bounds set by informal racial segregation rather than across
them, a fact of tremendous import for the geographical development of faith-based charity in the city.

In exploring these dynamics, the many ways in which race, ethnicity, class, and residency correlate with the uneven historical patterns of Plainfield’s labor market appear striking. The high affluence zone encompassing Plainfield’s northern reaches and the suburbs beyond are dominated by families whose ancestors lived and worked in the area for multiple generations by the time the economy began to decline sharply in the late 1960s to early 1970s timeframe. People of German and English descent—the area’s earliest settlers—are identified with the most affluent suburban areas of all. The suburban areas one and two notches down on the class scale are dominated by Eastern and Southern European white ethnics whose ancestors poured into Plainfield between about 1890 and WWI. The poorest people in the area are African-Americans, a group with only a miniscule presence in the suburbs. Not coincidentally, African-Americans were systematically denied full access to Plainfield’s economy until the late 1960s, by which time the fateful industrial downturn was underway.

Appalachians tend to crowd the middle ground between affluent whites and African-Americans. Most families of Appalachian descent only settled in Plainfield after 1939. The amount of time they had to accumulate intergenerational family wealth was thus less than white ethnics but greater than African-Americans, a factor that helps to account for their intermediate class status and their prominent place in urban and suburban working-class areas. In short, then, the length of time a family’s ancestors were embedded in the Plainfield economy prior to 1970 correlates highly with contemporary class status, something which suggests that pre-1970 wealth accumulation was probably decisive in establishing family patterns of post-1970 educational success.
The changes of postindustrialism have also abetted the continued evolution of the area faith community. While still being dominated by Protestants and Roman Catholics, that faith community has experienced internal shifts since 1970. The most striking change has been the dramatic growth of white non-Fundamentalist Protestant Evangelicalism in the area, something most vividly symbolized by the emergence of a half dozen megachurches claiming a thousand or more members in the suburbs. Below the prominent megachurch tip, however, there also lies a large body of sizeable Evangelical churches with hundreds of members each. Evangelical growth has come from both independent churches and mainline Evangelical denominations like the United Methodists and Christians (Disciples of Christ). Both the Fundamentalist and Roman Catholic communities, while still large, appear to have lost many adherents to non-Fundamentalist Evangelical churches in recent decades. As African-American churches have stayed near to their members, they remain concentrated in county cities. All but perhaps a handful of these are either Baptist or Pentecostal in theology. In the interstices of these broad patterns, white working-class Christians continue to sustain a large and diverse body of churches that—whether they embrace Fundamentalist, Holiness, Pentecostal, or other traditions—belong to the wider Evangelical community as a whole.

As these recent trends have developed within a faith community that was already strongly Evangelical by 1970, 21st century Plainfield is a true bastion of Protestant Evangelicalism. In fact, young Evangelicals undertaking expressly Evangelical activities—from faith-based neighborhood clean-ups to Bible study groups at the city’s hippest coffee house—constituted what there was of a young adult downtown subculture in Plainfield circa 2008 – 2009. In Plainfield, as in the southern American Bible Belt, boisterous public assertions of Evangelical faith are commonplace, as in the mock 2008 election signs that touted candidate “Jesus Christ”
as “Your Best Choice,” the bumper sticker containing an image of a crucified hand that was underscored by the caption “Body Piercing Saved My Life,” or the hand-painted mural on the side of a commercial building that featured shadowy figures writhing in an inferno alongside a warning that “Hell is Real!”

In the context of deepening postindustrial austerity and hardship, more and more Plainfield residents have turned to public welfare and private charity for basic needs. At the same time, however, private charities and private charitable resources abound in the city. The available evidence—limited though it is—indicates that the sphere of private charity in Plainfield actually exceeds state and national averages for vigor and generosity. To take but a few examples: a comparison of national and local survey data shows that Charles County residents volunteer at almost twice the rate of Americans as a whole; the local Habitat for Humanity chapter, a frequent award winner, is regularly among the most productive in the state; and last, but certainly not least, Plainfield is home to scores of private charitable foundations that subsidize on-the-ground organizations year in and year out. The top five of these charitable foundations—all of them established through endowments from wealthy local families—have a collective net worth approaching half a billion dollars. In conjunction with the philanthropic commitments of local elites, the strong Plainfield faith community helps to underwrite the groundswell of support that reproduces private charitable flows in the city day in and day out.
III. SLM Plenty

a. Introduction

Owing to the depressed economic conditions of twenty-first century Plainfield, food insecurity exists as a widespread problem within the city.\textsuperscript{11} During a media interview on the subject in winter 2009, an employee of the regional Food Bank declared bluntly that “There is a very, very strong need for food in this area.” In response to this crisis, many organizations and residents within the community donate considerable sums of money, goods, and labor on a regular basis to local charitable organizations that distribute food in the form of hot meals and grocery giveaways to the area’s needy. One of the larger and more esteemed food charities in the region is the Staff of Life Ministries (SLM). The present chapter provides both an overview of regular SLM operations and a description of the Evangelical Protestant outlook that animates the organization’s leadership.

The SLM sits near to the geographical center of Plainfield’s Swing neighborhood, a large neighborhood that grew up around the city’s first large-scale manufacturing enterprises in the mid-nineteenth century. For more than one hundred and fifty years—through waves of Germans, myriad white ethnics, and Appalachians—the Swing has been the heart of the city’s white working class. Today more than eighty percent of Swing residents are white, many of them either born in Appalachia or born to at least one parent who was.\textsuperscript{12} As the non-white

\textsuperscript{11} Food insecurity exists where a person lacks “access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (National Research Council 2006:13).

\textsuperscript{12} These conditions in the Swing represent but one instance of a much larger Midwestern phenomenon. A group of experts on Appalachians living in the Midwest wrote in 2000 that “a large portion of urban Appalachians today are blue-collar workers living at the margins of the economy, managing well enough in good times but suffering greatly in times of economic downturn. A smaller, but significant, number of migrant families and their descendants are among the urban poor, surviving in the social welfare system” (Obermiller, Wagner, and Tucker 2000:xiv).
population of the Swing has grown slowly following the devastation of Urban Renewal. African-Americans and people of mixed race heritage make up about equal parts of the remainder.

The majority of people who access SLM charity are poor white residents of the Swing or adjacent neighborhoods. That said, this area of the city is mixed income rather than predominantly poor. There are still a significant number of relatively stable working-class and lower to middling middle-class families in the neighborhood, although this bottom-half of the income spectrum inequality tends to manifest as geographical segregation at the block level. Nursing, teaching, and office management are among the professions that vouchsafe middle class status to some Swing households. The stable working-class households tend to have a breadwinner in craft labor, skilled labor, or in what remains of the unionized industrial workforce. On the whole, median household income in the Swing hovers in the range of about twenty-five thousand dollars, less than half of the national average. About a third of Swing households live below the poverty line.

The long and broad streets that form a grid pattern over most of the Swing today seem quiet, as though comprising a stage too large for the production currently underway. Long gone are the days when soot and smoke from nearby factories compelled Swing residents to repaint the exterior of their homes every couple of years. With few exceptions, the great factories and warehouses of the Swing’s industrial heyday either loom in silence or are altogether gone. The duplexes, row homes, and apartment buildings so common in the working-class neighborhoods of other American cities are rare here. An astonishingly high proportion of dwellings in the Swing are spacious, single-family houses built before 1930, testaments to the erstwhile purchasing power of the skilled artisans and factory managers who needed to live within walking distance of work. Many houses are kept attractive and in good repair by residents who struggle
mightily against age and the elements, but a great number are also visibly distressed. Abandoned and crumbling properties are scattered throughout the neighborhood, as are overgrown lots made vacant by the wrecking ball.13

The SLM itself occupies a building that was constructed several decades ago to serve as the home of a working-class church. Though dated and made mostly of inexpensive cinder block walls, the building is clean, trim, and well-stocked with the equipment necessary—much of it acquired at second and third hand—to run a social service ministry, from the abundant tables and chairs to expensive food preparation and storage equipment like stoves and freezers. The SLM carries no paid staff, nor does it accept any public funding. Circa early 2009, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and third Thursdays were the busiest days on the SLM schedule. On Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, SLM volunteers served hot meals and distributed groceries to the needy free of charge. On third Thursdays, the high point of the organization’s monthly calendar, volunteers distributed prodigious sums of groceries—sums far in excess of what is distributed on eithers Tuesdays or Wednesdays—to all heads of household gratis.

Every charitable giveaway is accompanied by a Protestant worship service conducted by one of the two resident pastors or a guest speaker approved by them. These two are Pastor Harold Edley, the founder and head of the SLM, and his protégé and likely successor, Pastor Julie Swartz. On Tuesdays and third Thursdays, a worship service is held prior to the distribution of food and groceries. Recipients are not obliged to come to this service, but there is an advantage to arriving and taking one’s place in the SLM sanctuary as early as possible. Earlier arrivals have the opportunity to sit near to the sanctuary exit, which ensures that they will

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13 As will be described at length below, vacant lots and distressed properties—while common in the Swing—are even more prevalent in the city's Daletown neighborhood, the historic heart Plainfield’s African-American community and the setting for chapters six through eight.
be among the first called to eat and receive groceries, and portion sizes of both tend to larger at the start of the line than at the end. On Wednesday nights, a worship service lasting between sixty and ninety minutes in length is held after the meal but before the grocery giveaway. This service is described by the pastors as “mandatory.” Excepting private interactions between a pastor and others, religious outreach takes place almost exclusively through these public sermons.

b. The Leadership of the SLM.

Pastor Harold Edley is an older man with many years of retirement already behind him. For several decades, he shepherded Protestant congregations in this part of the Midwest. Through his long involvement in ministerial and civic affairs, Pastor Edley has earned a reputation as a man of warmth, integrity, and commitment. He has also developed myriad ties, both professional and social, throughout the community, many of which connect him to affluent individuals and organizations. Those connections notwithstanding, the Pastor is often critical of conventional Protestant churches, which he feels all too often invite spiritual lethargy through their preoccupation with the likes of building funds, committee meetings, and the hum-drum execution of regular worship services. His organization is different. “The Staff of Life Ministries,” he insists, “is not founded on services. It’s founded upon service, and there’s a difference.”

In recent years, the Pastor’s body has slowed, but his mind is unimpaired. He is quick and perceptive. He’s witty and has a deep stock of good jokes capable of drawing cackles without violating the bounds of Christian propriety. He enjoys laughing almost as much as he enjoys making others laugh, and he excels at using self-deprecating humor to enliven a listless
congregation. He’s generous with his time and resources. Once he delegates a task, he moves on to some other affair and makes a deliberate effort to avoid micromanaging.

In interpersonal conversation, the pastor is affable and easygoing, but also direct. He values doing. “You will or you won’t,” he seems to be saying, “so why beat around the bush when there’s work to be done?” Though he conveys a carefree attitude at times, he’s also watchful. He’s a careful student of body language and facial expressions. The first time I ever met him he gripped my handshake far harder than he ever did again, and he refused to let go for what felt like a long, long time. And as he pumped his right forearm up and down, up and down, he stared directly into my eyes without ever once blinking, twitching, or tweaking his broad smile. He’s nobody’s fool, and he’s not going to be taken by glad-handers, back-slappers, double-dealers, or anyone else. He’s been around too long and seen too much of the sinful human heart for that. And he’s capable of being firm, unnervingly firm even, if he feels such a posture is necessary to protect the resources or reputation of the SLM.

Pastor Edley’s distinctive and sophisticated understanding of Evangelical Christianity places special, though somewhat uncommon, stress on the reality of God’s power to heal both spiritual and physical ailments. This emphasis permeates his personal ministry, his sermons, and the structure of worship services he conducts. While he recognizes that one must indeed be born again to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, he notes that Christ pronounced this injunction only once and in private.14 By way of comparison, Jesus commanded his disciples to go out and heal the sick many times. In no way does his belief in God’s healing power lead Pastor Edley to denigrate or dismiss the importance of modern medicine. On the contrary, the Pastor notes that the scriptures themselves countenance standard medical care as it was practiced in antiquity as

well as miraculous healings. In a word, he regards modern medicine and God’s healing power as complementary.

Toward the end of each “healing” service that the Pastor conducts, then, he calls to the front every person who wishes to be healed, spiritually or physically, through the power of the Lord. He anoints with oils, practices the laying on of hands, and prays for healing in the name of Jesus Christ. He is not a Pentecostal: speaking in tongues is not a part of his ministry, though seekers sometimes do collapse backwards into the arms of a waiting male assistant. The pastor credits the Lord for having wrought many miraculous healings throughout his ministry over the decades, though he acknowledges that many who faithfully sought healing did not receive it. Confessing that he does not understand how or why the Lord heals when He does, the pastor has learned to accept that he is meant to be the “proclaimer, not the explainer” of God’s healing power.

At a certain point during the steady expansion in the scale of charitable operations at the SLM, Pastor Edley became troubled by the thought that the message of spiritual healing was being subordinated to the mere distribution of material resources. This concern subsided, however, when Pastor Edley felt instructed by the Lord to seek in Isaiah 58. He turned there and found validation in verses six through eight:

“Is not this the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy healing shall spring forth speedily.”

As Pastor Edley interprets this verse, the biblical conception of fasting encompasses more than merely abstaining from food or drink for a period of time. To fast is to undertake some kind

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15 The famous parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37, is a case in point.
16 Isaiah 58:6-8 (American Standard Version)
of spiritually disciplined practice that has been commanded by the Lord. Moreover—according to this passage—the charitable work of giving to the hungry and sheltering the exposed, when undertaken in the right spirit, provides for the needs of the poor as well as promotes the healing of the giver.

The pastor’s understanding of spiritual sickness and spiritual healing dominate his interpretation of widespread problems in contemporary America, such as alienation and poverty. The greatest problems facing Plainfield residents today, he says, are “spiritual problems.” They need, he says, “to discover a purpose for living and to believe God wants to help them.” In reflecting on the extent of 21st century American poverty, his thoughts take off from the perceived failures of the President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty:

“Poverty is no better today than it was then. Because poverty, to me, is more a spiritual problem than it is a money problem…The bottom line is I feel it’s a spiritual problem, and that’s the reason we try to teach spiritually. You want to meet that spiritual problem.”

The poor are poor, he says:

“Because of their outlook on life, not because they don’t have the opportunity. It’s there, but they don’t take advantage of it. It’s there, but the government just keeps pourin’ money to them…Now here’s these poor people around here [coming to the SLM]. They don’t have much. But they’re smoking. They’re on dope, alcohol, and other drugs, and their money’s down the tube. They’re running around having children. And men have become rogues. To me, that’s a spiritual problem.”

Unlike secular conservatives who find fault with the choices and lifestyles of the poor per se, Pastor Edley holds that spiritual warfare plays a part in producing the pernicious habits and destructive lifestyles that account for poverty among the poor. Without the empowerment and healing that comes through being alive in Christ rather than being dead in sin, the poor are continual victims of their own fallen nature. Speaking one evening on chapter two of Ephesians to a congregation made up mostly of charity recipients, the Pastor said:
“Every one of us at one time in our life—might even be today—have fought against God. We’ve turned our own wicked way...May I say to you: The chances are, if you have strayed from doing what God tells us to do in His work, if you strayed from God and His presence, the Devil’s gonna take advantage of it. [Paraphrased, the Apostle Paul says]: ‘Once we were also ruled by the selfish desires of our bodies and our minds. We have made God angry and we were going to be punished like everyone else.’”

Because he sees a direct, causal relationship between material and spiritual poverty, Pastor Edley holds that lifting oneself out of economic hardships and embracing Christ as one’s personal Savior go hand in hand. In the aforementioned sermon, he continued by describing part of the SLM’s mission as follows: “We seek to tell individuals that they can be healed in the name of Jesus. And you can. And the greatest healing that is needed is spiritual healing. People need to be restored to God through the Lord Jesus. And as we are strengthened spiritually, we can meet every other affliction in a better way.” As he envisions it, “an age of real spiritual awakening,” one in which more people were born again in Christ, would differ markedly from the present:

“There would be more honesty; there would be more people willing to really work and apply themselves. And they would have more self-esteem; they’d have more confidence; they would be more tolerant of others.”

In the meantime, his advice to the believer in dealing with troubled and recalcitrant people is to “See if you can love ‘em into the kingdom.”

Pastor Julie Swartz serves as Assistant Director of the SLM. She is a protégé of Pastor Edley’s and the organization’s other resident pastor. She came to her current position through a series of unexpected turns. By her own account, Julie spent most of her life as a “very introverted, very quiet person.” She remembers having often been called “stupid” by her mother.
growing up and she was, in general, “cultured not to ask questions. I was cultured not to ask for things.” She struggled with depression and had intense difficulty communicating with others, especially strangers. Pastor Julie grew into such a timorous, insecure adult that, as she says, “It was a hard thing for me to ask the Lord for anything, cause I used to get in trouble for asking, you know, for something.”

Before ever coming to the SLM, Pastor Julie, as a middle-aged mother and wife, felt called to the ministry, specifically a ministry aimed at teaching women “how to cope” with their hardships. She heard God speak to her and say “Prepare the way for the Lord.” Because this was also the message spoken by God to John the Baptist, she chose to follow the latter’s example and embrace vegetarianism, as well. At the time of her first contact with the SLM, she was searching for a quiet, peaceful place to pray and “seek the Lord.” A pastor friend whom she consulted suggested contacting the SLM.

After having regularly used SLM space for solitary prayer for some time, she felt the Lord guiding her to speak from the pulpit during a public service. Pastor Edley welcomed her request. In no time at all, Pastor Julie was tapped to conduct worship services in Pastor Edley’s stead while he vacationed. Not long afterward, the Assistant Director who preceded Pastor Julie stormed out the SLM doors in a fit of frustration for the final time. Her last act as Assistant Director, however, was to hurl the building keys past Julie’s startled face. In recalling her immediate accession to these new responsibilities, Pastor Julie recalls that, “When things changed here I didn’t let anybody know I was nervous. And so I just kept seeking the Lord and was like: ‘Lord, you brought me here. And so I’m just gonna trust you.’ And, so, I did…And the power is in the Lord. And I had to rely on God through my life. I have a lot of afflictions in my life, and because of those things I know that I can help others now.”
In responding to stress this way, Pastor Julie was literally practicing what she preaches. Taped to the center of her office door is a sheet of standard white paper with this message printed in bold, black font: “Good Morning. This is God. I will be handling ALL your problems today. I will NOT need your help...So, have a good day!!! ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.’” Proverbs 3:5.” The physical centrality of this message on her door mirrors the preeminent place that it has in her thought and preaching. The doctrine that faith in God empowers the believer to endure and ultimately triumph over any hardship, however agonizing or protracted, is the crux of her faith.

Though both Pastor Edley and Pastor Julie place this theme of spiritual healing or empowerment through faith at the forefront of their teachings, the two tend to interact with the charity seeking public in different ways. More so than Pastor Edley—whose homiletic style often involves detailed scriptural exegesis—Pastor Julie’s sermons, prayers, and teachings highlight more of what it means to practice the life of a faithful Christian day in and day out. She aims, in other words, to give to her audience a clear and accessible idea of how a faithful Christian ought to live and ought to respond to the sorts of problems that recur most often for working-class people.

She tells homely anecdotes about living like a dandelion for Jesus—that is, not conforming to the world, being “connected to a vine that’s strong” and “not easily removed.” She insists that believers ought to always “lean on Jesus,” and she tells stories about people who were vindicated by staying obedient to the Lord, even though doing so had seemed ridiculous in the eyes of the world. She instructs volunteers to think of themselves as the hands and feet of God, laboring to bring about his will through their mundane acts. Do not expect rewards, she counsels, but have faith that God will provide. And she implores people to recognize that each
of us is special and that the haunting thought that “we have no purpose” is one of Satan’s tricks to keep us separated from God. By making a habit of preaching through one accessible example or metaphor after another, Pastor Julie constructs a sort of idealized Christian against whom her listeners can measure their own conduct. Pastor Julie also instructs through the example of her own conduct, for she is habitually calm, polite, and kind, despite often experiencing stress and pressures in the course of her work.

Paralleling Pastor Julie’s conviction that the poor ought to gather strength through faith in God is her belief in the importance of living within one’s means and being resourceful with what one has, however unfashionable or unpopular that may be. No doubt, this outlook owes a lot to her austere country upbringing. She advocates producing homemade soap, learning to sew, and making pillows cushions, blankets, and whatever else from scraps of cloth. She plans to teach these and other skills by offering courses in home economics at the SLM, and she expects to invite lecturers who have special knowledge or skills to share. At present, however, she laments:

“People don’t know how to improvise. You know, I had someone ask about [receiving] a high chair. [When I was a young mother] I didn’t have a high chair. And so I told her what I used. I mean, I didn’t have money when I started out. I was a single mom, too. At that time they used to send out Sears and Penny’s catalogs. But you can gather telephone books, too. And I just put these catalogs in a grocery bag, brown grocery bag, and I used a belt and tied my children in the chair. Boosted ‘em up and tied ‘em so they didn’t get off. And I sat right by ‘em, fed ‘em, and got ‘em off. But that was their high chair, you know. I didn’t have money to buy a high chair, you know. I didn’t have room for all kinds of added equipment, you know.

To be clear, though, Pastor Julie holds individual effort within the context of a supportive community as the model for social change, not striving in isolation. She believes that churches are responsible for providing just such a community, and that each church has a duty to help the residents of the neighborhood within which it is located. “We need to rethink church,” she says. “Church is not an hour at Sunday. Church is the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is connected to help one another.” In fact, she believes that churches ought to be open to assist
people in need or simply to provide a refuge for prayer twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week:

“I don’t know how it’ll be done, but it will be done if we seek the Lord. But I know that there’s gonna be healing—you know, spiritual, physical, emotional. You see a lot of emotional needs…I think it’s not only gonna affect physical poverty, but it’s going to affect the spiritual poverty. Whether Christians realize it or not, a lot of Christians are spiritually poor. Not in the sense that Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit,’ because the poor in spirit are those who realize that we have to be nothing of our own but connect to his spirit. That’s what that means, but spiritually poor is not realizing the power of God and that He wants to provide everything we need. And our needs are not cars and jobs. Our needs are our relationship with God.”

As sorrowful as she is about the decline of community and just plain neighborliness in America, Pastor Julie could not help but be ambivalent about the economic recession that began in 2008. On the one hand, she recognized and lamented the increase in suffering caused by the recession. But, on the other, she saw that the widespread hardships of the recession forced people to band together and help one another. In and around the SLM, she says, “I see the outcast, the poor, the underdog sharing Jesus and working together, having to work together.” This reminds her of what she learned about the Great Depression from those who had lived through it:

“And they said that times now are worse than times then because people then helped one another. And we [in America] have been in the mindset of ‘worried about just me.’ And people would work a half a shift, like one person would work the half a shift and another person would work the other half in eight hours. And it wasn’t just one person working the whole eight hours, so they continued to maintain. And then one helped the other with their excess, you know, that’s where they swapped goods, and so we need to go back to helping one another. And when we learn how to do that, things’ll be better.”

c. Of Supplies and Suppliers

The exceptional scale of SLM charity sets it apart from its peers in the greater Plainfield area. Every month the SLM spreads fifty thousand or more pounds of food over at least one thousand hot meals and one thousand four hundred separate instances of free grocery
distribution. This cornucopia rests upon a steady groundswell of entirely private donations—donations of money, labor, and materiel. Unwilling to accept the constraints that accompany public funding, Pastor Edley explains that “I don’t want the government money. I’d sooner be poor and have a ministry and preach Christ than have a larger ministry and have the money.”

The SLM has therefore been able to operate as a prodigious giver over the course of many years because it has managed to attract large sums of food and money from the local private groundswell month after month and year after year.

Financial donations are especially critical as these subsidize the infrastructure that allows meal service and grocery distribution to proceed at all. Hard currency is needed to pay for building upkeep, equipment replacement and maintenance, utilities charges, insurance expenses, assorted vehicle-related costs and much more. Out of respect for the sensitive nature of financial information, I never asked Pastor Edley or anyone else about this subject directly. Judging from basic ethnographic observation and many informal conversations, however, it is clear that Pastor Edley works, for the good of the SLM, to cultivate and maintain friendly relationships with many well-off individuals, businesses, and organizations in the community, including many churches, some of which he has had close ties to for decades.

When I once happened to describe my affiliation with the SLM to an elderly man I knew, it prompted him to recount that not too long before our conversation had he heard Pastor Edley speak of the SLM’s work at the meeting of a club to which he belongs: the Retired Executives of Charles County. During my time in Plainfield, this same man—along with many in his income bracket and above—attended a steak dinner fundraiser at the SLM that Pastor Edley had widely publicized on his own and also by enlisting his extensive rolodex. On a more regular basis, the

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18 For a study that identifies an inverse correlation between religiosity and government funding among American FBOs see Ebaugh, Chafetz, and Pipes 2006.
Pastor can frequently be seen on Tuesday and Wednesday nights at the SLM dining with a handful of affluent men and women who are there as his guests. When he wishes to take potential donors out for dinner, the Pastor has the option of utilizing some of the cash vouchers he regularly receives as donations from the operator of an upscale restaurant conglomerate in the area.

The great majority of monthly food donations to the SLM come from several large and regular donor organizations. The largest among them is the Plainfield Regional Food Bank. Approximately half of all the food that the SLM either serves as meals or distributes as groceries originates with this organization. While the Food Bank charges nominal rates for some of these items, their price amounts to only a fraction of what these goods would fetch in the marketplace. Contributions to the Food Bank from government, businesses, foundations, organizations, and individuals cover this wide expense gap and therefore provide an indirect subsidy to SLM operations. Many of the small-scale food drives that occur at places like libraries, schools, movie theatres, offices, and supermarkets, for example, deliver their donations to the Food Bank. (As per the Food Bank’s request, many of these drives focus on collecting the “Super Six” of boxed cereal, peanut butter, and cans of tuna, vegetables, soup, or beef stew.) As the Food Bank leadership regards the SLM as a reliable and efficient vehicle for reaching the needy of Plainfield, they have granted Pastor Edley’s organization, albeit informally, a privileged status. In the past, when Food Bank leaders have decided to increase giving within Plainfield, they have often opted to channel that increase through the SLM.

Other than the nominal cost of Food Bank donations and perhaps a few small and infrequent exceptions, everything else flowing into the SLM pool is donated free of charge. Two large grocery stores located in the affluent suburbs—both members of chains prominent in the
region—also donate substantial quantities of food to the SLM weekly. They donate, for the most part, meats, breads, and pastries that are very near to their “Sell By” dates. The SLM places the meats in a freezer and the pastries in a cooler immediately after receiving them. Several times a week the SLM also picks up sizeable donations of foods that are edible but not saleable from bakeries and restaurants, such as donuts or fast food chicken that is a day old. Contributions from these and other large and regular suppliers account for the great majority of the resources that flow into the SLM every month. In fact, the schedule of SLM giveaways is efficiently organized around these contributions.

In addition to the contributions of regular donors, however, SLM stores are continually replenished by a hodgepodge of irregular and one-off donors. At the start of every extended vacation in the public school calendar, for example, cafeteria refrigerators and freezers contain many perishables that are scheduled to spoil during the break. To prevent this waste, the local business with the contract to supply these cafeterias donates the relevant perishables, usually cold cut sandwiches and individualized cartons of milk and juice, to the SLM. Many civic organizations such as churches, youth groups, fraternal organizations, and others also choose to donate the proceeds of their periodic food drives to the SLM. As another example, a local man with an orchard on his rural property has harvested and donated thousands of apples to the SLM for several summers in a row now.

Many irregular donors, however, are just ordinary citizens with no prior relationship to the SLM who have a small amount of something that they wish to give to the needy: a local farmer with many rows of sweet corn standing in the field that he cannot sell; a successful deer hunter with more venison steaks and burgers than he can eat or share with his family and friends; an anonymous person who deposits a few boxes of groceries on the stoop of the building and
drives away; and a young girl who is moved to donate some of the profits she has made from selling beaded necklaces and wristbands to her parents’ friends and others—actual examples all. The important takeaway, then, is that the SLM is able to regularly redistribute large quantities of food to the needy because it regularly draws significant assistance, both financial and otherwise, from a diverse spectrum of donors in the community who help to constitute the local charitable groundswell. For all of this diversity, however, the SLM donor pool remains overwhelmingly homogeneous along two critical dimensions. One the one hand, the great bulk of resources donated to the SLM flow either from affluent white individuals or organizations headed by affluent whites. On the other, Protestant individuals and organizations greatly outnumber those of other faith backgrounds.19

d. Meals and Grocery Giveaways

Thanks to the contributions of donors, both regular and irregular, the SLM is able to fulfill its regular schedule of hot meals and grocery giveaways with ease. More often than not, SLM meals, which are served on plastic plates and eaten with plastic utensils, have tasty cuts of quality meats such as steak, tenderloin, pork chops, and chicken as their centerpiece. Judging from the price labels still affixed to these meats when they arrive, diners at the SLM routinely eat servings of meat that cost grocery store customers between six and fourteen dollars a pound. In addition to a serving of meat, the typical meal also contains a starch such as mashed potatoes or pasta along with a side of vegetables, usually canned, such as green beans, corn, carrots, or peas. As there is always a superabundance of pastries in the kitchen cooler, every night diners receive

19 See the following for evidence of high levels of charitable generosity on the part of Evangelicals and other religious conservatives: Regnerus, Smith, and Sikkink 1998.
a dessert item like a muffin, a large cookie, or, most commonly, a large slice of sheet cake topped with frosted icing.

The character and quantity of Tuesday and Wednesday night grocery giveaways always shifts according to what is available in the SLM stores. Rolls, bagels, and loaves of bread that just a bit too old for the discriminating grocery store customer are always available in great quantities. Other than that, though, there is considerable variation. On one average day in the winter of 2008 – 2009, each attendee received a grocery bag containing the following: one 15 oz. can of sliced potatoes; one 14.5 oz. can of cut green beans; one 24 oz. can of beef stew; one 14.5 oz. can of sliced carrots; and one 16 oz. bottle of flavored water. A lesser after-meal giveaway around the same time contained a small handful of individualized yogurt packets, a small tub of sour cream, a box of microwavable potatoes, and a second handful of individualized salad dressings from the fast-food restaurant Wendy’s. Some of the larger after-meal giveaways happened while the fields of the region were in harvest. On some of those nights, attendees trudged off with such things as a sack of onions, a ten-pound box of collard greens, or an even heavier bag of carrots. While the quantity of groceries distributed on a Tuesday or Wednesday is often substantial, no after-meal giveaway comes close to approaching the scale of third Thursday giveaways of food and other essentials. On an representative third Thursday in November 2008, for example, every independent adult or head of household coming to the SLM received the following:

8 to 10 cups of yogurt
6 to 8 plastic bottles of flavored water
1 plastic grocery bag full of raw carrots
1 plastic grocery bag full of red beets
1 plastic grocery bag full of apples
1 plastic grocery bag full of potatoes
1 plastic grocery bag containing 8 to 10 onions
1 microwavable dish of frozen black beans
1 medium-sized bag of potato chips
1 pack of sanitary napkins or 1 pack cotton balls
1 toothbrush
1 small roll of dental floss
1 pack of adult diapers

Many of the goods donated to the SLM, especially from one-off donors, come in small amounts that cannot be equitably distributed across a large number of people. In order to distribute these things in the fairest way possible, one of the pastors conducts a weekly raffle at the conclusion of the Wednesday night worship service. As attendees file into the sanctuary just prior to the start of service, each is handed a raffle ticket bearing a unique number. When service ends, the raffle begins. The goods to be raffled are lined up across the dais, and one of the pastors starts to blindly draw duplicate tickets from a fishbowl held by an assistant. Those with the ticket matching the number pulled by the pastor are instructed to call out and come forward to collect their prize. Clothing, furniture, and toys are regularly distributed this way, as are boxes of assorted foodstuffs. Vouchers for free oil changes that are donated by a local automotive garage represent another common raffle item. Shortly before Thanksgiving 2008, sixteen vouchers for free turkeys were sent unsolicited to the SLM by one of the city’s largest private employers, and these were distributed by raffle as well. In 2008, the SLM raffled off a perfectly serviceable van that had been donated, and in 2009 it did the same with a truck.

Pastor Edley confesses that he is unable to explain why the SLM attracts such a prodigious quantity of donated goods month after month, though he does insist that he has never solicited donations of food or other resources from any of the SLM’s current suppliers. Nor does he think that his personal connections throughout the community explain the volume of donations that come into the SLM. Asked about the secret to the SLM’s capacity to draw so much of the local charitable groundswell, the Pastor confesses:
“I don’t know. They just come. And I haven’t gone…I didn’t go to Harris Teeter Supermarket and ask them to do this. I didn’t go to Methodist church and ask them to do what they do. I didn’t go to Gojo’s. Gojo’s have given us recently thousands of dollars’ worth of stuff. I mean thousands of pounds. It’s a place that they have soap and lotions and stuff like that. It’s a big distribution company. Land of Lakes—we get our butter from Land O’Lakes butter. I got a call one day and the lady said ‘Could you use butter?’ Yeah, I said. ‘Well, [she said], we have a place we’ve been supplying the butter but recently they haven’t come and got it, even though we called them. And I heard about Staff of Life Ministries. Could you use some?’ I said “Yeah”. And she said ‘Well, when could you come?’ I said ‘Well, when would you want us?’ She said ‘Well, you could come today or any time.’ I don’t even know where Land O’Lakes is—have no idea. I mean, you talk about butter. We get hundreds of pounds, and they’re into little individual containers. It’s just, it’s given—I can’t tell you why….It just happens.”

e. The Recipients

On Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, when the SLM serves a hot meal and distributes a grocery bag to all comers, average attendance fluctuates between about one hundred and two hundred persons, though it is not uncommon for attendance to rise far above this. On the busiest evening in its history, the SLM served six hundred and six people. As a general rule, attendance numbers rise steadily over the course of a given month as public welfare benefits (which are distributed at the start of each month) dwindle. Because the volume of third Thursday giveaways is so great, these days usually attract representatives of about four hundred households that together encompass more than one thousand people.

Recipients of SLM charity are disproportionately men, women, and children who live in the Swing or in an adjacent neighborhood. The recipient population of every food charity in the city I came to know—and there were many based in several different neighborhoods—exhibited this propinquity bias. In fact, it is common at the SLM and elsewhere in the city for charity recipients to come and go on foot. For some, but not many, the journey to the SLM involves a public bus ride followed by a long walk. A few ride bicycles, and a few even come by way of motorized wheelchair. The minority who do drive a vehicle more often than not bring along
friends and relatives who share similar straits and are eager to avail themselves of SLM largesse. As the volume of third Thursday giveaways lifts overall attendance, so to does that volume alter the geographic distribution of the recipient population: more so on third Thursdays than on either Tuesdays or Wednesdays, significant numbers of needy people from areas outside of either the Swing or neighborhoods adjacent to the Swing flock to the SLM, including dozens from county towns other than Plainfield.

Many of the people who receive charity from the SLM have been rendered physically unfit for most kinds of work by old age, disability, or both. Contrary to widespread misconceptions about the so-called “idle poor,” however, a great many regular attendees work in the formal economy. With few, if any, exceptions, they do wage work that is insecure, poorly remunerated, and often temporary. Despite their working, in other words, they are unable to make ends meet on the basis of their paychecks alone. They are people for whom there is, as in the Country and Western song, persistently “too much month at the end of the money.”

Martin Frederick, the man who serves as Pastor Julie’s assistant and as the foreman managing the SLM workforce, characterized one of the trends he sees thus:

“I’ve noticed the young people are going through not having jobs or lost their boyfriend or their husband, and they got two kids to support and they just can’t make it. And they turn to the Staff of Life Ministries for help. And I ran into a young girl last night. It was her first time. She works as a home care [assistant]. Her husband’s not workin’. And they just couldn’t make it. So they heard about the Staff of Life Ministries, so they stopped. And now she wants to volunteer.

In addition to those who work and those who can’t, the recipient population also includes many men and women who are looking to work, longing to work even, but who cannot land a job. As a consequence, they eke out a living week after week on whatever combination of public

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and private resources they can cobble together. Pastor Julie relates that, in fact, recipients often approach her with requests for help in finding employment. Many also ask for financial assistance, particularly for rent expenses and utility bills. Her comments reminded me of the big and burly 60-ish white man I spoke with over a SLM dinner one night. Despite his hard-living exterior, he spoke softly and moved slowly. He offered that, despite his long experience in all sorts of trades, he couldn’t find work, and it seemed as though he was a very tired man. His last name was King, and on his privately-printed business card he advertised himself as the licensed, bonded, and insured “King’s Enterprises.” Down the center of the card, a column six items long ticked off the skills and talents that Mr. King offered for hire: “Antenna & Tower Business; Licensed Electronic Repair; Fabrication & Welding; Mechanical Automotive Repair; Home Improvement Business; Poetry & Song Composer.”

i. Race at the SLM

The make-up of the SLM recipient population gives insight into some noteworthy racial dynamics that operate within the faith based sphere. On the whole, whites greatly outnumber African-Americans and other non-whites among SLM recipients. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, African-Americans tend to account for approximately twenty percent of all attendees. On third Thursdays, the AA proportion rises, although whites continue to constitute a solid majority of recipients. Given that African-Americans comprise more than twenty-two percent of the city’s population and a much greater share of the city’s poor, it is clear that African-Americans are underrepresented among SLM recipients. Pastor Edley acknowledges this underrepresentation with dismay, but he also confesses to being unable to explain the reasons for it.
One of the reasons is certainly geographical. Poor people tend to face mobility constraints at higher rates than their more affluent peers. The poor, for example, have more limited access to private vehicles and also higher rates of physical disability than non-poor peers. In places like Plainfield, where public transit services are inadequate in the extreme, mobility problems are especially acute. What this means is that, all other things being equal, a given charitable institution with a fixed address will tend to draw poor people from its home neighborhood at much higher rates than those from neighborhoods farther away. There is, in other words, an inverse correlation between the frequency with which a given person visits an organization and the distance between that organization and a person’s primary residence. As the Swing is an overwhelmingly white neighborhood and African-Americans are concentrated in neighborhoods some distance from the Swing, it stands to reason that poor whites, for geographical reasons alone, should outnumber African-Americans at the SLM.

Yet geographical constraints are not the only factors driving African-American underrepresentation at the SLM. During an informal interview I conducted with Ben Harris, one of the more prominent and well-connected men in the Charles County African-American community, I raised this subject. Mr. Harris, who was at the time serving as Director of the Plainfield Urban League, agreed with my interpretation that, in addition to those people facing mobility constraints, many needy African-Americans were electing not to visit the SLM despite being able to do so. The explanation, according to Harris, lies with the fact that poor African-Americans in Plainfield tend to avoid engaging with organizations and institutions that they do not regard as “theirs.” Only when respected figures in the African-American community, such as pastors or others in leadership positions, vouch for the decency of a white-dominated organization will large numbers of poor blacks feel comfortable engaging with it. According to
this analysis, then, large numbers of needy African-Americans forego the SLM’s generous charity because this organization has not been endorsed forcefully enough by leaders in the black community.

These circumstances raise a number of additional issues worth considering. First off, this is an interpretation that explains black underrepresentation at the SLM as a function of the SLM’s status as a “white” organization in the eyes of the black community. This explanation neither invokes nor needs to invoke any kind of racist or discriminatory practices within the SLM, past or present, to account for black underrepresentation. On the contrary, at no point in all of my time at the SLM did I ever witness Pastor Edley, Pastor Julie, or any other staff member of the SLM act in a racially insensitive or discriminatory way. It was my judgment, based on considerable experience, that SLM members took their religious duties seriously and consistently strove to treat “the least” among us in a kind and humble Christ-like fashion irrespective of race, ethnicity, faith, weight, appearance, or any other factor.\(^\text{21}\) In fact, through Pastor Edley, the SLM has mutually supportive relationships with many leaders from within the black community, including several pastors. The analysis offered by Ben Harris suggests, however, that these leaders have not, for whatever reasons, sufficiently publicized their support for the SLM throughout the black community. If and when they do, the black proportion of the SLM recipient pool is likely to rise, perhaps considerably.

\(^{21}\) Verses 40 – 45 of Matthew 25 contain the scriptural source of the widespread Christian convention of referring to needy people as “the least of these” or “the least among us.” “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and yet took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these least, ye did it not unto me.” Matthew 25:40-45 (American Standard Version)
This raises a question that is especially important in light of faith-based policy considerations: What accounts for this generalized reluctance on the part of poor blacks to engage with organizations, even charitable ones, that are identified as the Other, particularly the white Other? In addition to geographical constraints, it is this feature of the cultural climate—rather than any concrete facts or information about the SLM per se—that goes far toward disinclining needy African-Americans from frequenting this organization. The answer lies with the subject that Ben Harris spent a significant amount of our informal interview describing: the frequent indignities and injustices, some small and others large, that African-Americans face living in a society where white privilege is the norm.

As more flagrant forms of racism and racial discrimination have lessened in recent decades, scholars have focused more attention on less conspicuous forms such as institutionalized racism and color-blind racism. Most pertinent for the subject at hand here is the study of microaggressions, those practices, both verbal and nonverbal, that convey messages of inferiority, often in subtle and even unconscious ways, to members of marginalized and minority groups (Sue 2010:3-5). As is true throughout the United States, being assailed with racialized microaggressions is a part of everyday life for African-Americans in Plainfield.

Many African-Americans, including Ben Harris, for example recounted to me instances of being subjected to a de facto “last hired and first fired” policy in the local labor market. Among others microaggressions I witnessed were a female city council candidate, at a town hall meeting on race relations no less, argue her point about the cultural deficiencies within the black community at large by contrasting supposedly typical behavior with the “articulate” black male professional sitting across from her at the table. At hotly contested basketball games between Plainfield’s largely African-American flagship high school and the area’s most affluent and
overwhelmingly white suburban high school, fans in the student section of the latter team have been known to mock their opponents with “2-4-6-8, you’ll work for us one day!”22 Also, the policies of establishment institutions in Plainfield, whether public or private, are often felt by African-Americans as abuses against their community, such as the recent decision to place new homes for low-income families in the most remote, inconvenient corner of the city or the fact that the main boulevard through the SE is also the most poorly maintained road in the city.

Far and away the most flagrant and offensive microaggression I witnessed during my fieldwork involved a speech given by the county library director—a prominent, well-paid white male public official—to an overwhelmingly African-American audience at one of the city’s historic African-American community centers on Martin Luther King, Jr. day 2009. With Barack Obama’s inauguration set to happen the following day, the crowd was full of hope and pride. Many were the elderly men and women in the audience with long memories who had never imagined such a possibility as an African-American president. In a foyer off the main hall, small business owners advertised and sold products. Beneath a pillar separating the foyer from the hall, two young men, surrounded by onlookers, played a match of chess. The mood was one of solidarity and celebration all around.

Visibly intimidated by the prospect of public speaking, the library director stepped before the lectern and chose to read a published article recounting the story of baseball great Jackie Robinson’s triumph over racism in America’s national pastime. Eyes focused downward, he read the article verbatim, including the portions which described abuses directed at Robinson by his contemporaries. Two times, then, over the heads of preachers, grandmothers, business

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22 As a telling detail, however, when competing against a local high school made up heavily of poor white students, the same affluent student section chants instead, “The wheels on your house go round and round, round and round, round and round.” This is a reference to the perception that poor whites frequently have as their primary dwelling the much-ridiculed “mobile home” or “trailer.”
owners, and children did this white public official hurl the word “nigger.” A short while after concluding his speech, he mounted the dais a second time to apologize for any offense he might have given. That he chose to do as he did in the first place speaks volumes about the state of white privilege in America, including the privilege to speak and act without having to worry about what might give offense to minority communities at all.

The point in recounting these incidents is to demonstrate that microaggressions, along with more overt forms of racism and discrimination, function to reproduce a cultural climate in which African-Americans have legitimate reasons to be anxious about interacting with organizations about which little is known other than their association with whiteness. Every one of these organizations represents, to people of color, a possible site of insult, abuse, and denigration. When black leaders publicly vouch for the decency of a certain white organization, they are in effect asserting, to black listeners, that the probability of being mistreated in a racialized way there is relatively low. In making their choices about which charities to visit, African-Americans must consider the possibility social and psychic transaction costs that do not affect whites. This is an important form of white privilege, as it lowers the costs associated with obtaining “free” charitable goods for whites vis-à-vis non-whites. In Plainfield, as elsewhere in America, microaggressions and other forms of racism and discrimination reproduce a climate in which African-Americans tend to avoid unfamiliar organizations associated with whiteness, the merits or demerits of a particular white organization being immaterial. In Plainfield, this process contributes to the underrepresentation of African-Americans among the SLM recipient population.
ii. Regular and Cyclical Recipients

White or black, however, the majority of recipients on both Tuesday and Wednesday evenings are regulars who come to the SLM at least weekly. Many come alone, but groups of three, four, and five friends are not uncommon. Quite a few romantically linked couples, married or not, attend the SLM together. All in all, a significant number of people, probably around one hundred and twenty-five, make an effort to get to the SLM every time that a hot meal is offered or groceries are distributed. Though it takes prolonged involvement to realize it, the lines at the SLM are populated with many of the same faces night after night after night. On third Thursdays, a greater portion of the recipients are people who attend less frequently, oftentimes only for this once-a-month giveaway.

In addition to regular SLM attendees, the recipient population at meal and grocery giveaways frequently includes people whose attendance is more cyclical in nature. These are people—often parents with children—who make a habit of frequenting the SLM when, for whatever reason, they skid into a bout of especially difficult times. Job loss, sudden expenses, and slack time in jobs such as construction and temporary work often push cyclical attendees back to the SLM after a period away. So do the temporary yet recurrent layoffs that are common throughout the remaining manufacturing sector in Plainfield, dependent as this sector is on ever-fluctuating customer demand to maintain a workforce.

To all recipients the SLM is a godsend, a reliable stream of valuable resources in an exceptionally volatile world. This stream represents, in other words, a stabilizing force for people who are living in the grip of great instability. Because recipients get both groceries and a meal at one stop, SLM giveaways are all that much more valuable. Hot meals and groceries they can eat. In paying less for food (not a small budget item for anyone, let alone a whole family),
recipients free up whatever little money they do have for other expenses. Constantly in danger of being buffeted by another round of damaging political and economic changes, these men and women use SLM resources to help establish some degree of equilibrium in their lives by maintaining a certain level of food consumption that lessens the likelihood of their experiencing chronic hunger and the problems that stem from it.

Owing to the preponderance of regular recipients, SLM giveaways run seamlessly. The people know the drill: when to arrive, where to sign, where to wait, when and how to move from the sanctuary to the cafeteria, how to be served, and how to finish it all up and head for the groceries on the way to the exit. And because the regularity of recipients overlaps with the regularity of certain leading volunteers—especially Pastor Julie and her chief assistant, Martin Frederick—social relationships have developed between the two groups.

With these relationships as a baseline, Pastor Julie and other leading volunteers frequently choose to direct additional SLM resources to individuals or families for special reasons that may have been privately communicated: a cake to a family with a coming birthday or a bike to a young boy without one. I remember seeing a single mother who was known to be struggling tremble and sob after being pulled from a crowd and given a twenty-five pound box of groceries. And I also remember seeing a teenage girl luminous with joy after having been given a fashionable winter coat that was a few seasons too dated for the donor. Acts of individualized charity like these happen all the time, often out of public view. In addition to giving to individuals or families in exceptional ways, the pastors also serve as listeners, mentors, and counselors for people who face dispiriting circumstances day in and day out and may have few other places to find sympathy and support.
Recipients of SLM charity adopt a variety of different strategies for negotiating the recipients’ dilemma, all of them intended to contest the notion, integral to the behaviorist ideology, that the poor are poor because they lack the traits esteemed by middle-class culture. Among the ways in which they demonstrate their possession of these estimable traits and thus their worthiness, many recipients of SLM charity show a willingness to pitch in and help perform some task or other around the SLM when asked. Pastor Julie, who hails from a humble country background and is on friendly terms with more regulars than anyone else, remarks that:

“If we’re short, I can call these people by name and say, you know: ‘I need some help. Would you be willing to help?’ And, you know, they were so excited about, first, me knowin’ their name; second, bein’ chosen to help out. They worked beyond the time I had needed ‘em. [And after finishing they say:] ‘What else can I do to help?’ ‘Is there something I can do?’…It doesn’t matter what our education is, or our ability, we all have a need to be needed. And that’s where we [at the SLM] hope to be able to plug in more people—you know, simple things.”

It also sometimes happens that, in the exchange between charity giver and charity receiver, recipients make remarks, often without solicitation or prompting, which showed that they were eager to make volunteers aware of their basic human decency. On one occasion, a slight sixty-something man explained to a couple of volunteers—completely out of the blue—that he was carrying twice the normal allotment of groceries because he had a woman and her two boys staying with him for a time. It was a hardship, he admitted, “But she’s helped me out before, so I gotta’ help her out when she needs it.”

Whether they actively work on behalf of the SLM or not, virtually all recipients who come through the SLM doors evince respectfulness and gratitude. Personalities range from the quiet to the outgoing, but it is extremely rare for a recipient to act in a rude, impolite, ungrateful, boisterous, indelicate, or disrespectful way. This almost never happens. In casual conversation, many refer to the SLM as “the church,” and they comport themselves in a way that befits a house
of worship, whether in the sanctuary proper or not. They modulate their voices and eschew
indelicate language, despite what they do outside. They have enormous respect for the learning
and generosity of Pastor Edley. Many recipients over the years have asked him to officiate their
nuptials. And when speaking with him—and to a lesser extent Pastor Julie and other leading
volunteers—they adopt a humble, even deferential, posture. Very rarely does a recipient skip out
on one of the “mandatory” worship services that follow Wednesday evening meals. These habits
of respectfulness hold over the whole population, whether intelligent or slow, disheveled or trim,
fervently religious or politely noncommittal.

f. Surplus and Sunday School

Over the course of the first few months of 2009, donations of food coming into the SLM
(already far and away the largest charity of its kind in the region) began to soar to unprecedented
levels. It soon became apparent that more and more organizations were being stirred into
philanthropic action by seeing and hearing of the hardship wrought locally by global recession.
In fact, monthly donations of food to the SLM continued to grow into summer 2009. The two
organizations principally responsible for driving this growth were Christ Our Savior Methodist
church and the Community Harvest of Charles County.

Christ Our Savior is an affluent and almost exclusively white Evangelical megachurch
based in the suburbs. Around the start of 2009, Christ Our Savior began to host a standing food
collection drive that solicited donations from church members and others connected in one way
or another to the church. Receipts from these drives were then turned over to the SLM.
Donations to the SLM from the Community Harvest of Charles County far exceeded even the

23 As described more in chapter five, however, this increase in food resources coincided with a sharp drop in financial
contributions to the SLM.
robust Christ Our Savior efforts. The Community Harvest is a long-running operation that rescues food that would otherwise be discarded from restaurants, grocery stores, hospitals, catering services, coffee shops, church kitchens, and other places. For the most part, this is food that has been prepared but left over after consumer demand has been exhausted—yesterday’s battered fish sticks from a restaurant, this morning’s sausage links from the hospital kitchen, and so on. Operating expenses at the Community Harvest are covered mainly through donations from individuals, businesses, foundations, churches, and other civic organizations.

Comparing the average Tuesday and Wednesday night grocery giveaway of fall 2008 with summer 2009 reveals the prodigious impact of Christ Our Savior and Community Harvest contributions. In fall 2008, for example, an average giveaway consisted of the following: one plastic grocery bag containing five small items adding up to four or five pounds in weight, two grocery bags containing a moderate quantity of fruits and vegetables, and as many loaves of bread, rolls, and bagels as one cared to take. The five small items usually consisted of some combination of things like a can of green beans or peas, a can of condensed milk, a jar of Peanut Butter, a box of Macaroni and Cheese, a can of soup, chili, or beef stew, a packet of instant potatoes, or a bottle of water or juice. One bag of fruits or vegetables usually contained something like a head of cabbage, a pound of collard greens, or six or eight apples, pears, beets, onions, or potatoes.

By late summer 2009, however, the quantity of food given away on Tuesday and Wednesday nights had come to represent approximately three times the amounts that were typical just nine months prior. The better part of this increase came in the form of precooked meats and soups that had been rescued in large quantities by the Community Harvest and frozen into individualized Zip-lock packets by the SLM. On a normal Tuesday in August 2009, for
example, each adult or head of household received the following: a three pound bag of fried chicken; a three pound bag of frozen soup; a bag of potato chips; a ten pound sack of potatoes; a head of cabbage; the formerly standard four to five pound bag of canned and boxed groceries; a citronella candle; and again as many loaves and bagels as people wanted.

The preexisting scale of SLM operations—which included the capacity to handle large quantities of food and the fact that the organization is open and staffed just about every day—was instrumental in drawing the better portion of these additional resources. Because most what the Community Harvest collects is perishable, these items must be either frozen or distributed promptly. This explains why, as Pastor Julie said, “When all the other places are closed…the Community Harvest just bombards us with food.” Martin remarked at the time:

“That’s what we was talkin’ about last night over there, you know: A lotta places [that distribute free food] is wonderin’ where their next stuff is comin’ from, and we’re trying to figure out how to get rid of more. Like last Monday: we cooked stuff extra all weekend. Come Monday, there’s thirteen boxes a meat comes through the door. So I mean, now, where, you know, how did we gain anything on the freezer? You know what I mean? I mean, and so we cooked more. What good does it do? Just more comes in. Like pastries and bread, we give it away and there’s more…We did have the cooler empty the other day. We had very little stuff in there. Ain’t gonna stay that way. It’s just gonna be right back full again. But [Julie] is tryin to give away more—get rid of it, don’t hoard it. We start hoardin’ it, then we gotta throw it away.”

Apropos this last remark, the blessings of superabundance also brought along the dangers of inefficiency and waste. So much food was piling up at such a rapid pace in 2009 that it was becoming possible for items to be buried or overlooked for long enough that they spoiled. Pastor Julie, Martin, and others were aware of this problem and they worked conscientiously to manage the stock to prevent the spoliation of foods in the SLM’s possession. Despite their best efforts, however, some foodstuffs did occasionally spoil before reaching the needy public. Sacks of raw vegetables like onions, carrots, and potatoes—being stored at room temperature—were the items most likely to spoil. It didn’t happen often, but it did happen.
Somewhat surprisingly, at the same time that the SLM was struggling to shunt a rising tide of donations out to a needy public, the total number of men, women, and children seeking assistance on Tuesdays and Wednesdays remained stable. This mystified most observers, as other indicators of need such as unemployment rates and public assistance rolls were climbing steeply during that same timeframe. Officials from the Plainfield Regional Food Bank conjectured that more and more people were being driven to share housing by moving in with one another. According to this hypothesis, more people may have been receiving assistance, though the total number of registered households fluctuated little. A middle class black man named Roger who resides in the Swing and regularly volunteers many hours at the SLM suggested that many of the people who were being pushed into the ranks of the needy in 2009 were probably, as yet, too prideful to seek out such a publicly visible source of charity as the SLM. Rogers’s testimony carried weight, for he had Pastor Edley’s permission to regularly distribute SLM groceries from the back of his own car to his needy neighbors. According to Roger, these neighbors were more than happy to take what he had to offer, but, despite living near to the SLM, they absolutely refused to be seen going there to receive assistance on their own.

In any event, because the quantity of groceries given away skyrocketed while the number of recipients remained more or less unchanged, each person therefore began to receive more and more than had been customary. Before long, recipients were showing up with buckets, crates, duffle bags, push carts, and even wagons in order to help them transport these unprecedented loads. Volunteers now began to save rather than discard cardboard boxes that had been used to transport donations to the SLM. These boxes were made available to recipients who wanted to use them to hold and transport their groceries. Some recipients opted not to use boxes or
anything else to hold their grocery bags. Instead, they would ask volunteers to loop the handles of one plastic bag after another over their outstretched arms. Whatever was left over would be lain across their upturned forearms. More than a few people, many of them old and frail, started regularly hobbling out into the Midwestern twilight like this, festooned and overburdened by the pressure on the SLM to just frantically get rid of things and make room for more. About this time, Martin remarked in passing that “A lot of these people comes through all the time. A lot of them is not to the point they that need it anymore. They just gotta have it.”

This expansion in resources also enhanced the SLM’s ability to reach people with its spiritual message. Despite many attempts over the years, the SLM had never succeeded in establishing a flourishing Sunday worship service. As of fall 2008, Pastor Julie was conducting regular Sunday worship services at the SLM that drew between an average of seven and ten people. All of these people were regulars at the SLM during the week, either as volunteers, recipients, or both. All enjoyed the informality and the opportunity to ask questions and constructively digress that the small group atmosphere allowed. In January of 2009—shortly before the SLM began to be regularly inundated with new supplies of food from the Community Harvest and Christ Our Savior—Julie recalls that “The Lord just said, you know, we have so much food, we need to have a meal.” Julie began to publicize the fact that, from that point on, Sunday worship would be followed by a free meal.

Very soon, twenty to twenty-five people were attending worship service every Sunday, and people were praising the high quality of the meals (which could be cooked with more care than the weekly meals that served hundreds). Within six months, attendance had climbed to an average of between fifty and seventy. More than eighty-five people attended the biggest Sunday event of the summer. Having taken care to accumulate a sufficient supply of various meats, one
bright and hot July day the SLM hosted a great barbeque cook-off following service in the back parking lot, an authentic American potlatch in which the organization showered the public with ribs, chicken, steaks, and one hot pan of tasty side dishes after another. Flushed with this success, Pastor Julie began to imagine that in the not-too-distant future the SLM would both serve meals every day of the week and deliver meals to housebound residents of the Swing.

People who were already regular recipients of weekday SLM giveaways made up the bulk of new Sunday worshippers. Many of them already had a relationship with a SLM that stretched back years, and many had come to know and appreciate Julie before ever attending a Sunday worship service. According to Julie, a lot of the people who come to Sunday services are “outcasts to society. Not necessarily all because of society, but they themselves don’t feel welcome in the traditional churches. And I had people that said, you know, if they came on Sunday, would they have to wear certain clothes. Or, you know, they don’t have very nice clothes to wear. Would it be alright?”

Similar issues, she says, have discouraged people from participating in the Bible studies that she holds prior to weekday meals:

“We have people here who can’t read. And some of ‘em are embarrassed by it and some of ‘em will tell you, “I can’t read.” Some of ‘em can’t read because they can’t see, but I’ve found, like at the Bible studies, they like to do like elementary school type thing where you fill in the blank. They like the questions to be directly out of the Bible and they put in the fill the blank and they’ll want one for next week....I had someone come up to me one time and say, ya know, they didn’t want to go to the Bible study because they didn’t know the Bible very well and they were afraid they might be embarrassed and I said well you know, we just kind of have an open forum and it’s just you know I encouraged him to come and be a part of it. And afterwards he came up to me and thanked me for encouraging him to stay, um, that he felt like it was the first time that he wasn’t felt degraded. And he learned from it, and he came back. It’s just learning how to try to see things through the eyes of those who are coming. So many people just wanna be able to be worth somethin’.”
IV.   The SLM Workforce

a.  A Place of Work

The voluminous redistribution of food in the form of meals and grocery bags represents the public face of the SLM. Yet behind this face lies the organizational reality that SLM operations are as dependent upon expenditures of human labor power as they are upon the goods obtained via donations and nominally-priced purchases. The SLM redistributes what it does, however, without utilizing technology any more sophisticated than that which is found in the average American household: electric heat and lighting, running water, telephones, a vehicle, and some basic cooking and refrigeration equipment. The prodigious giveaways that this organization routinely hosts therefore depend upon similarly prodigious expenditures of human labor power. Embodied in every meal and every bag that the SLM gives away for free, then, is a discrete expenditure of human labor. The SLM is a charity and a church, but it is also, incontrovertibly, a place of work. When understood as a workplace, the SLM has vital insights to offer regarding the nature of faith-based charity in the United States, including insights that challenge the received neoliberal wisdom regarding the causes of American poverty.

As a workplace, labor power within the SLM must be distributed across a variety of interrelated tasks in coordinated fashion so that the scheduled output of meals and grocieres might proceed smoothly. The work involved in preparing enough food to serve a meal to several hundred people includes the following but also much more: maintaining regular communication with donors or sellers; picking up goods with a vehicle that must itself be kept in good working order; using brute physical exertion to shelve and move goods; consulting the expiration dates on the organization’s existing and anticipated items as a basis for rotating stock and planning meals.
weeks ahead of time; maintaining a sufficient supply of essential items such as grocery bags and cleaning products; maintaining the cleanliness of cookware and tableware; cooking and otherwise preparing food; paying the utility bills required to pay for water, heating, lighting, and powering kitchen appliances; doing the kind of bureaucratic work involved in fundraising, record keeping, and the intake of recipients; ensuring that these interrelated tasks are done in ways harmonize with one another; and so on.

b. Six Categories of Labor

Considered more schematically, the diverse tasks integral to regular SLM operations divide into six categories: administration, management, and four separate categories of physical labor. Administrative tasks are those that involve overseeing or negotiating relationships between the SLM and outside actors, such as other civic groups, government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, and private individual donors. Involving high financial and legal stakes, administrative duties require diligence, tact, and responsibility. Management tasks differ by being oriented toward overseeing and negotiating relationships and functions that are internal to the SLM. The principal management task is to ensure that needed work gets done in a coordinated fashion. Management does this by overseeing and organizing the labor process. Though members of the SLM workforce charged with management duties do not often have to intervene in a forceful way, they are bound to ensure that other workers both observe the relevant regulations and sustain a reasonable degree of labor discipline. Management is also charged with other tasks such as resolving disputes and guarding against the possibility of troublesome behavior such as theft.
Meal preparation, meal delivery, menial labor, and general labor constitute the four categories of physical labor. Meal preparation entails straightforward kitchen work: tasks such as cutting, cooking, boiling, broiling, and otherwise processing raw foods into hot meals. The work of meal delivery consists of doling food onto recipient plates, transporting meals to diners waiting at tables, refilling drinks, and so on. Menial tasks are those that bring workers into close contact with dirt and filth—picking up trash in the parking lot, cleaning toilets, sweeping floors, and so on. The final subcategory of labor, general labor, encompasses a large variety of essential but unskilled tasks. Not every form of general labor is burdensome, but, as a rule, general labor does involve the most physically demanding work in the organization. This includes the work of unloading trucks, moving stock, rearranging furniture, as well as lighter tasks such as bagging and distributing groceries.

While only providing charitable assistance for an average of two to three days a week during the 2008 – 2009 timeframe, the SLM was consistently open for operations six and seven days a week. In other words, the work of successfully hosting two or three giveaways required several days of additional behind-the-scenes work as well. In total, thousands upon thousands of work hours are invested in the SLM mission each month. Being a charity, the workplace atmosphere is more relaxed than the average business. There is ample time for lolling about and socializing among the workers. People converse casually, tell stories, gossip, share jokes, and have laughs. No one feels the need to feign being busy when figures of authority stroll past. The pace of work is generally moderate, though punctuated occasionally by tasks that must be accomplished swiftly.

A number of factors account for the appeal that the SLM evidently has for so many volunteers throughout the Plainfield area. For one thing, the organization places no barriers
whatsoever in the way of men and women who wish to volunteer. The sorts of burdensome hurdles that are common at many other charities—such as fingerprinting, background checks, references, or training—are altogether absent at the SLM. The atmosphere is in general relaxed, but not imprudently so. On one particular point—the protection of children—the organization is especially vigilant. Opportunities for vandalism, theft, and damage to the organization are also kept to the minimum. The organization displays a prudent use of locks and the sparing allocation of keys. The core of the volunteer base on any given day is made up of trustworthy and watchful men and women, including but not limited to Pastor Julie and Martin, who have taken a personal sense of ownership over the well-being of the organization. There is regular, though not ubiquitous, oversight. Thanks, also, to their informal relationships with recipients or in the neighborhood more generally, Pastor Julie and Martin are occasionally given information that allows them to act in defense of the SLM’s interests, such as warnings about a certain recipient’s drug problem, violent streak, or propensity to steal.

c. An Overview of the SLM Workforce

Despite the scale and variety of labor constitutive of regular SLM operations, the organization carries no paid staff whatsoever. Every jot of work that goes on within the SLM—from cooking to cleaning to preaching—is accomplished exclusively by unpaid labor. The SLM is a successful organization because, among other reasons, it draws unpaid labor just as it draws food, which is to say voluminously. Never once has the SLM had to close prematurely, suspend a meal, or otherwise renege on its commitments due to insufficient help. On busier days, as many as fifty to sixty different men, women, and children spend some amount of time at the SLM laboring on behalf of its mission. Over the course of a year, many hundreds of men,
women, and children work there. This total population constitutes the SLM workforce. As described in more detail below, the SLM workforce evinces a high degree of class diversity, while, on the racial dimension, whites account for a much higher percentage of the workforce than even their approximately eighty percent share of the recipient population. Women and men tend to make up roughly equal proportions of the SLM workforce.

Members of the SLM workforce are divided—substantively if not formally—into one of six distinct worker categories. A worker’s place in this six-part taxonomy is determined by the nature of his or her relationship to the SLM. And that relationship is defined by an individual’s orientation toward the SLM on these three dimensions taken together: one, the degree to which one’s labor is or is not voluntary; two, the relative intensity of one’s commitment; and, three, the relative importance of SLM resources in helping to reproduce one’s own life. The six worker categories that follow from this method of relational differentiation are secure core, insecure core, secure auxiliary, insecure auxiliary, semi-voluntary, and involuntary labor.

Members of the first four of these categories are volunteers. The men and women in the first two—only fourteen in number—are core because, through their intensive involvement, they play a central role in making the SLM run day in and day out. Auxiliary workers (who account for the vast majority of the SLM workforce) are volunteers whose commitment to the organization is much more modest. Those who qualify as insecure—whether core or auxiliary—are volunteers for whom SLM charity forms a critical contribution to their household resources. The same is not true of secure volunteers. Members of the fifth worker category, semi-voluntary labor, are those who choose to discharge state-mandated work obligations—such as those imposed upon recipients of public assistance or those who have been assigned community service hours by the courts—at the SLM rather than one of the other organizational options
available to them. *Involuntary* laborers reside at a court-appointed halfway house but are ordered to do charitable work at the SLM while making their transition back into mainstream society following a term in prison.

The lines of differentiation established by these six worker categories also intersect in important ways with two other patterns of difference within the SLM workforce, one socioeconomic and the other functional. Regarding the former, levels of socioeconomic heterogeneity are much lower within each of the six worker categories than within the SLM workforce overall. In other words, members of each of the six categories are much more likely to resemble one another on key socioeconomic dimensions—particularly class and race—than they are to resemble members of the other five groups. Regarding the latter, functional segmentation, workers in each of the six categories tend to specialize primarily in one or two of the six task categories mentioned above: administration, management, meal preparation, meal delivery, menial labor, and general labor. Members of the secure core, for example, concentrate primarily on administration and management, while members of the insecure auxiliary tend to perform general labor functions. Every member of the SLM workforce concentrates primarily on one cluster of interrelated tasks or functions rather than another. Only a handful of people in the workforce regularly veer from their concentration and into a second or third domain for more than a minimal amount of labor.

In sum, then, a division of labor has emerged within the SLM which structures the labor process so that the regular schedule of charitable giveaways—which necessitates extensive, interconnected work—might proceed without disruption. And this division of labor is, moreover, constituted and reconstituted through three intersecting patterns of difference: relational differentiation, socioeconomic heterogeneity, and functional segmentation. What is
striking is how much this system, internal to the SLM, reproduces patterns of difference and stratification that prevail in the society at large. As but one example (of which there will be more below), male working-class members of the insecure core perform the bulk of physical labor within the SLM while white middle to upper-middle class members of the secure core have exclusive responsibility for administrative duties. Because the division of labor also entails spatial segregation among workers as a matter of course (e.g., some in the kitchen, some in the parking lot, and others in the office), members of the SLM workforce are more likely to socialize within the boundaries of their own worker category rather than across them. This pattern reinforces social segregation along class and race lines.

The SLM division of labor is itself reproduced by the way in which authorities within the secure core—chiefly Pastor Julie and Martin—direct new workers to tasks such as sweeping floors, bagging groceries, or even, on rare occasions, office management. Engaging with the task brings workers into association with others similarly situated, and one quickly grasps, through both observation and conversation, the unwritten rules about where initiative is and is not welcome, rules about who is responsible for what within the SLM. Given the consistency that reveals de facto policy, it is apparent that a worker’s class background and volunteer status determine the tasks to which they are assigned. Volunteers who commit themselves intensively to their SLM work week in and week out rise from auxiliary status and into either the secure or insecure core.

i. The Core Group

Although the SLM workforce comprises many hundreds of men, women, and children in a given year, the contributions of fourteen adult volunteers matter more than the contributions of all the rest put together. This nucleus or core group, seven of them secure and seven insecure,
constitutes the backbone of the SLM workforce. All consistently devote at least twenty-five hours of labor per week to the SLM and often much more. Working that much, including on days when no food distribution events take place, the seasoned members of the core group impart a high degree of order and efficiency to SLM operations. Eight out of the fourteen, three secure and five insecure, are men. Three members of the secure core are middle to upper-middle class, while the other four are working-class retirees who enjoy a high degree of economic stability. All members of the insecure core are working-class and poor. Two members of the insecure core are of mixed race ancestry and the rest white. All secure core members are white. One member of the secure core is around thirty years old, while everyone else in either the secure or insecure core with the exception of Pastor Edley is between about forty-five and seventy. Ten of the eleven working-class men and women in the core group live in the Swing. None of the better-off people do. With due consideration for the exceptions just mentioned, then, most members of both the secure and insecure halves of the core group are working-class white residents of the Swing between about fifty-five and seventy years of age.

The emergence of this core group was both advantageous and unexpected to Pastor Edley. In the earliest days of the ministry, he imagined that the SLM would attract a cadre of impassioned Christian volunteers from the suburbs. These people, he thought, would staff key positions, oversee operations, and provide organizational continuity over time. That cadre never materialized to accomplish those tasks, according to Pastor Edley, but the present core group did:

“We tried to get people from the suburban area churches to come in and provide leadership. And we really worked at that. We couldn’t get ‘em involved. Some, but not to any degree at all. Just terrible. And we tried to go that way, but then people began to come who were not really...They were Christian but they weren’t connected with church. And they said “We wanna do something in the Kingdom.” There isn’t a leader at the Staff of Life Ministries today that I invited to come to work. They’ve all asked to come. They just come. God raised them up, and they just keep coming. Like Julie—Julie Swartz, she is one precious soul. She probably gives sixty to ninety
hours a week. I mean she just lives and breathes things of the Lord and the Staff of Life Ministries… Martin and Virginia and Lester and Dan. Look at our cook. He gives at least forty hours a week. He isn’t paid anything.”

Pastor Julie explains that her remarkable commitment flows from passion rather than a sense of obligation: “I love the excitement of being here and being able to help in so many different ways,” she exults. “I don’t wake up in the morning and say ‘Uuuggghhh, another day….’ It’s like: I jump out of bed. God has just changed me, too—so much, because I was never a morning person. And so I’m up by four o’clock a lot of times.”

1. The Secure Core

   The seven volunteers who constitute the secure core possess a level of economic security far beyond the reach of the equal number of men and women who make up the insecure core. Two of the seven are women who are supported by the income of their husbands. The remaining five are retirees who had, before retirement, worked the whole of their adult lives. The group of retirees is made up of Pastor Edley and two sets of married couples, Martin and Carol and Dan and Beverly. During their working years, Martin and Dan were both hard-working members of the blue-collar aristocracy, the former a card-carrying member of the construction trades and the latter a unionized steelworker. Carol and Beverly have been best friends since childhood, and the two women worked alongside one another for decades as cafeteria employees at a public school in the neighborhood. These two couples live off the pension and social security incomes to which they are entitled after decades of unionized and public sector employment.

   Members of the secure core are primarily occupied with administrative and management duties. Decisions made about how to allocate resources, how to organize labor, how to spend financial donations, and how the SLM ought to be oriented vis-à-vis other organizations, public and private, are made by members of the secure core. Secure core members shoulder the
responsibilities most liable to affect the short and long-term health of the organization. They handle that which matters most. As a result, the men and women of the secure core occupy positions of authority superior to any enjoyed by other members of the SLM workforce. The internal hierarchy of SLM authority and the directives that flow downward from it command obedience because it is known by all that these arrangements represent the will of the pastors, whose unconditional right to govern the organization as they choose no one openly challenges.

At the pinnacle of the SLM hierarchy stands Pastor Edley. Although he has been gradually withdrawing from day to day involvement at the SLM—particularly from management duties—he continues to exercise principal control over financial and legal affairs, interaction with affluent individuals and organizations from the community, and also the more prominent preaching occasions. For all practical purposes, however, he has transferred control over everyday operations to Pastor Julie and Martin. To ensure that their authority commands respect and obedience, Pastor Edley has adopted a habit of publicly stating, before both recipients and the rest of the workforce, that these two have his trust and have been delegated to serve in his absence. The lesser levels of authority enjoyed by the remaining members of the secure core flow, in turn, from the backing they receive from Pastor Julie and Martin.

For their part, Pastor Julie and Martin work closely together on a daily basis without any sign of disagreement or disharmony. Serving with great energy and commitment, both assume administrative and management duties at various times throughout the week, though Pastor Julie devotes more energy to the former than the latter. This administrative work involves keeping atop of records, communicating with donors and outside organizations, handling mail, preparing sermons, and so on. She is assisted a few times a week in this work by Shannon, an affluent mother who is able to stay out of the workforce due to her husband’s successful career.
In day to day affairs, Martin serves as the representative of the two pastors out among the workforce. In the world of paid employment, he would be considered a foreman—a shop floor supervisor managing the labor process so that the necessary work is accomplished in a timely and efficient manner. This is in fact a position that he held for many years during his career in the construction trades. As needed, then, he directs individuals or crews to perform certain tasks, he coordinates tasks that take place at different locations, and he also frequently circulates throughout the organization in order to both be available and to keep abreast of what is happening. His ambulatory habits also discourage theft, foot-dragging, smoking in unauthorized areas, or other actions that pose potential hazards for the organization.

Many members of the SLM workforce, core and non-core alike, regard Martin’s supervisory style as overbearing. He’s aware of this complaint but is indifferent to it. To him, his behavior is motivated by a desire to do right by a noble organization, and others in the workforce ought to do the same. If you’re going to do something, he insists, “you do it right. Do it the way you would want somebody to do it for you.” To his credit, Martin holds himself to the high standards that he expects of others. He’s even taken to offering his help to elderly and disabled people in the neighborhood. In summer 2009, he was personally caring for the lawns of eleven Swing houses whose residents were too old or too feeble to manage the work themselves.

Martin attributes his own work ethic to the example of his father, a “man of his word” who was killed while working as a hand on an Appalachian farm. Ten year-old Martin was working alongside him when it happened. By the time he was twenty, Martin was in Vietnam: “I was with an infantry unit. We went into Cambodia with a hundred and ten men. We come out with fifty-five.” He resisted the temptation to reenlist his way to the twenty-year retirement mark, came home, and resolved to put the war behind him. He recognizes, however, that
Vietnam has made him long appreciate things that most Americans take for granted, things like having a bed, not being rained on, not having leaches on your skin at night, and not being shot at.

Dan “the Peeler” is the most difficult of all SLM volunteers to classify. He has been assigned this nickname by other core group members because of his prodigious capacity for peeling potatoes. It is a commonplace for him to personally peel one thousand or more potatoes in a single day, but he’ll only take up these labors if he has his favorite store-bought peeling knife. So much does he favor this little tool, in fact, that Dan the Peeler forbids anyone else from using it, and he actually hides it in one of his secret spots when occupied with some duties other than peeling. As his peeling habit suggests, Dan, despite his sixty-seven years, prefers to do manual labor reminiscent of his decades as a steelworker rather than management or administrative tasks. As a result, he is mainly occupied with general labor alongside the insecure core. In that context, though, the word of Dan the Peeler carries uncommon weight, and he is the one elevated to the position of foreman in Martin’s absence.

Carol and Beverly, the wives of Martin and Dan respectively, are mainly responsible for the administrative task of planning SLM meals weeks in advance. They also make a habit of helping to prepare trays of food in the staging area of the kitchen on evenings that free dinners are held for the public. These two exercise less open authority than any other members of the secure core. But it is hard to judge how influential they are behind the scenes, how many of their observations and comments inform decisions that appear to have Martin or Pastor Julie as their proximate source. It does seem, however, that Carol and Beverly, through the observations they report and the opinions they offer, exercise significant behind-the-scenes influence with the men and women who wield public authority, especially Pastor Edley, Pastor Julie, and Martin.
Each member of the secure core has his or her own reasons for being involved so extensively, but the desire to help others who are less fortunate is an impulse they all share. The middle class members of the secure core—Pastors Edley and Julie and Shannon—tend to be much more explicit in explaining charitable work as part of their own effort to live in line with God’s many commandments to help the poor and needy. Martin, whose own religious convictions have deepened ten-fold since working at the SLM, explains his motives in sentiments that the working-class secure core members all share:

“Before I retired, I told my wife, ‘Now when I retire I wanna go someplace where I can help some people. Just wanna help people. Just wanna give back. You know, I didn’t have nuthin’ when I was growin’ up. I just wanna help people now, because I don’t have to go to work. So I just wanna help people as much as I can. That’s, just the giving, that’s all. If there woulda’ been all this when I was younger, I think my life woulda’ been different. But a lot of it I didn’t know about. And…it wasn’t there. It just wasn’t there like it is now.”

His wife Carol shares the same impulses, because, as she says “You don’t live this long and not have somebody helping you someplace along the way. So, I just feel like, you need to help other people too.”

The respective motivations of the working-class and the middle-class members of the secure core are distinguished by one key issue, however. All of the former and none of the latter live in the Swing. In fact, all four of the former—Martin and Carol and Dan and Beverly—live within walking distance of the SLM. Beverly has lived in the same house for her entire life, over sixty years. None of them has lived in this neighborhood for fewer than forty years. These people have a level of social and emotional commitment to the Swing that, borne of experiences like growing up there, raising children there, and owning homes there, the middle class people do not share and probably cannot appreciate. Martin, Dan, Carol, and Beverly all regard the SLM as a stabilizing force for the Swing, a neighborhood that, hard times notwithstanding, they still care about.
2. Insecure Core

The *insecure core* group comprises another seven adults who work at the SLM as though it were a full-time job. Unlike the secure seven who constitute the other half of the SLM workforce’s backbone, however, insecure core group members lack any appreciable degree of economic security. In fact, these men and women belong to the same vulnerable and hard-pressed layer of the Plainfield working class as regular recipients of SLM charity. All or nearly all of them first encountered the SLM either as a charity recipient or as someone obligated to do public service work in exchange for state welfare benefits. Unlike ordinary recipients, however, volunteering has made members of the insecure core SLM insiders. And as insiders, they enjoy greater access to SLM resources, a privilege they parlay into extra meals, extra groceries, and also much else. Intensive volunteering at the SLM has become, in other words, in the context of poverty and limited formal employment opportunities, an integral part of each person’s household survival strategy.

The size of the insecure group fluctuated slightly during the 2008 - 2009 timeframe, as when it swelled to twelve, for example, during the winter months when opportunities for seasonal employment and outdoor recreation both plummet. A few of the seven described in this chapter, the steady nucleus, took some time off at various points for one reason or another, but they always returned. There were also a few others who drifted into or trickled out of the insecure core in response to their own ability or inability to find work. A forty something woman named Tina discontinued volunteering in fall 2008 after receiving a job offer from a former boss who had been tapped to manage a newly-opened suburban restaurant. With evident pride, she told other SLM volunteers about her new position on the restaurant’s kitchen staff.
Someone asked what her hourly pay was going to be. She replied that she didn’t know and didn’t care because, “I’m not one of those people who needs fourteen or fifteen dollars an hour.”

Only two of the seven insecure core group members—Lester and Virginia, a husband and wife couple who are both of mixed-race descent—are non-whites. Only two, Virginia and Jackie, are women. The five men are Lester, Big Doug, Dan the Cook, Gene, and Hank. Hank is in his late forties, while the other six men and women are between their early fifties and early sixties. Six of the seven have adult children, but only Dan the Cook’s three boys seem to be on their way toward long-term economic security. Each has enlisted in the military, two in the Army and one in the Marine Corps. At one point, two of the three were simultaneously stationed in Iraq, having apparently traded one type of insecurity for another. All seven live in the Swing save Gene. He grew up there but chooses to live in a small house he inherited in a neighborhood nearby. Several of the seven have no vehicle and get to and from the SLM by either walking or hitching a ride. Pastor Edley marvels at their dedication and acknowledges that these people have made an important contribution to the growth of the SLM:

“They just give hours…It turned to where I realized that God was saying to me: “Don’t depend on those suburban churches. Depend on me. I’ll raise up leadership.” So almost everybody who’s involved in the ministry here now are from the community. They are the poor people. These people working—Virginia and Lester and Dan and others are as poor as anybody on this earth.”

Four members of the insecure core—Dan the Cook, Hank, Virginia, and Jackie—constitute the nucleus of the kitchen staff, and they work mainly on meal preparation. In preparing dinners, the kitchen staff consults the weekly menus that are drawn up in advance by Carol and Beverly. Not only are they tasked with preparing a meal for several hundred people every Tuesday and Wednesday, however, but the kitchen staff must also prepare lunches for everyone who is laboring for the SLM on a given day. Because work goes on at that SLM six
and seven days a week, they typically prepare lunches three times more often than dinners. Even on the busiest days, however, the number of people who eat lunch at the SLM rises to only about twenty-five or thirty. The kitchen staff is also responsible for making coffee in the morning, maintaining cleanliness, requesting that supplies be brought to the kitchen, and any other aspect of the meal preparation process.

Raw materials at the SLM are stored in one of three places, all of which are located at least a little distance away from the kitchen: the stock room, the refrigerated cooler, and the freezer. All three are kept under lock and key and, to ease the burdens on management, both Dan the Cook and Virginia have been given a duplicate set of keys for each of these storage spaces. Dan the Cook is regarded as head of the kitchen staff, though everyone recognizes that he has authority only because the Pastors have delegated a modicum of it to him. His authority is basically confined to directing members of the SLM workforce outside of the secure core to transport goods from one of the three storage spaces to the kitchen. Less often, Virginia exercises the same kind of authority. Dan the Cook is a disheveled guy who seems to habitually sport the first quarter inch of grizzled and graying beard. Despite his gruff appearance and the rock-and-roll lifestyle that he leads outside of the SLM, he’s polite with workers and his directives are always gentle, delicate, and qualified. Other than Dan the Cook and Virginia, no member of the insecure group is authorized by either of the Pastors or Martin to exercise any kind of authority.

The three members of the insecure core group who do not belong to the kitchen staff spend most of their time doing general labor, a catch-all category which mainly entails the brute physical work of moving unprocessed goods from one location to another. Gene, Lester, and Big Doug, in other words, do the strenuous work of lifting, stacking, heaving, pitching, lugging, and
muscling one heavy thing after another between locations. They load and unload vehicles; they move bulk boxes and crates around storage spaces, from storage to the kitchen, and back and forth between any number of other places. They also do the lighter work of making bags out of individualized items that have been removed from bulk packaging; and they physically distribute bags and other packages to charity recipients. The job of driving and maintaining the SLM van that is used to transport goods to and from the organization—which is covered in more detail in the following chapter—also falls into the category of general labor.

In their work as general laborers, Gene, Lester, and Big Doug are almost always joined by other members of the SLM workforce, Dan the Peeler most often of all. On most Tuesdays and Wednesdays, the number of people who do general labor at the SLM stands at approximately twenty. On third Thursdays, the peak of monthly SLM activity, that figure often climbs to fifty or more. A single multistage task such as efficiently offloading and moving the contents of a twenty-four foot straight truck can involve a dozen or more people at one time. Unlike most auxiliary laborers whose familiarity with SLM operations is modest at best, Gene, Lester, Big Doug, and Dan the Peeler know what work needs to be done when, and they initiate tasks without direction. And unlike the non-volunteer workers who are at the SLM under some degree of compulsion, these four men all show a fair degree of alacrity in their work. And while all of them are willing to aid in delivering meals when needed, they tend to leave that work for others. Moreover, they scarcely, if ever, engage in menial work, which is considered the province of non-volunteer workers, a large majority of whom are African-American. Coincidentally or not, Gene, Lester, Big Doug, and Dan the Peeler, all spent at least large portions of their working lives in heavy industry.
In addition to giving of their labor, members of the insecure core also contribute to the SLM operation in other important ways. All core workers, insecure and secure alike, tend to promote operational efficiency by giving guidance and instruction to less seasoned non-core workers. Owing to their regularity, all core workers also maintain relationships with outside figures and organizations, stay alert to changes in equipment that require attention, the expiration dates on foods, and much more. Core workers also frequently utilize their knowledge, personal possessions, and social relationships to aid the SLM. Lester, a crack mechanic, spends many hours repairing the SLM van, just as others have spent time installing an audio-visual system in the sanctuary. Big Doug has lent tools to the SLM, and Gene has donated spare equipment parts to it from his own supplies. When her daughter got a job at a bakery, Virginia persuaded the owner to donate breads and pastries that would otherwise have been discarded to the SLM. And when the SLM sanctuary was in need of a fresh paint job, Martin, the retired union painter, arranged to have his former employer donate several thousand dollars’ worth of material and labor to the project gratis.

The men and women of the insecure core have, without exception, lived more chaotic and unstable lives than their working-class peers in the secure core. The sociologist and theologian Tex Sample distinguishes between members of the American white working class who strive for respectability and those who flout the standing conventions of decency by embracing a “hard living” lifestyle (1984:75-85). Most members of the insecure core, at least in the past if not in the present, spent years going at life in a hard living sort of way. Dan the Cook did prison time; Gene, by his own admission, came close more than once. Several others have family members who are incarcerated. Many have long histories of drug use behind them. Gene spent years addicted to heroin after doing a tour in Vietnam surrounded by cheap, high-quality junk. Jackie
was plunged into years of crack addiction after the death of her daughter. At least a few of them continue to drink and smoke marijuana often. Without question, insecure core laborers are rough around the edges—less kempt, less decorous, and also less churched their Martin, Dan the Peeler, Carol, and Beverly. All of them, however, strive to consistently respect the SLM as a religious institution by speaking and behaving with propriety and reserve. Occasionally, an off-color joke sneaks out, but only Jackie, whose mercurial disposition often overwhelms her best intentions, regularly violates this unspoken code through temperamental outbursts and profanity. For the most part, given their work habits and upright comportment, members of the insecure core appear as models of bourgeois respectability while in the workplace.

The greater turmoil that insecure core laborers have endured is, in all likelihood, related to their relative youthfulness. Whereas the working-class secure core laborers all entered the labor market in the 1950s and 60s, most of the insecure laborers began full-time work in the 1970s or later. Through no fault of their own, then, people in the latter category came into adulthood as the conditions that had made economic stability possible for large sections of the American working class were beginning to unravel under myriad pressures. They came upon the scene, in other words, as the American economy was beginning to hemorrhage the kinds of jobs on which Dan the Peeler and Martin raised families and sent kids to college. As a consequence, insecure core laborers have spent a far higher proportion of their working years in poorly remunerated, non-unionized jobs. Lester and Gene, the two oldest, represent partial exceptions to this rule. As described in more detail in the following chapter, Lester had the misfortune of working for three decades for a steelmaking firm that liquidated its pension and medical obligations through bankruptcy. Gene, who quit school in the early sixties, pursued decades of hell-raising, substance-abusing, and chopper-riding before getting saved at a biker church in a
city north of Plainfield. In his younger days, though, Gene made a habit of flitting from one
good job to another, which he insists was easy to do: “Back in my day, if you had a strong back
you were okay,” he says. “Not anymore. Now you gotta be smart.”

Though all members of the insecure core would like to work full-time in the formal
economy, not one of them does so. Only Hank—who does seasonal bricklaying work—is
formally employed even part of the time. Instead of spending their days searching for work in a
high unemployment area glutted with job seekers who are younger and better educated, most
members of the insecure core treat volunteering at the SLM like a full time job, putting in the
same long, steady hours week after week and month after month. All of them agree with Gene’s
opinion that “there ain’t no jobs around here.” Martin, who is retired but has been familiar with
the blue collar labor market in Plainfield since the late 1960s, says as much by contrasting the
present with the past:

“The jobs are gone. It used to be when you finished high school, you could go to work at Titan,
Premier Steel, or all over the place. Anywhere, White Motors, anywhere, you know, Hart
Diesel—you know, just go out and apply for a job and you’d get it. All you had to do was show
up. You could go anywhere and go to work. You could quit a job today, but in an hour you
would have a job. You would. You could walk across the street and go to work someplace else,
you know. Now they’re not there.”

Yet, despite chronic unemployment, every member of the insecure core is managing to
avoid the twin perils of hunger and homelessness. They all manage to achieve a minimal level of
material stability by carefully cobbling together monies and resources from wherever they can.
Several receive public assistance in one form or another—welfare, food stamps, subsidized
housing. At least three live in households that receive monthly disability payments from the
government, and one more is trying to qualify.24 Gene was fortunate enough to inherit a home

24 Many economists, politicians, and others have, in recent years, noted the skyrocketing rate of Social Security
Disability Insurance (SSDI) claims in the United States (Markiewicz 2011). Many fault the current system for
supposedly allowing large numbers of abled-bodied people to collect disability income. In its current form, then,
from his deceased parents, while Dan the Cook was fortunate enough to be taken in by the woman who used to be his mother-in-law. Still, things are so lean that Dan the Cook repeatedly gives thought to the possibility of relocating to a trailer in the mountains of Tennessee that is owned and occupied by a friend. Although prospects for a job are no better down there, the lower cost of living appeals to Dan.

All of the men make a little money here and there by doing whatever odd jobs come their way. These jobs are all under the table and typically last between a few hours and a few days. Often, the men are connected to an odd job by a friend. Gene once disappeared for a few days to dig postholes in a rural fence-building job he linked up with. He’s also done spring and summertime landscaping work for suburban homeowners. One of Lester’s neighbors, John, does a lot of work as an independent contractor and all-around handyman. When he needs an assistant, which he does on some bigger jobs, he brings Lester along and pays him a fair hourly wage. Big Doug’s wife works at a box retailer, and he also supplements the family income by running an independent moving and hauling operation out of the bed of his dilapidated, rust-bucket of a 1980 pick-up truck. He gets paid to move belongings from one residence to another, to demolish and haul off a rickety backyard shed, to drag away old appliances that have been replaced by more affluent homeowners, and so on. Big Doug and Lester both derive a significant share of their modest incomes from the practice of collecting, processing, and selling

the SSDI program is criticized as a large-scale deterrent to work (Maestas et al. 2012). The ethnographic evidence from Plainfield, however, suggests that many people pursue disability income precisely because, despite trying, they are unable to find secure and steady employment. It is structural unemployment in the economy—not indolence and malingering—that drives many able-bodied people to SSDI. This is the reason that SSDI claims are skyrocketing in the United States. Scholars on disability claims in Norway have used quantitative data to prove as much in that country, for they “conclude that unemployment and disability insurance are close substitutes.” (Bratsber et al. 2010).
scrap metal to firms that deal in recyclables. Their scrapping forms the main topic of the next chapter.

What is especially noteworthy here is that volunteering at the SLM has also come to represent a route or means by which members of the insecure core obtain material resources that are critical in helping them to get by week after week. Free meals, groceries, and other kinds of assistance that they obtain through the SLM are essential parts of the basket of resources that they must continuously cobble together in order to maintain the minimal standard of living that separates them from the homeless and the hungry. The same general point of course applies to the poor men and women who receive SLM charity but do not volunteer at the organization. But the signal trait that distinguishes these two groups from one another is that members of the insecure core derive far more from the SLM than ordinary recipients. Through volunteering, members of the insecure core have developed substantive relationships with the SLM, and these relationships have given them increased access to organizational resources. In essence, then, a sort of de facto exchange relationship holds between members of the insecure core and the SLM. Time, labor, and sometimes other resources, then, flow in one direction and an amplified quantity of “free” resources flows in the other.

Whereas regular, non-volunteering recipients eat two and sometimes three meals a week at the SLM (if they attend on Sunday), for example, it is common for members of the insecure to have between ten and fifteen over the same period of time. Although the SLM only hosts public giveaways two and three days a week, the actual work required to prepare for these giveaways is spaced across five, six, and sometimes seven days. And every day that it is open the SLM prepares a lunch for the people who are working there. Several days a week, moreover, coffee and day-old donuts that have been donated by a local bakery are available for workers who arrive
early enough in the morning. Many volunteers also make a habit of helping themselves to portions of food larger than those doled out to ordinary recipients. They also take second servings when it suits them to do so; this is a privilege that ordinary recipients do not enjoy. In fact, the kitchen staff customarily sets aside better cuts of meat for members of the core group. And these cuts are prepared with special care. While ordinary recipients get steaks that have lost most of their flavor by being cooked in large tubs of boiling water, for example, insecure core laborers are given steaks that have been seasoned and grilled in a frying pan.

Yet even the additional, larger, and better meals that insecure core laborers consume account for only a portion of the extra resources that they derive from their involvement with the SLM. Though the exact amount is difficult to quantify, there is no question that members of the insecure core take away more groceries from the SLM every month than ordinary recipients. Some do it more than others, and most probably try to do it without being seen. In spending enough time there, however, one observes plenty of occasions on which people take two bags of groceries instead of one, two packets of sausage patties instead of one, a tub of sour cream for a spouse whose tongue had been shredded by an epileptic fit, as well as whole sacks of potatoes and other comestibles that are withheld from ordinary recipients. Dan the Cook even had the habit of distributing plastic containers full of pastries to insecure core workers after the SLM was mostly empty and ready to shut down for the night. Most often, then, workers either make off with small amounts in a quiet way or several of them participate in taking equal shares of one kind of food or another. Because they mostly go about skimming resources off the top in this sort of careful way, they avoid appearing like out-an-out thieves who are there to wantonly plunder the organization.
Nevertheless—as will be described in the following chapter—many people, particularly Martin and the other working-class members of the secure core, regarded any amount of unauthorized private appropriation as theft, plain and simple. Neither of the pastors, however, viewed skimming by the insecure core in such a black-and-white fashion. Pastor Edley—whose political consciousness has been shaped by experience of childhood poverty in Appalachian coal country—was well-aware that skimming outraged some people, but anyone who brought complaints to him could expect a forceful response: “Come on, buddy!” he exclaimed to an imagined critic, “Madoff stole more than all the poor people that’s ever lived. Over fifty billion dollars. The rich steal far more than the poor ever can. What the poor people steal doesn’t amount to anything. Now they’ll be sent to jail for stealing a loaf of bread. But if you have the right lawyer, enough money, you can keep out of prison.”

For her part, Pastor Julie recognized in skimming a direct parallel to the ancient Hebrew practice of gleaning, which she described as “leav[ing] the outer edges of the crops for the poor to come in and pick.” “God revealed to me,” she continued, “that that was required—to allow those who were impoverished or had lesser to come and pick, you know, from the field. My biggest thing [is that we] should be more focused on waste than people stealing. We need to make sure that we use the food so that nothing goes to waste or things get outdated.”

The skimmers themselves, however, had a viewpoint that differed from either the critics who championed liberal property rights or the pastors who possessed such rights without choosing to enforce them. Though they were careful not to speak too freely on the subject, their

\[25\] After making these remarks, Pastor Edley illustrated his point by retelling a story he used to hear in his youth: “I was born down in the hills, and they tell a story down there. This guy—coal mines and all—he stole coal. Throw it off the car, and then his friends come over and pick it up, so he got sent to prison for stealing coal. So he got in prison and got educated. Went to college while in prison. And as an educated guy, he got out and didn’t steal coal anymore. This time he stole the railroad.”

\[26\] Ruth 2:2-23
behavior and occasional comments showed that members of the insecure core felt entitled to resources above and beyond those distributed to ordinary recipients, and it was from their labor that this entitlement derived. More than once, for example, a member of the insecure core offered me a little extra food on the grounds that, “You worked for it.” Many of them also habitually described their involvement with the SLM in terms typically reserved for the world of paid employment. They complained that they weren’t getting enough “days off” or announced, in frustration, “I’m going to quit this place.” Some had a habit of marking the timeline of an anecdote by beginning, “Before I started working here.” Never did they express remorse or guilt over skimming. On the contrary, in friendly company, they skimmed with aplomb. Thieves were those who took without working—like the people who stole toilet paper from the SLM bathroom during the evening meal—or those who greedily took more than their labors justified. Nor, however, did members of the insecure core ever attempt to justify their skimming to anyone outside of their congenial circle, not even when—as described in the following chapter—their ability to conduct the practice came under attack.

In addition to the fruits of their skimming, insecure core members benefitted from their involvement with the SLM in other ways, as well. Lester and Virginia make extensive use of the SLM van for personal purposes, a subject covered in the following chapter. Pastor Edley has also been known to give away five, ten, and maybe fifteen dollars to one of the insecure laborers when that man or woman is especially hard-up. Members of the insecure core are well-aware of the fact that their access to SLM resources has made them better off than they would otherwise be. Gene once recounted to me how, prior to his involvement with the SLM, he used to travel a regular circuit of charities in order to obtain the meals and groceries that got him through every week. Full-time volunteering at the SLM has, however, obviated the need for that travel. On a
separate occasion, Dan the Cook—who is himself on welfare—described to me how he chastised a discontented welfare recipient who was compelled to be at the SLM as a condition of receiving state benefits. Tired of her grumbling, Dan sat her down and proceeded to add up the monetary value of the welfare checks, the food stamps, and the SLM goodies she was receiving. When all was said and done, he lectured her, she was being paid the equivalent of twenty-one dollars an hour for her labor. Whatever the merit of his calculations, his appreciation for the SLM was clear.

ii. Auxiliary Workers

The vast majority of SLM workforce members belong to the auxiliary faction: they are men, women, and children volunteers whose commitment to laboring at the SLM is modest, usually amounting to about ten hours per month or fewer. The auxiliary workers vary in the regularity of their involvement. Some come consistently all the year round, while others come intermittently or perhaps even just once or twice in a year. Like the core group, the auxiliary group is divided into secure and insecure factions. In the auxiliary group, secure volunteers far outnumber insecure ones. Almost all auxiliary volunteers are white. A prominent number of regular auxiliary volunteers are retirees.

1. The Secure Auxiliary

Most secure auxiliary volunteers come to the SLM as members of a group that seeks to do charitable work *en masse*. Even those secure auxiliary regulars who come solo or with a few friends often encountered the SLM for the first time as a member of a formal group. Churches or other avowedly Christian groups—particularly those that resemble the SLM leadership profile in being white, affluent, and Evangelical Protestant—are the primary source of secure auxiliary
volunteers. Among this roster are youth groups, women’s groups, Bible study groups, entire Christian school classrooms, small groups of young people whose course of religious instruction includes a service requirement, and more. Some religious volunteers are more likely than others to explicitly cite faith as the source of eleemosynary motives. Many seem diffident about doing so without knowing the faith status of their interlocutor.

Not all groups of auxiliary volunteers are, however, religiously affiliated. The SLM also attracts, for example, groups of coworkers, often with employee sponsorship, and the United Way frequently directs the queries of groups interested in doing charitable work to the SLM. When secure auxiliary volunteers—whether secular or religious—are asked why they (or their group) chose the SLM over myriad other organizations in the local sphere, their answer is typically some variation on, “I/we wanted to help others out and I/we had heard about the SLM.” So well-known is the SLM—which is to say, so extensive are Pastor Edley’s connections—that several times a year the organization hosts church groups that have traveled hundreds of miles to Plainfield in order to undertake urban missionary work. In short, then, the social capital that is embedded within the SLM ministry—particularly through the connections of its leaders—accounts for great success of the organization in drawing both goods and labor power from the local charitable groundswell.

With the exception of auxiliary regulars—for these people take up the same task at each visit—auxiliary volunteers are inserted into the SLM division of labor by members of the secure core, usually by either Martin or Pastor Julie. Traditionalist conceptions of gender and age roles prevail. Women and children are assigned to service work such as ladling out food and delivering drinks to diners. Auxiliary men and older boys are assigned to general labor. In finding themselves working alongside insecure men and women, more than a few secure
auxiliary volunteers are visibly discomfited by the blurring of class boundaries. These affluent folks sometimes give unintentional offense to working-class volunteers by such actions as rudely refusing to engage in friendly, peer-to-peer small talk or by turning up their noses at the evening meal.

2. The Insecure Auxiliary

The size of the secure auxiliary segment of the SLM workforce far exceeds the size of the insecure auxiliary. The men and women of the latter segment—who number approximately twenty-five to fifty people in a given month—hail from the same stratum of the impoverished working class as the insecure core. They are charity recipients who choose to volunteer and receive rather than merely receive alone. They participate in the same general labor as the insecure core, through for far fewer hours per month.

Like insecure core group members, these men and women typically first encountered the SLM as recipients or as people who discharged state-imposed non-voluntary obligations there. Owing to either these experiences or even older social relationships, many members of the insecure core and insecure auxiliary are friends and acquaintances with one another. Almost all are white, although a handful of African-Americans do participate in the insecure auxiliary. Most, if not all, of these African-Americans have joined the insecure auxiliary after having had positive experiences at the SLM as either general recipients or non-voluntary laborers.

Members of the insecure core are the ones who, on a regular if surreptitious basis, control the skimming of resources at the SLM. And these people—such as Dan the Cook, Virginia, and Gene—by and large regard members of the insecure auxiliary as friends and coworkers. As such, the latter are permitted, even encouraged at times, to join in the skimming. In fact, despite doing considerably less work, insecure auxiliary members derive nearly as much by way of
skimming as the insecure core. They too take away on a consistent basis better cuts of meat, extra helpings of groceries, snack items withheld from general recipients, and more.

There are, for instance, several unemployed women living in the Swing who have the uncanny knack of showing up at the SLM right about the time that lunch is being prepared for the insecure core. Typically, these women begin by doing a little work, such as cutting sheet cake into individualized slices or folding plastic utensils into napkins. They then eat with the rest of the workforce and, following that, they depart. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, they return after a few hours away in order to receive dinner and groceries.

Many among the insecure auxiliary engage with the SLM on a cyclical basis, particularly during periods of unemployment. A man named Clarence is one of these. Small but sinewy, he literally makes his living as a manual laborer digging ditches in the construction industry. During the winter months, when digging the frozen Midwestern ground is impossible, he volunteers at the SLM often. He works hard, too, and he has been known to good-heartedly remind others that the pace of SLM work is much slower than what he is used to. Another man in a similar situation, Bill, worked for a small, non-union manufacturing plant on the edge of town. As the Great Recession disrupted the manufacturing sector, Bill’s employer laid off and rehired workers as customer orders fluctuated. On separate occasions both Clarence and Bill explained their motivation for volunteering and receiving charity rather than receiving alone thus: They didn’t want handouts. They didn’t want to be freeloaders. They wanted to work for their daily bread, sweat for it even. And it was clear that they wanted their willingness to work to be known far and wide, for they were proud of it.
iii. The Non-Voluntary Faction

The non-voluntary segment of the SLM workforce is comprised of *semi-voluntary* and *involuntary* workers. The former are mostly adults but also some minors who choose to discharge a state-imposed work obligation at the SLM rather than at some other approved community organization. The semi-voluntary category includes recipients of public assistance (such as welfare payments or public housing) as well as those who have been assigned community service hours by the courts, usually for a misdemeanor criminal conviction like driving under the influence or destruction of property. Many semi-voluntary workers choose the SLM because the long work days there allow them to knock off large chunks of time in a single visit, something that is not possible at most city charities. Involuntary workers are former prisoners who, as a condition of their residence at a halfway house meant to ease their transition back into the mainstream, are ordered to work several days a week at the SLM.

Rare indeed is the non-voluntary worker who is not from a working-class background. Alone among the different segments of the SLM workforce, African-Americans comprise a significant portion of non-voluntary workers. They are particularly well-represented among involuntary workers, often accounting for a majority of this faction. While the total volume of work done by the non-voluntary segment is modest—especially as compared to the contributions of volunteers—these people, mostly men, perform the most menial and disagreeable work that the SLM has to offer. This is the work to which they are unfailingly directed by Martin and Pastor Julie. Non-voluntary workers sweep the floors, mop the floors, collect litter in the parking lot, lug out the trash, and scrub the toilets as well. While some semi-voluntary workers—particularly those well-liked by members of the insecure core—are permitted to skim, none of the involuntary workers ever is.
Never once, did it seem, was foreman Martin ever contented with either the work or the comportment of the non-voluntary faction. In truth, they seemed to frustrate and annoy him on a regular basis. Being foreman, he was the one responsible for assigning tasks and supervising their completion. And according to how he mimicked their complaints and recalcitrance, all he ever heard from non-voluntary workers was, “Uhhh! I don’t wanna be here… I have to be here…I ain’t gonna do that.” To Martin, “Volunteers are better. It’s in their heart to be here, so they’re gonna be better at what they’re doin’.”

By the middle of summer 2009, as the SLM was in fact being swamped by volunteers and those wishing to volunteer, the composition of the workforce was beginning to shift. Martin marveled at the time, “We’re havin’ so many people to volunteer. I just heard last night they was like three churches wantin’ to bring people and a school wantin’ to bring the kids. It was a different school than [the Christian K-12 school that already brings students to the SLM regularly]. This is more people.” So bountiful were the volunteer riches by this point that Pastor Julie, both in-person and over the phone, was actually beginning to turn volunteers away, sometimes whole groups of them at a time. Nevertheless, on Tuesday and Wednesday nights the SLM workforce included three to five times as many people needed to actually complete the work that needed doing. Recognizing this trend, many members of the insecure core started to step into the background so that secure auxiliary volunteers might have the opportunity to contribute. For their part, the SLM leadership, in the context of this volunteer surge, decided to discontinue accepting non-voluntary workers of any kind with the exception of the few recipients of public assistance who were already entrenched in the insecure core.
V. Scrapping

On those summer mornings when my father was out of work, we would get up before dawn to look for scrap metal thrown out in the better neighborhoods.

Tom Sexton, born in 1940, poet and childhood resident of Lowell, Massachusetts, Crown Jewel of the original American Rust Belt.  

a. Introduction

The current chapter provides an in-depth account of insecure core member Lester’s involvement with the SLM, as well as pertinent elements of his background. As it is based upon wide-ranging ethnography and interviews, this chapter also includes some coverage of other members of the insecure core, particularly Lester’s wife Virginia and his good friend Big Doug. Due to political economic shifts beyond his control, Lester has been forced in recent years to make the transition from unionized steelworker to informal economy metal scavenger. In this latter work, he has been heavily subsidized by SLM resources.

The account that follows interweaves narrative and political economy to achieve two objectives. One, it presents an extended treatment of a topic covered less intensively in the preceding two chapters: that charity recipients often negotiate the recipients’ dilemma by performing worthiness, or, in other words, by demonstrating that they possess the character traits celebrated by liberal culture. Two, this chapter describes a collision within the SLM between Lester’s desire to perform worthiness and Pastor Edley’s decision to enforce liberal property

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27 These verses come from a Sexton poem entitled “The Proper Balance,” which can be found in his collection, A Clock with No Hands (2007). Biographical data on Sexton appear on an unnumbered page in the back of this collection.
rights. The details of this encounter contribute ethnographic support for the argument developed in full in the concluding chapter: namely, that the performance of worthiness by charity recipients—while certainly an act of contestation against the meanings of the behaviorist ideology—nevertheless facilitates the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

b. Lester: A Biographical Sketch

As described in chapter two, many thousands of Appalachian migrants flocked to Plainfield between WWI and the 1970s in search of better lives through industrial employment. Lester was himself born in Appalachia, part of the small minority of people in that region who are of multiracial descent. With neither running water nor indoor plumbing, Lester’s impoverished family relied, as much as they could, upon the bounty of the land. Today, more than forty years on, he wistfully recalls plucking apples and pears from trees during the warmer months, eating homemade canned goods during the colder ones, and feasting on regular meals of cornbread, beans, and groundhog. Compared to what people are facing today, however, he says that down in the hills they “had it easy.”

Having come of age at a time when many working-class men could secure steady work without a diploma, Lester dropped out of high school before finishing eleventh grade. Soon afterward, he moved to a sizeable city in the region and earned a living doing construction work. Much of his spare time was spent hanging out with friends and working on cars. Before long, a cousin coaxed him north with news of the abundant factory work in Plainfield. “I come up here in 1973,” he recalls. “That’s when it was. Back then, steel was the thing. I was in this town two days and I was workin’. I went to two places. The second place called. Everything was
workin’—in 1973, everybody was. And I got laid off in ‘74 for almost a year. They called me back, and I worked ever since. Till they got rid of us."

After being hired by one of America’s leading steel manufacturers in 1973—a company referred to here as *Premier Metals*—Lester spent three decades working at the company’s unionized Plainfield mill. In its postwar prime, this mill covered hundreds of acres, employed thousands of workers, and provided technological leadership in certain steel product markets. The work was hard and, according to Lester, “lotta guys got killed out there.” More than a few coworkers were killed after being drenched in molten steel or, in Lester’s words, “coupled-up” between railroad cars.

For blue-collar work, however, the mill paid extraordinarily well. Toward the end of his mill tenure, Lester sometimes grossed as much as sixty thousand dollars a year. As his hourly wage was never more than fifteen dollars an hour, however, overtime pay and bonuses redounding to work crews that met productivity goals were critical in boosting his annual salary. Because of the nature of their duties, for example, Lester and his immediate coworkers frequently logged considerable overtime during snowstorms, sometimes spending as much as thirty-two consecutive hours onsite. While the snow fell, these men had a habit of cheerfully reminding one another that “that’s money comin’ down.” As Lester remembers it today, “That was a good place to work, I’m tellin’ ya.”

During his three decades at the mill, Lester and his wife Virginia raised several children. They even raised Lester’s younger brother, whom the couple had brought up from Appalachia while he was still a boy in his teens. Away from the mill, Lester continued to pursue his passion

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28 The year in which Lester began at Premier, 1973, was incidentally also the year in which American steel production reached its all-time peak (Rogers 2010:127).
for fixing up cars. Much of his time was devoted to repairing the cars of men and women who couldn’t afford to pay standard garage rates. Sometimes these people repaid Lester with what little cash they could spare, but, more often than not, they offered a promise to reciprocate in the future, a basket of homemade goods or food, or something else in kind that their resources would allow: “I coulda probably had millions a dollars in the bank, but what good’s it gonna do me, you know? Half the cars that come through there, I never even got paid for. Somethin’ I like to do— that’s it, that’s all. Let it slide…yeah, I like workin’ on them cars. I still do.” With all of this experience tackling one unique problem in one unique vehicle after another, Lester had made himself into a versatile and highly skilled mechanic.

One published history of Premier Metals describes the 1950s and 60s as a period of “unprecedented prosperity” for the company. Over the course of the next several decades, however, the problems that plagued the American steel industry as a whole drove Premier into bankruptcy. By the late 1950s—if not before—the steel industries of Japan and Europe had begun to impose serious competitive pressure on American producers (Hall 1996:44). Moreover, having been reconstructed following the war, Japanese and European steel manufacturers utilized technology that was more efficient than that which was embedded in American plants. The common American strategy, adopted by Premier and others, of retrofitting new technologies onto older plants failed to yield comparable levels of efficiency (Hall 1996:54-55). From the 1960s onward, steel profits were further undermined by the emergence of minimills, the expansion of substitute products such as aluminum and plastics, rising legacy costs, and other factors (Rogers 2009:105). Those American firms that were still operating in the late 1990s and early 2000s faced at that time a new round of soaring energy costs and plummeting steel prices. The latter was partly attributable to a surge of imports following the collapse of East Asian markets after
the 1997 financial crisis in that region (Rogers 2009:162). Firms that survived these tumultuous decades did so, moreover, by boosting productivity through technological investments that eliminated rather than created jobs (Rogers 2009:179).

While often operating in the red, Premier declined steadily throughout the neoliberal era. Ultimately, new ownership took over and imposed a thoroughgoing process of restructuring on the Plainfield plant. To Lester, who had watched Midwestern plants restructure, relocate, or close for decades, it was a blow, but not necessarily an unexpected one: “Oh, I’ll tell ya,” he recalled, “when they shut the [neighboring] plant down it affected [the city] a lot. You know, I’d know’d we was next. I’d know’d we was gonna catch it next. About ten years later, they caught us...One day the big man come in and said: ‘That’s it for you guys. You all is done.’ [We] says ‘What’ya mean ‘done’?’ He said ‘You’re done. They give your job away’… [The other workers] was cryin’ and hollerin’ and shit….Oh, I didn’t worry. I said ‘What’s gonna be is gonna be.’ I’m the type a guy like this: I made it this far, I’ll make…I’ll make it longer. You know what I’m sayin’? That’s the way I look at it. You might not have as much, but you’ll make it. You’ll make it. Let it go.”

More than a decade before having been forced into an early retirement by restructuring, Lester had purchased a home in a working-class Plainfield neighborhood. At the time, he expected that his pension would continue to cover his monthly mortgage payments until the house was paid off. Shortly after retiring, however, Premier declared bankruptcy, and the bankruptcy judge eventually released the company from all pension obligations. With his

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29 A complete account of Premier’s demise would contain more details and chronicle more upheavals than just the company’s ultimate bankruptcy. To a certain extent, then, the account of Premier’s decline presented has been condensed and certain historical vagaries have been omitted. This has been done to both ensure brevity and to protect confidentiality. Nevertheless, this account is accurate in all of the essentials. No facts pertinent to Lester’s life have been fabricated or misrepresented.
pension obliterated, Lester began to receive retirement benefits from the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC), a federal corporation created by Congress in 1974 to provide some measure of compensation for victims of terminated plans (Fletcher 2011). Monthly disbursements from the PBGC, however, amounted to only a fraction of what he would have received had his private pension benefits survived. Nor did the PBGC replace the private medical coverage that he had also lost to Premier’s bankruptcy.

Not long after losing his pension, Lester’s mortgage payments leaped by a third. According to him, “It was supposed to go down, but it didn’t.” Frustrated, he marched down to the lender one day and demanded an explanation. He was told to read the fine print, and then he was shown the door. Shortly afterward, he stopped paying on the mortgage altogether and told his wife, “We’ll stay as long as we can.” In the end, the finance company sent an employee over and, according to Lester, “she paid me seven hundred and fifty dollars to move out of my own house…Well, the biggest thing is dealin’ with them finance companies. You should never deal with ’em—never. If I had a good job today, I’d never deal with ’em anymore. It’s just a place to….They take your money. Obama should help none of ‘em. Money they’ve ripped off of all the poor, working-class people…should help none of ‘em. Should let ‘em all go under. Let ‘em make it the best way they know how. Well, they’re rich people. It’s a rich company.”

After vacating their erstwhile home, Lester, Virginia, and their then-teenaged son Duane removed to a small-town Appalachian trailer that had been left vacant since the death of a relative. With even fewer prospects of work in the hills than in Plainfield, however, the family returned north and was sheltered by a Christian charity for a short period. Living back in Plainfield, Lester was closer to sixty than fifty, without a high school diploma, and in need of work in a high unemployment area. Getting work in automotive repair was out of the question.
Not only did he lack a diploma or an equivalency degree, but his traditional skills had been made anachronistic by technological change, particularly by the extensive incorporation of computer technology into vehicles. Moreover, two local automotive technology programs keep the local labor market well-supplied with young and up-to-date graduates. Unable to find employment in Plainfield, Lester began commuting each day to work construction in a major city more than one hundred miles away. Despite his habit of stopping on the way home for naps, the early mornings, the long days, and the four round-trip hours of driving took too much of a physical toll, and he had to give up that work too.

In struggling to weather this long series of hardships, Lester and Virginia had turned to public assistance. Eventually, they were even awarded a space in one of the more desirable public housing complexes in Plainfield. In addition to including a garage, their unit is nestled in the Swing among privately-owned homes populated mainly by working and lower-middle class people. As state law mandates that recipients of public assistance serve a certain number of hours per month at an approved community organization, Lester and Virginia were soon logging hours at the SLM. While working there one day, Lester was asked to run some errands with the SLM van. His reliability as a driver and skills as a mechanic endeared Lester to Pastor Edley. And with the pastor’s encouragement, Lester assumed the role of full-time driver and in-house mechanic for the SLM.

Given the amount of work needed to maintain SLM operations, Lester’s principal task involves shuttling back and forth across the Plainfield area in the SLM van picking up and dropping off food and other goods five, six, and sometimes even seven days a week. To accommodate these loads, everything has been removed from the inside of the van save the two seats in the front cabin. All told, Lester regularly works more than forty hours a week for the
SLM. As he only owes about ten hours per month to public welfare, the bulk of his work is done as a volunteer with neither official status nor formal remuneration of any kind. Both Lester and Virginia have long cherished their relationship to the SLM and with Pastor Edley in particular, whom they admire greatly for his intelligence, integrity, and generosity. Pastor Edley, for his part, recognizes and appreciates their devotion. As Lester tells it, the pastor once said to him, “I never seen people like you guys. You guys are really dedicated.” Lester accounts for his dedication by saying that this is how a person who has been “hired” ought to work.

The SLM van, however, is twenty-five or so years old, thoroughly dilapidated, and frequently in need of repair. Some problems are serious enough to temporarily idle the van, while others, if detected and fixed in time, are minor. In the informal but entrenched division of labor that reigns at the SLM, keeping the van road-ready is Lester’s responsibility. When the van does break down in some major way, repair duty becomes a job of its own. Simple, obvious problems can be addressed quickly. Others, however, are elusive and difficult. Some malfunctions, for example, require twenty or more hours of labor to isolate and repair. Without question, Lester’s extensive knowledge and skills have saved the SLM substantial sums of money in recent years.

Much of the running that Lester does on behalf of the SLM requires weekend and early morning travel. In order to make that work easier on him—and because he has earned Pastor Edley’s trust—Lester has been given a set of keys as well as permission to take the van home every night. For all practical purposes, the SLM van has become Lester’s personal vehicle. Seeing that the SLM pays insurance, inspection, registration and licensing fees, as well as maintenance and fuel costs, this is no small bit of informal compensation. In addition to using it as personal transportation for him and his family, Lester also parlays the van into a regular
source of income: it is his means of production, the vehicle that he uses to scavenge for scrap metal.

c. Scrap Markets Global and Local

In this age of extreme inequality, millions of men, women, and children around the world survive by scavenging for valuables among what others have discarded as waste (Molina 2007:230). While scavengers often obtain food, clothing, and other useful items in the course of their work, they typically focus on collecting large quantities of recyclables such as metal, plastic, and cardboard that can be traded for cash (Molina 2007). Vis-à-vis their role in the overall economy, scavengers function as raw material suppliers for industry. With specific reference to recyclable metals, they make money by selling what they collect to scrap dealers (more formally known as metal recyclers), and these firms in turn generate revenue by supplying industrial customers such as steel mills, copper refineries, and iron foundries with quantities of scrap feedstock. Scrap, in other words, substitutes for virgin ores as a raw material input in the making of metal objects by industry (Hall 1996:23).

Although scrap has been regularly traded across national borders for centuries (Strasser 1999:100), a genuinely global market in recyclable metals has emerged only in recent decades (Kiser 1993b). As in other sectors of the world economy, the development of a global scrap market has been facilitated by the signature trends of the neoliberal era: i.e., by privatization, trade liberalization, the easing of restrictions on capital mobility, revolutions in information technology and shipping, and the growth of enormous markets in regions that were only a few short decades ago considered economic backwaters (Greer 2010; Kiser 1993b; Taylor 2007). As a consequence, the global trade in scrap has mushroomed (U.S. Congress 2010), and global scrap
prices are now guided by the movement of secondary metals prices on the leading international commodities exchanges (Kiser 1993d; Greer 2010:55).

This globalization of the scrap industry created the conditions that made a historically unprecedented cycle of scrap boom and bust possible between the end of recession in America in 2002 and the onset of global economic crisis in late 2008. Three interrelated factors were pivotal in creating the boom that finally peaked (Schaffer 2009) in summer 2008. Modest economic growth in the advanced economies, much of it debt-financed, represented the first cause. Sensational economic growth in certain emerging economies—much of it centered upon enormous and metal-intensive infrastructural projects—represented a second and far more important cause of climbing metal prices (Glaister 2008; Seabrook 2008). No country accounted for a greater share of worldwide scrap demand during the boom years than China, but others such as Turkey, Mexico, Taiwan, India, and South Korea also consistently imported large quantities of scrap from the United States, the world’s leading exporter (Logue 2007; Schaffer 2009; The Economist 2009). Third, rising metal prices drew hedge funds and other institutional investors into metal commodities, which only served to intensify upward price pressure on scrap (Fischer et al. 2009; Greer 2010:237-38; U.S. Congress 2010). A declining dollar compounded the upward pressure by stoking still more financial speculation during the same time frame (Lerner 2009; Logue 2007).

Most of the metal that the scrap industry purchases originates with large-scale sources such as demolished factories, buildings, bridges, towers, and stadiums, decommissioned ships and airplanes, automobile graveyards, government surplus auctions, as well as the waste produced by metal manufacturing industries and metal fabricating firms (Sibley 2004:G3). Compared to these concentrated sources, the scrap tonnage added to the global marketplace by
scavengers is small, although the number of scavengers worldwide is enormous. In America, too, large numbers of people scavenge for recyclables to sell (Ferrell 2006; Rendleman and Feldstein 1997; U.S. Congress 2010). Some of this small-scale work is done by individuals who sell scrap infrequently, perhaps only once, but many are the people who run their own regular metal scavenging operations. Though traditionally described as *peddlers* throughout American history (Strasser 1999), metal scavengers are known as *scrapers* in the vernacular of the contemporary Midwest, and what they do is known as *scrapping*. The work of collecting, processing, and selling scrap metal to dealers occupies these individual scrapers five, six, and seven days a week. Many have no income source that brings in more than their scrap operations, and some have no other income source at all. In Rust Belt cities like Plainfield—where jobs are scarce but stray metal abounds—scrapping thrives.

Contemporary Plainfield is awash in derelict and discarded metal. Much of it is embedded in the city’s built environment, particularly in older residential neighborhoods and former industrial zones that are now a dim and crumbling reflection of what they used to be. Factories that once employed hundreds of people, even thousands, are shuttered and silent. Old businesses are boarded-up. Vacant houses abound. According to US Census Bureau data, the housing vacancy rate in Plainfield has risen more than 1,200% since 1950. At a public meeting in spring 2009, Plainfield’s mayor remarked apologetically that, despite the city’s aggressive demolition policy, “thousands” of houses still “need to come down.” In fact, a substantial portion of what was Plainfield circa 1950 was razed and hauled off some time ago. Even Lester’s former workplace is gone. “I wish you coulda seen that place,” he says. “I can’t believe how they went out there and riddled that place. They cut it down. I know they cut the scales
down. They cut the hospital—all that stuff down. They moved everything upstairs, up front—
took it right to the melt shop. They scrapped it all.”

On the more intimate scale, smaller objects of all shapes and colors and sizes are
scattered throughout the city. Knick-knacks and bric-a-brac pile high in attics. Cast iron stoves,
hot water heaters, and other heavy objects gather in the basements of people secure enough to
disregard their cash value. Old appliances collect dust in suburban garages. Scrap surfaces just
about anywhere, sometimes without any apparent logic—a chunk of rusty fence in an empty lot
here, a heap of car parts in a back alley there. Probably the single most important source of
derelict metal for the average Plainfield scrapper is, however, the local waste stream. This
stream is most bountiful in the affluent neighborhoods at the city’s edge and in the adjacent
suburbs, but working and lower-middle class neighborhoods also generate significant quantities
of metal waste, too. Insofar as consumerism and planned obsolescence continually replenish
local waste streams, scrappers can piece together an income.

Each scrapper approaches this landscape of broken and derelict metal in his or her own
way. In the age of private vehicles and cheap gas, however, the typical scrapper strategy has
involved simply trawling the streets and alleys in an automobile—usually a truck, but sometimes
a van or car—searching for scrap. This practice is more rational and less uncertain than it might
appear. For any number of reasons, fresh pieces of scrap continually emerge into public view.
Violent storms or melting snow, for example, expose previously hidden scrap. Objects spring
from the back of truck. People litter. Most importantly, though, Plainfield locals know that
hard-pressed men and women roam about in vehicles collecting metal. And because they know
this, area residents, business owners, and others routinely place their metal and partly metal
refuse in prominent locations, such as curbsides, front yards, and back alleys. Homemade signs that read “Free,” “Please Take,” or something similar are often attached.

Through this sort of straightforward trawling, scrappers obtain a nearly endless array of objects that are made either partly or entirely from metal. Because they aim to amass as much weight as possible, even small and light objects are eagerly added to the daily haul. Scrappers collect loose wiring, hubcaps, small motors, sections of pipe, shredded umbrellas, tripods, frame backpacks, belt buckles, and anything else made of metal that crosses their path. Some, but not all, rummage through dumpsters, garbage cans, and bags for smaller objects.30

In addition to smaller objects, roaming scrappers also frequently encounter durable consumer goods that contain significant quantities of metal. Many are, despite being dingy or outmoded, still serviceable. Home appliances like refrigerators, dishwashers, air conditioners, dehumidifiers, and so on are especially common. Treadmills, basketball poles, and other kinds of exercise equipment also turn up with some regularity. Power tools and antiquated objects like cast iron bathtubs surface occasionally. Large scores such as these disappear quickly, whatever time of day or night they are deposited. Either roaming scrappers spot them directly or scrappers are notified of them by alert friends. Big Doug, for example, receives frequent tips on the whereabouts of good scrap from a friend who works full-time crisscrossing Plainfield as a public bus driver.

As scrappers are acutely aware, metal prices vary widely by kind and grade of metal. Although the North American scrap industry recognizes more than two hundred distinct grades

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30 This is reminiscent of street scavengers in New York City, only some of whom—the maligned “black-bag” guys—rummage through bags the contents of which they could not see from the outside (Botha 2004). Among Plainfield scrappers, too, sifting through trash for scrap is perceived as an activity having lower status than merely picking up scrap which is spotted while in the process of trawling.
of metal, the principal distinction in the industry is between ferrous and nonferrous metals (Recycling Today 2008:6-7). Ferrous metals are those that, like cast iron and carbon steel, contain high proportions of iron. Ferrous metals are far more abundant than nonferrous metals and consequently far less valuable. In fact, even more common nonferrous metals such as aluminum, lead, copper, and bronze routinely sell at prices that are many times higher than ferrous prices. In one particularly good week during 2009, Doug made two hundred seventy dollars on aluminum alone.

Although the average Plainfield scrapper slowly accumulates a stock of aluminum from soda cans, automobile radiators, and air conditioners or a stock of copper from pipes and wiring, he or she collects far more ferrous tonnage than anything else. The primacy of ferrous also comes through in the scrapping nomenclature. In that nomenclature, scrap generally refers to the most common variety of ferrous: known as either sheet steel or sheet tin. Other recyclable metals are, by contrast, referred to by compound names in which scrap is modified by the appropriate adjective, such as copper scrap, aluminum scrap, and so on. This is the background to Lester’s frequent remark: “You have to get a ton of scrap before you get any money.”

Though men and women of all backgrounds engage in scrapping, certain demographic patterns are apparent among the scrappers of Plainfield.31 With few exceptions, the scrappers of Plainfield are men rather than women. And despite the high proportion of African-Americans in Plainfield, the clear majority of male scrappers are white.32 Most scrappers are working-class

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31 The following estimates are based upon ethnographic research that included the following: having seen scrappers at work throughout the city over the course of one year; having done participant-observation with several scrappers and having asked them about these subjects; and having frequently seen scrappers unloading and selling their loads at metal recycling locations around the city.

32 The reasons for this seeming racial disparity are uncertain at this point, but it seems plausible to conjecture that, on average, white working-class men in Plainfield have greater access to vehicles especially suited to hauling scrap, particularly trucks. If a lower percentage of truck ownership is in fact the case among African-Americans, this is
family men like Lester, and the mean age is probably somewhere between 45 and 65. They are, in other words, old enough to be slowed by physical ailments but young enough to still press through the backbreaking labor that scrapping requires. The majority have had at least some experience in industrial labor, if not long-term industrial employment. This common background has equipped scrappers with skills and knowledge that are particularly useful in working with scrap, whether this means handling tools or distinguishing among different types of metals. Age, high rates of unemployment, limited education, and a skill-set that fits poorly with the informational economy have, however, combined to leave these men marginally employed or unemployed altogether. Hence, they scrap.

d. Scrapping with Lester and Doug

The days on which Lester trawls for scrap in the SLM van typically begin early in the morning and end early in the afternoon. More often than not, he scraps alone. Although all of the expenses associated with the van, including fuel costs, are subsidized by the SLM, Lester allocates these and other resources carefully. He does so by opting to do most of his trawling in the areas that have, for him and for others, consistently yielded substantial quantities of publicly accessible scrap in the past. He trawls affluent areas both inside and outside of the city limits, of course, but also urban neighborhoods that are densely populated by the economically more

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probably due to both higher rates of black poverty and a greater preference for trucks among whites. In particular, a great percentage of the white working class in Plainfield embraces the aesthetic preferences, cultural mores, and social practices that characterize white, rural America—which includes a passion for large, powerful, and rugged personal vehicles. On account of the massive in-migration of Appalachian whites during and after WWII, many contemporary Plainfielders were either born in Appalachia or had at least one parent who was. Higher mortality and incarceration rates among African-American men probably also play a role. It is probably also the case that trucks are less available to women, on average, than men. Moreover, gendered obligations such as caring for children or grandchildren and the high rate of female employment within the service sector likely discourage scrapping on the part of women, as do the inescapable strength requirements of this work.
secure elements of Plainfield’s working and lower-middle classes. By moving through side streets and alleys at a pace of between ten and fifteen miles per hour, Lester is able to scan widely while also conserving gas.

Not until he lost his job at Premier did Lester take up scrapping. Big Doug, however, has been scrapping since the mid-1970s. He is a hulking fifty-something white man with a colorful history of blue collar labor, and he has served as something of a scrapping mentor to the former steelworker since the two met at the SLM. Doug has shared with Lester, for example, his hard-won knowledge about where and when to find good scrap. He has also implored Lester to stop bypassing garbage bags: “Lester, look in bags,” he remonstrated. “Bags are very important any more. There’s money in them things. As long as you don’t make a mess, people don’t mind.” He’s also taught numerous other tricks of the trade, such as the fact that artificial Christmas trees contain scrap beneath their faux pine needles. Scrapping, Doug opines, “is a good thing for an old dog to learn.”

Doug has also instructed Lester on how to load large and heavy objects into a vehicle without assistance. First, he says, maneuver the vehicle as close as possible to the object. Then push, twist, and tilt the object until it leans securely against your back bumper. Finally, while squatting low and gripping the raised portion of the undercarriage with both hands, heave the object up, forward, and slide it into the vehicle’s compartment. When the two men scrap together, as they often do for a few afternoon hours at a time, Doug gladly cedes all of what they find to Lester, whose financial circumstances are far bleaker than his own. “Whatever I can do to help someone else,” Big Doug insists, “I’ll bust my butt to help them out.”

For his part, Lester frequently volunteers to repair or tune-up Doug’s truck. Doug’s automotive repair skills are, as even he admits, subpar at best. Lester’s assistance saves the man
money and keeps the truck—with which Doug scrapes and does under-the-table moving and demolition jobs—on the road. “Lester,” Doug certifies, “is a very smart man on working on stuff. I’ll tell you what: me and him can have [the] transmission out in this [truck] in half an hour, flywheel broken down with drive shaft and all.” Lester is, according to Doug, a “kind-hearted” man who “likes to help people out.”

Accumulating a large sum of scrap—that is, a load worth transporting to a dealer for sale—is hard, time-consuming work. Scrapper likes Lester sometimes trawl for hours on end without turning up much of anything at all. The amount of scrap on the street at any given moment is finite, and competition only slows the accumulation process. In Lester’s experience, “Sometimes it takes ya two weeks to get a load—cuz you got so many scrappers out there. Some ‘em them guys are wicked out there. They’ll fight ya for a piece of scrap. Not me. I let it go. If they get it, they get it. If they don’t, they don’t. I just let ‘em go.” Big Doug, however, doesn’t tend that way, and he keeps a five-pound claw hammer tucked beneath his front seat just in case.

Scrapper likes Lester and Doug, however, also rely on strategies other than just trawling. Regular assistance from non-scrappers is often critical in being able to promptly and consistently accumulate loads. Being known as someone who scavenges metal is one of the average scrapper’s great assets. And, as a rule, the more widely a scrapper is known, the more likely it is that he or she will enjoy regular assistance and the periodic windfall. Private assistance takes many forms. Oftentimes, scrappers receive donations directly from friends or acquaintances. Sometimes, in fact, anonymous donors simply deposit metal objects at a scrapper’s residence without any kind of advanced notice or subsequent explanation. Scrappers are also frequently approached during the act of trawling by strangers who are looking to unload a sundry metal object that is, to the giver, merely garbage or clutter. Even outside of the trawling context,
scrapers are often contacted and offered the opportunity to remove this or that item from someone’s basement or garage. In many cases, the item in question is a heavy, unwieldy thing that owners want gone but cannot move themselves. Lester, his brother, and his son once procured three plows this way, one of which weighed eight hundred pounds.

According to Lester, then, “You gotta know somebody. One day a neighbor guy come over. He said: ‘Hey, I bought a house over on Broad. I got a fridgerator; I got a stove; I got a washer and a hot water heater.’ I said: ‘Well, let’s go get it.’ That give me almost a load right there. You gotta get a lot of heavy stuff. You can get all the little stuff you want and you still can’t get a load. Or I’ll stop and I’ll pick up a piece a scrap and a guy’ll say: ‘Hey, I got a fridgerater down there. Want it?’ Or—‘I got a stove,’ or a drier, or something like that, you know. That’s like, I was goin’ around Sunday pickin’ up scrap. Every time I stopped: ‘Hey, want another lawnmower?’ I think every house I stopped—I got about six….I got six lawnmowers…six lawnmowers for scrap. All of ‘em was junk but one. I kept the one that’s good—cuz I got a guy that buys ‘em. He buys ‘em off me. He fixes ‘em up and sells ‘em to somebody. And ah, I sold him one, two…I sold him three.”

Some of the biggest paydays that scrapers have, however, come when they are asked by a property owner to clear an entire space, such as a warehouse or business, of its contents. They are invited to take possession of whatever they want—metal or otherwise—on the condition that the rest be deposited in the local landfill. These are often big jobs, so scrapers typically bring friends or family members on board to share the work and split the earnings. Lester and Big Doug have both participated in many jobs of this sort. Doug, for instance, has pulled safes from a former bank building, an organ and other things from a closing charity, and even untold
miscellany from a closing funeral home. The last of these jobs only came Doug’s way, however, after several other scrappers demurred.

Often in the course of his scrapping, Lester picks up things that he thinks the SLM might be able to use or give away. Over the past few years, he has donated an encyclopedia set, countless toys, at least one bike, and many other things to the organization. Many of these objects contain, like the bike, at least some quantity of metal. Doug operates similarly. When, for example, the big man does one of his frequent but small-scale demolition jobs—tearing a roof off someone’s house, dismantling a backyard shed, and so on—he delivers the good wood that he finds to friends who heat their homes with wood-burning stoves.

The most methodical scrappers in Plainfield spend six nights a week trawling through neighborhoods and areas that are scheduled to receive trash service on the following morning. They cruise alongside hundreds of trash piles in a single night. Whenever a scrapper spots metal—which residents are often thoughtful enough to segregate from non-metal refuse—he or she stops the vehicle and gathers it up. This is Doug’s primary scrapping strategy although Lester’s SLM commitments prevent him from doing likewise. Doug usually sets out about nine p.m. on the assumption that most people have placed their garbage curbside by that time. Some start sooner while others wait until daybreak. When Doug encounters the owner of a trash pile that he happens to be inspecting, he tells him or her, “Thank you. I got a twenty-year-old son. He’s not workin’. I need the extra money.’ And people give it royally. I mean, it’s unreal what people throw away. They’re throwin’ away money they don’t realize they’re throwin’ away.”

Some scavengers throughout the world develop profitable relationships with organizations that produce steady streams of scrap such as window installation businesses or metal fabricating firms. Rather than just throwing metal away, then, such organizations set it
aside for a particular scavenger. Neither Lester nor Doug, however, enjoys such a privileged relationship with a regular generator of scrap waste. Virginia, however, runs a parallel scrapping operation out of the SLM kitchen. While volunteering thirty plus hours a week in that kitchen, she makes a habit of collecting all of the discarded aluminum pop cans, pie plates, and baking dishes that pass through. Gene, another member of the insecure core, has been granted permission to recycle the prodigious sums of cardboard produced by SLM operations. A good friend of Gene’s, incidentally, generates an income stream by selling bales of recycled foam carpet padding.

Though neither Lester nor Doug engages in metal theft, such theft has long accompanied the trade in scrap (Strasser 1999:116). While sophisticated teams of expert thieves occasionally pull off major metal heists (Johnson 2010), crude hack jobs undertaken by amateurs remain the norm. Drug addiction is a common motive (U.S. Congress 2010:8). Electrical power stations that contain large sums of copper are a common target (U.S. Congress 2010:3). The work involved in catching and prosecuting metal thieves is, however, notoriously difficult (U.S. Congress 2010:9). Not only do thieves routinely cut stolen metal into untraceable shapes and sizes, they also have the ability to sell their loot far from the crime scene.

In Plainfield, where vacant structures abound and drug addiction is rife, metal theft is a widespread problem. Thieves frequently break into empty buildings and make quick work of wiring, piping, hot water heaters, furnaces, brass fittings, and anything else of value, even non-metal goods. Nor is it uncommon to see vacant buildings in Plainfield that have been stripped of aluminum siding, rain spouting, and other exterior metals. So widespread are these crimes that many Plainfield home sellers are reluctant to post “For Sale” signs around their properties for fear of inviting theft. Not even America’s hallowed pastime is safe. Shortly after one of the few
large manufacturers remaining in Plainfield donated an aluminum flagpole to a Little League Baseball field in the city, thieves sawed through its base and hauled it off in the dead of night. One rural homeowner whom I know once returned home after a weekend away to discover that the metal footbridge spanning her backyard brook had been stolen.

Because industrial customers demand supplies of scrap feedstock that are contaminant free and qualitatively consistent (Kiser 1993d), scrap dealers pay scrappers higher prices for loads that are clean and presorted by kind and grade of metal. Many scrappers, therefore, Lester and Doug included, habitually process their scrap with painstaking care. This value-adding work requires considerable investments of time and labor, as well as access to a familiar array of hand tools and to a secure storage space such as Lester’s garage, a shed, an enclosed porch, or a basement.

On the one hand, scrappers must wash away dirt, peel back rubber, cut away fabric, pry off plastic, smash glass, and otherwise remove foreign objects from their scrap. On the other hand, they must sort metals by kind and grade as carefully as possible. They divide sheet steel from cast iron, stainless steel from aluminum, bronze from copper, number one from number two copper, and so on. Unsorted and improperly sorted loads command inferior mixed metal prices. Scrappers like Lester have been prepared by long years of physical labor, both paid and unpaid, to do scrap processing work quickly and effectively. They have a mastery of hand tools, a knowledge of common metals and their identifying characteristics, physical stamina, and other vital attributes and skills.

Although Virginia rides shotgun on trawling runs only occasionally, she regularly assists Lester in processing scrap. Like her husband, she’s handy with tools, comfortable breaking down metal and partly metal objects, and familiar with the distinctions that separate common
kinds and grades of metal. Even with help, however, scrapping is grueling work, especially for someone who is older and unwell. Lester has considered giving up scrapping more than once, but he hasn’t yet done so. “Oh, yeah, it gets rough,” he observes with characteristic sobriety. “What it is, it’s all that drivin’ you gotta do. You don’t realize the drivin’ your doin. Sometimes you might drive two hundred mile in one day—one day. Just runnin’ around the block or up an alley or here and there. Then you gotta unload it, and then you gotta strip it, and then you gotta put it all back up on there. It’s a job—after a while.”

In Plainfield, as in other Rust Belt cities, multiple scrap dealers operate within short distances of one another. Scrappers watch price movements and respond accordingly. Information about local market conditions—about which firm is buying and at what price—continually circulates among scrappers by word of mouth. When price parity obtains in the local scrap market, scrappers make their sales decisions on the basis of such factors as geographical proximity, past experiences, or a dealer’s general reputation. According to Lester, some dealers run a more ethical business than others: “The best place is to take it to Frank’s. He’ll give you a fair price out of it. Yep, Frank’s is number one. All these other companies do is just rake off ‘a people, and then they take it out there and get the full price. I’m just sayin’….Ya take a pot a gold down there [to a company identified with another owner]: he’ll give you half of what it’s worth. And then he’ll turn around and take it out to Frank’s and get four…you know, I’m just sayin’. They do.”

According to Lester, scrapping intensified in Plainfield as prices rose during the boom years. When asked what kinds of objects scrappers were selling during the reign of high prices, Lester replied, “Oh, anything and everything. They pretty well cleaned this town up, I’m tellin’ ya.” During that period, scrappers were getting eight or nine hundred dollars apiece for a single
junked car. A loaded-down truck bed of sheet iron was commanding, at times, three hundred dollars or more. Illegal dumping sites in the countryside were being picked clean of metal. One middle-class Plainfield resident related to me how, during this period, he once watched a man climb out of a city gulch with his arms full of rusty metal.

In the fall of 2008, however, as the global financial crisis continued to intensify, large swathes of worldwide scrap demand evaporated. Buyers throughout Asia and Europe began canceling previously placed orders (Recycling Today 2008). Export yards on the coasts responded to contracting foreign demand by attempting to sell directly to industrial customers in the American interior (Marley 2009). This about-face strategy only served to depress heartland prices further. In Plainfield, the price of a ton of sheet steel fell more than eighty percent in a few months. Profit margins in the American ferrous scrap industry as a whole fell from an average of $200 to $20 per ton (U.S. Geological Survey 2009:85). Between the summer and the end of 2008, copper and aluminum prices fell sixty-five and more than fifty percent respectively (Glaister 2009). In describing the effects of the recession in early 2009, the president of one Los Angeles metal recycling firm lamented, “I don’t even think we have an industry. That’s how bad it is.” (Glaister 2009). Lester concurred: “Everything went back to nuthin’. Period. Nuthin’.”

The collapse of scrap prices inaugurated yet another period during which Lester and Virginia were whipsawed by a series of misfortunes far beyond their control. Freefalling prices immediately ravaged earnings on the scrap that Lester collected. In the early part of 2009, he collected thirty-eight dollars on a load that would have fetched about five times that amount just seven months before. It also seemed that, however unlikely, the recession had actually pushed more people than ever before into scrapping. In the late summer of 2009, Lester reported, “I used to pick up two loads a week. Now it takes ya two weeks to get a load.” Big Doug agreed:
“You got more people out here because of the way the jobs are right now because there ain’t too many jobs in Plainfield. You might have fifteen guys going down the street doin’ the same thing—scappin’. There’s young guys. There’s old guys. There’s middle-aged guys.” Scholars working in other parts of the world have also documented a rush of people into scavenging during recessionary periods, lowered prices notwithstanding (Moates 2010:53; Molina 2007:169). With needs to meet and the formal labor market in shambles, scavenging at least offers an income level above nil.

### e. Tensions at the SLM

To the extent that Lester continued to scrap at all despite abysmal prices, he was able to do so thanks to his unrestricted access to the SLM van. By summer 2009, however, a number of changes were in motion that augured the end of insecure core skimming, Lester’s private use of the van included. First off, the working-class members of the secure core—Martin, Dan the Peeler, Carol, and Beverly—had never accepted the legitimacy of skimming, no matter how tolerant the pastors were of it. What Pastor Julie called “gleaning,” they regarded as out-and-out theft, and they resented it immensely. Carol said bluntly that these people, for taking things that weren’t theirs, “are going to have to answer to God.” When speaking amongst themselves, these four often shared tales of the latest outrages and commiserated over having to sit on their hands while the insecure core, as they saw it, looted the place. When describing his frustration with the insecure core one day, Dan the Peeler lost his temper and fulminated at them in absentia, “You’re here for the church! You’re not here for yourself!”

Moreover, having long made a habit of flouting SLM rules and policies in small ways, many members of the insecure core gradually expanded into evermore flagrant and substantial
violations. It was a classic case of “Give a person an inch, and they take a mile.” Gene, as Carol and Beverly frequently complained, had developed the habit of ambling into the kitchen in plain view of everyone and commandeering whatever food or drink he liked at any time he liked. There were also eyewitness reports of a third person riding in the SLM van at times, something prohibited by the insurance policy and thus an extremely dangerous financial liability.

Respectfulness of Martin’s authority also plummeted. In one particularly acrimonious example, Big Doug arrogated onto himself the responsibility of removing impacted ice from the door of a walk-in freezer. When he hastily banged away with a hammer and flat-head screwdriver he had brought from home, however, he tore the rubber gasket encircling the door and thus cost the SLM money in parts replacement.

And on the skimming front, the overall pattern of private appropriation had shifted in ways that even sympathetic observers had difficulty viewing as anything other than theft. In short, some (but not all) members of the insecure core had begun to take large quantities of valuable items for the purpose of reselling rather than using them. For example, large quantities of frozen meat began disappearing around the same time that Tiffany had adopted the habit of quietly leaving by a back door each night while toting two and three bulging knapsacks. There were also administrative-level suspicions that some goods offered as donations were being appropriated by insecure core members before ever reaching the SLM. There was a spike in the number of instances in which easily resalable goods—such as sacks of potatoes or boxes of latex gloves—were discovered tucked away in some out-of-the-way spot on the property, as though hidden there until they might be recovered at a more favorable time.

In response to these bolder and more damaging violations of SLM protocol, the working-class members of the secure core—Martin and Dan the Peeler especially—organized to reassert
control over the SLM workforce. Martin was the most forceful of the bunch, the most comfortable with tense face-to-face confrontation. As he saw it, he was right, others were wrong, and they could walk if they didn’t want to toe the line. On the strength of this disposition—and the unequivocal backing of the pastors—Martin patrolled and enforced more vigorously than he ever had. He took to bursting through doors and into workspaces with little to no warning. And he also began to rebuke workers for infractions they had been accustomed to committing with impunity: no smoke breaks, no unauthorized people in the kitchen, and no private appropriation of SLM resources. Some of the people felt especially insulted by Martin’s insistence that they—as per SLM regulations—sign in and sign out like common volunteers with no special standing or privileges whatsoever. Anger at Martin became widespread. Hank—who claimed to be training as a mixed martial arts fighter—boasted that he found motivation during workouts by imagining himself punching Martin repeatedly in the face.

Martin and Dan the Peeler moved against Lester’s use of the van for scrapping too. During the afternoon lull at the SLM between lunch for the workers and dinner for all, Lester often ran errands for the SLM, usually with Doug as his sidekick. Whether they did or didn’t have errands to run, though, they frequently used this slot of time to scrap. Martin, however, put the kibosh on this by assigning Lester a partner, usually Dan the Peeler, on any legitimate runs. And of course he also sought to terminate any and all illegitimate uses of the van during the afternoon. Lester was furious and he cursed Martin behind his back. He also made loud threats about the possibility of turning in his keys. Dan the Peeler overheard these threats one day and, with none of the insecure core members in earshot, remarked quietly that neither Lester nor any of the others would quit, “Because of all the things that they get from here.”
Even with all of these measures taken against him, Lester still possessed the ability to scrap at other times of the day—including the early morning hours, always his preferred time. Martin had won increased but not total control over usage of the van. As recession dragged on through 2009, however, financial contributions to the SLM dropped off considerably. While reorienting the SLM in the wake of this financial downturn, Pastor Edley effectively threw his decisive weight behind Martin in the latter’s struggle with Lester. After having long turned a blind eye to Lester’s liberal use of the van, the pastor approached his driver and deferentially solicited advice on how the organization might go about saving some money. Lester volunteered that he might cease to scrap with the van, and he was a man true to his word.

Big Doug felt that Lester was being treated badly, as did others in the insecure core. “If they’d watch,” Doug insisted, “Lester does a lot. So I don’t think they should say a lot to Lester because if it wouldn’t be for Lester them vehicles would not run. He’s on the road seven days a week—twenty-four hours. I mean he’s always goin’ here, pickin’ up there. The pastor should be happy he’s got what he’s got, because [do] you know what it’d cost him to have a mechanic run twenty-four hours on that stuff? He has no idea. The minister—Edley’s a nice guy, but he has no idea.” For all of this conviction, however, Big Doug never protested directly to Pastor Edley, Martin, or any of the others with decision-making authority. Nor did any other member of the insecure core—Lester included—openly contest the reassertion of SLM rules on the grounds that their labors entitled them to perquisites. Despite privately believing in their right to skim and despite acting in *sub rosa* solidarity on the basis of this ethic, the insecure core, when push came to shove, backed down as though their position carried no social weight. And in this assessment they were right, for their practices, however compelling *vis-à-vis* certain abstract
moral standards, contravened liberal property rights in a social order founded upon enforcing those rights.

While one setback after another was eroding his scrapping income, Lester received notice one day that he owed the PBGC—the federal corporation organized by Congress that had been providing him with a pension since Premier Steel’s bankruptcy—a considerable sum of money. Because of an accounting error that originated with the PBGC, the corporation had been, it reported, habitually overpaying Lester. Many of his former coworkers received a similar notice, some even being told that they owed the PBGC hundreds of thousands of dollars.\(^{33}\) To reclaim what it declared that it was now owed, the PBGC began to garnish a sizeable portion of Lester’s monthly allotment. As a consequence, his monthly pension income was slashed by about three-quarters.

Around the SLM, Lester was starting to withdraw. His participation in the general sociability of the place dropped off, and he seemed to be spending more and more time alone in one of the far corners of the cafeteria. Instead of chit-chatting with other volunteers as he once did, he developed a habit of arranging three or four chairs side by side and stretching out across them on his back. Then he would pull his omnipresent baseball cap down over his eyes and go to sleep. His twenty-something son Duane who came around the SLM from time to time noticed the change. Lester was losing weight and neglecting little tasks like washing the van or sprucing up the yard—tasks that he had always carried out with pride. “He’s changed,” Duane observed. “He’s not the same as he used to be. It’s like, man, he just plain don’t care no more about anything.” And Lester’s health, already fragile, was disintegrating as never before. “Well, I’m

\(^{33}\) This information was obtained via a phone conversation with a high-ranking, current official of Lester’s former union.
like that old guy,” Lester once said. “He told me one time: ‘I don’t like changes.’ He said it makes him get older. I said, ‘Oh, I know that. Ain’t nuthin’ you can do about it. That’s life, you know. Lotta changes.’

f. Out with the Old

Pastor Edley terminated Lester’s use of the van for private purposes only when that activity began to jeopardize the overall health of the SLM. Up to that point, he had shown remarkable tolerance. Yet, by the end of summer 2009, a number of dangerous trends at large within the SLM workforce had the pastor’s attention, including those that had elicited reactions from Martin and Dan the Peeler—unprecedented theft, insubordination, fuel costs, and liabilities associated with the van. Most alarming of all, however, was the possibility that certain members of the SLM workforce had brought drugs into close proximity to SLM operations.

As Martin and Lester were dueling over the van, Kristi—one of the neighborhood women who had a knack for visiting the SLM just as lunch was being prepared—was arrested for illegally selling her husband’s prescription drugs. After being convicted on the testimony of a buyer, she was sentenced to several years in prison. There were reasonable fears that she had sold on SLM property, if not in the building itself then in the parking lot outside. Pastor Edley had also caught wind of reports that several members of the insecure core were regular users of marijuana. These were serious issues, much more serious than modest skimming by a small number of people, and the pastor resolved to take the steps necessary to protect the organization.

Yet, by his own admission, Pastor Edley faced a difficult quandary. The people he had come to regard as potentially dangerous to the SLM’s survival were also volunteers, volunteers with whom he had friendly and courteous social relations. Among the dilemmas this situation
thrust upon him: How do you tell people they are no longer needed when they are needed? How do you terminate people who are only volunteers? And how do you “fire” someone when there is no incontrovertible proof of wrongdoing? But before long, he hit upon an ingenious solution to all of these vexing problems.

Being blessed with a steady stream of able volunteers from all sorts of backgrounds, Pastor Edley selected a firm and experienced woman to serve as a new day-to-day manager at the SLM. Pastor Julie was freed up to concentrate on more spiritual responsibilities, while Martin continued to serve as on-the-ground foreman. This woman was unknown to anyone in the insecure core, and Pastor Edley charged her with restoring proper order to the SLM. This all commenced at the end of August 2009, just as my ethnographic research was coming to a close.

A few months later I received a letter in the mail from Gene. He told me that Lester, Virginia, Big Doug, Dan the Cook, Tiffany, and many others had ceased to come around to the SLM at all. They had been, in his words, “run off.” Gene also relayed to me that Lester had had a heart attack and that, according to word around town, “he isn’t looking too good.”
VI. HOH Dearth

a. Introduction

On the opposite side of town from the Swing neighborhood, home of the SLM, lies the Daletown neighborhood. As described in chapter two, contemporary Daletown—though sharing the same name as its social and spiritual forebear—is not coterminous with the original Daletown, the neighborhood that was largely obliterated by urban renewal and highway construction in the 1960s and 70s. The geographical center of contemporary Daletown lies about a half a mile to the south and east of the original neighborhood’s center. The Daletown of today is comprised mainly of several large public and Section 8 housing complexes that were completed after the start of urban renewal, as well those outlying parcels of the original Daletown that escaped the wrecking ball. As has been true for generations, Daletown remains the poorest, most heavily African-American section of Plainfield. Much of the wider community—particularly the affluent, white community—is all but ignorant of Daletown’s existence, while those who are familiar with the neighborhood tend to regard it as a hotbed of criminality and social dysfunction.

A small, African-American Pentecostal church named Christ the King Apostolic Temple runs the largest faith-based charity in Daletown, the Haven of Hope (HOH). This chapter and the two that follow describe HOH operations and some of the people whose lives intersect with those operations in one fashion or another, including paid employees of the HOH, volunteers, donors, recipients, and others. The three aspects of HOH operations examined most carefully are these: one, the ways in which the neoliberal context—and particularly the funding environment—shapes the character of HOH operations; two, the strategies employed by
recipients of HOH charity to negotiate the recipients’ dilemma; and, three, the striking neglect of the HOH by businesses and civil society organizations, the failure, in other words, of the eleemosynary groundswell to reach Daletown in any appreciable degree. As counterparts to these issues were covered in chapters three through five on the SLM, this approach allows city-wide patterns to emerge into view. In the dissertation’s final chapter, the existence of these city-wide patterns serves as the basis for conclusions regarding, on the one hand, the nature of the relationship between faith-based ministries and the reproduction of capitalist social relationships and, on the other, the propensity of market-based models of charity to intensify rather than alleviate inequalities among the poor.

b. An Overview of Daletown Today

Since the completion of urban renewal and highway construction in the 1960s and 70s, Daletown has been a profoundly isolated neighborhood, far more isolated than any other neighborhood in Plainfield. This isolation manifests along several interwoven dimensions. Most glaring of all is the geographical isolation, that is, the way in which prominent elements of the Plainfield built environment divide and segregate Daletown from the rest of the city. As Daletown occupies a remote corner of the city, thinly populated rural areas border the neighborhood to the south and east. The entirety of Plainfield therefore lies to Daletown’s north and west. In both of those directions, however, elevated highways stand between Daletown and adjacent areas.

To the west, another poor neighborhood lies on the opposite side of the highway from Daletown. To the north, however—in the direction of Plainfield’s Center City, principal thoroughfares, and many major city institutions—the divide reaches its point of maximum
intensity. The first barrier between Daletown and the Center City is an elevated highway that rests upon an imposing earthen embankment disrupted by only a few well-spaced underpasses. On the other side of that highway from Daletown, however, lies an industrial park and bridge, the former of which rises from the ground that once held the original Daletown. Therefore, more than a mile of uninhabited concrete and steel lie between the northern edge of Daletown and the center of Plainfield. This built environment conveys the impression that Daletown has been deliberately walled off from the rest of the city, as though placed in quarantine. One scholar who has written on Plainfield says that Daletown feels like a “no-man’s land” and another has asserted, in private conversation, that “People don’t even know it exists.”

Most residents of contemporary Daletown live in either one of the large public housing or Section 8 complexes that dominate the neighborhood. The former of these are the Reinert Homes and the latter are known collectively as Memorial Court. All of these units were built throughout the 1960s and 70s to house people displaced by Urban Renewal. Not until the 1970s, when an anti-discrimination lawsuit forced the city of Plainfield to cease its practice of “ghettoizing” public housing, were public housing units finally built outside of Daletown for the first time. Most of the occupied single family homes that remain in Daletown show significant wear and deterioration. Perhaps almost as numerous as these single family homes, however, are the lots that hold either vacant and crumbling structures or the detritus and rubble of a demolished home. The nondescript browns and tans of the low-income projects, as well as the deteriorating buildings and overgrown lots, render Daletown a visually barren and unstimulating environment overall.

The total population of Daletown is approximately five thousand five hundred. Owing in part to the eligibility requirements of public and Section 8 housing, the population of Daletown is
heavily skewed in the direction of African-Americans, women, and children. The best available Census data—which are imperfect because parts of Daletown span several Census tracts—indicate that the female to male ratio in the neighborhood is at least five to three, and more than forty percent of residents are aged seventeen or younger. Figures from the elementary school located in Daletown classify eighty-five percent of students as either “black, non-Hispanic” or “multiracial” and only thirteen percent as “white, non-Hispanic.” Unmarried mothers with a child or children constitute a disproportionately high percentage of Daletown households. Also present in large numbers are households headed by elderly or disabled adults, more than a few of them raising their grandchildren or even great-grandchildren. Noteworthy by their absence are the layers of working and lower-middle class men and women who contribute much to the reproduction of social stability in the Swing, including through the SLM.

c. Economic Conditions in Daletown

It is an exaggeration, but only a slight one, to characterize Daletown as a neighborhood without much of an economy at all. Plainfield city government is the largest employer in the neighborhood, particularly the city school system. One large elementary school, Daletown Elementary, and another building in the city school system are located in the neighborhood. The second largest employer is probably the nonprofit sector, comprised mainly of churches and other civil society groups. Actual residents of Daletown, however, comprise a miniscule portion of these two workforces. Private sector businesses are almost nonexistent in Daletown. There are literally no grocery stores, produce stands, restaurants, office buildings, automobile garages, or any other common private sector employers of working-class labor in Daletown.34 The hub of

34 By any definition, Daletown counts as a “food desert,” for it is certainly one of the country’s “poor urban areas, where residents cannot buy affordable, healthy food” (Walker et al. 2010:1). An extensive review of previous
private sector commerce in Daletown is a gas station cum convenience store—the Handy Mart—that, despite characteristically high prices (Curtis and McClellan 1995:101-102), sells large quantities of food, drink, alcohol, tobacco, toiletries and other sundries to neighborhood residents all the year round. In this milieu, unemployment and poverty rates are exceptionally high. Median household income is, at most, about fourteen thousand dollars, which represents about one-quarter of the American average. According to state figures, 97.7 percent of students at Daletown elementary classify as “economically disadvantaged.”

The dire reputation of Daletown is to some extent justified by the scale of crime, particularly drug-related crime, in the neighborhood. In 2005, one of Plainfield’s large charitable foundations hired a consulting firm to conduct a survey of Daletown residents. The priorities most frequently listed by neighborhood residents were, in descending order: drugs, safety, issues with the city, and then jobs. According to one of the study’s principal authors, “residents insisted that children once felt safe there. Now, neither they nor adults can leave their homes without fear.” In addition to drug crime, prostitution, violence, and theft are all-too-common in Daletown. According to Clay Jones, a long-time Daletown resident, the natural order of things has been inverted in recent decades. In Clay’s youth, Daletown children were taught that, when about in the neighborhood, they should cross the street at the sight of any carousing adults. Nowadays, however, he and his older peers go out of their way to avoid groups of young people.

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research has shown that predominantly African-American neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets than predominantly white neighborhoods, even when controlling for income (Walker et al. 2010).
d. Problems Facing Children in Daletown

Community leaders from both the educational and non-profit sectors believe that these conditions are wreaking profound havoc in the lives of Daletown children. It is widely acknowledged that many Daletown children have extensive exposure to illegal drug use from an early age, including, in some cases, prenatally. On the basis of her first-hand experience, one former school administrator—an African-American woman with a long history in Plainfield education—insists that some Daletown parents have a habit of dropping their elementary-aged children off at school in cars that reek of marijuana smoke. Also according to her, drug-addicted parents, even when physically present, “are basically not there for their kids.” “Their priority is not the child,” she laments. Owing to this, she says, the lives of many children in Daletown want for adequate structure and consistency. Their healthy development, educational and otherwise, is imperiled as a result. In the classroom, the deficiencies of their home lives yield a lack of patience and an inability to focus on complex tasks. The data do in fact show that, on the whole, Daletown Elementary students suffer from serious educational shortcomings. Only thirty-five percent and thirty-three percent of them qualify as proficient in reading and mathematics respectively, while only twenty percent do so in social studies. Regarding the role models that these children have nearest at hand, the portion of Daletown adults who have graduated from high school or obtained an equivalency diploma is, at the most, only slightly above fifty percent. The percentage of Daletown residents with a four-year degree is nugatory.

e. The Civil Society Response

In this milieu, a host of nonprofit and community groups in Daletown regularly dedicate resources toward the project of ameliorating these grave social problems. A large number, probably a majority, are either African-American churches or affiliate parachurch organizations. Almost are rooted in either Baptist or Pentecostal theological traditions. Several large secular community groups and civic organizations also operate in the neighborhood. While some of these faith-based and secular groups offer programs for adults—such as job retraining, literacy classes, computer skills, and food assistance—the substance of community social action is oriented toward improving the lives of Daletown children.\(^{35}\) The decisions made by Daletown community organizations to pursue this or that mission rather than another, however, are not made in a vacuum. They are, in fact, powerfully shaped by the agendas of the grant-making agencies that dominate the local nonprofit funding environment.

During the decades of Charles County’s industrial glory, many successful local companies (some of them very large) and many affluent local families (some of them very wealthy) established dozens of private grant-making foundations in the county. These foundations are charged, according to the rules of their endowments, with providing financial support to local community organizations. The combined assets of the four largest foundations in the county alone amount to more than half a billion dollars. Much of the grant money disbursed by local foundations—big and small—is channeled to community groups through the Charles County office of the United Way. The local funding cycle runs according to a regular annual schedule. What this means is that, at the same time each year, large numbers of social

\(^{35}\) For an account that describes the vital work African-American churches and FBOs do with children in poor neighborhoods throughout America see Dilulio (1999).
service agencies—faith-based and secular—submit grant applications that, if successfully awarded, will help cover operating expenses for the coming year or, in rarer cases, coming years. For community organizations with few other sources of support, their survival is thus put to a referendum every one or two years.\textsuperscript{36} Many of these organizations also apply for public grants annually, where the same dichotomy between well-heeled funder and cash-strapped agency holds.\textsuperscript{37}

The dovetailing of extensive urban poverty and a robust funding universe has far-reaching consequences for the direction of social action in the city. First off, robust funding ensures that the private social service sector constitutes an important segment of the local labor market in its own right, especially for a certain category of person. To wit, the private social service sector employs many people who are smart and talented and conscientious but also lacking in formal educational credentials. For such people, it would be difficult and more often than not impossible to attain positions with comparable levels of authority and prestige in other sectors of the labor market. Without private social service employment, most would be cast into the low end of the labor pool, where unemployment and underemployment are rife. The social service agencies of Daletown contain many staff members who fit this description.

In short, then, livelihoods and social positions depend upon the success or failure of an organization’s grant application. This reality creates intense competition for grant monies among community organizations—sometimes even within a single organization. All sorts of alliances and antagonisms that are unrelated to the work of helping needy people well up in this

\textsuperscript{36} For an ethnographic account that describes the importance of ties between FBOs and wealthy philanthropists, see Adkins and Kemper (2006).

\textsuperscript{37} Grant awards are paid out of returns on investments that descend, ultimately, from endowments that were enabled by economic successes in Plainfield’s past, particularly robust profits in the heavy industrial sector. As such, Plainfield’s erstwhile economic glory continues to help sustain, in a very real and material sense, the reproduction of everyday life in the city, even long after the relevant firms have pulled out or folded altogether.
context. Nepotism is common, while competition also breeds sentiments and practices that impede collaboration. So important is the winning of grant monies, in fact, that some locals with reputations as skilled grant writers are informally contracted by community organizations to compose, either in whole or part, their annual funding applications. Should such an application be successful, the writer consultant from outside will be compensated in some fashion.

The sum total of these circumstances gives grant makers enormous power to shape the direction of social action in Plainfield. The lever by which they do so is known as “funding priorities.” By promulgating a funding agenda that expressly favors certain kinds of community action over others—say homeless services over afterschool tutoring programs—a grant maker encourages community organizations to adopt its priorities as their own. An organization that defies these priorities, that charts its own course despite the direction in which the funding winds blow, greatly reduces its chances of being awarded funding. As a corollary, the principals involved also greatly increase their chances of being put out of work or at least losing some income. Such risk-taking is understandably rare, however.

What happens in actuality is that the community organizations in Plainfield that seek grant monies routinely revise their mission statements and program offerings to satisfy the “priorities” of funders, particularly the local United Way. One grant reviewer described to me—with obvious dismay—how the agendas of numerous Plainfield community organizations have shifted in recent years in order to stay in step with the changing priorities of funders. What he saw from his vantage as an inadequate level of commitment to specific programs can also be seen, however, as a pragmatic decision on the part of community leaders to either serve the funding priorities and preserve jobs or serve no one at all and be the cause of lost jobs, perhaps even one’s own.
It comes as no surprise that charitable foundations in Plainfield—established and still operated by men and women who are successful in the conventional meaning of the term, sometimes famously so—embrace individualistic rather than structural explanations of poverty and other social problems in twenty-first century America. In rejecting a structural outlook out of hand, funders thereby reject the notion that inequalities of wealth and power contribute to the production and reproduction of social problems in the United States. In this rejection, they hold to the view—if only implicitly—that entrenched social problems like poverty and inequality can be substantially remedied without altering the political and economic foundations of American capitalism. What the amelioration of American social problems requires, in their view, is widespread personal transformation of poor and otherwise afflicted individuals. Herein lies the essence of their individualism. They are, in other words, influential adherents of the behaviorist interpretation of poverty.

With these presuppositions animating their policy decisions, funding agencies in Plainfield support approaches to social action that, in their view, focus on empowering poor and struggling individuals. In this sense, “empowering” means attempting to cultivate in these people character traits and professional skills that—it is believed—will better enable them to succeed in the labor market. This bias in favor of individualistic approaches is apparent in the Plainfield United Way’s “targeted areas,” which include “early education, graduation and training, avoiding risky behavior among youths, family stability, and economic independence.” For the benefit of the Plainfield media, a United Way spokesperson elaborated on the common thread binding these different target areas: “Our goal is really to get to the root causes of the problems. We need to build a community and start building strong families.” To reiterate, then, according to the main conduit of private social service funding in the city, personal and familial
shortcomings are the “root causes” of social problems in Plainfield, but inequalities of wealth and power do not merit a comment. Social service organizations that aim to win funding do well to espouse a similar viewpoint and organize their programs accordingly.

In fact, it is worth noting that many FBO leaders actually disagree on principle with the individualistic philosophies espoused and pushed by grant makers. Knowing the stakes and having next to no power of their own, however, they have little choice but to tailor their organizations and missions to suit the dictates of funding agencies rather than their own empirically-informed vision. One FBO leader with a long history of winning grant monies on the strength of applications that extolled behaviorist pieties about the need for success-oriented thinking and individual responsibility among the poor had this to say in private, for example: “This is the main trouble: People gettin’ out of prison and not bein’ able to find jobs. That’s the biggest problem in the Daletown area. So therefore if they can’t find a job, they can’t be with their families and then welfare is after ‘em [for child support]. And then they take their license from ‘em, and they go underground, and then they drive without a license. And, you know, it’s just [the cycle].”

f. Competing African-American Political Traditions and their Treatment by Funders

The pivotal issue here is the fact that Plainfield funding agencies—for the most part subtly and indirectly—shape the direction of social action in the city by rewarding community organizations that implement their individualistic philosophy and deterring other orientations upon the pain of non-support. The case of Norman Taylor brings this issue into stark relief. By all accounts, Norman Taylor was the most outspoken, charismatic, and influential black radical in Plainfield during the 1960s and 1970s. During that timeframe, he held leadership positions in
numerous Black Nationalist groups and movements, including those that resisted urban renewal and those that fought trade unions over racial discrimination in the apprentice system. The radical cadre of which he was a leading figure also published a weekly newspaper, ran a liberation school, and founded Martin Luther King, Jr. day in the city. According to Taylor himself, these efforts were motivated by what he calls a philosophy of “corporate improvement for Afro-Americans.” Many in the black community remember him as a principled and courageous radical who surpassed all others in his ability to, as one of his peers put it, “bring the city out” in protest.

In the early 1980s, Taylor accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and he, like his grandmother before him, became a Pentecostal preacher. Thus did he move, in his own words, out of his “Saul period.”\(^{38}\) He acknowledges that, as a preacher, he continues to have “a revolutionary tint to my ideology, even in my interpretation of Christ.” Despite remaining privately a left radical, however, Taylor does not publicly mix politics and religion at this stage in his life. “One of the reasons I don’t do it,” he admits, “is that it would scare black folks, church folks, to death. They ain’t used to that. It’s just truth.”\(^{39}\)

Despite the lowered public profile that he has kept for many years, however, Norman Taylor’s reputation among the Plainfield power structure as a troublesome radical is fixed, and

\(^{38}\) One of the best-known and most cherished stories in Christendom describes the Apostle Paul’s conversion to Christianity. As recounted at various points throughout the New Testament, particularly in the books of Acts and Galatians, the Apostle Paul was born into a Jewish family and given the name Saul at birth. As a Jewish Pharisee in his young adulthood, Saul was a zealous persecutor of early Christians. While Saul was traveling one day on the road to Damascus, however, Jesus Christ appeared before him from behind a blinding light. After three days of blindness, Saul’s sight was restored after the laying on of hands by Ananias of Damascus, a disciple of Christ, and Saul afterward converted to Christianity himself, thus becoming the Apostle Paul. In vernacular usage, Christians like Norman Taylor often invoke this account as a metaphor to accent the gulf that divides the pre and post-conversion periods of their own lives.

\(^{39}\) According to Robert Fowler—prominent counterexamples notwithstanding—the significance of conservative churches within the African-American community has ensured that, historically, “much of black religion was inner-focused and concentrated much more on changing individuals and preparing for heaven than on political actions in this world” (1985:297).
he remains *persona non grata* among funders in the area. “There are social workers who run agencies who I could teach for hours,” he explains. “And I could not run an agency because I spent time attacking the evils in this society—and would do it again. This is the price you pay. And I understand that this is the price. With my intellect and the jobs that I’ve had, [my wife and I] should probably be in a different position. But there’s no painless way to change a society—or really be an effective witness for the Lord. If you’re gonna be an effective witness for the Lord, you have to be with the people. You have to be of the people. You can’t really be like Commander Spock and Kirk. You can’t beam down and then go back. You gotta stay.”

To be sure, Norman Taylor’s ideal of what a social service agency should be differs radically from the vision of the United Way and other individualistically-oriented Plainfield funders. He gives full-throated opposition to a model of Christian social service that limits itself to merely softening the day-to-day hardships of the poor—an approach he metonymically condemns as “handing out cheese”:

“We can never assume we’re solving the world’s problems by handing out cheese. There’s a problem in the distribution of the resources that causes handing out cheese to be necessary. You use social services as a means to reach people so that you can be a witness to them. Once I feed you, I have credibility to talk to you. And as long as one out of ten of those people is being pulled off and being shown another way of life, not only to get saved, but I believe the purpose of saving men is so that we can fulfill the Kingdom of God, which is His will be done on earth as it is heaven. Which means we are now organized. We are his workmanship made unto good works. So after you get saved and you get six months of being a babe in Christ—after that, you work. And after enough time of handing out cheese, the contradictions ought to be apparent to you that there is something wrong that keeps this line endless for cheese. So that you ultimately, now, want to change the distribution system. It becomes a pathology if all you wanna do is hand out cheese. No man wants to paint a house or to do anything else that never ends. There’s gotta be an end to this paint job. There’s gotta be an end to it. And if I’m gonna continue to do this, and there is no change, then we really ain’t doin nothing. We’re part of the pacification system. We’re part of the system that is acquiescing to tyranny. And that can never be justified.”

During the 1970s, Norman Taylor and several other leading Black Nationalists in Plainfield sought to establish sturdy institutional bases from which to advance their social
agenda. One of their main efforts involved organizing a “Black United Fund.” Intended to serve as a Black Nationalist alternative to the United Way, the Black United Fund raised money from donors and then allocated operating funds to worthy “minority-oriented social service groups.” At its peak, the Black United Fund supported such local groups and causes as Black History Week, Black Rally for Human Rights, the Ebony Kadets, a Migrant Farmworkers Council, and more.

In the fifth year of the Black United Fund’s existence, however, donations from the community plummeted, particularly from labor and business groups. Controversy ensued. The executive director of the Black United Fund publicly claimed that the director of the United Way had actively discouraged business and civic groups from contributing to his organization. Local media recorded the United Way director’s response: “I have never initiated a call to a specific corporation about Black United Fund. We would never presume to tell civic funds what to do with their money. If somebody contacts me and asks why we have a Black United Fund I say I’m not sure. I don’t appreciate the need for it in this community. Go down to any of our agencies and you will see black people being served at almost every one. We don’t make a distinction between serving blacks and whites. We [the United Way] serve a wide spectrum of need.” The Black United Fund did not long survive this loss of financial support from companies and unions.

During the years that Norman Taylor was at his most politically active, his critiques and actions were frequently opposed by members of Plainfield’s black integrationist community. Urban Renewal—which the nationalists opposed and the integrationists supported—caused the most prominent and consequential of these rifts. For several decades, Allen Gray has been one of Plainfield’s leading integrationists. Though a former (and unrepentant) supporter of Urban
Renewal, Gray hardly accepted the racist *status quo* of an earlier time, for he was instrumental locally in fighting patterns of racial discrimination—as in unfair housing and hiring practices—where African-Americans were denied equality of opportunity merely on the basis of their race. His integrationism was activist, though of a less radical cast than that championed by Taylor and other nationalists.

With a long and successful career in both the public and private sectors now behind him, Mr. Gray still attributes his achievements to the influence of elder family members. “From day one,” he remembers, “my dad and mother and grandmother talked about, ‘Achieve, achieve, achieve! Get a good education.’” Today Allen Gray espouses what many regard as a “conservative” explanation for the problems that beset black communities across America. He decries the absence of the work ethic among the young and the collapse of the traditional household structure, especially in the form of unwed motherhood. As part of his effort to counter these tendencies, he has spent decades mentoring promising young African-American men in Plainfield. “As you move up,” he explains, “reach back and bring somebody with you. That’s what we were taught.”

One of Gray’s more successful mentees in the city today is Clifford Smith. Despite being only in his early thirties, Smith has distinguished himself by succeeding in many high-level positions in the city’s nonprofit sector. When asked in 2008 to describe the mission of the organization he then headed—which also happened to be one of the city’s iconic African-American community organizations—he explained that, “We don’t fight for causes so much, but we either adapt or work harder to obtain positions and opportunities that many people say we couldn’t.” Since making these remarks, Mr. Smith has ascended to a place on the board of one of Charles County’s wealthiest foundations.
g. An Overview of the HOH

The Haven of Hope is a large, multifaceted faith-based charity located in the Daletown neighborhood. It is affiliated with Christ the King Apostolic Temple, a small African-American Pentecostal church also located in Daletown. Established over a decade ago as a free grocery ministry, the HOH has expanded during the interim by adding one new program and offering after another. The majority of HOH programs are designed to serve children from the ages of about six to thirteen, and almost all of them rely overwhelmingly upon grant funding for their support. The HOH does not, in other words, enjoy much support at all from business or civil society organizations in Plainfield save the grant-making agencies—not other churches, not the Food Bank, not the Hunger Task Force, not youth groups, not professional groups, not the ministerial coalition, not restaurants, not grocery stores, companies, or any of the other organizations that shower the SLM with resources day in and day out. Owing to grant support, however, the HOH is able to sustain a small paid staff of about six persons. On account of the HOH reliance on grants—many of which, especially public ones, prohibit proselytizing as a condition of acceptance—explicitly religious language and appeals are absent from the formal content of many programs hosted by the organization.

The HOH mission itself is housed in a large white cinder block building near to the geographic center of Daletown. Internally, the building is divided into a number of different spaces, including a large multipurpose room, a church sanctuary, a small computer room, a few private offices, several storage rooms, and a dining area with a rudimentary kitchen attached. In order to both brighten the atmosphere and disseminate a religious message, Christian-themed posters, images, and other symbols prominently adorn the inside walls of the HOH. Many of these feature images of Jesus Christ at their center—always with Christ depicted as a black man.
There are also many photographs scattered throughout the building of Daletown children smiling and laughing and gallivanting in the course of HOH programs.

Pastor Gloria Bell serves as both lead pastor of Christ the King Apostolic Temple and director of the HOH Mission. Her husband Steven—whose several decades as a skilled union worker continue to provide security to the family via a good retirement pension—also volunteers at the HOH with some frequency. Having been raised in the Daletown of the 1950s and 60s, Pastor Bell is disheartened by the state of the neighborhood today. Be that as it may, however, she remains dedicated to Daletown. “I am committed to this section of town cuz this is where I grew up,” she explains. “When I grew up here, it was a safe place. There was nobody doin’ drugs. If they drink’d, they drink’d in the household. Everybody seemed like [they] had a father or a man in the house. It was a safe place. No one would try to grab you, rape you, try to get you to sell drugs, or anything. But now it’s not a safe place for children at all.” A donation letter sent out from the HOH describes Daletown conditions in much the same vein: “[U]nemployment and absent fathers due to incarceration are the norm. Most children in this community expect to become drug dealers, drug users, gang members or pregnant. Why? Because this is what they see and live with every day! The youth we serve can easily go from POTENTIAL to PRISON. Won’t you help us in meeting the needs of these often invisible, forgotten Daletown at-risk children and families?” [Italics in original].

Owing to these background conditions, then, the HOH aims to serve as a self-described “neighborhood mission” with two principal goals. First, the HOH aims to simply exist as a safe space, a refuge, in other words, where neighborhood children can be, at least for a time, insulated from the deleterious influences that surround them in Daletown. Whether they do homework, play games, participate in programs, or just hang out, being at the HOH places significant
distance between them and the drugs and violence and other problems afoot on the outside. Pastor Bell’s husband Steven explains that the second element of the HOH’s mission involves exposing these children to a “different way of life.” The “different way” that he and other members of the HOH workforce extol is defined as the opposite of the lifestyle of drugs and crime and low educational attainment that fits the description of many adults in Daletown. It is a lifestyle, in other words, of conventional success—of getting an education, achieving economic stability as an adult, and avoiding criminal entanglements of any kind. Put another way, the HOH aims to help constitute Daletown children as successful liberal subjects, as subjects who embrace an individualistic social order as natural and pursue goals accordingly. As HOH documents frequently exclaim, “Success is achieved one child at a time!” 40

i. The HOH Workforce

Three of the HOH’s four largest programs cater exclusively to children: a mentoring program, an afterschool tutoring program, and a summer program that includes both educational and recreational components. The fourth, a food program that distributes groceries to heads of household in a manner similar to the SLM, will be described in detail in the following chapter. With these four large programs and a passel of smaller ones to operate at various times of the year, sustaining HOH programs week in and week out requires considerable investments of human labor power and non-human resources. As at the SLM, a large workforce that is anchored by a small number of highly-involved men and women has emerged to fulfill HOH

40 The children themselves are frequently reminded that, “You can be anything you want to be!” In the spring and summer of 2009, with Barack H. Obama’s first term as President of the United States only just beginning, this message resounded with exceptional frequency in the halls of the HOH, where almost all workers are African-Americans.
labor power requirements. The HOH workforce is—like the SLM’s—patterned and stratified in its own unique way.

The men and women who comprise the HOH workforce fall into one of four categories: HOH staff, visiting employees, volunteers, and semi-voluntary workers. As was described in chapter four with respect to the SLM, the principles of relational differentiation and functional segmentation structure the division of labor within the HOH as well. In other words, the nature of the relationship that binds a person to the HOH determines the worker category to which that person belongs, and members of one worker category tend to specialize in some tasks rather than others. HOH staff, for example, assume management responsibilities while semi-voluntary workers specialize in menial tasks.

Regarding demographic considerations, almost all of the people who compose the HOH workforce are African-Americans, and women outnumber men by a significant margin. Adult African-American women of all ages and African-American men who are middle-aged and older account for more than half of all HOH workers. Younger men in their twenties and thirties represent only a small fraction of the HOH workforce. Along the class dimension, the vast majority of HOH workforce members qualify as either poor or working-poor. They are overwhelmingly people who inhabit the lower income strata of the American working class. Of the small number of workers at the HOH who do enjoy economic security, most are women who benefit from a husband’s solid income. Very few members of the black middle class participate in the HOH workforce. Members of the white middle class are all but nonexistent at the HOH.

1. **Staff**

HOH staff members are formal employees of the organization, individuals who draw taxable income from HOH revenues. As HOH revenues come mainly from grant awards, these
people depend for their livelihoods upon the organization’s continued ability to secure grants. In the summer of 2009, six African-American women accounted for the entirety of the HOH staff. All of these women are bound by social ties—ties of friendship and kinship—that long predate their involvement with one another at the HOH. Apropos the organization’s history, in other words, the HOH staff was assembled out of a preexisting network of friends and family members. These six women—with Pastor Bell as their director and leader—constitute the stable core of the HOH workforce.

HOH staff members—and they alone—perform administrative and managerial tasks within the organization. Two of the women, including Pastor Bell, tend to concentrate on high-stakes administrative tasks like writing grant applications, disbursing paychecks, paying bills, organizing events, negotiating relationships with other organizations, and so on. The remaining four women take the lead in supervising the day-to-day operations of HOH programs that are funded by grants, such as the mentoring and summer programs. They do not contribute in any consistent way to HOH programs that are not funded by grants. They do not, in other words, also volunteer their labor to the HOH.

As the six members of the HOH staff have a formal monopoly of power over resource distribution and policy formation, they stand apart from all others in the HOH workforce. The line between them and workers in the other three categories is the most pronounced of any in the context of HOH operations. This workforce division between HOH staff members and others also permeates other realms, such as everyday social intercourse. Despite racial, class, and gender similarities between HOH staff and many other members of the workforce, the former group constitutes an inner circle that is chary and cautious in its interactions with other workers, whether those interactions occur inside the context of HOH operations or not. To socialize on
equal or nearly equal terms with members of this inner circle is not a privilege granted to visiting employees, volunteers, and semi-voluntary workers.

2. **Visiting Employees**

Visiting employees constitute only a miniscule portion of the overall HOH workforce, approximately five to ten people per month on average. As the label applied to them here suggests, these men and women are paid employees of other organizations (often public) who have been directed by their employer to work at the HOH. As one example, during the winter of 2008–2009, the HOH received several visiting employees from a state program that paid low-income senior citizens to participate in community service work. As another, several teenagers worked at the HOH during summer 2009 and were paid by a Plainfield city program that was meant to both subsidize community organizations and boost youth employment rates while public schools were out of session. As measured by the amount of labor they actually contribute, however, the impact of visiting employees on HOH operations is modest at best.

3. **Semi-Voluntary Workers**

Semi-voluntary workers at the HOH are defined by the same relationship as their counterparts at the SLM. They are men, women, and sometimes underage teens who have been ordered to perform community service work by the state, and they have elected to fulfill their obligations at the HOH rather than somewhere else. Semi-voluntary workers have been so ordered because, most commonly, they must work in exchange for public service benefits or they have been convicted of breaking the law and must perform community service work as part of their court-mandated sentence. Semi-voluntary workers at the HOH perform the most menial and filthy tasks, such as picking up trash from the parking lot, mopping floors, and cleaning
bathrooms. While semi-voluntary workers at the SLM do the same work, the racial composition of this segment is inverted across town. Whites—unfailingly poor whites—form a significant portion of the semi-voluntary stratum at the HOH. Whites are almost otherwise nonexistent among the HOH workforce. Most of the men in their twenties and thirties who participate in the HOH workforce also do so as semi-voluntary labor.

4. Volunteers

Volunteers at the HOH—defined as people who contribute labor to the organization without either earning money or discharging state-mandated obligations by doing so—constitute the largest segment of the HOH workforce. Over the course of the year, the number of unique volunteers at the HOH probably fluctuates up and down from a mean of about twenty-five people per month. Volunteers constitute half or more of the entire HOH workforce in a given month. A minority of approximately six volunteers contributes between twenty-five and forty hours a week at the HOH, sometimes more. Most volunteers are residents of Daletown or adjacent neighborhoods who have found the HOH to be a hospitable and worthwhile place to spend time doing good and giving back, particularly on behalf of the children of the community. Many are socially connected to the HOH through either their ties to HOH staff persons or through their attendance at Christ the King church. Almost all volunteers are African-Americans, with women greatly outnumbering men. Most are of modest means, but a small number of black middle class men and women volunteer at the HOH at times throughout the year.

More than a few volunteers, however, are men and women from Daletown who have lived lives of extreme difficulty and hardship. They have battled drug addiction for years, sometimes decades. Some have experience, even long-term experience, in sex work. Many have
been in prison, and a few have been in prison for more of their adult years than not. Many of these people presently receive disability payments from the state, a fact that would prevent them from working even if they wished to do so. As it is designed to be for children, then, the HOH is also a refuge for these people too, a place where they can be productively occupied by community tasks rather than powerfully tempted in their idleness. A small number of them are parents of children involved in HOH programs, though, as a rule, few parents actually ever devote significant volunteer time to the HOH. The handful of parents who do volunteer from time to time appear much more inclined to do so on days in which HOH programming includes an appealing special opportunity, such as a visit to a pool or a trip to an amusement park.

With the exception of the administrative and managerial tasks that are the prerogative of HOH staff, volunteers work in all capacities at the organization. They serve as mentors for children. They tutor kids after school and provide instruction in the summer program. They shuttle children to and fro in one of the HOH vehicles, whether to a recreational outing or to a child’s front door. They are also the backbone of the grocery giveaway program, which includes such steps as maintaining paperwork, assembling grocery bags, distributing the food to recipients, and more. In their work, volunteers follow the plans and protocols that have been laid down by HOH staff persons.

ii. HOH Programs

Other than a second-hand clothing closet and a grocery distribution program that is covered at length in the next chapter, all HOH programs are designed exclusively to serve the children of the Daletown neighborhood. One of these is a state-sponsored program in which responsible and upstanding adults serve as mentors for children of the same gender who have one or both parents incarcerated. Such mentors are expected to compensate for an incarcerated
parent by intervening in the child’s life as a good mother or father would: facilitate educational success, model moral behavior, be attentive to the child’s needs, introduce him or her to the opportunities of the wider world, and generally take an interest in the child’s life so as to promote self-esteem and discourage imprudent choices. In Pastor Bell’s estimation, “A mentor helps a lot, especially with the fatherless of the homes. Eighty percent of the households here are female-headed households. So if we can find men that will take the responsibility and just take a kid and mentor him, they’ll be doin good [Emphasis in original].”

During the academic year, the HOH hosts an afterschool tutoring program in which volunteers are charged with helping students to understand and complete their school assignments. A small computer room was added to the HOH a few years ago on the assumption that the future success of these children will require general computer literacy, which is something that few of these children have the opportunity to practice in their homes. For six weeks in June and July, the HOH also hosts a summer program that draws dozens of children from around Daletown and even some from adjacent neighborhoods. During the morning hours of this program, children receive educational instruction and assistance. Program hours following the midday lunch break are occupied by recreation, sometimes onsite and sometimes off. Every program that the organization runs for children—whether it unfolds on or off of HOH grounds—provides, at some point, free meals. HOH staff design their programs in the knowledge that many Daletown children leave home hungry each morning.

Recreational excursions are a common feature of HOH programs for children. HOH staff view time away from Daletown as an opportunity to show these children the world of possibilities beyond the elevated highways that bound their everyday lives. They hope that, through exposure, Daletown children will be inspired to dream about a different kind of future
and make efforts accordingly. To this end, groups of children are taken on trips to zoos, museums, sporting events, and also to outdoor settings, such as to nature preserves, walking trails, or lakes. On one particular trip, Pastor Bell’s husband Steven took several children to a cloth-napkin restaurant and mandated that each one of them order an entrée that required the use of a fork and knife, something that, according to him, few of these children handle regularly in their homes.

iii. The Fact of Dearth

In attempting to better the lives of children and others in Daletown, however, the HOH must contend with a chronic shortage of essential resources, including a shortage of human labor power. While grant awards enable the HOH to operate many of the aforementioned programs at a basic level, all HOH programs—whether grant-supported or not—suffer from chronic dearth. All give the impression of being suboptimally staffed, suboptimally resourced, or both. The groundswell of regular community support that allows the SLM to flourish—that allows abundance and options to be the norm there—bypasses Daletown altogether. In fact, the contents of the HOH building itself—such as frayed carpeting, cracked tiling, sagging tables, broken appliances, and more—bespeak a thoroughgoing austerity. Most importantly, pervasive dearth necessarily limits the degree to which HOH operations can help the people whom they serve.

A critical shortage of volunteer labor impairs every HOH program with the exception of the grocery giveaway. For research demonstrating the reliance of FBOs on volunteer labor see Kearns et al. (2005). And for research on the especial dependence of African-American churches on volunteer labor, see Chaves (1999).
to reign. So few men without criminal convictions were willing to mentor children of prisoners, for example, that HOH staff sought to enlist this ethnographer into that program. Likewise with the afterschool tutoring program where students—all of them in need of serious educational assistance—outnumbered tutors by a factor of at least two to one and oftentimes as much as four to one. Although public computers at the HOH contained educational games and other features for kids, these computers were old, slow, and saturated with viruses.

The ratio between workers and children in the summer program was much higher than even in the case of tutoring, the former being in the range of approximately four or five adults to each child, most of them between the ages of five and ten. Despite the best efforts of several conscientious adults, it was impossible to maintain good order for more than a few minutes at a time. It was summertime, and the kids preferred to talk and laugh, run and play, rather than sit still and learn. An ideal environment for educational development it was not. One middle-class professional educator who volunteered in the program withdrew from interacting with younger children at all. Instead, she retreated to the quietest corner of the sanctuary each morning and provided instruction for a few of the interested and well-behaved older children. Incidentally, without the initiative of this woman, the HOH summer program would have lacked anything approaching a suitable collection of books, workbooks, paper, and pencils with which to host an educational component at all. Only a few parents—a great many of whom were unemployed and available—ever volunteered at the summer program even intermittently. Most of them seemed to appreciate the program as a free childcare service during the summer recess.
h. The Annual HOH Fundraising Banquet

On an unseasonably cold evening in spring 2009, the HOH held its annual fundraising banquet in a hall on the sprawling campus of one of the county’s largest megachurches, a church with an overwhelmingly white and affluent membership. For several months preceding the banquet, staff persons and volunteers from the HOH had worked to publicize this event and raise donations for it. Not only did they post public fliers and mail donation letters to businesses, community organizations, and individuals throughout the area, they also appealed to many people in-person. Tickets cost thirty-five dollars per adult and ten dollars apiece for children. Prospective donors and attendees were also invited to purchase—also for ten dollars—a ticket voucher that would pay for a child from Daletown to attend the banquet.

On the appointed night, approximately one hundred and twenty people turned out for the HOH’s annual fundraising banquet. At least a dozen, maybe a few more, were children from Daletown who had been sponsored by a voucher purchase. Only about ten of the attendees were not African-American, all ten of them white. There were many half-filled and nearly-empty tables throughout the hall. The space could have easily accommodated at least five or six times the number of people in attendance. Most of the attendees were working and lower-middle class African-Americans who were middle-aged or older. According to information printed in the evening’s bulletin, thirty-nine businesses and twenty-one individuals had made donations to the event. Among those twenty-one were Norman Taylor and the Plainfield Chief of Police.

Prior to the start of the HOH banquet, volunteers had prepared a “silent auction” by distributing an array of items—including gift cards, pieces of homemade artwork, knick-knacks, and other things—across a long series of tables joined end to end at the back of the hall. A pen and lined piece of paper had been placed beside each of the items. When attendees arrived, they
were encouraged to peruse these objects and then write down their bids on the piece of paper adjacent to the item or items they would like to purchase. Those who wished to surpass the bid of a person who came before merely crossed out the previous entry on the paper and wrote a larger figure beneath it along with their name. The results of this silent auction—read aloud at one point during the festivities—revealed that the people in attendance had little disposable income to contribute to the HOH. Many of the two dozen or so items in the rear of the hall received only one or two bids apiece. Gertrude Campbell, one of the county’s most prominent and successful African-American women, personally bid on a majority of the items, and she won nearly all of them. Without her single-handed participation, many items would have received no bids at all.

By way of contrast, about five months prior to this banquet, another fundraiser had been held on these same suburban grounds. Held the night before Thanksgiving, this earlier Community Night of Thanks had been organized to help raise funds for a faith-based homeless shelter in Center City Plainfield. That shelter is operated by white Evangelicals who have deep ties throughout the local faith-based community, particularly throughout the affluent Evangelical churches that populate the Plainfield suburbs. Thirty county churches, including all of the largest suburban megachurches, cosponsored this event. Very few African-American churches participated, however. On the “Night of Thanks,” back-to-back worship services were held in the cavernous megachurch sanctuary. One hundred percent of the night’s donations were destined for the homeless shelter coffers.

For both services, thousands of people filled the sanctuary to capacity. Turnout for the second service was so great that the megachurch parking lot was filled to capacity and beyond. One of the ministers on hand took to the microphone and exulted that, with nowhere for them to
park, “hundreds” of cars had been turned away at the main gate. A single anonymous donor promised to match, on a dollar for dollar basis, all of the evening’s donations up to the three hundred thousand dollar mark. A second megachurch promised to donate its entire Sunday offering to the cause as well. According to some people au courant, tithes and offerings on ordinary Sundays at that church regularly approximated about fifty thousand dollars. Although the final tally was never publicly released, total donations for the Community Night of Thanks event had to have amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

At the HOH banquet, Pastor Bell served as master of ceremonies for the evening. After some opening remarks in which she summarized HOH achievements and thanked all who supported the organization, she began to direct the people in the front of the room toward the hot plates and trays that had been set up buffet-style on tables that sat against a wall perpendicular to the silent auction. The event had been professionally catered, and spread across these tables was a delicious assortment of meats, vegetables, breads, desserts, and more. After all of the attendees had served themselves, the city’s only African-American council member rose to the lectern and spoke briefly on her conviction that “service is the rent you pay for living.” Several other African-American community leaders spoke as well, including a public school principal. Guests were also entertained by a performance of Daletown Elementary School’s African Dance Troupe.

The speaker engaged to give the evening’s keynote address was Tynesa Davis, a young African-American woman who has achieved national recognition for her status as an unjust victim of America’s “War on Drugs.” After having led what she described as “an advantaged and sheltered childhood” in an East Coast suburb, she left home after high school to attend a prestigious university. During her freshman year, however, Ms. Davis began dating a drug
dealer who abused her and forced her to work as a drug courier. Since her release after several years in prison, she has become a prominent critic of American drug policies. Ms. Davis has received many awards for her work and has also been sponsored by many large corporations to speak to crowds of young people across America. She describes her personal mission as “forc[ing] today’s students to listen in hopes that they will recognize that there are consequences to their life choices.”

Though Tynesia Davis eschewed unambiguous references to faith and God, the idioms and cadences of her speech suggested that she had at least a background in conservative Protestantism if not a full commitment to that faith tradition. Aiming at the children in the audience, the fundamental message of Davis’s speech was this: Young people in America must, by dint of determination and hard work, forge within themselves frames of mind conducive to success, frames of mind capable of transcending any obstacles they might face. Hers was a paean to fortitude and resilience, to inner strength and the resolute will, to the belief—Protestant and American to the core—that mind really is over matter. She exhorted the boys and girls in the audience to “step out on your own, and you be the leader.” Don’t settle for second best, she implored, but “go get what’s yours.” Anything worthwhile will take struggle, she assured them, so you “need to make sure you have high self-esteem.” She also proffered this piece of advice: at the bottom of her own hardships, she was able to vanquish flitters of self-doubt by repeatedly affirming to herself that, “I’m the bomb.” “Forget what’s going on in your own household,” she commanded, and take heart from “the Obama effect.” Anyone can achieve anything now, she insisted. The inauguration of Barack Obama had proved it so.

As Ms. Davis approached the climax of her speech, she invoked the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and quoted his remark that, “There is nothing more dangerous than to build a
society with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it; who feel that they have nothing to lose. People who have a stake in their society, protect that society, but when they don’t have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it.”⁴² Made by King in response to African-American rioting in the mid-1960s, this remark was intended to help make sense of these events by illuminating something of the mindset prevalent among rioters. A long history of racism and discrimination and exclusion had sown in many African-Americans the feelings that they “have no stake” and “have nothing to lose.” Some of these people thus gravitated easily toward destruction and rioting under inflamed conditions. His was a statement, in other words, that the political and economic conditions of American society contributed to the making of social problems and that therefore the structure of American society warranted changing. The spirit of this quotation militates against individualistic interpretations of social problems as myopic and unavailing.⁴³

For her part, however, Ms. Davis followed her quoting of Dr. King by pleading with the children in attendance to understand that the truth about American society is a hopeful truth: “Young people: You have a stake in society!” President Obama, she celebrated, is “living proof of that.” In other words, while Dr. King faulted American society for systemically excluding African-Americans, Tynesia Davis would fault those who fail to mentally triumph over the erroneous belief that such exclusion continues. To say such a thing in the context of an event

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⁴² This remark, widely available on the internet without citation, was made by Dr. King in front of television cameras. The footage is reproduced at the beginning of episode eight of the documentary series, Eyes on the Prize. See Merritt (2011:40).

⁴³ This interpretation is supported by the published statement of Dr. King’s that represents an elaboration of the remark quoted by Tynesia Davis: “Riots grow out of intolerable conditions. Violent revolts are generated by revolting conditions and there is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of people who feel they have no stake in it, who feel they have nothing to lose. To the young victim of the slums, this society has so limited the alternatives of his life that the expression of his manhood is reduced to the ability to defend himself physically. No wonder it appears logical to him to strike out, resorting to violence against oppression. That is the only way he thinks he gets recognition” (Carson 2001:303-304).
organized to assist impoverished African-American children who live amidst drugs and
criminality and contemporary discrimination is to prioritize the individualistic approach to social
problems, an approach that expects to produce genuine social change by inculcating the right
attitudes in a critical mass of young minds.

To make these remarks as though they are a logical extension of Dr. King’s sentiments is
to shanghai an iconic structural critique into the service of political economic individualism. No
doubt Ms. Davis believed that her comments were faithful to Dr. King’s original meaning. In
any case, the object is less to criticize the individual speaker than to discern in the speech
fundamental truths about the present era. The object, in other words, is to note that, owing to the
complete hegemony of neoliberalism in contemporary America, public discourse has become
debased to the point that neoliberal speakers enjoy the privilege of citing even iconic dissidents
in support of their position without being deterred or corrected or rebuked by the presence of
vigorous countervailing traditions.

A couple of days after the banquet, Florence, one of Pastor Bell’s dearest friends and a
woman who lent significant support to the fundraising effort, shared her thoughts about the
affair. She and many others in attendance, she admitted, had been disappointed by the Tynesa
Davis speech. Ms. Davis, these people all pointed out, hailed from a privileged suburban
background and had only become embroiled in the drug trade as an adult. As such, her
experiences and the lessons of her life had little to nothing in common with the problems that
confronted impoverished children in Daletown on a daily basis, such as the widespread
availability of drugs and also the allure of earning much-needed money through involvement in
the drug economy. What is noteworthy, however, is that this criticism of Davis’s message as
tone-deaf on the class dimension is not necessarily a repudiation of individualism per se.
Florence’s criticism is compatible with either a more class-sensitive individualism or a structural critique after the fashion of Dr. King. The direction that such nascent disaffection takes tends to be determined by the contours of public discourse at the specific historical moment in question. And on that day, somewhere on the margins of Plainfield’s public life, Norman Taylor was holding fast to a radically different vision of the future, so radically different, in fact, as to be almost incomprehensible to the subjects of the neoliberal world.
VII. The HOH and an Uneven Faith-Based Geography

a. Introduction

The previous chapter provided both an overview of Plainfield’s Daletown neighborhood and a description of the techniques by which funding agencies ensure that faith-based actors in the city adopt individualistic rather than structural approaches to social problems. Chapter six also introduced the HOH, a faith-based social ministry located in Daletown that hews to prevailing norms and operates according to an individualistic philosophy. The evidence from chapter six also shows that serious shortages of both resources and labor power prevent the HOH from running its programs at optimal levels. In other words, the groundswell of charitable flows that descends upon Plainfield organizations day in and day out largely bypasses the HOH.

The first half of the present chapter delves more systematically into the question of HOH dearth, particularly as that dearth manifests in the context of the organization’s weekly food ministry. The second half of the chapter then expands upon this analysis by providing a careful overview of Plainfield’s entire nutritional subsector—that is, the totality of organizations in the city that host hot meals, grocery giveaways, or both to the general public free of charge. The evidence shows that Plainfield’s nutritional subsector has developed in a geographically uneven way, which is to say that some poor city neighborhoods contain much higher concentrations of free faith-based food resources than others. Upon careful examination, it is clear that the uneven geographical development of the nutritional subsector in Plainfield produces a form of white privilege in which redistributive flows gather disproportionately in white rather than African-American neighborhoods. The wider significance of these observations—both theoretical and policy-related—will be spelled out in the concluding chapter.
b. An Overview of Friday Morning Grocery Giveaways

On all Friday mornings excepting the first Friday of each month, the HOH hosts a two-pronged free grocery ministry for the general public. The first prong consists of a conventional onsite giveaway whereby bags are distributed in an organized fashion to needy men and women who visit the HOH for that purpose. The second consists of an ambulatory service whereby free grocery bags are delivered to the homes of men and women who—due to age, infirmity, or both—have been awarded a place on the HOH’s home delivery schedule. Because public welfare and food stamp benefits are replenished at the start of each month, recipient turnout for faith-based food charity tends to be lowest during that time. This is the reason that the HOH suspends its grocery ministry on first Fridays.

On grocery giveaway Fridays, recipients begin to file into the HOH fifteen to twenty minutes before the official eleven a.m. start time. As they enter the main door, these male and female heads of household visit a small table staffed by a couple of HOH volunteers to fill out the requisite paperwork. After doing that, recipients take their seats among the pews and chairs that have been assembled into a makeshift waiting room in the HOH multipurpose space. HOH staff members, including Pastor Bell, operate in the knowledge that many of the men and women queueing up for grocery bags are living deeply troubled lives—lives plagued by crime, drug addiction, poverty, abusive relationships, as well as a host of emotional, psychological, and physical ailments.

In addition to merely nourishing the body then, the HOH attempts to minister to wider needs as well. To that end, someone associated with Christ the King church is always on hand to give a brief and informal sermon to the audience of recipients before the actual distribution of groceries commences. More often than not, the speaker is a lay member of the church who
knows first-hand what it is like to sit where these people sit and to suffer as these people suffer. The speaker is there, in other words, to share the Good News that, whatever problems or afflictions one might be facing, empowerment through faith in Jesus Christ holds the answer.  

In order to convincingly illustrate the transformative power of faith in Christ as one’s personal Savior, most sermons revolve around the speaker’s sharing of his or her own testimony. Among Pentecostals and other conservative Christians, a testimony refers to an autobiographical narrative in which the speaker dramatically highlights his or her experiences of hardship and how conversion to faith in Christ has carried him or her to a better place in life. The candid sharing of one’s testimony on the part of believers is regarded as an effective technique for “reaching the lost,” that is, producing conversions among non-believers.

After the speaker closes his or her sermon with a prayer, another worker begins to lead recipients two at a time through a doorway and into the dining area where individualized grocery bags have been piled into boxes. Heads of household receive one bag apiece. The size of the recipient pool fluctuates over the course of the month. While attendance early in the month sometimes dips as low as twenty-five, attendance at the end of the month sometimes reaches three times that figure.

The HOH recipient pool reflects the demographics of Daletown. The majority are African-Americans who hail from the neighborhood, with mothers in their twenties and thirties and males and females over the age of fifty accounting for especially large portions of the total recipient pool. Many of these people come and go on foot. A fair number of whites also attend Friday morning giveaways. Many are poor white country folk who hail from the rural areas

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44 Apropos this widespread sentiment, in fall 2008 the Plainfield city newspaper quoted the head of another Evangelical charity in the city as saying, “We believe the greatest need of everybody is to have God in their life.”
adjoining Daletown’s most remote borders. All told, African-Americans tend to outnumber white recipients by about a three to one ratio.

i. The Recipients’ Dilemma at the HOH

As people queueing up for charity in America—the land of individualistic ideologies and “Pick yourself up by the bootstraps” injunctions—recipients at the HOH cannot help but be impinged upon by the recipients’ dilemma. They must confront the fact that, in this culture, to accept the assistance they need is to risk inhabiting a scorned social identity. Truth be told, however, the feeling that one is in danger of being defined as an inferior other for needing assistance is much less intense at the HOH than at the SLM or other sites where conventionally successful people abound. In the latter kind of place, there are brand new cars in the parking lot and people with perfect teeth serving as volunteers. When charity passes directly from affluent to poor hands, the basic sentiment of the meritocratic ideology—that those who have are above and those who have not are below—is reinforced as a result. At the HOH grocery giveaway, however, the socioeconomic distance between givers and receivers is typically modest. In fact, as it often happens that the poor serve the poor at the HOH, the gap between givers and recipients there is frequently nonexistent.

Although in attenuated form, the recipients’ dilemma is nevertheless alive and well within the HOH. As such, recipients face one of three choices: accept charity and risk inhabiting a scorned social identity; engage in acts of overt contestation that jeopardize access to much-needed assistance; or find some third way to accept charity whilst also avoiding the social space occupied by the supposedly indolent, dissolute, and unworthy. As at the SLM, many HOH recipients opt for a third way that entails performing worthiness in the course of receiving assistance. By doing this, they automatically contest the notion that their poverty is due to
unworthiness, and they thus transcend the recipients’ dilemma that has been foisted upon them by the behaviorist ideology.

As at the SLM, many HOH recipients perform worthiness by working for their bread—that is, by laboring as volunteers or semi-volunteers on Friday mornings. Given that the scale of labor inputs needed to execute the HOH food program is relatively modest, however, the number of people capable of performing worthiness through work is limited. One alternative tack by which virtually all recipients prove their worth is by demonstrating their respect for both the HOH as an institution and the staff who lead it. When recipients speak on HOH premises, for example, they tend to convey deference and gratitude through both their body language and their speech. Aspiring to be as polite and proper as they are able, many recipients do their best to suspend the slang and profanity that is common in their customary speech. When addressing HOH staff, they use formal titles punctiliously, such as “Pastor Bell” or “Sister Florence” or “Brother Will.”

Recipients also observe HOH rules carefully and without complaint. They listen to sermons respectfully, follow worker instructions faithfully, and consistently arrive on time. The occasionally tardy person tends to enter sheepishly, and he or she frequently offers a word of apology to the first HOH worker whom they encounter. Also, when given the opportunity in the course of ordinary conversation, many recipients offer personal information by which they aim to convey the fact that their poverty and hardships are due to extenuating circumstances rather than bone-deep personal deficiencies. They describe, for example, how much their judgment has suffered due to a lack of proper role models throughout their lives, how past mistakes have saddled them with criminal convictions they will never be able to escape, how profoundly they have been damaged from the inside out by the effects of childhood sexual abuse, how
assiduously they have searched for work without success, and also, of course, how enormously
difficult it is to kick a hardcore drug addiction. In short, then, recipients of HOH charity
resolve the recipients’ dilemma in their favor by demonstrating that, poverty notwithstanding,
they do possess the traits that entitle one to worth according to the mores of liberal culture. They
work, in other words, to demonstrate that, contra the behaviorist ideology, they are people of
substance and worth.

ii. HOH Grocery Bags

The contrast between the modest turnout at HOH grocery giveaways and the extensive
poverty of Daletown presents something of a paradox. Although there are probably one
thousand or more poor households within a twenty minutes’ walk of the HOH, Friday morning
attendance rarely exceeds seventy-five and is often below that. While many factors no doubt
contribute to dampening turnout, the small size of HOH bags certainly plays a major part. The
size and composition of HOH bags follows a standard format week after week. Each bag—one
per household—comprises the following constitutive parts: one meat item, such as a packet of
chicken legs, a packet of sausage patties, or a pork chop; two or sometimes three canned good
items such as stewed tomatoes, green beans, or sliced pineapples; one starch item such as a
packet of rice or a bag of beans; and finally one snack item like a small bag of pretzels or a box
of microwavable popcorn. That is, in sum, one small packet of meat, two or three canned good
items, a starch, and a small snack per household per week. Taken altogether, a single HOH bag
contains food enough to serve a single full meal to, at most, three adults.

45 Each one of these examples I have heard expressed by at least three different people in the HOH recipient pool.
iii. HOH Workers on Friday Mornings

Unlike some of the other large HOH programs, Friday grocery giveaways are not funded by grant monies. As such, none of the HOH staffers who collect a paycheck from managing grant-supported programs works in the grocery giveaway. With some supervision from Pastor Bell, a clutch of voluntary and semi-voluntary workers operates the grocery program. A few highly-involved HOH volunteers take a leading role in managing the Friday operation. Other than these few key volunteers, the grocery workforce fluctuates considerably each week. Economically secure people—including members of the black middle class—scarcely ever participate as volunteers in the grocery program. Aside from Pastor Bell, then, workers in the grocery program—volunteers and semi-volunteers alike—are economically insecure men and women who receive and appreciate HOH food assistance as much as non-working recipients. All hail from the same poor to working-poor layers of the postindustrial class hierarchy.

While relatively simple so far as charitable operations go, HOH grocery giveaways still require that workers successfully complete a number of distinct tasks in a coordinated fashion. Hours before recipients began to arrive onsite, workers clean and ready the relevant spaces within the HOH. They dust tables and sweep floors. They move pews and tables and chairs around the building in order to accommodate the coming audience. Trusted volunteers are given the keys to closets and refrigerators by Pastor Bell and instructed to pull large boxes of unsorted food from the HOH stores. Other workers then sort the diverse items contained in these boxes into individualized bags that meet the standardized format described above. A few people staff the sign-in table and, if necessary, assist recipients in filling out the required paperwork. When the sermon is completed, workers take up the process of actually distributing individualized grocery bags to recipients as they pass through the line.
Alone among HOH programs, however, the grocery giveaway never wants for helping hands. On the contrary, the grocery program consistently attracts more voluntary and semi-voluntary workers, by a long margin, than any other program hosted by the organization. In fact, as measured by the number of adults onsite and prepared to do work, more labor power gathers at the HOH on Friday mornings than at any other time during the average week. While between ten and fifteen volunteers participate on most Friday mornings, the afterschool, tutoring, and summer programs struggle to draw even three or four unpaid workers on a consistent basis. These discrepancies are driven largely by two facts. One, the labor required of any one worker in the grocery program is simple, modest, and easy. And, two, involvement in the grocery giveaway program carries with it a fringe benefit absent from other HOH programs: the opportunity to partake in self-interested skimming.

iv. Grocery Skimming

Only on Friday mornings do non-staff members of the HOH workforce have ready access to even some of the organization’s food stores. At all other times, these stores are kept entirely under lock and key by HOH staff. On Friday mornings, then, a sort of *skimming window* obtains between the moment presorted boxes are wheeled out from storage and the moment the last bag is given away. The skimming consists of two clearly demarcated periods: the first being the period during which workers assemble individualized bags from boxes of unsorted items and the second being the period of the hand-to-hand distribution process itself.

On many points, skimming at the HOH differs from its counterpart at the SLM. For one thing, the skimming window at the SLM was open—at least for the core group—whenever the building was. For another, the HOH is housed in a much smaller building and food stores are only ever accessible to non-staff workers in the dining room, a public and heavily-trafficked
space. Members of the HOH staff are usually only a room or two away, and the possibility that they might burst into the dining room without forewarning is ever present. Workers at the HOH never enjoy the kind of prolonged, private access to organizational stores that is the norm for their SLM peers.

Another important difference lies in the fact that the people who skim groceries fluctuates a good deal each week. At the SLM, by contrast, a small and stable cadre of people dominated skimming activity. All were on good terms with one another, and a skimming consensus had been forged among them by longstanding practice. At the HOH, however, fresh and unfamiliar faces join the grocery workforce almost every week. The bonds of solidarity and consensus that facilitate skimming at the SLM are missing, at least in part, from the HOH grocery workforce at the start of each Friday morning.

While none of the above hurdles actually prevents skimming on Friday mornings, together they do shape the character that HOH grocery skimming necessarily takes. For starters, the first people to initiate skimming each Friday are the men and women most familiar with the grocery operation: regular Friday volunteers. As these regulars proceed with their skimming of groceries, they work quickly to establish a consensus around the right of all workers present to skim. They utter remarks—audible to other grocery workers but not loud enough to be heard beyond the dining room walls—about how, with this extra packet of sausage patties, they will have a real feast tonight or how their relatives will really enjoy a few extra meals of this or that canned good during the upcoming week. While offered in a seemingly offhand way, remarks such as these—coming as they do from the most experienced people in the room—serve to define the nature of the status quo. With skimming thus affirmed as a norm and a right, it remains as such until openly challenged, which is something that never happens.
In fact, seasoned volunteers are not content to merely skim while other volunteers and semi-volunteers look the other way. On the contrary, regulars work to ensure not just that everyone consents to skimming but that everyone actively skims. For example, newcomers who do not embrace skimming quickly enough are asked, “Did you get your bag yet?” or urged, “Take some of these for yourself. These are good.” On one illustrative occasion, a semi-volunteer named Holly declined to skim after a regular encouraged her repeatedly to do so. The regular, Andy, scolded her for her unfounded misgivings. “You’re a worker!” he eventually thundered, as though the connection between that status and the right to skim was self-evident.

On another occasion it was I who delayed too long after having been repeatedly encouraged to skim. After I had apparently exhausted her patience, a seasoned volunteer named Cynthia (the principal subject of chapter eight) kindly pointed to a hiding spot in the room and notified me that, “Mike, I put your bag right there.” By hewing to these two principles—establishing consensus and ensuring that all are complicit in skimming—skimmers produce a climate in which two favorable conditions hold. First, no one in the workforce is liable to inform on them. And second, no one can be singled out for punishment by HOH staff. If the guilt of everyone paralyzes the HOH staff, then, in a way, no one is effectively guilty of anything.

With this congenial climate being reestablished anew each Friday morning, the practical mechanics of skimming at the HOH runs as follows. Most commonly, during the course of assembling individualized bags from the contents of unsorted boxes, volunteers and semi-volunteers stuff extra items into the bags that they intend to take home themselves, especially extra meat items. They do the same for bags that they intend to give to family members and friends whom they expect to see pass through the line.
Unable to roam the HOH as staff members do, skimmers are usually compelled to find a spot for their engorged bags in the dining room area. Placing these bags beneath a table—preferably one covered by a low-hanging table cloth—is a favorite tactic. They also do the same for the engorged bags they have prepared for family members and friends. Some workers also make a habit of lugging two or more engorged bags with them as they leave for home at the end of the day. Sometimes as they go—depending on who is within earshot—they announce out loud but to no one in particular that they will be delivering this second or third bag to good person so-and-so, their indisposed neighbor or family member or friend.

HOH staff are aware that grocery skimming goes on right beneath their noses. Sometimes a staff person or two will even walk into the room when transparent skimming is in progress. When they do, however, staff members tend to feign obliviousness. Skimmers act out their part in this charade by shifting awkwardly into some authorized grocery work and pretending to have not been doing exactly that which they were just seen doing. No one involved either offers an apology or demands one. So long as no one crosses the ill-defined line between discreet skimming and wanton thieving, the former is treated as an inevitable part of life that it would be bad form to challenge. When resource contestation at the HOH migrates into higher-value domains than groceries, however, staff take a more hardline approach. As the story of Will’s involvement with the HOH illustrates, resource contestation can sometimes produce bitter conflict.
c. Will and the HOH

Will is an African-American man who was, in the 2008 – 2009 timeframe, about forty-five years old, unemployed, and living in a Memorial Court apartment near to the HOH. He is a physically big man, well over six feet tall, approaching three hundred pounds, and he has an oversized personality to match. Although unmarried, Will has fathered several children by multiple women. He is boisterous, jocular, and outgoing—always passionate, sometimes sentimental, and never, not ever, at a loss for words. For all of his prolix ways, however, Will’s autobiographical remarks have a tendency to highlight the flattering and obscure that which is less so.

Unlike most residents of Daletown, Will had been raised in affluence by two African-American professional parents. His mother was a deeply religious woman, and she reared Will in the ways of her favorite Biblical passage: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.”

46 Psalms 91:1-2, King James Version

In his mid-teens, Will was taken to a Pentecostal church rally by a girl he was wooing and, entirely without expecting it, he “caught” the Holy Ghost and ended the night speaking in tongues. For the entirety of the thirty years since, he has been a believing Pentecostal. By his own admission, however, Will’s behavior has more than a few times deviated from the righteous and holy path.

With money in his pocket and well-connected friends as a teen, Will encountered hard drugs at an early age. By his mid-twenties he was addicted to crack cocaine. In order to support his drug habit, Will became a professional thief. Four times that vocation has landed him in
prison. In the vernacular of the prison—which he is wont to use when describing his erstwhile life of crime—Will “has four numbers.” At some point during his twenty-year battle with addiction, Will trained for the ministry, and for a period he even enjoyed success as a Pentecostal preacher. But his “pride”, as he confesses, led to his ministerial downfall, and that precipitated his most recent return to the crack-theft-prison cycle.

Sometime after his release from prison in 2007, Will ended up residing at Memorial Court. While in his Memorial Court apartment, however, Will was surrounded by people and temptations and goings-on that threatened to pull him back into addiction. At that point, Will felt the Lord commanding him to volunteer at the HOH. His obligations as a volunteer and the accountability that follows from relationships with others would, he sensed, help to keep him clean:

“I knew it was imperative that I plug in there, because if I didn’t, then I was going to plug into that lifestyle that’s of the heel. So they have watched me for six months. Leave that apartment, I don’t go in no other apartments. Leave that apartment, and go straight to that church…Men’s mind must be renewed, first of all, in a structured environment and they must be accountable to someone. Otherwise, guess what: We’re gonna go back to doin’ what we do. Man, thank God for deliverance! There was nothing else for me to find but deliverance. There was no other place for me to go except hell. I’m talking ‘bout bustin’ it wide open. There was no other place for me to go, other than to the bottom.”

Between winter 2008 and summer 2009, then, Will consistently devoted twenty-five hours or more per week to working as a HOH volunteer. He worked in multiple programs and was widely regarded as especially patient and helpful with children. After Will had earned enough of Pastor Bell’s trust, she began to frequently charge him with the task of delivering the Friday morning sermon. As did most, Will frequently spoke on the power of faith in Christ by sharing his own testimony. “You know, it’s amazing,” Will implored the people one Friday morning, “He will clear your past as long as you stay in him. Come on now! It’s like I have a raging forest fire behind my life. My past is like a towering inferno, with flames shootin’ out.
It’s almost like, I have no choice but to sell out: For Christ I live, for Christ I die, you feel me? As long as you walk in Christ, the victory is yours—in your marriage, in your family. Victory through the blood of Jesus! That’s the measure of God and his Grace. That’s the measure of God and his forgiveness. God and his mercy! Come on now! Nobody is hopeless if they’re touched by the master. Nobody is hopeless. Whom the Son sets free is free indeed.”

Throughout this period, Will was busy on many fronts other than his volunteering gig at the HOH. For one thing—although unemployed and several times a felon—he was nevertheless diligently looking for work. And in addition to his HOH commitments, Will also volunteered with other organizations. He had even managed to set himself up as the informal spiritual mentor for the football team of the city’s flagship high school. These endeavors were motivated in part by Will’s self-conscious desire to update his résumé with a roster of productive activities after a long period of incarceration and unemployment. At one point, he even attempted to organize a job referral service under HOH auspices that would link employers with unemployed men in Daletown. In no time at all, young men from Daletown were rapping on Will’s apartment door to inform him of their availability, but he had to abandon the initiative after Pastor Bell forbade him from presenting himself as a formal ambassador of the HOH.

Most important of all, though, Will was working tirelessly to resurrect his ministerial career. Speaking on Friday mornings was a part of this effort, as were the guest preaching slots he frequently filled at Christ the King and other Pentecostal churches around town. Beyond just preaching, however, Will’s larger vision involved establishing a faith-based transitional house that would serve as a temporary residence for ex-convicts between their release from prison and their ultimate return to unsupervised society at large. As Will was very well-aware—even to the point of being able to cite the pertinent statistics and trends from memory—significant sums of
government grant money were available to support the kind of transitional housing program that he envisioned.

With vision, commitment, and a powerful testimony as a reformed convict behind him, Will felt like a shoe-in for steady streams of grant money. As full-time director, he would solve his unemployment problem and free up time to explore other ambitions as well. Will networked with people from all over the area who were well-placed in the charitable sphere and sought their advice—ministers, grant writers, program operators, and also people on the funding side of the equation. By late spring 2009, Will was polishing up his first transitional house funding application. So confident was he in the imminent success of his as-yet-to-be organized transitional house and the prominent ministry to follow that Will had already decided upon a title for his as-yet-to-be ghostwritten autobiography, a story of waywardness, redemption, and triumph through the blood of Christ: *I Am That Man*. In a more somber moment, though, Will also confessed that, following his not-too-distant ministerial success, he would finally see himself as a father in whom his own estranged children could take pride. And he planned to return to their lives without delay once he reached that point.

Despite his charisma and gregariousness—or perhaps because of these traits—Will was a polarizing figure at the HOH. While everyone acknowledged his intelligence, the sincerity of his faith, and his commitment to the children of Daletown, some people—including some influential people—still had misgivings about him. While some people admired his eloquent speech, others thought that he used his verbal gifts to browbeat those who disagreed with him. And in Will’s eagerness to consistently play an important role in HOH programs, some saw altruism and commitment, but others decried vanity and ambition. Some thought that his enthusiasm all too often cascaded into reckless impulsivity, as when he tried to organize a job referral service.
without considering the possible legal and pecuniary implications for the HOH. And finally, some people were disquieted by his aggressive faith-based networking. They regarded these efforts as an upstart’s attempt to curry favor in a competitive funding environment where informal alliances and relationships are crucially important. For some months, the tension between Will and a few key people in and around the HOH staff began to quietly mount.

For all of the subterranean tensions, however, Will had been volunteering intensively at the HOH for more than half a year by the start of summer 2009. He had made himself valuable in several HOH programs and had won the friendship and loyalty of many other volunteers. Some of the more involved parents—impressed by his consistently sincere and constructive engagement with their children—sung his praises as well. A few weeks into June, then, the summer program started and Will was on board as a volunteer. Several paycheck-collecting members of the HOH staff worked the program as well. Before long, Will approached Pastor Bell and explained that—as a valuable volunteer who contributed at least as much to the program as paid staff—he felt that he was entitled to receive pay as well. He felt, in other words, that the value of his labor entitled him to compensation, irrespective of his original standing as a volunteer.

For her part, however, Pastor Bell was not persuaded, and she held to the status quo ante. For several weeks, the two of them were locked in a stalemate—neither Will relinquishing his claim nor Pastor Bell acceding to it. Their relationship deteriorated a little more with each passing day. In early August, however, the stalemate was broken when Will was required to appear in Civil Court on a warrant for the nonpayment of child support. Heading into the courtroom, Will thought that his odds for going to sleep that night as a free man were slim to none. Surprisingly, however, the judge showed clemency and released him on his own
recognizance. The judge was motivated to rule as he did because he was impressed by both Will’s record of recent volunteer activity and the testimony of a character witness who came forward on his behalf.

After the proceedings had ended, a county caseworker accosted Will in the hallway. According to his retelling of the exchange, she told him that, if he wished to remain a free man, then, “The main thing is pay them something. Even if it’s twenty-five dollars every two weeks, pay them something. Because they look and see you don’t have a job, but they see you doing something. Just pay something. If you just pay something, it will alleviate all this.” Elated by his victory in court but still sans an income, Will explained his predicament and beseeched the caseworker for some help. As he remembers it, Will said to the woman, “Well, listen, let’s kinda use some little reverse psychology here. Use some of this leverage like you used on me and some of this power, and call up Gloria Bell and find out about my money. You call Pastor Gloria and explain what happened to me. And explain to her that ‘Hey, this man is anticipating being paid and he needs his money. No question.’” Shortly thereafter, Pastor Bell cut a check in Will’s name, but it destroyed their relationship for good, and Will soon removed himself from the HOH workforce altogether.

d. The Van Delivery Service

About the time that Will or some other speaker begins to share his or her testimony on Friday mornings, the second prong of the HOH grocery ministry—the home delivery service—begins to branch off from the onsite operation. The HOH maintains a list of about twenty-five men and women who are entitled to receive their grocery bags via home delivery. All are people for whom an in-person visit to the HOH represents a genuine hardship—usually because their
mobility has been impaired by age, disability, or some other infirmity. Most live in Daletown or an adjacent neighborhood, more often than not in public or Section 8 housing. All have earned their spot on the list because they or someone close to them knows HOH staff. Many of the people on the home delivery list are well-respected elders in Plainfield’s African-American community. Owing to the importance of social ties in securing a place on the delivery list, very few of such recipients are white.

The home delivery effort is headed by Clay Jones, a volunteer who is also Pastor Bell’s older brother. Clay is always assisted by at least one other volunteer, usually another man. When the Friday morning sermon begins, Clay and his assistant take that as their cue to start loading the HOH van with grocery bags, a job that takes only a few minutes. After loading the van with enough bags to deliver one to each house on the list, Clay and his assistant quickly hit the road. Clay drives and follows a route he planned some time ago for maximum fuel and time efficiency. As Clay pauses the van in front of one scheduled destination after another, the assistant leaps from the van with a grocery bag in tow, raps a notice of delivery on the front door, and then deposits the bag according to the resident’s prearranged preferences.

Some of the home delivery recipients complain about the modest size of HOH grocery bags. With their mobility limiting them seven days a week, the preference that these people have for bags that contain more than a household meal or two is understandable. In some cases, the complaints are more valid than even the recipients themselves know, for it occasionally happens that workers at the HOH pilfer valuable comestibles—particularly meat—from the bags destined for home delivery. By the time this is usually discovered, however, the bag is only feet from a recipient’s doorstep, and the problem cannot be remedied, at least not right away. There have
been times, though, when Clay has ensured that a shortchanged person receives a second bag the following week as recompense.

Some people, however, are even worse off than those who have been shortchanged by a light bag. According to Pastor Bell, HOH resources are insufficient to serve all who request grocery home delivery, and she frequently has to deny additional people who request to be placed on the delivery list. Almost all are deserving according to HOH mobility criteria, but the organization simply lacks the resources needed to assist them. For the record, it also sometimes happens that—especially as attendance at HOH giveaways spikes at the end of the month—the onsite operation runs out of grocery bags before all of the recipients have been served. When that occurs, some of the people in line are turned away empty-handed.

**e. The Fact of HOH Dearth**

The above account of shortages in the grocery delivery program refocuses attention on one of the dominant themes in the past chapter and a half: the fact of HOH dearth. Every single HOH program is dogged by critical shortages, and the efficacy of each one is impaired as a result. A dearth of volunteers impairs the HOH’s ability to adequately staff the tutoring, mentoring, and summer programs. Meager financial support—as most evident in the case of the fundraising banquet described in the previous chapter—prevents the HOH from purchasing much-needed material resources and infrastructural improvements. For its part, the giveaways of the grocery ministry are modest, paling in comparison to the output of the SLM, for example. In fact, while the HOH does run the Friday grocery ministry, it has been unable to mount a hot meal ministry despite long aspiring to do so. Although the HOH has sought assistance from larger and
wealthier organizations in the past, none have been willing to either help purchase costly kitchen appliances or help sustain the ample resource base needed to run a hot meal ministry.

The evidence of the previous four and a half chapters makes plain the enormous gulf that exists between the SLM and the HOH resource bases. Another way of describing this is to say that the great groundswell of charitable support which descends upon Plainfield charities day after day deluges the SLM while largely bypassing the HOH. It is thus fair and accurate to say that the flows constitutive of this groundswell move unevenly, that is, concentrate more densely in some quarters of the city than others. By itself, however, the contrast between the SLM and the HOH is too narrow to be of value in drawing conclusions about the fundamental nature of faith-based activity, whether in Plainfield or elsewhere. If it were true, for example, that Daletown contained numerous well-supported charities omitted so far from this narrative, then HOH dearth would be a relatively unenlightening phenomenon.

What is needed, then, are data that will illuminate whether the disparity between the HOH and the SLM is anomalous or representative of a more general pattern. The remainder of this chapter details the overall pattern of nutritional subsector activity in Plainfield, an important and revealing subset of all faith-based charity in the city. The evidence marshaled here demonstrates that, in fact, the disparity between the HOH and the SLM is part of a city-wide pattern. As a whole, the nutritional subsector in Plainfield has developed in a geographically uneven way, a way that actually produces a form of faith-based white privilege in the city.

f. An Uneven Geographical Development

In the month of August 2009, thirty separate religious organizations, all of them Christian, hosted a combined total of one hundred and two hot meals and forty-six grocery
giveaways for the general public in Plainfield. These organizations and the food efforts they supported constituted the nutritional subsector of the faith-based sphere in Plainfield that month. Protestant charities accounted for the overwhelming majority of nutritional subsector activity: ninety-seven of the hot meals and forty-two of the grocery giveaways. Roman Catholic charities accounted for the remaining five and fourteen respectively. Four Plainfield neighborhoods encompass the great majority of all nutritional subsector activity in the city: Center City, Topside, the Daletown of the HOH, and the Swing of the SLM. All four contain intense concentrations of poverty both within and along their borders, although two are predominantly African-American and two predominantly white. Nonwhites, mostly African-Americans, comprise about sixty-five percent of all residents in the Daletown and Topside neighborhoods. The Swing and Center City, by contrast, are approximately eighty percent and sixty-five percent white respectively.

These nutritional subsector data confirm that, in short, some neighborhoods are far more generously supported by nutritional subsector resources than others. Most glaringly, Center City organizations hosted fifty-eight hot meals and eleven grocery giveaways between them in August 2009. Taken together, these Center City figures represent more distinct nutritional subsector events than were hosted by all other charities in the city combined that month. While the totals

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47 The process of collecting data on the composition of the nutritional subsector consisted of three distinct research initiatives. First, data regarding the location and frequency of hot meal and grocery giveaway events open to the general public were collected from Plainfield’s daily newspaper every day between 9/2008 and 9/2009. The weekly Community Announcements feature was the most important source of nutritional subsector data. August 2009 was a typical month, well-suited to serve as a monthly nutritional subsector sample. Data on the backgrounds of nutritional subsector charities—including the faith traditions to which they belonged and the racial composition of their leaderships—were culled from organizational titles, websites, newspaper articles, personal visits, and knowledgeable informants. All data presented here have had their validity checked against the totality of data collected—through ethnography, interviews, and other approaches—during the course of research. In sum, then, there were no hot meals or grocery giveaways hosted for the general public that were omitted from these data. All data regarding the mean household income and racial composition of Plainfield neighborhoods come from factfinder.census.gov, an official webpage of the United States Census Bureau.
from the Swing and the Topside were comparable, each of these neighborhoods hosted three times the number of nutritional subsector events held in Daletown. Despite the fact that Daletown is the city neighborhood where poverty is most intensely concentrated, neighborhood organizations there hosted only seven grocery giveaways and zero hot meals between them in August 2009. These data show, in other words, that the nutritional subsector in Plainfield has developed in a geographically uneven fashion. It is an uneven geographical development, moreover, that cannot be explained merely by the uneven distribution of need in the city. Other factors are at play. Apropos the contrast between the SLM and the HOH, the disparity between these two organizations—rather than being an isolated phenomenon—is part of a more general pattern.

i. Synchronic Representation and Diachronic Flows

It is critical to keep in mind, however, that the above figures provide a static depiction of a single month’s worth of nutritional subsector activity. The eighty-six meals and thirty-five grocery giveaways tallied there were, in actuality, produced and reproduced through regular flows of goods and labor that were carried to Plainfield charities by individuals and other organizations. It is, in other words, the charitable groundswell that makes and remakes the nutritional subsector. The geographically uneven subsector of August 2009 was therefore a function of a geographically uneven groundswell. It is ultimately to the unevenness of flows—to

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48 When I described these conditions to one well-informed African-American professional, she replied knowingly that “Daletown has been left for dead.”

49 For the record, there was no nutritional subsector activity in August 2009 that would contradict the thesis that an uneven geographical development obtained in Plainfield that dramatically favored some neighborhoods over others. If, for example, a large Center City charity bordered Daletown or one charity hosted a mobile delivery service into other neighborhoods, then that would be problematic. It would indicate that the summary above provided an account of the nutritional subsector that exaggerated unevenness, but none of this is so.
the fact that charitable flows deluge some neighborhoods and trickle into others—that one must look to explain the cumulative unevenness as statically represented in those August 2009 figures. Almost by definition, charitable flows tend to move from affluent to poor segments of the community, from the haves to the have-nots. The key to explaining the uneven geographical development of the nutritional subsector therefore lies in understanding why affluent sources disproportionately support the charities of some neighborhoods rather than others.

ii. A Theory of Donor Action

In order to understand the logic of affluent giving in Plainfield, one must begin from the premise that, in all situations where a free market in charity reigns, decisions lie with givers. Donors—whether of labor or goods—are the ones who decide whether and where to give. The uneven geographical development of the nutritional subsector is produced by uneven flow patterns that are constituted through the actions of myriad individuals and organizations that choose freely amidst a field of competing options. The best-supported organizations—those that are the elites of the competing field—are those to which significant sectors of the affluent giving public repeatedly turn of their own volition.

To be more specific, givers tend to channel the flows that they control to charities that meet two criteria. The first—that the giver must know of an organization’s existence—is an obvious requirement. In metropolitan areas, however, most people have only a fractional knowledge of their local charitable sphere. Hence, despite its straightforward nature, the importance of this first criterion should not be underestimated. Second, givers will support only those organizations that they regard with at least a modicum of esteem. This does not mean that donors will only support charities that they revere, but it does mean that donors will decline to
support charities that they either hold in low regard or know in name only. Both the evidence from Plainfield and a commonsense understanding of charitable intentions confirm the power of these two criteria over the direction of charitable flows. The paramount fact to recognize, however, is that both of these criteria—knowledge of an organization and a favorable disposition toward it—are overwhelmingly acquired by people through influences in their native milieu. Social connections and social intercourse play the predominant role in shaping a potential donor’s understanding of the local charitable sphere. What happens in actuality, then, is that people tend to give—whether as individuals or as decision makers within organizations—to charities with which they have become familiar through contacts in their native social milieu.

iii. The Power of Social Capital to Shape the Direction of Charitable Giving

When these observations about donor tendencies are inverted—that is, viewed from the perspective of the receiving organization—they yield the following principle: Well-supported charities are those that are both widely-known and highly-regarded by significant segments of the giving public, particularly the affluent giving public. The opposite also holds. Poorly supported organizations are those that are poorly known, poorly regarded, or both. In sum, then, there is a strong positive correlation between the degree to which an organization is supported by the overall charitable groundswell and the degree to which that organization is known and respected among the leading sources of charitable flows. Put another way, this is an argument that the social capital possessed by a faith-based charity is decisive in determining the level of support that an organization does or does not receive from the charitable groundswell in its home area.
The concept of the social capital possessed by a faith-based charity requires some clarification. The present discussion aims to develop a conceptual framework—rooted in the social capital literature—that explains the empirical character of nutritional subsector uneven development in Plainfield. Although many unique definitions of social capital have been advanced in recent decades (Portes 1998:3-7), Pierre Bourdieu’s classic is well-suited for the present purposes. According to Bourdieu, social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (1985:248). This definition of Bourdieu’s embraces what Portes—in his review of the literature—characterizes as a “consensus…that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (1998:6). Bourdieu’s definition also subsumes both bonding and bridging social capital within it, the former of these referring to fecund connections within a group and the latter to fecund connections across group lines (Bartkowski and Regis 2003:19).

Applying the social capital concept to FBOs requires recognizing first that, in these organizations, a relatively small number of people serve as leading figures or FBO elites—that is, as people whose contributions make a significant impact on the course of organizational operations. A significant impact is one that must be accounted for in order to provide an adequate general description of an FBO and its operations. Administrators or managers among the official charity staff are the most easily identifiable leading figures in most organizations. In many cases, though, people only connected by informal ties, such as prominent volunteers and friends of the organization, make contributions that count as significant and thus qualify as
leading figures. If a person is involved with a charity but his or her contributions fail to qualify as significant, then that person is not a leading figure in the organization.

Every person, whether involved with a charity or not, possesses a certain amount of social capital of his or her own. Every person is, in other words, embedded in a “durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” that yields connections to an aggregate of “actual or potential resources” (Bourdieu 1985:248). As this applies to the present discussion, each FBO elite possesses his or her own quantity of social capital. In day to day terms, this means that FBO elites, through their known associations with the organization, regularly carry the name and reputation of a given FBO to elements of the durable networks to which they belong. Through their involvement with FBOs, then, these leaders enlist their personal social capital into the service of the charity. To the extent that they choose, their social capital works to support organizational operations. The life of the charity is, in other words, continuously imbued with the personal social capital of its leading figures. The overall social capital that results from uniting the personal social capital of all leading figures into the service of a single organization—whether from an additive or synergistic process—constitutes the total faith-based social capital possessed by, or embedded within, that organization.50

As with so many other socioeconomic characteristics, social capital is unevenly distributed across the population (Lin 2000; Pichler and Wallace 2009). It follows, therefore,

50 In some cases—especially as it concerns prominent or acclaimed organizations—one might argue from a methodologically holist perspective that an organization has social capital of its own, above and beyond whatever is imparted by leaders. While this might be true to some extent, flawed and disreputable leadership can quickly squander the social capital accumulated by an organization per se through a long career of success and esteem. In other words, then, leaderships must, through their efforts, continually reproduce the social capital of an organization. It is according to the behavior of charitable leaderships that organizational social capital rises or falls.
that faith-based social capital varies across FBOs as well. On account of variations of total social capital among leadership cadres, some FBOs possess considerably more faith-based social capital than others. Their connections into the community are more extensive, and the fecundity of their connections—as measured by their capacity to produce tangible support—is much greater. Most important of all is the degree to which a charity has fecund connections among affluent givers, whether individual or organizational. Inequality between faith-based organizations is an outcome of the unequal distribution of faith-based social capital. Uneven development at the organizational scale is a product of the uneven development of faith-based social capital across charitable organizations. Those charities that possess considerable faith-based social capital enjoy generous support from the local groundswell, while those wanting for faith-based social capital suffer accordingly.

People in the Plainfield faith-based community know these truths well, and this awareness is evident throughout their actions. It explains why Pastor Edley, for example, speaks at venues like the Retired Executives of Charles County and why, also, he makes a habit of personally inviting well-heeled men and women from within community to SLM fundraisers. Those short on social capital know the same truths all-too-well. When, for example, HOH staff were attempting to raise funds for their annual banquet, one woman sought to enlist my help in persuading Pastor Edley to spread word about the event. She didn’t know the Pastor personally, she admitted, but she knew that I did. And she also knew that, according to his reputation, he was well-connected to a lot of “people with money.” An awareness of the need for faith-based social capital also explains why Will worked so diligently to forge contacts among influential people while trying to get his transitional house ministry established. The people closest to this sphere of life know that the quantity of faith-based social capital possessed by a charity
determines, more than any other factor, the level of support that organization receives from the local groundswell. The disparity of faith-based social capital between the SLM and the HOH accounts for the divergent fortunes of these two charities.  

iv. Faith-Based Social Capital at the Scale of the Neighborhood

A parallel logic applies when these concepts are extrapolated from the organizational to the neighborhood scale. Some neighborhoods abound in faith-based resources and some do not. The explanation that follows from what has already been established above is this: Neighborhoods rich in faith-based resources are those that are rich in faith-based social capital, whether that social capital is concentrated in one organization or spread out across many. Poorly supported neighborhoods are those that lack either a single charity possessing significant social capital in its own right or a collection of charities that, when taken together, instantiate a significant overall sum of social capital in the neighborhood. Note, however, that faith-based social capital is a product of the personal social capital of leading figures in a charity. The abundance or dearth of social capital among neighborhood residents is not the pivotal factor in determining the faith-based social capital in that neighborhood. Resident social capital matters only to the extent that it contributes to the faith-based social capital of an organization through leading figures. In sum, then, faith-based resources develop unevenly across a city—with some neighborhoods being better served than others—because concentrations of faith-based social capital are distributed in geographically uneven ways. Neighborhoods in which high

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51 For an ethnographic account describing the life or death importance of social capital to FBOs see Adkins and Kemper (2006).
concentrations of faith-based social capital obtain draw substantial portions of the charitable groundswell while the reverse is also true.

The foregoing theoretical schema—which holds that faith-based resource unevenness follows from the uneven geographical development of faith-based social capital—provides a framework for explaining the nutritional subsector inequities of Plainfield that were visible in August 2009. The pivotal facts in Plainfield are two: Not only do African-American charities tend to possess much lower quantities of faith-based social capital than their white counterparts, but Plainfield charities also tend to locate in neighborhoods that match the racial composition of their leaderships—African-American charities in African-American neighborhoods and white charities in white neighborhoods.

Although there are nuances that will be elaborated below, the overall pattern thus produced is one of largely white neighborhoods enjoying the benefits of well-supported white organizations and largely black neighborhoods suffering from relative dearth. The two predominantly white neighborhoods in the August 2009 data—Center City and the Swing—are the best supported in the city, while the most heavily non-white, Daletown, is the least well-supported. To repeat, however, the ultimate cause of this unequal pattern is the uneven geographical development of faith-based social capital, a fact that derives from the makeup of charitable leaderships, not neighborhood residents. One way or the other, however, the uneven geographical development of the nutritional subsector yields a form of white privilege that disproportionately favors impoverished whites over impoverished African-Americans. The remaining pages of this chapter adduce empirical evidence to support this explanation.
v. Inequality, Segregation, and African-American Social Capital

The relevant literature has consistently demonstrated that, on average, African-Americans possess considerably less social capital than their white peers (Fernandez-Kelly 1995; Lin 2000:788; Parks-Yancy 2006; Putnam 2000:321; Sullivan 1989; Wilson 1987). One particularly apt study by Perry demonstrated that fundraising deficits among African-American FBO workers vis-à-vis their white counterparts “are best understood as deficits in the social capital of these individual workers” (2013:159). The factors that have contributed to the making of racially inflected social capital inequalities are all but beyond counting (Goldfield 1997; Lui et al. 2006; Oliver and Shapiro 2006). The Plainfield incarnations of many were surveyed in chapter two: discrimination in employment and housing, the destruction of accumulated wealth through Urban Renewal, the disproportionate effects of postindustrial disinvestment, and more. Over the same period, however, equally powerful political economic trends have facilitated the accumulation of wealth among whites (Brodkin 1998; Katznelson 2006; Lui et al. 2006). As of 2010, the median net worth of black households was only five percent of whites, and the black poverty rate approached three times that of whites (Mishel 2012:385,420).

The same patterns of American life that have contributed to the making of racial inequality have done likewise for racial segregation. For all of the genuine changes in American race relations in the past several decades, thoroughgoing racial segregation remains the norm in many aspects of American life. The barriers that have impeded black movement into the middle class and beyond have contributed to segregation among professionals. Housing discrimination, past and present, contributes to segregation in domestic life. Public education, voluntary
organizations, racial angst, fear, distrust, animus, and much more also reproduce longstanding patterns of segregation (Bobo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2013).

In the decades since the Civil Rights victories of the 1960s, it has become apparent that racial inequities are reproduced by more than the overt and formalized racism of yore. As a result, many scholars have investigated the techniques, tactics, and patterns that reproduce racial inequities whilst also remaining consistent with formal equality of opportunity. Chapter three provided one such analysis by describing the way in which a wider climate of microaggressions deters African-Americans from seeking assistance at charitable organizations identified with whiteness, regardless of the particular merits or demerits of that organization. This aversion—regardless of how prudent or understandable—contributes to the reproduction of racial segregation.

Far more significant in contributing to the reproduction of racial segregation in Plainfield, however, is the fact of white racialized anxiety. By this is meant the trepidation among whites—rooted more often than not in the range of feelings between anxiety and fear than the range between hostility and hate—to enter into and inhabit spaces identified with blackness: black homes, black charities, black churches, black neighborhoods, and so on. White racial anxiety about black spaces is common throughout the Plainfield area. Whether it is more intense among affluent than poor whites, there is not evidence to determine, although the former do tend to live and work and socialize in much more racially homogeneous spaces than the latter.

What is evident, however, is that racialized anxiety is clearly common among the affluent—that is, among the people who form the core of the local charitable groundswell. When, for example, the young assistant pastor of a white suburban Evangelical megachurch attempted to organize a week-long “urban mission” trip into one of Plainfield’s black
neighborhoods, many parents barred their children—especially their girls—from participating. While this pastor frequently took groups of church youths to the SLM without objections, he admits that, most of the time, the affluent members of his church think predominantly of “drugs, danger, and violence” when they think of Plainfield. There was also the observation of a white middle-class professional who, on the basis of his religious convictions, chooses to live with his young family in the largely poor and African-American Topside neighborhood. He explains that many white friends and family members experience intense anxiety when visiting his home, and still, years after he first settled in Topside, they remain dumbfounded that he and his wife are choosing to raise their children there despite having the option of doing otherwise.

vi. A Concise Explanation

What all of these intersecting trends yield, then, is the reproduction of intensive, deeply-entrenched racial segregation in Plainfield, to say nothing of America more generally. As a consequence, social contacts and connections tend to predominantly hold within rather than across racial lines. In the case of African-Americans, the networks within which they are embedded are dominated by other African-Americans. Meanwhile, the forces of discrimination and segregation have impeded the accumulation of per capita wealth in the African-American community, and the relatively smaller size of the African-American community vis-à-vis whites has limited absolute wealth accumulation as well.

What exists then is a situation in which African-American FBO leaderships are enmeshed most deeply in the networks that have the least capacity to give. White leaderships, by contrast, tend to have extensive connections among the segments of the community that show the most absolute generosity. It is for these reasons, then, that white charities such as the SLM possess so
much more in the way of social capital vis-à-vis African-American charities like the HOH. In the language of Bourdieu’s social capital theory, “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources” to which white FBO elites are linked is far, far greater on average than their African-American counterparts. As the flows constitutive of the charitable groundswell in Plainfield are shaped by the distribution of faith-based social capital, white organizations draw a much larger share of that groundswell than African-American ones. In August 2009, for example, African-American faith-based organizations hosted scarcely one-fifth the number of meal and grocery giveaways of their white counterparts, twenty-six to one hundred and twenty-two.

As has already been stressed, however, the pattern of uneven geographical development as seen in August 2009 was not produced by the uneven development of faith-based social capital alone. It was produced by the merger of two trends: one, the relatively greater social capital among white charities vis-à-vis African-American charities; and, two, the tendency of charities to settle in neighborhoods where the racial composition of the resident population matched the racial composition of the leadership population. Owing to this latter geographical factor, faith-based social capital is unevenly instantiated across the distinct poor neighborhoods of the city. The highest concentrations of faith-based social capital gather in Center City, where there are ten white charities and only one African-American one. The least gather in Daletown, where there are two African-American FBOs and zero white ones. While the Swing and Topside resemble one another on paper—twenty-three and twenty-two nutritional subsector events respectively—the unrivaled scale of SLM giveaways ensures that the quantity of free food available in the Swing dwarfs that available in the Topside. For the record, however, the situation in the Topside nevertheless supports the contention that white faith-based social capital is critical in drawing significant charitable flows. In that neighborhood there is one white FBO
and five African-American ones, although the former hosted a full fourteen of the Topside’s twenty-two nutritional subsector events in August 2009.

g. Some Brief Remarks on FBO Placement

A comprehensive study of why charities in Plainfield tend to settle in neighborhoods where the racial composition of residents tends to match the FBO leadership is beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth making a few remarks on this subject in order to convey the complexity of the issue. In all likelihood, racial anxiety among white charitable leaderships probably plays a part, if only unconsciously, but this is hardly the whole of the story. For one thing, most food charities in Plainfield are churches, and churches have a tendency to settle near to their parishioners. As worship is highly segregated, churches dominated by a certain ethnic or racial group tend to settle in neighborhoods where that group is dominant or at least prominent. The outcome for charitable work in Plainfield is that white neighborhoods draw white churches and the white charities that they support, while African-American neighborhoods draw African-American churches and the African-American charities that they support. To a considerable extent—in Plainfield at least—charitable segregation supervenes upon residential segregation.

Many other factors are in play as well. Higher real estate prices, for example, tend to discourage African-American charities—which are typically poorer than their white counterparts—from settling outside of African-American neighborhoods. The sedimentation of historical development patterns also plays a critical role. With Urban Renewal having devastated the original Daletown, there is a paucity of structures that would be well-suited to hosting churches and charities in the contemporary Daletown, dominated as it is by public and Section 8 housing. By comparison, Center City remains home to many mainline Protestant churches that
originally located in that area in the first half of the nineteenth century. Though wanting for members, these flagship churches—the first of their denominations in the area—continue to support food charities thanks to the generous support they regularly receive from their coreligionists in the suburbs. Many churches also have a special interest in assisting the homeless. This has prompted several to set up food charities in the Center City area, which is where the homeless typically congregate.52

h. Conclusion

In sum, then, the uneven geographical distribution of faith-based social capital ensures that the resources of the local charitable groundswell flow in geographically uneven ways, and the unevenness of these flows ensures that some neighborhoods are far better supported by the nutritional subsector than others. In fact, the best-off of the poor neighborhoods, Center City and the Swing, are actually the neighborhoods best-served by the nutritional subsector, while the most intensely poor neighborhoods, Daletown and Topside, are the least well-served. It also happens that the former two are predominantly white and the latter two are predominantly African-American.

What exists, then, is a situation in which a disproportionately large share of the local charitable groundswell settles into the neighborhoods that contain slightly better-off elements of the city’s poor population. The most destitute live in the neighborhoods, particularly Daletown, that are largely bypassed by the local charitable groundswell. Given these dynamics, the redistributive flows of the nutritional subsector, absolute generosity notwithstanding, actually

52 Research by Milligan and Fyfe (2004) has noted a tendency of voluntary sector organizations to cluster in city centers as a strategy for optimally reaching communities that are dispersed across the city.
exacerbate inequality between the different strata within Plainfield’s poor community, between, to a considerable extent, the white and the African-American poor. As the white poor of largely white neighborhoods are disproportionately favored by the flows that constitute the nutritional subsector, these flows therefore produce and reproduce a form of white privilege within the local faith-based sphere. As will be apparent in the following chapter, this situation limits the degree to which some poor people can utilize faith-based resources in their push for a better life.
VIII. Faith-Based Dearth: The Lived Experience

a. Introduction

Chapters six and seven described many aspects of social life Daletown, including the fact that faith-based organizations in the neighborhood are systematically underserved by the wider charitable community. Despite the hard work and dedication of existing HOH staff and volunteers, organizational operations manifest this neglect on point after point after point: too few financial donations, too few volunteers, too few resources, too few groceries, and no ability to provide any hot meals at all. This patterning contrasts sharply with the situation at the SLM, where a superabundance of support enables a robust program of meals and grocery giveaways. Also on the basis of SLM superabundance, Lester and many other volunteers facilitate their own household reproduction by skimming valuable resources on a regular basis. It stands to reason, then, that volunteers at the HOH, being surrounded by austerity rather than plenty, are disadvantaged vis-à-vis their SLM counterparts in their efforts to marshal faith-based resources toward the end of household reproduction. By providing a narrative life history of an HOH volunteer named Cynthia, the present chapter demonstrates how faith-based dearth—itself a consequence of community neglect—limits the potential of such organizations to serve as platforms for the personal transformation of the poor. The many implications of this observation will be spelled out in the concluding chapter.

In the spring of 2009, Cynthia was a thirty-two year-old African-American mother living in Memorial Court with her two daughters, one of them a thirteen year-old named Fiona and the other a four year-old named Destiny. At that time, the girls had been participating in HOH programs for more than a year. Members of the HOH workforce cherished Cynthia’s girls as some of the brightest, kindest, and best-behaved in the entire neighborhood. The warm way in
which the girls were being treated motivated Cynthia to begin volunteering intermittently at the HOH during the spring of 2009. Over the course of that summer, her level of involvement steadily grew. Cynthia was patient but firm with the children, and she was quick to help with anything when asked. When she served as a chaperone on an HOH excursion—to a public pool or amusement park, for example—Cynthia was especially watchful over the children, always, it seemed, scrutinizing passersby and policing the perimeter of the group. When she interacts with adults, Cynthia looks a person in the eye. And when she smiles—which is not often enough—she radiates sincerity. Even the gleaming gold crown over her left incisor is genuine.

Despite her growing involvement with the HOH over the course of spring and summer 2009, however, Cynthia continued to straddle two worlds. There was, on the one hand, the world of faith and volunteering and the HOH. And on the other hand there was the world of addiction to crack cocaine, involvement in crime, and residency in Memorial Court. Each of these worlds threw stressors and obstacles into Cynthia’s path. In order to negotiate this predicament of hers, Cynthia had to summon enormous fortitude and creativity on a daily basis. She is, above all else, a survivor. Will, who is something like a surrogate older brother to Cynthia, recognizes her mettle as well, “Cynthia don’t take no stuff, bro. She truly is not one to take no mess off nobody.”

b. Cynthia’s Early Life

Cynthia is not a native Plainfielder, having only moved to the city for the first time in summer 2007. This move to Plainfield was only the latest in a long series of relocations that had spanned most of her adult life. Born in Chicago, she grew up there with two parents and eight siblings, six of them girls. She was close to the middle of the birth order. With that many people
in the family, Cynthia says that “We were always poor. Always stayed in the projects. Never had nuthin’.” To the hardships of poverty, others were added. Both parents had substance abuse problems, mainly drugs for the mother and drink for the father. There were worse things too: “I come from a messed-up background. My background is just...It ain’t right the things done to us. And it’s just—it’s crazy, because everybody now went through it except for the boys. And for me to keep movin’ around, movin’ around: it’s like I’m just tryin’ to escape. You know, trying to run away.”

By the age of thirteen, Cynthia already had a long rap sheet full of misdemeanor arrests, most of them for fighting and assault-related incidents. Before ever finishing the ninth grade she was expelled from her local public school system altogether. “I was so bad they kicked me out the whole school district, not the school,” she recalls. “I wudn’t allowed to go to the school district. That’s how bad I was.” In her seventeenth year she left home, and by eighteen she had given birth to her first daughter.

Over the years, Cynthia has held numerous different jobs in the formal economy, jobs she admits to securing by falsifying her résumé: “I always put on there that I had a high school diploma, [or] that I was like a two-year graduate. I ain’t never graduated high school in my life. So I been schemin’ all my life to get ahead.” The most she ever earned was fourteen dollars an hour while working in the collections department at Wells-Fargo home mortgage. At one point she sold illegal drugs. Cynthia’s own mother and father were two of her regular customers. At another point she worked on the dietary staff at a medical facility and watched as her superiors in the nursing corps made a habit of stealing Vicodin from the cups full of pills that were prepared for patients each day.
For a three-year period in her twenties, Cynthia was married, but that union ended very badly. Shortly after marrying, she and her husband relocated to his hometown of Kansas City, a place where Cynthia had no friends, family, or connections of any kind. Not too long after settling into their new apartment, the husband became consumed with the belief that Cynthia was being unfaithful. “He swore up and down that I was sleepin’ with the neighbor,” Cynthia remembers. “Well, we gets into a fight. I’m runnin up the stairs to run to the neighbor’s. He just take the baseball bat and hit me in the behind in my legs. So I falls to the ground thinkin that it woulda been over by then. But he took a screwdriver and stabbed me in my back, which almost missed my spine they said by two inches. So I’m layin in the hospital, you know, face forward in the bed. They said he tried to come finish me off in the hospital. They couldn’t even find and catch up with him. He was in and out so quick, just dipping in his car, that they took [me] from the airport with the police, on a plane, transported me back to Chicago. Police was there to pick me up at the airport and take me to my mom’s.”

Before she was able to end the relationship for good, however, Cynthia went through the cycle of violence, separation, and reunion “four or five times.” “That was all I was used to was that, you know, ‘love,’” she admits. “I remember one time they found me on a highway. You know, he had beat me all in my head and hit me upside the head with a vodka bottle and the pizza man said he drove past and I was layin’ over in a ditch. And he was a-gone. He all beat me up so bad and threw me in a ditch I didn’t even know where I was at...I took him back after that because my mom was like, ‘This man works.’ He was a manager at Valvoline, which is an oil change thing. ‘He works, you know, he got a car, he got a job, you need somebody to help you take care of Fiona’ and this and that.”
Before the time she was thirty, Cynthia had done a year in prison and been in jail—according to her own estimation—“maybe over thirty times.” Among the incidents that landed her behind bars, “I done been in jail because of my dad puttin’ his hands on my mom. I done stabbed him in his back. I done stabbed him in his hand.” Her many arrests and convictions notwithstanding, Cynthia counts herself lucky for having avoided more serious charges, “I never did credit card fraud. I never prostituted or nuthin’ like that, but I always was fightin’. I don’t have no drug charges on me. That’s one thing I’m blessed with. Never drugs or prostitution. If you get that on you, that’s like, it’s over. Because once the police ever see that, it’s like, anything else is like really petty to them you know, but them two thing like that—drugs, prostitution, murder, like felonious assault or something like that. All mines is like misdemeanors, not even a gross misdemeanor.”

In the first half of 2007—just prior to her coming to Plainfield—Cynthia was living with her two daughters in Chicago. Although she had first added her name to the Section 8 waiting list in 1999, Cynthia was still waiting for a placement as of 2007. Over the years—with only a modest income during the periods that she was employed and no support from either of her children’s fathers—Cynthia struggled mightily to keep a roof over their heads. There were several times that, despite her best efforts, she still came up short. In Illinois, she explains, “the cost of living was so high that we was gettin’ like evicted every three or four months.” To make

53 Among those familiar with the penal system—and especially among those who have been incarcerated—the distinction between prison and jail carries great status significance. Among such people, these two terms are not synonymous. Jail refers to county and city jails, while prison refers to state and federal penitentiaries. Prison time is much, much more difficult than jail time. Convicts in prison are more hardened and violent. The milieu is more dangerous. The controls are stricter and the sentences longer. To people who have been incarcerated in prison, those who have only been to jail are callow, soft, untested. In the eyes of those who have done prison time, conflating jail with prison is an affront, something that denies them the superior status to which they are entitled by experience.
matters worse, Cynthia had several warrants out for her arrest in that state. Had she been apprehended by the authorities, she would have been incarcerated and the state would have taken custody of her children. She knew one woman who had moved to Plainfield, an acquaintance who raved that rents were only twenty-five dollars a month there. “That was, like, amazing to me,” remembers Cynthia.

One day Cynthia ambled into an Illinois state welfare office and asked for relocation assistance. By her own admission she was known in that office as a bad seed, and staff there were only too happy to assist in moving her out of their jurisdiction. The office paid for three bus fares to Plainfield, a fare even for the two year-old who was entitled to ride for free. When Cynthia reminded the disbursing agent at the welfare office that only she and her older daughter actually needed a ticket, she was told that staff were just trying to make sure that Cynthia had no additional excuses for returning to the office. A couple of representatives from the welfare office put Cynthia and her girls on a bus bound for Plainfield. As a parting shot they informed her that, were she to return to Illinois in the future, she would be ineligible for public assistance of any kind for two years.54 Cynthia’s mother was also on hand to see them off. As the door on the bus swung open, she slipped a five dollar bill into Cynthia’s hand. Cynthia was thirty years old. Her girls were eleven and two.

Upon arriving in Plainfield, Cynthia stayed briefly with the acquaintance who had touted the cheap rents, but she left within a few days after realizing that the goings-on in that household were not what she calls “up living.” A shelter for victims of domestic violence subsidized two weeks in a hotel after Cynthia left her acquaintance’s house. Following the hotel stay, Cynthia...

54 Cynthia’s eviction from the welfare rolls matches well with the assessment of many anthropologists that—as summarized by Morgen and Maskovsky—“welfare restructuring is fundamentally about the devaluation of care work and results in an intensification of class- and race-based inequalities among women” (2003:322).
and her two daughters moved into a Section 8 unit in the Memorial Court complex in Daletown. She was elated at the time, twenty-five dollars a month indeed. In retrospect, however, she sees it differently: “I guess the good things that you think it is came out to be the worst things that ever happened in my life, you know.”

c. Memorial Court

The main entrance to Memorial Court—referred to locally as “MC”—lies across the street from the HOH. The MC complex is comprised of about thirty separate buildings, each of them containing a dozen individual apartment units. The total MC population is between one thousand and fifteen hundred individuals, with single mothers and their children probably constituting the most common household type. All MC apartments are Section 8 units. As such, the federal government pays almost the entirety of each household’s monthly rent. Residents pay a nominal amount, with Cynthia’s twenty-five dollar monthly bill being close to average. Many residents, however, fail to consistently make their payments on time. MC management penalizes tardiness with an aggressive system of fines whereby late fees accrue for each and every day that there is an outstanding balance on a resident’s account. These daily late fees only cease to accrue when all overdue charges are paid in full.

MC is ground zero for the extensive drug economy of the Daletown neighborhood, an economy centered upon the sale and use of crack cocaine. According to several well-placed informants, the drug economy of MC is not run by a sophisticated, well-organized gang in the textbook sense of the term. What there is in MC, however, is an interconnected group of people with long-standing ties to one another and the community who dominate drug sales in the complex. They are what one informant called a posse that maintains control over the local
marketplace by using intimidation and, if necessary, violence. These mid-level operators who ensure that MC is continually resupplied with illegal drugs are supported by a phalanx of young adults, mostly young men, who serve as street-level dealers and children, mostly boys, who serve as lookouts and runners.

The young men who serve as street-level dealers in MC draw what is, in the context of the extreme poverty of the neighborhood, a significant income from the drug trade. This income provides them with the money to buy such local status emblems as clothes and jewelry and sneakers and a car. And this income is also something they deploy in order to shunt some of the risks of their criminality onto others, particularly poor single mothers. In short, dealers find a single mother who will—in exchange for petty cash, groceries, gifts, access to a vehicle, birthday parties for her kids, and so on—allow her own apartment to be used as a base for drug sales. When dealers levy a surcharge of three to five dollars on any buyer who wishes to smoke the product onsite, mothers sometimes get a cut of these earnings as well. Sometimes the relationship between the dealer and the mother turns sexual, but not always.

In any case, the dealer preserves his residence and law-abiding identity at a different location. Should a police raid occur when he is at the sale site, he pleads innocence on the grounds that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. If a raid occurs when he is not there, he is even safer still, especially because the very real threat of reprisal deters those who might consider “snitching.”55 In this way, dealers at MC—and no doubt elsewhere—shield themselves

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55 The fear of retaliation felt by would-be informants in Daletown is a warranted one. In spring 2009, the mayor of Plainfield gave a series of “State of the City” talks at various community organizations around town. Although the turnout at the talk given in Daletown was relatively sparse, many well-informed local residents did attend, mainly, it seemed, to ask their own questions and share their own information rather than hear the mayor’s boosterish summary of his first term achievements. One particular woman criticized the mayor for allowing her neighborhood to be, as she said, overrun by drugs and violence and gangs. She relayed that, although neighborhood residents know much about the
behind the bodies of single mothers. When a dealer has insinuated himself in a way such as this, it takes a countervailing power of some kind to force him out.

There are few limits to what the average crack cocaine addict will sell or trade in order to get his or her next high, and for some there are no limits at all. Knowing the power of addiction first-hand, Will exclaims that, “Crack cocaine is 10 billion and 0 on seven continents all over the world! It’s the undefeated, unanimous, heavyweight champion of the world.” Another former addict who used to frequent the SLM said more succinctly, “There is no one who has done crack just once.” Addicts who lack the cash to buy the drug outright turn to any number of other selling, bartering, and trading strategies. Many in MC sell their food stamps—sometimes their entire monthly allotment—in order to get access to drugs. Sometimes they are given cash in direct exchange for use of their government-issued benefit card. Sometimes the drug dealer or an emissary loads up a cart full of items while in the grocery store and then has the cardholder pay for it on the spot. Stealing is a commonplace among addicts. Some dealers even distribute “shopping lists” to addicts which detail the items they are willing to exchange for drugs. Many addicts, more women than men, also turn to sex work in order to raise money to support their habits. If a sex worker plies her trade in an MC apartment that is not her own, she is usually charged a fee by the leaseholder or the dealer running the site for the privilege of using a bedroom.

activities of criminals near their homes, “Nobody wants to turn ‘em in” due to fear of reprisal. She described one instance in which an older neighborhood woman called the police on young men in her area, presumably because she believed them to be participating in crime of some kind. Shortly thereafter, a group of young men from the neighborhood destroyed the woman’s car and set it on fire. When the woman rushed outside to investigate the commotion, one of the young men stared at her, surveyed the scene and hollered, “This is my street!”
Cynthia took up residence in MC in the summer of 2007 feeling that, all things considered, she was in a halfway decent place in life. She was out of Illinois and thus away from many relationships and entanglements that had proved disastrous in her past. While she still drank alcohol occasionally, she had ceased to use any kind of illegal drugs. With warrants for her arrest several states away, she also felt that the specter of being forcibly separated from her girls had receded. And although she had next to no money, her subsidized rent at MC was so low that the perennial threat of eviction and subsequent homelessness had receded as well. Soon enough Cynthia’s daughters were participating in HOH programs. Pastor Bell and some others from the church also provided the family with a little assistance in getting set up in their new MC apartment. On the whole, then, it felt to Cynthia that she and her daughters, whatever the hardships of their new situation, were making a fresh start, and that was cause for optimism.

In terms of personal finances, of course, things were lean in the extreme. While she collected monthly food stamp benefits and a Section 8 voucher, Cynthia was denied some other important benefits that she had previously received from the state. Having exhausted her welfare benefits in Illinois, she was deemed ineligible for cash assistance after arriving in Plainfield. As her younger daughter had grown beyond eligibility age for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, Cynthia’s household was denied those benefits as well. In need of an income, then, Cynthia secured an entry-level job at a fast food restaurant in downtown Plainfield right about the time she moved into MC.

Being employed, however, raised a separate problem: the lack of child care coverage, particularly for Cynthia’s younger daughter Destiny. When eleven year-old Fiona was available,
Cynthia could count on her to watch her younger sister. The times during which Cynthia had to work and Fiona was simultaneously unavailable—such as during school hours—presented a major problem, however. At two years old, Destiny could hardly be left alone for hours on end. These being the circumstances, Cynthia invited an eighteen-year-old woman whom she had met in the shelter to come live in her apartment with the three of them. In exchange for watching Destiny while Cynthia was at work, the young woman was provided with free room and board.

About three weeks into this arrangement, however, the eighteen-year-old woman found a new boyfriend and promptly discovered that childcare responsibilities cramped her style. She felt trapped and apparently resentful. One day while Cynthia was at work the young woman called social services to report that Cynthia had abandoned her children. When Cynthia stepped off the bus that day after finishing her shift she was still unaware of the abandonment allegation. She looked across the parking lot and saw the police “puttin’ my kids in a squad car. They had ‘em with the Halloween costumes still on, breathing machines, everything.” After Cynthia rushed onto the scene, she was placed in a separate car and taken in for questioning. By eleven that night, however, Child Protective Services had verified Cynthia’s version of events and released the girls back into her custody.

Cynthia admits that after the fear and distress of nearly losing her children she returned to MC “not in the right state of mind.” She stopped at the Handy Mart convenience store and bought some beer before returning to her apartment. After swilling a few beers, Cynthia looked out the window and spied her erstwhile babysitter hanging out with friends. “I ended up goin’ where she was at,” Cynthia recalls, “and jumpin’ on her. Ended up in jail that night, right after I got my kids back.” With no one to watch Destiny while she worked, Cynthia quit her job. She had entertained the idea of working nights only, but skeletal public bus service after 9pm would
have made late night commuting both burdensome and dangerous. For a short time, she made about fifty dollars a week by donating plasma as often as possible at a for-profit blood bank located in downtown Plainfield. After a few weeks, however, the blood bank discovered her asthma and she was barred from making future donations.

Even at that point—after a stay in the Plainfield jail and the loss of two income streams—Cynthia was still managing to forgo all intoxicating substances other than alcohol. In the weeks before Christmas 2007, however, she was penniless and depressed. According to Cynthia, a prominent religious figure in Daletown promised to provide some toys and other gifts for her girls but never delivered. The twenty-fifth of December was an ordinary, giftless day in Cynthia’s household that year. What she did not learn until the twenty-sixth, however, was that one of her sisters had been murdered on Christmas day: “Her husband shot her four times and he shot hisself in the head and killed hisself,” she says. Cynthia and a man she was involved with set out for the funeral in a rental car paid for by Cynthia’s mother. Out on the plains, however, they collided with a coyote. Because of the delays associated with the crash and the repairs, Cynthia missed her sister’s funeral. That, she said, “just made me distraught. So that led to me steppin’ out. I started smokin’ weed, and then I started smokin’ [crack].”

In January 2008—as soon as she was able—Cynthia filed her annual tax return. When she received a five-hundred-dollar refund check, she blew the entire sum on a frenetic crack smoking binge. After that incident, though, a few months passed and Cynthia says she “slowed down a bit.” Come June, however, she was notified that another female relative—this time a daughter of her eldest sister—had been murdered by gunfire. This niece, it so happened, had been riding in the passenger side of a car driven by her boyfriend in Chicago. As the boyfriend drove by a crowd of rival gang members, he threw the hand signs of his own gang in their
direction. Several men in the crowd promptly produced guns and fired into his car. While the boyfriend escaped unhurt, Cynthia’s niece was shot in the head and killed. “So it was, you know,” Cynthia relates, “that really kicked, set if off right there because I didn’t see my mom then for here almost like a year and to go down there and have to bury my niece. From there it just went downhill, downhill, downhill, downhill, downhill. It seemed like it didn’t get no better.” Cynthia describes the thirteen months that followed her niece’s murder as “hell.” Her addiction climbed from a twenty to a one-hundred dollar a day habit. At its nadir, she was selling four-fifths of her food stamp allotment each month, having only about one hundred dollars per month left over to support the household diet.

Throughout this period of Cynthia’s all-consuming, day-in and day-out addiction, Fiona, then just twelve, maintained the household and served as primary caregiver for three-year-old Destiny. This is one of the reasons, says Cynthia, that “I’m so proud of her, and I will do anything for my baby, you know, especially now anyways. Because even when I was trippin’, she always fed her sister, gave her a bath, dressed her. If I looked like I was high or tired or had a hangover, when she left that morning she would take her sister with her. If she seen somebody knock on my door, if she knew I was about to get ready to go in my room, she would get up and take her sister and take her to her room and they’d put on a movie. So she always had my back.” Still, Cynthia acknowledges that, “It’s a shame when your child have to grow up so quick.”

At the outset of 2009, Cynthia made a number of resolutions intended to better life for her and her girls. Two of the more important ones involved personal transport: to renew her expired driver’s license and to buy a car. Within a few weeks, she was filing the tax return for a new year, this time using unprecedented creativity. “I was told you could file taxes and say that you’re self-employed,” Cynthia recalls. “So I made up my own daycare and went to Walmart
and got my own receipt and filled it out for a thousand and fifty a month. And I got my taxes back—it was like four thousand dollars. Well, I put that all on the house, furniture and stuff that I have in my house now. Well, then I felt that was not good enough—that I needed some more. So I reported it [her income tax refund check] stolen, and they gave me another four thousand. And I just blew that. I had blew eight thousand dollars.”

By mid-summer 2009, Cynthia had been in the throes of hardcore addiction for a year. She had blown through considerable sums of money and was deeply disappointed in herself for it. Despite having engineered the eight-thousand dollar IRS windfall, she was no closer than before to the goals she had set for herself at the start of the year. She was also disgusted with living the life of an addict, of feeling like an addict. “It’s just, it’s downgradin’,” Cynthia confesses. “Your whole personality change. It’s like you got bipolar. You just flip. Everybody got an addiction to something. It was just, mines took me to a place where I didn’t even know who I was anymore.” On top of the profligacy and the degradation, Cynthia lived in constant fear that she might overdose. In addition to leaving her daughters motherless, she feared that, should she overdose, “when they do my autopsy, my momma gonna see my drug level and flip and have a heart attack. Every time I get high, I used to think about that. And that’s your conscience thinkin’ like, you know.” Weighed down by all of these burdens, Cynthia began to finally scale back her crack intake.

The regular involvement of her daughters with the HOH also assisted in helping Cynthia to move toward sobriety. Thankful for the way her daughters were praised and appreciated at the HOH, Cynthia began to spend time volunteering at the organization. While she continued to smoke crack even after becoming involved with the HOH in her own right, she found that the more she spent time at the church, the more she was fortified in her fight against addiction. “It
started weanin’ me off,” she reflects. “Because I didn’t wanna come there and people started seein’ me, you know, they lovin’ my kids, they see the potential in my kids. And then you see her mother, she a mess. That ain’t a good example. And it started hittin’ me. When I say it started hitting me, it started hittin’ me. Every night it was just eatin’ me up, eatin’ me up, and then I’d get up and I come to church and I sit for three more hours, four more hours. Until I started bein’ down there all day.”

e. The Drug-Free Rally

As Cynthia’s involvement with the HOH was deepening throughout the middle of 2009, the organization hosted a Drug-Free Rally on its grounds that summer. The main financial backer of this rally was the Street Ministry Outreach division of the Living Faith Tabernacle, a racially-mixed, working-class Pentecostal megachurch based in Plainfield. As the director of this Street Ministry Outreach division, a woman by the name of Sister Wilhelmina served as the lead organizer of the Drug-Free Rally. Sister Wilhelmina also happens to be an old friend of Pastor Bell’s. In fact, all of the people who participated in conceiving, planning, organizing, and executing the Drug-Free Rally had preexisting social relationships, and all were Pentecostals. While this leadership group did comprise members of several different Pentecostal churches, including African-Americans and whites, it included no one from any other faith tradition, not even the Black Baptist tradition that was represented by two churches in Daletown. Here was yet another example of the power of social relationships between people and organizations—in this case faith being a more powerful mediator than race—to shape the content and direction of organized social action.
On a beautiful Saturday in July 2009, then, a Drug-Free Rally supported in varying degrees by a number of Pentecostal churches ran from one p.m. to seven p.m. on HOH property. This site had been chosen by organizers because, being planted in the middle of Daletown, the HOH sat at the crossroads of illegal drug activity and vulnerable youth in Plainfield. The Rally was intended, first and foremost, to disseminate an anti-drug message among the youth of Daletown—to convey that life in the drug world was a dead end and that healthy alternatives were available for young people to take. In order to attract children and their parents, the Rally featured free games, including an inflatable Bounceplex, and snacks like cotton candy, although the entrées being offered from the makeshift food stands on the edge of the parking lot—Italian sausages, catfish, and more—were only available at the price of about eight dollars apiece. In the hopes of drawing older teens and young adults, the Rally featured a slate of “Gospel Rap” artists who performed from a tractor trailer flatbed that was outfitted with microphones and amplified speakers.

As at the fundraising banquet earlier that spring, the organizers of the Rally prepared and distributed a brochure to commemorate the event. And just as before, the brochure showed that, for all the hard work of the organizers, the Rally received only scant support from the wider community. The pages of the brochure dedicated to thanking donors featured only a small collection of individuals and very small businesses. Most of the latter were from within the black community—a few restaurants, a photography business, a small AM radio station, and several black churches, all of them Pentecostal. Despite at least fifteen Black Baptist churches in Plainfield, none appeared as a Rally supporter in these pages. Not one person with any of Plainfield’s elite family surnames appeared in the list of donors either. Nor were any large local companies acknowledged as Rally supporters.
The program of speakers and performers at the heart of the Rally was structured in much the same way as a Pentecostal worship service. From pastors to rappers, all participants proclaimed, in one form or another, the message that, whatever one’s problems, the solution lies in being empowered through faith in Jesus Christ as one’s personal Savior. One of the Gospel Rap artists rhymed, for example, “Somebody gotta pray/Somebody gotta/Somebody oughta/Drugs, Crime, Affliction/God can deal with any problem you have!” During the instrumental break in a later song, a different artist spoke extemporaneously on the parallels between the Israelites of ancient Egypt and the contemporary residents of Daletown: Just as the former were delivered out of chattel slavery by the power of the Lord, so too does faith in God have the potential to release residents of Daletown from the trammels of addiction, poverty, abuse, and more. When the headliner finally took to the mic, he admonished the young dealers in the audience: “You gotta switch products. You can build corporations. Take that gift and switch products. [You are] one decision away from a change!”

Many adults, including Cynthia, had been drawn to the Rally in order to compete in what was billed as a “testimony contest” by event organizers. Believers who wished to participate were instructed to submit a written version of their testimony to Sister Wilhelmina on the morning of the Rally. As the Rally unfolded outside, some organizers hunkered down inside, read submissions, and determined which testimonies were the “best.” Authors of the winning testimonies received valuable financial prizes such as bus passes and rental assistance. When Sister Wilhelmina announced the winners at the end of the program, however, many people were outraged by the results. There was a feeling among many that the personal preferences and family ties of some judges determined the winners rather than merit or deservedness. Will went so far as to claim that one judge, but not Sister Wilhelmina, manipulated the entire process. “She
made sure that the people she wanted to get their rent paid got it paid,” he insisted. “And I don’t think that was fair.”

Unlike Will, however, Cynthia had actually submitted a handwritten copy of her own testimony to Sister Wilhelmina on the morning of the Rally. At that time, she hoped to win, and she planned to pay the balance of her overdue rent at MC with her prize. Having greatly curtained her drug habit by that time, Cynthia was searching for ways to reduce her vulnerability to any pressures whatsoever within MC—to drug dealers, the management company, or anyone else. Only a few days before the Drug-Free Rally she had notified neighbors of the regime change by posting a sign on her own front door, “This is not the party house,” it read. “Don’t come over here. Don’t beg for nothing. Don’t ask for nothing.” Around the same time she also changed her cell phone number, and her former companions were starting to leave her alone.

When Sister Wilhelmina read out the names of the winners, however, Cynthia’s was absent. More so than Will even, Cynthia was wounded by the outcome of the testimony contest. She had been so eager to win the contest, in fact, that she professed a willingness to read her testimony out loud in front of the entire crowd if need be. Following Sister Wilhelmina’s announcement, however, Cynthia felt personally insulted, and she too believed that favoritism and nepotism had carried the day. She had also been offended that the only meals available at an event billed as providing “Free Food” were prohibitively expensive to the average Daletown resident, a complaint that came to the surface after having lost the contest. “The whole thing was a joke to me,” Cynthia said in the aftermath. She was so furious, in fact, that after hearing the winners announced she marched down to the Handy Mart and bought a forty ounce bottle of malt liquor.
Fortunately for Cynthia, her dejection at having lost the testimony contest did not cause her to relapse back into heavy crack cocaine use. The contest episode did, however, expose one of the more general problems of Cynthia’s situation: Residing in Daletown, she lived in a neighborhood that was largely neglected by the charitable groundswell that rises up week after week in the county. As such, faith-based operations in the neighborhood tended to be characterized by dearth rather than abundance. The gulf between neighborhood need and neighborhood faith-based resources was therefore enormous. Without question, friends and family members of Daletown charity administrators were among those who benefitted most from the FBOs in the neighborhood, but it was hardly as though these people lived high on the hog. What was true, however, is that people on the outside of those social and familial circles, people like Will and Cynthia, received appreciably less. As a consequence, Cynthia’s repeated efforts to improve her life by using faith-based resources as a foundation for efficacious personal effort were stymied by faith-based dearth.

Although the HOH had helped Cynthia get on her feet after arriving in Plainfield, she had been hurt by some more recent incidents that she counted as slights against her and her girls, especially since they happened as Cynthia’s involvement with the church was increasing. As the end of the public school year approached, for example, Cynthia learned that her older daughter Fiona would be graduating eighth grade with honors. Overcome with pride, Cynthia crafted some homemade invitations to Fiona’s graduation ceremony and passed them out to people at church. On the day of the ceremony, however, not a soul from the church showed up in support. Contemporaneous with all of this, the HOH was offering cash awards to children involved in its
programs for high grades on their report cards. Fiona’s card was so outstanding, however, that she was owed almost two hundred dollars according to the HOH’s own criteria. According to Cynthia, though, Fiona had to wait out a long cycle of delays and excuses before receiving her money from the HOH staff. “They act like they don’t even wanna pay my baby,” Cynthia protested.

Slights and excuses, however, paled in importance when compared to the much more serious problem of Cynthia’s inability to secure childcare for her four year-old. Being without trustworthy family and friends in Plainfield, Cynthia could not obtain childcare for free. While being without a job, she didn’t have the income necessary to pay for it. And being without childcare, she was not at liberty to take work should she find it anyway. A short time before the Drug-Free Rally Cynthia had asked Pastor Bell whether anyone from within the HOH family might be willing to watch Destiny free of charge, but Cynthia never heard anything more about the subject after that initial conversation. At least as much as any other factor, then, lack of childcare thwarted Cynthia in her efforts to improve the life of her young family. In fact, this deficiency hounded almost all of Cynthia’s undertakings, including ones much more modest than finding and maintaining steady employment: “I’m here all alone,” she grieved. “It’s a difference if I had somebody. I don’t have nobody. If I wanted to get away for the weekend, I couldn’t. Movies by myself—how could I?”

About a week after the Drug-Free Rally, for example, Cynthia learned from an MC acquaintance named Stephanie that it was possible to enroll in Plainfield Community College (PCC) and receive financial aid checks for, she was told, “five thousand dollars.” What Stephanie was referring to is the possibility—very real and utilized by many Americans—of borrowing more money in the form of federally backed student loans than is required to cover
the costs of tuition, books, and related educational expenses. The difference between the amount borrowed and total expenses thus becomes, to these student borrowers, supplemental income in the present. To this end, many students borrow the maximum allowable amount semester after semester. Before regulations were changed in 2009 to prevent the practice, some people even enrolled in college, collected the entirety of their student loan, and then withdrew from school without ever paying a penny toward tuition or other educational expenses.

Whichever of these avenues Stephanie was recommending—obtain loan money and attend class or obtain loan money and don’t—Cynthia was in disbelief that such a thing was possible. When she finally became convinced that Stephanie was speaking the truth, Cynthia sprang into action and began searching the internet for ways to obtain her General Equivalency Diploma (GED). With a little looking, Cynthia found a web-based company that provided what purported to be a legitimate GED. Applicants only had to pass a basic exam and pay a two hundred and seventy-dollar transcript fee. Suspecting a scam, Cynthia phone the Better Business Bureau and received, much to her surprise, confirmation of this company’s legitimacy. She then called PCC and received additional confirmation that the school does in fact accept this company’s GED as proof of a diploma or its equivalent for purposes of admission.

After borrowing the two hundred seventy-dollar transcript fee from the HOH, Cynthia enrolled at PCC and completed her financial aid paperwork. A week before the start of classes, however, she met her regular impasse: “Well, here it is, Monday I go to start school. Even on my FAFSA, now it’s been approved now for five thousand some dollars. I ain’t got nobody to watch Destiny, so I’m not gonna get the check if I’m not goin’ to classes, because they gonna

56 Either a high school diploma or an equivalency degree is required to enroll in higher education. In fact, about a year after this episode, two Plainfield area women were arrested for falsifying GEDs with the intent of enrolling in community college solely for the purpose of obtaining student loan monies.
drop me as of, what, the third or fourth time you miss class? I never even went back to sign up for my classes to me.” Unable to either get a job or to attend community college without childcare, Cynthia once again petitioned the state welfare office for cash assistance. She was reminded that, having exhausted her benefits in another state, she would only be granted cash assistance if she were declared a “hardship case.”

Much of Cynthia’s motivation to establish an income stream—whether through employment, student loans, or welfare—flowed from her desire to move out of MC for good. For one thing, staying clean in MC was a day to day struggle. For another, Cynthia feared for the safety of her and her girls. Their apartment had been broken into three times and egged once in the previous two years. Also, there were sex offenders living in the complex and Fiona, despite being only thirteen, was being propositioned by older men more and more each day. “It’s so scary,” Cynthia explained, “because she can’t walk to the store [without being accosted].” And as a mother who wanted a wholesome and stimulating environment for her daughters, the bleakness and austerity of MC was dreadful, “There’s no playgrounds. I was brought up where they had block parties and basketball games and stuff within your community. It’s not like that no more.”

In early August 2009, Cynthia’s frustrations with MC came to a head following a confrontation with a neighbor. One afternoon that August this neighbor woman and her boyfriend fought. The fight ended with the boyfriend physically battering the woman, leaving her with a black eye and other visible bruising. The following day Cynthia watched through her peep hole as the boyfriend reentered the neighbor’s apartment. Afraid that he was there to deliver another beating, Cynthia dialed 911 and reported all she knew about the situation. When the police arrived, the man was arrested and hauled off to jail.
What Cynthia did not know, however, was that the boyfriend and girlfriend were back together after having reconciled. In retaliation for having put her boyfriend in jail, the neighbor called Child Protective Services and reported Cynthia for a host of violations, some true and others fabricated: selling food stamps, using crack cocaine, keeping kids in a filthy home, and also having various men watch the girls. Cynthia denied every one of the allegations, accused her neighbor of lying out of spite, and claimed that financial assistance from family members was supporting her. “I had cleaned my act up so quick,” Cynthia marveled, and CPS closed the case forthwith.

The day after CPS closed this case, however, a small crowd of people gathered in an MC parking lot—several of them with ties to the HOH—to watch as Cynthia and her girls were loaded into the back of a Plainfield police car. For a few days their whereabouts were unknown. Nor did anyone in Daletown seem to know why the three of them had been picked up at all. As it had happened, though, only a few hours after having been cleared by CPS, Cynthia turned gravely to her daughter and said, “Fiona, I’m thinking about moving. How bad do you wanna move?” According to Cynthia, Fiona replied, “Ma, I wanna move. I’m tired of people knockin’ at the door all the time. I’m ready to move.” Cynthia breathed deeply, locked eyes with her daughter, and nodded her head. Then she flipped open her cell phone and dialed the women’s crisis intervention center to report herself as a victim of ongoing domestic violence. She was, she said to the operator, living in fear and looking for help. After being picked up by the police a short time later, the three of them were admitted as a family into a Domestic Violence Shelter for Women and Children in Plainfield where they would be permitted to stay for ninety days while they received assistance in making a fresh start.
Unwilling to return to MC under any circumstances, Cynthia asked Will to visit her former apartment and retrieve her possessions. He assembled a small moving crew from the large number of young men he knew in Daletown, and they carried out Cynthia’s wishes. By that time, Will’s plan for establishing a faith-based transitional home had made great progress, and he was only a few months away from beginning to secure actual grant monies. (The man who mentored and advised Will through the process of building a successful faith-based ministry was, incidentally, none other than Norman Taylor, Plainfield’s foremost radical from the heyday of local Black Nationalism.) Despite needing to properly outfit his transitional home in order to meet grant guidelines, Will declined Cynthia’s offer of the furniture in her old apartment. Though only gently worn, Will sensed “familiar spirits” in that furniture, and he avoided touching those pieces at all during the move. When Will returned all of the clothes that had been collected from around the apartment to Cynthia, she found herself with thirty-two loads of dirty laundry, a magnitude that she took as symbolic of how disorderly her life had become.

From the relative stability of the shelter, Cynthia once again began to take steps in the direction of a new future. Returning to MC was out of the question for her, but so was returning to Illinois. While going back to her home state would reconnect Cynthia to the kind of valuable support networks she lacked in Plainfield, she would also be subject to incarceration if arrested there. Her options being limited, Cynthia began to look for work. With the help of shelter contacts, she was hired into an entry-level position at an Arby’s fast-food restaurant at a starting wage was $7.60 an hour.

As her workplace was located about five miles from downtown Plainfield and Cynthia had no reliable access to private transportation, she was compelled to commute via Plainfield’s subpar public bus system. Each one-way trip to and from work required one station transfer and
lasted about two hours. Eight hours of paid work for Cynthia therefore required thirteen hours of her time, an additional four for commuting and one for a meal break. Taking into account her total time outlay, Cynthia was grossing about $4.68 per hour. Almost the entirety of her eight hours was spent standing at the cash register or on the food preparation assembly line. Cynthia’s feet were so sore from all the standing that she adopted the habit of walking on her heals during the latter half of her shift.57

As it was summer and school was out, Cynthia could count on Fiona to watch Destiny much of the time. Still, Cynthia hated the thought of Fiona losing more of her youth to babysitting, so she continued to search for an alternative arrangement. An acquaintance put her in touch with an elderly woman who ran an unlicensed daycare operation from her public housing apartment in Daletown. Though this woman’s operation wanted for developmentally appropriate enrichment opportunities, there were other children there and the setting was, to all appearances, a safe one. And as this woman charged only twenty dollars a day, even Cynthia could afford to pay at that rate. Nevertheless, five twenty-dollar days out of seven consumed such a significant portion of Cynthia’s net income that, after settling up with the daycare operator every two weeks, she was, in her own words, “back down to bein’ broke.” Truth be told, though, Cynthia was—paradoxically—more at peace being broke than not, for any amount of money shortened the distance between her and a relapse. “When I get money in my hand,” she confessed, “I get real nervous.” To preempt that anxiety, Cynthia took to spending the remainder of each paycheck on consumer goods for her girls like clothes and sneakers or at least converting her cash into a prepaid debit card.

57 For a detailed account of the travails of fast food employment, see Carol Stack’s work on the subject (2001).
Within the first few weeks of her tenure at the shelter, Cynthia was able to establish a fair degree of order in her life. She was working, staying clean, and successfully avoiding the people who had done the most to exacerbate her past problems. More optimistic than she had been for a long time, Cynthia formulated a fresh three-month plan that she hoped would ensure stability for her and her daughters in their post-shelter life. The main points of her plan were these: stay clean, get her driver’s license renewed, buy a car, sign a lease on a suitable house or apartment, find a new church home, and follow through on her earlier attempt to enroll at PCC and thereby, in addition to earning credits toward a degree, create a supplemental income stream from financial aid sources.

More than anything else, though, she wanted to give her girls a better life. With her older daughter not too many years away from adulthood, Cynthia hoped their experiences together would continue to motivate Fiona to excel in school and ultimately beyond. “You know, I’m really surprised [we made it this far],” Cynthia reflected, “because we done slept in cars. We done been homeless so many times I couldn’t even count on my hand how many times. So it’s not new to me, you know, to struggle. But, I’m thinkin’ that since she had to go through this, maybe she already know, ‘This is not what I want to go through.’ So I’m hopin’ it goes the opposite way than what it went from me. It went from me the way that we was brought up around drugs and abusive that I took that same route. So I’m hopin’ it turns the other way. Because we in this together.”

g. In Search of a New Church Home

Cynthia had included the task of finding a new church home on her three-month plan in August 2009, but this was not the first time she had considered leaving the HOH. For a brief
stint during spring 2009, she had some wonderful experiences while attending a largely white and middle class Evangelical megachurch in the Plainfield suburbs. (Not coincidentally, this church also belonged to a denomination with a long history of support for social justice activism, including on the issue of racial equality.) Cynthia marveled at how kind and receptive everyone at the church was and how welcoming they were to her girls. On her first visit she was awestruck by the number and variety of activities listed on the church’s main bulletin board—Bible classes for children, exercise classes for adults, organized excursions, and much more. After missing Sunday service at Pastor Bell’s Christ the King Temple a few weeks in a row, though, some members of that church came around to her apartment and peppered her with what she felt to be accusatory questions. “Where have you been?” several people asked her. According to Cynthia, one senior figure from the church even chastised her, “You just left us, you know. Well, you just left us when we helped you when you got here.” After enough of these visits, Cynthia returned to Christ the King Temple out of a sense of obligation.

By the time she settled into the shelter in early August, however, Cynthia had resolved to leave Christ the King again—this time permanently. In general, she was disillusioned by what she saw as too much competition and infighting throughout both Christ the King and the HOH. Among her many specific grievances, she had been appalled by the way that HOH staff had discarded Will as an expendable outsider. To Cynthia and many other parents, Will was among the most compassionate, dedicated, and helpful persons that the HOH had in its entire workforce. Worse than even Will’s denigration in her eyes, however, was Christ the King’s practice of treating its poor parishioners as resources who were duty-bound to help support church operations rather than as needy people entitled to assistance from the church. For example, in early August Cynthia had been asked by some Christ the King officials to donate the remaining
dollars on one of her prepaid debit cards to the church in order to help pay for stationary, pens, and other office miscellany. Despite resenting the request, she obliged them. Then, a few weeks later, she was asked by some of the same people to contribute what remained of her monthly food stamp allotment in order to help buy food and other supplies for the annual church picnic. When Cynthia demurred, she was reminded that, living at the shelter, she already received three meals a day for free and thus could spare her food stamps for the time being. Just as she had done in the past, though, Cynthia was planning to sell some of those food stamps in order to create some liquidity. Instead of buying drugs with the cash, however, Cynthia planned to buy other much-needed items, like new clothes for her girls or supplies to outfit the apartment she planned to rent after leaving the shelter.

**h. A Final Service**

On a hot and humid morning at the end of August 2009, about thirty adults and half as many children streamed into Christ the King Temple for regular Sunday worship service. Unbeknownst to them or anyone else, that service was destined to last a full five hours. Most of the adults were women, and Cynthia was—at least for the time being—still among them. A guest speaker had been invited by Pastor Bell to conduct the main worship service that day, a distinguished female preacher from St. Louis who was known both formally and informally as “Queenie.” When one of Pastor Bell’s assistants introduced Queenie to the congregation, he made it known that she was “anointed.” Queenie had brought with her a female assistant, and both women were dressed in brightly colored full-length gowns with necks so high that every inch of skin between their chins and their toes was covered save their hands.
For the first ninety minutes of the service, the congregation sang one hymn of praise and celebration after another. Exclamations of “Praise Jesus!”, “Amen!”, and “Hallelujah!” punctuated the singing again and again. Not once in those ninety minutes, however, did Queenie lift her eyes up from the large Bible spread across her lap. She appeared to be doing something more focused than even studying or praying, something more like trying to draw divine energy from off of the pages and into herself. When she finally rose to her feet after an hour and a half of singing, her homily centered upon her own testimony—the story of how faith in Christ had delivered her from a life of turmoil and drugs and sin. She described how, before accepting Christ as her Savior, she had spent much of her early adult life trying to balance a successful career in the music industry and a long-term romantic relationship with a major drug dealer, the latter of which was tortured by addiction and violence.

After speaking on this subject for about an hour, Queenie asked all of those who wished to either accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior or receive the anointing to proceed in the direction of the altar. The carpeted area between the first row of pews and the elevated stage that held the pulpit began to fill up with people. Each of them sought the Lord in his or her own inspired fashion. Some kneeled and prayed at the base of the altar. Many stood relatively still with their eyes closed and their arms raised in prayer. Others proceeded to praise the Lord and rejoice while pacing, rocking, spinning, or dancing. As the space filled up, Queenie’s assistant solemnly walked through the crowd and daubed the head of each person with anointing oil, which, in many Christian traditions, is believed to facilitate the entry of the Holy Spirit into one’s life.\(^\text{58}\)

\(^{58}\) Among the many Biblical verses that Christians commonly cite to support the practice of anointing with oil are Exodus 29:7, Leviticus 8:12, and Luke 4:18.
When all on the carpet had been anointed, Queenie, her assistant, Pastor Bell, and two more assistant pastors from Christ the King began to move through the crowd together as one. With Queenie in the lead, this group of five proceeded through the crowd and, employing prayer and the laying on of hands, ministered to each person on the carpet individually. Many of them responded to the touch of Queenie’s hand on their forehead by speaking in tongues or launching into an ecstatic trance. Several began convulsing and then collapsed into the arms of Queenie’s four helpers who gently lowered them onto the floor. Helpers waiting in the wings—mostly adolescents—rushed over and covered these people with blankets from a stack that had been kept at the edge of the sanctuary for this purpose. Many continued to convulse and gyrate on the floor for some time after being covered.

After nearly an hour and a half, all but a few people on the edge of the sanctuary had been ministered to individually. Queenie moved toward these remaining people and, for the first time during this worship service, began to speak prophetically. First there was a young girl of about fifteen who stood by herself crying. Queenie approached the girl, shuddered, and stumbled backward for all to see. Queenie then announced that she was feeling immense power emanating from this girl. Moreover, she said, this girl was destined to become a great worker for the Lord, a singer and anointed prophetess like herself. After this, Queenie shifted a few feet to her left and stood in front of a handsome twenty-something man wearing a pressed New York Yankees t-shirt tucked into a pair of khaki pants. She then prophesied that this man standing here before the assembly was ordained to become a great preacher. The young man grinned, and the girlfriend who had brought him to church lit up with pride.

Finally, Queenie began to move toward the one person who had delayed coming to the altar longer than any other in the congregation, a person whom she had never met—Cynthia. As
she approached Cynthia, Queenie began to speak extemporaneously on the notion that we, all of us, are “products...products of our past.” When she came to a halt directly in front of Cynthia, Queenie looked the young mother up and down, and she confessed to being able to see that Cynthia was truly “Hell on Wheels.” Many times, Queenie prophesied, Cynthia had tried to leave the world of sin, but each time she had lost faith. Each time she returned. At hearing this, Cynthia’s knees buckled and the upper half of her body plunged forward toward the floor. Hunched over at an almost ninety-degree angle, limp and swaying from side to side, Cynthia tucked her left arm underneath her waist to prevent herself from completely collapsing. She grimaced as though in pain, but Queenie only pressed harder. “We’re products of our past,” she insisted, and she knew what she divined in Cynthia’s face. Many things, she said, many things from childhood, had caused Cynthia pain and anguish, and these still needed to be worked out, still needed to be healed with the help of the Lord. Upon hearing that, Cynthia began to weep.

A few days after that church service, Cynthia was nursing sore feet, struggling to stay sober, and reflecting on her life. She had ten dollars to her name and thirteen days between her and her next paycheck. People from the church were calling her phone in order to schedule a trip to the grocery store. She thought about her past and she thought about her future. She was hopeful that her three-month plan was going to finally put her and her daughters on solid ground. Maybe, she thought, they’d even catch an unexpected blessing or two in the interim. Lord knows it was time. And she thought about Queenie, about their encounter and about Queenie’s prophesy, about the words Queenie had spoken over Cynthia’s life, “When that lady said Sunday that she know I’m ‘Hell on Wheels,’ now that was the truth. She spoke right into what she seen. Some people got the gift of seein’, you know. But it used to be so crazy.”
IX. Conclusion

a. Introduction

The preceding six chapters—three devoted to activities in and around the SLM and three to the HOH—have covered a great deal of ethnographic ground. At the level of straightforward narrative, these six chapters have sought to convey something of the everyday lived experience of America’s postindustrial poor. In order to advance a set of scholarly arguments, however, the SLM and HOH narrative blocs were each anchored in a single conceptual matrix of interlocking themes and relationships. The more prominent themes constitutive of that narrative-organizing matrix were these: the connections between Evangelical religiosity and the behaviorist interpretation of poverty; negotiations of the recipients’ dilemma on the part of charity recipients; patterns of solidarity that arise around the practice of skimming; and the nature of the charitable groundswell in Plainfield and its tendency to produce and reproduce the uneven geographical development of the city’s faith-based sphere.

With comparable data therefore spread across both blocs three through five and six through eight, it is possible to highlight a number of similarities and differences between the respective faith-based settings in the Swing and Daletown. The present chapter is devoted to organizing these points of similarity and difference into a sequence of interrelated arguments that provide a deepened understanding of the meaning and practice of faith-based charity as a strategy for addressing the contradictions of twenty-first century American capitalism. These arguments, which yield conclusions pertinent along the dimensions of both class and race, make a general contribution to the existing literature by treating in-depth the understudied subject of FBO recipient agency in the context of the neoliberal era FBO upsurge.
Toward these ends, then, the present chapter is divided into seven sections in total. All of the sections below develop data from chapters three through eight to make inferences about the deeper meaning of postindustrial faith-based activity. Section b clarifies the tendency of Evangelical FBOs to discursively constitute and reconstitute a religiously inflected version of the recipients’ dilemma. Section c describes how poor charity recipients consistently respond to this dilemma with performances of worthiness. Section d, by explicating the Marxist theory of praxis, prepares the way for the class-based analyses of section e. The four subsections of section five demonstrate that the ways in which Evangelical FBOs engage with charitable subjects tends to encourage behaviors on the part of recipients that—however contestatory or dissident at a superficial level—actually serve to facilitate the reproduction of the very capitalist social relationships responsible for producing poverty in the first place.

Following these class-based arguments, section f examines the relationship between faith-based activity and racial inequality by extending upon chapter seven’s analysis of uneven faith-based geographical development. In chapter seven it was argued that the uneven geographical development of Plainfield’s faith-based sector—its nutritional subsector in particular—followed from the uneven geographical development of faith-based social capital in the city. The character of this unevenness being what it was, faith-based charity in Plainfield ultimately reproduces a form of eleemosynary white privilege in the city. Expanding upon these insights in section f below, then, entails developing a general hypothesis that, to the extent that faith-based resource flows are structured by social capital distribution, such flows will exhibit a powerful tendency to exacerbate rather than mitigate existing forms of racial inequality.

The final section of this chapter, section g, marshals the data from Plainfield to assess the validity of the behaviorist interpretation of poverty. Those data show that, contra the
behaviorism of Marvin Olasky (1992; 2000) and many others, poor people in postindustrial America not only work as a matter of course, whether formally employed or not, but they also, through their practice, demonstrate possession of the liberal virtues they are so often accused of lacking. This being the case, poverty-reduction policies that stress personal rather than structural transformation fly in the face of the realities of chronic austerity that characterize life for so many in postindustrial America.

b. Neoliberal Behaviorism and the Making of the Recipients’ Dilemma

As carefully detailed in the introductory chapter, the behaviorist interpretation of poverty, an interpretation especially prominent among Evangelicals past and present (Hicks 2006; Hilton 1992; Hofstadter 1996), holds that poverty typically stems from dysfunctional character traits and behavior patterns among the poor themselves (Kittay 1998:125-26; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:326-27). In other words, according to this doctrine, the poor, by and large, have only themselves to blame for the hardship and want that mark their lives. In cultures such as the United States where behaviorism has been historically hegemonic, the poor are regularly stigmatized as flawed, broken, and unworthy. With poverty thus a source of personal shame, many people feel driven to conceal their straits from others. As the Great Recession intensified across the country in fall 2008, for example, the head of a secular Plainfield charity described the plight of many people who were calling her organization’s assistance hotline for the first time: “They’re embarrassed,” she told the local newspaper. “I’ve had calls from women who didn’t want me to call them back because they didn’t want their husbands to know. I’ve had them cry.”
To publicly seek charitable assistance in America, then, is to announce one’s poverty in a context where many potential observers equate poverty with personal inferiority. For this reason, charity seekers in America face what has been called here the recipients’ dilemma. To queue up for charity involves, on the one hand, exposing oneself to the stigma and opprobrium of behaviorist meanings. On the other hand, however, openly contesting behaviorist meanings in some vocal or unwelcome way in a bid to publicly reassert one’s dignity and worth has the potential to jeopardize one’s relationship with the charity in question, especially as FBOs are private, hierarchical institutions in which recipients retain no formal rights. One of the germane questions that the Plainfield data speak to, therefore, is this: In addition to partaking of the wider influences of American culture, do Evangelical FBOs somehow through their discourses and practices actively reproduce the behaviorist ideology and thereby intensify the recipients’ dilemma in their home spaces?

The data from Plainfield justify an affirmative answer to this question. The SLM, the HOH, and other Evangelical FBOs in Plainfield do reproduce the behaviorist ideology in their interactions with poor recipients, particularly through the formal content of their traditional religious discourses. Unlike the more direct approach of secular organs of behaviorism—which flatly impugn the poor as flawed and inferior—Evangelical discourses tack an indirect course. To wit, in Evangelical theology, human beings are regarded as inherently sinful or fallen—that is, as existentially estranged from God by Original Sin. According to Evangelicals, then, believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and one’s personal Savior is the only path to overcoming this estrangement. Belief in Christ, according to this theology, redeems sin and reunites the believer with God (Carpenter 1999; Hunter 1983:64-65).
Most important for the present purposes are the common political inferences of this Evangelical theology. In addition to its dire eschatological consequences, the state of being estranged from God by unredeemed sin—that is, the state of being an unbeliever—leaves a person captive to ungodly and dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors in the present world. The unbeliever is, according to Evangelical doctrine, especially vulnerable to the fallen aspects of human nature—to greed and lust and sloth and violence and all else that is un-Christian (Carpenter 1999:54). To be in a state of sin is to be fundamentally unfree, driven as though by some inner metaphysical lash toward unholy and self-destructive thoughts and actions. For the believer who has faith and leans on Christ, however, no problem, hardship, or obstacle is either unbearable or insurmountable. Thus does one frequently hear in Evangelical circles that faith in Christ promises “real” or “true” freedom and also the conviction that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

As a corollary of this belief system, a great many American Evangelicals—more so white than African-American Evangelicals in fact (Emerson et al. 1999)—interpret poverty as a product of either faithlessness among unbelievers or insufficient faithfulness among believers. Either the poor person in question has failed to accept Christ as his or her Savior, or that person has failed to rely enough on Christ for strength. In the former instance, the person remains locked in the grip of pestilential sinfulness. In the latter, he or she, though knowing better, continues to reject the aid of the Almighty and thus acts in ways that perpetuate one’s own problems. The head of one Plainfield FBO encapsulated the crux of this Evangelical logic when he publicly remarked that, “We believe the greatest need of everybody is to have God in their life.”

59 Philippians 4:13 (New King James Version)
In other words, then, the prototypical Evangelical response to poverty is to urge that the poor embrace an Evangelical model of personal transformation through faith in Christ (Noll 1992:295; Smith 2002:115). This discursive maneuver on the part of Evangelicals locates the principal cause of poverty within the individual. Such a response differs dramatically from accounts that identify structural conditions as the cause of widespread poverty in capitalist society, perspectives that are much more common within non-Evangelical than Evangelical branches of American Christianity (Craig 1995; Hopkins 1940). Making either no or only scant mention of structural causes, the dominant Evangelical discourse in America reproduces the idea that the poor themselves are to blame for their own poverty. Though not typically as callous or invidious as secular behaviorism, Evangelical FBO discourse ends at the same place: attributing poverty and poverty-related hardship to individual causes. These patterns were evident at both the SLM and the HOH.

In the primacy that Pastor Edley gives to spiritual healing, for example, he reveals his belief that intra-individual factors account for most cases of poverty. His prepared sermons, a few of them quoted above, demonstrate as much. One of the great motifs of his preaching, after all, is the idea that “Poverty is a spiritual problem.” “Every one of us at one time in our life,” the Pastor has warned, “have fought against God. We’ve turned our own wicked way…May I say to you: The chances are, if you have strayed from doing what God tells us to do in His work, if you strayed from God and His presence, the Devil’s gonna take advantage of it.” Pastor Julie, while subscribing to the same theology as her mentor, emphasizes individualistic and more populist “Lean on Jesus” strategies as responses to hardship in her preaching and teaching. “This is God. I will be handling ALL your problems today. I will NOT need your help,” reads the didactic sign on her office door.
While funding-related constraints lessened overtly religious appeals at the HOH, those that were made there resounded with individualistic themes as well. The mini-sermons that preceded Friday morning grocery giveaways, for example, habitually keyed in upon the need for individual faithfulness as a response to hardship. Thus pleaded Will one typical Friday morning: “As long as you walk in Christ, the victory is yours—in your marriage, in your family. Victory through the blood of Jesus!...Nobody is hopeless if they’re touched by the master.” Many of the speakers and performers who spoke publicly at the Drug-Free Rally urged, to the wholesale exclusion of structuralist analysis, individualistic responses to poverty, crime, and addiction. “Somebody gotta pray/Somebody gotta/Somebody oughta/Drugs, Crime, Affliction/God can deal with any problem you have!” rhymed one of the Gospel Rap artists on hand that day.

In all of these instances and many more, then, the discourses and practices of Evangelical FBOs convey the message, if only implicitly, that intra-individual factors account for poverty and other hardships. In so doing, these FBOs reinforce the basic message of the behaviorist ideology—namely, that something is wrong with the poor themselves. As such, Evangelical FBOs often reproduce the recipients’ dilemma of the wider culture at the moment of maximum vulnerability for the poor, the moment of charity receipt. Despite salient racial differences between the SLM and the HOH and the even greater poverty levels of Daletown, structuralist accounts of poverty were equally absent from the sanctioned voices of both organizations.

c. Negotiating the Recipients Dilemma

These observations bring the discussion around to what has been this dissertation’s principal research question all along: How do the recipients of Evangelical faith-based charity in
Plainfield negotiate the recipients’ dilemma in such a way that they neither inhabit a space of shame and unworthiness nor contest behaviorist meanings in ways that jeopardize their access to much-needed resources? The answer is this: A great majority of faith-based charity recipients—inclusive of both those who do and do not work as volunteers—transcend the recipients’ dilemma by demonstrating, through their discourse and practice, that they possess values and character traits that vouchsafe worthiness in liberal society. These people show the world, in other words, that they are patient, respectful, sober, thoughtful, considerate, appreciative, helpful, judicious, fair, and also, critically, willing to work. In this way, poor recipients transcend the false dichotomy at the heart of the behaviorist ideology. With only rare exceptions, behaviorism would have people be either non-poor and worthy or poor and unworthy. Through their careful but firm practice, however, poor recipients subtly contest the invidious meanings of behaviorism and assert their worth without also violating any of the conventions of decorum necessary to preserve a relationship of good standing with the FBO in question. Because of the behaviorism implicit within mainstream Evangelical theology, however, this is a victory that must be won anew each day.

Before elaborating more upon the performance of worthiness as a technique for transcending the recipients’ dilemma, however, it is first necessary to clarify a broad distinction that was implicit throughout the foregoing ethnographic chapters—namely, the distinction between conventional and worker recipients. Those chapters, four and six in particular, detailed the internal divisions of labor that structured production at both the SLM and the HOH. Although each FBO was unique in its own ways, both drew large numbers of poor people who, in addition to collecting charitable assistance, devoted significant volunteer labor to the furthering of organizational operations. According to the typologies of chapters four and six,
these hardworking men and women were labeled as *insecure core* and *insecure auxiliary* volunteers at the SLM and *volunteers* at the HOH. In order to facilitate the present analysis of performances of worthiness, these three categories of volunteer labor will be heretofore treated collectively as *worker recipients*. Those who receive from an FBO without also working for it are alternately classed as *conventional recipients*.

While both worker recipients and conventional recipients respond to the recipients’ dilemma with performances of worthiness, members of these two groups tend to concentrate on some practices rather than others. Worker recipients, by definition, turn to manual labor as their chief tactic for performing worthiness in the face of the recipients’ dilemma. So great was the investment of time and labor at the SLM that worker recipients there formed the backbone of a very large workforce, with many of them giving thirty hours a week or more to the SLM. Dan the Cook, Tiffany, and Virginia maintained kitchen operations. Lester and Big Doug executed the regular round of weekly pick-ups and drop-offs. With occasional help, Lester, wearing his mechanic’s hat, kept the ancient and dilapidated SLM van on the road. Gene could be counted on to advise the ever-changing army of auxiliary workers on the tasks at hand. “They just give hours,” marveled Pastor Edley. Though the scale of production at the HOH was less, worker recipients there often logged dozens of hours of volunteer work per week as well. People like Will and Cynthia and Andy served indispensably as food giveaway laborers, tutors, field trip chaperones, and more.

Given that conventional recipients have a different relationship with FBOs, they tend to perform worthiness in the face of the recipients’ dilemma in different ways as well. Although—as Pastor Julie noted—many conventional recipients jump at the chance to be of assistance, few of them regularly have the opportunity to do so. Short of work opportunities, then, conventional
recipients tend to deploy a battery of other techniques in the service of performing worthiness. Demonstrating respectfulness of the institution and its leaders is probably the foremost of these techniques. At both the SLM and the HOH, conventional recipients demonstrated respectfulness by doing such things as being punctual, summoning good posture while both standing and sitting, observing titles and formalities in speech, being patient, and following rules, even tedious and nettlesome ones, without grumbling or griping. Even the unbelievers and the irreligious among the recipients tend to sing along with hymns and listen to sermons attentively at both the SLM and the HOH. When conventional recipients have occasion to speak with FBO leaders in-person, they express sincere gratitude for assistance, and it is not at all uncommon for one of them to ask for help in finding paid employment.

Also, as recounted several times above, some conventional recipients are eager to share with others an explanation of their poverty. When they do so, they tell their stories with feeling and nuance. They are not looking to blame someone else for their lot, but they are hoping for at least a little compassion. They tell autobiographical stories of job loss, discrimination, domestic violence, sexual molestation, imprisonment, the tragic deaths of people close to them, and, perhaps most commonly, one frustrated effort to get ahead after another. Above all else, they want it to be seen that they are people too—people who have suffered and struggled and hoped and tried. They are people who, their poverty notwithstanding, have redeeming qualities and characteristics. “I count too!” they seem to be saying through their performances of worthiness. “Despite the disapprobation and periodic scorn of this culture, I do count, and I’m going to give you the opportunity to see as much.” “So many people just want to be worth something,” said Pastor Julie of the people who ask her, day in and day out, whether there might be something they could do to be of help around the SLM.
In all of the above ways and more, then, worker and conventional recipients alike perform worthiness in the face of the recipients’ dilemma. Being unable to attack behaviorist meanings too stridently given their inferior power status in the context of FBOs, recipients characteristically deploy performances of worthiness as an indirect contestation of behaviorist meanings. Through these performances, they demonstrate that they do indeed possess the traits esteemed by liberal culture, traits that they are widely condemned for lacking. This is to say that, in other words and contra behaviorist meanings, they transcend the recipients’ dilemma by proving it possible for a person to both meet liberal standards of worthiness and also be poor. The following section summarizes the Marxist theory of praxis in order to prepare the way for section e wherein praxis theory is marshaled to explicate the wider class-based significance of recipient interactions with FBO operations.

**d. The Marxist Theory of Praxis**

It is common when describing the Marxian theory of praxis to begin by referencing the influence of Georg Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach on Karl Marx’s thought. Under the influence of Hegel, Marx came to understand human consciousness or subjectivity as the continuously evolving product of dialectical interaction with an objective order. For Hegel the idealist, the objective order of nature and society at any given point in space and time represented but one moment in the historical development of the rational Spirit as its progress is made manifest (Hegel 1977). Under the influence of Feuerbach, however, Marx rejected Hegel’s idealism. In Feuerbach’s famous critique of religion, he argued that the constitutive doctrines of Christianity
arise in response to material circumstances (1989). In other words, material conditions yield ideational configurations rather than the other way around.

The Marxist theory of praxis selectively weaves these conceptual elements into the doctrine that human consciousness is the continuously evolving product of dialectical interaction with material existence, which means, for Marx, primarily social existence. Labor—broadly conceived as effort on the part of subjects to alter their social environments—represents the form of dialectical interaction that is foregrounded by the Marxist theory of praxis. This theory therefore embraces a dialectical materialism in the sense that, unlike Feuerbach, Marx recognizes that subject-object relations are characterized by a continuous process of action and reaction, by a process, in other words, of subjects being continuously remade through their social engagements.\footnote{As the point is summarized in Anthony Giddens’ classic treatment, “Human consciousness is conditioned in dialectical interplay between subject and object, in which man actively shapes the world he lives in at the same time as it shapes him” (1971:21).}

Critically for his theory of praxis, however, Marx regarded the social order of any given time and place as an objective order. The patterns of social life are neither amorphous nor random. They are, on the contrary, structured by the mode of production or political economic system characteristic of the society in question. Marx anchors these conclusions in the basic fact that humanity must produce and reproduce its material existence (Marx 1994:115). The stock of resources arrayed by a specific society toward this end—including natural powers, human labor, and technological organization—constitutes that society’s forces of production.

Marx furthermore argues that, in order to ensure their optimal exploitation, the forces of production in a given society must be nested within a congenial armature of stable relationships among people and institutions. These latter are for Marx the relations of production, and they
develop in response to the imperatives of the forces of production. In Marx’s thought, moreover, the core feature of a society’s relations of production is its class structure or system of class relations. In Marxist terminology, then, the forces and relations of production taken together constitute a given society’s *mode of production*—that is, its political economic base (Marx 1977:493-494, fn. 4; Marx 1994:211-212).

Marx’s mode of production theory has many implications for his theory of praxis. For one thing, because social life is organized along structural principles—particularly class principles—the dialectical praxis that produces and reproduces consciousness is patterned accordingly. In other words, the structural principles that undergird social life also shape and organize the inner patterns and relationships of human consciousness. The structure of human consciousness reflects the structure of the society—particularly the class structure—within which that consciousness has been formed. Through the dialectical exchange of praxis, then, the human subject develops a form of consciousness in which the objective structures of his or her native society is inscribed as foundational subjective principles. As expressed by Marx at one point, “My general consciousness is only the theoretical form of that whose living form is the real community, the social essence” (1994:73).

To draw upon a conceptual term of more recent coinage, then, we can say that, according to Marx, dialectical praxis *naturalizes* the historical and contingent conditions of a specific society—particularly class relationships—as timeless truths among the subjects in that society. In this way, the thoughts and perceptions of subjects are habitually bounded by the unconsciousness assumption that fundamental social relationships of the present are somehow fixed and eternal. Such is the meaning and import of the subjective *naturalization* of prevailing social relations.
In addition to its effects on the shaping of human consciousness, the mode of production of a given society conditions the development of the ideological *superstructure* in that society (Marx 1977:493-94, fn. 4; Marx 1994:211-212). What this means is that ideological superstructure elements such as law, philosophy, religion, art, morals, and more develop in ways that support the ongoing reproduction of the existing mode of production. Because both ideological superstructures and human consciousness develop in ways that are consonant with the prevailing mode of production, the presuppositions and ideas of the former appear natural and self-evident to most people in a society. The experience of dialectical praxis therefore primes subjects to receive the dogmas of their home societies as eternal truisms. Thus does the synergy of ideology and praxis create subjects whose beliefs and behaviors run in directions that support the reproduction of the class relationships in which they are enmeshed.

With these ideas as their backdrop, Marxist theorists have long debated the question of whether and how dissident forms of consciousness—particularly forms advocating the structural transcendence of capitalism—might arise or be cultivated within capitalist society. While ambiguous on some points, Marx’s own writings stressed that both the experience of collectivist structural relationships (particularly modern factory work) and the political efforts of intellectual leaders had parts to play in advancing radical consciousness on a widespread scale. On the former point, the theory of praxis holds that an ongoing cycle of dialectical engagement with forms of social organization grounded in principles antithetical to those that undergird capitalism will likewise encourage antithetical forms of consciousness. On the latter point, the promotion of radical political economic understandings on the part of theoretically sophisticated political actors has been widely regarded as a valuable—if not essential (Lenin 1969)—condition of widespread revolutionary sentiment.
For all the debates and disagreements within the Marxist tradition, however, at least one doctrine has been universally shared: namely, that the subjective naturalization of capitalist social relations, which is effected through ordinary social praxis and reinforced by ideology, stands as a major obstacle in the way of anti-capitalist dissent. Other things being equal, then, an inverse correlation exists between the stability of a capitalist society and the extent to which capitalist social relations have been denaturalized among subjects in that society. In the following section, these and the other foregoing principles of the Marxist theory of praxis are employed to elucidate the deeper significance of faith-based charity in capitalist society, postindustrial America included. Although the behaviors of conventional and worker recipients differ in their specific details, both of them facilitate the same general outcome: namely, the reproduction of capitalist social relationships in a context where those relationships would otherwise be fragile and insecure.

**e. The Class Significance of FBO-Recipient Relationships**

**i. Overview of the Present Section**

The present section is divided into four subsections. Taken altogether these four subsections seek to draw out the wider class implications of recipient performances of worthiness via the lens of the Marxist theory of praxis. In doing so, they advance two main arguments, one that derives wider class implications from conventional recipient behavior and another that does the same from worker recipient behavior. As these arguments are complex and multi-staged, it is best to provide a concise overview of them here before delving into the specific point-by-point argumentation.
In capitalist society, the working class exists in a state of formal dependence upon private capitalist investment to create employment opportunities that enable personal and household survival. The stable reproduction of capitalist social relationships requires that this state of dependence be naturalized as a timeless truth even beyond the bounds of ordinary political discourse. The experience of wage labor is the principal mechanism by which dependence is naturalized. Yet the unfolding logic of capitalist accumulation continuously produces some measure of unemployment and want, thus creating populations for whom the naturalization of dependence is no longer assured. This outcome represents a potential political problem. By drawing conventional recipients into performances of worthiness in the charity context, however, FBO efforts encourage these unemployed and underemployed subjects to engage in forms of praxis that reinscribe within themselves the naturalization of dependence. In this way, with respect to their interactions with conventional recipients, Evangelical FBOs produce effects that facilitate the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Regarding worker recipients, Evangelical FBOs do the same by, ultimately, drawing potential working-class leaders into situations where their dissident insights and energies are stifled and prevented from becoming socially efficacious in the form of autonomous working-class organization.

ii. Working-Class Dependence and its Subjective Naturalization

The divide between the working class or proletariat and the capitalist class or bourgeoisie represents one of the great axes of Marx’s analysis of capitalism. The latter, as owners of the means of production, wield enormous power in capitalist society—power that, while rooted in economic activity, radiates into every other sphere of society as well. Members of the working class however—being dispossessed of any productive property of their own—have no choice but
to sell their labor power to the owners of the means of production day after day in order to survive. As this has frequently been characterized in the American tradition, capitalist society is defined by a distinctive form of dependence—that of the unpropertied working class upon the propertied capitalist class. This condition of working-class dependence or dependence of the unpropertied is one of the foundational structural features of capitalist society. When the arguments below assert that FBO efforts serve to reproduce capitalist social relations, it is this relationship in particular—the social relationship of dependence—that they refer to.

In a mature and stable capitalist society, the dependence of the unpropertied on the propertied is both an objective structural fact and a principle that has been naturalized at the level of popular consciousness. In truth, of course, while the characteristic dependence of the working class is certainly an objective structural fact of capitalist society, it is hardly a universal or near-universal truth of social existence like marriage or the incest taboo. On the contrary, everywhere it exists, private wage labor has had to be made, established as a social norm. The process of making a working class from a precapitalist workforce, the process of proletarianization, is one of the central elements of the epochal social transition from some form of precapitalism to capitalism. And everywhere it has occurred, the process of proletarianization has been resisted tooth and nail (Polanyi 2001).

The implication of these ideas for the present analysis is this: The dependence of the working class is not an eternal truth or natural fact, and yet it needs to achieve widespread subjective naturalization within society in order to ensure that the masses attribute political

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61 In the United States, widespread antipathy to wage labor (which was frequently cursed as “wage slavery” [Foner 1999:60-62]) persisted deep into the 19th century (Bowles et al. 2005:152-54; Heilbroner and Singer 1999:81-83). The archetypal champion of an independent producer economy, Thomas Jefferson, pronounced on this point that, “Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition” (Heilbroner and Singer 1999:83).
economic legitimacy to capitalist social relations. From widespread legitimacy, a high degree of social stability tends to follow. A capitalist society in which the widespread naturalization of working-class dependence does not hold, however, is one that is weak in its foundations, susceptible to assaults form anti-capitalist forces. Such a society is one in which the belief that “Another World is Possible” is either widespread or could become so (George 2004). And it is a short step from collectively believing in the possibility of another world to collectively striving in order to make it so.

Indeed, all of the great oppositional movements to laissez-faire capitalism—whether reformist or revolutionary—have been fundamentally animated by a desire to reduce or even abolish the dependence of working-class people on the owners of the means of production for their survival. Labor unions have sought to increase the bargaining power of workers vis-à-vis employers through collective organization. Social welfare programs have been supported by working people as a floor below wages that prevents utter destitution. Public works programs have been dedicated to providing employment through public spending when private investment fails to adequately do so. More robustly, social democracy aims—through generous public spending, some degree of social control over private investment, and other measures—to provide a high living standard for society at large. At the far end of this continuum, revolutionary socialism aims to overthrow capitalist society and fix in its place an order wherein working people control both the political and economic spheres for the good of all. What these examples illustrate is that fact that working classes in which wage dependence is not naturalized as a legitimate and inescapable feature of human existence represent potential threats to the smooth reproduction of capitalist social relations. The widespread naturalization of wage dependency among the working class is therefore a prerequisite of capitalist stability.
These observations raise a question: By what mechanism or mechanisms is the widespread naturalization of working class dependence reproduced year in and year out within capitalist society? The answer is that, in capitalist society, the naturalization of dependence among working-class people is reproduced principally through the routine experience of wage labor. As according to the Marxist theory of praxis summarized above, praxis represents a dialectical engagement between a subject and the structural features of society such that, through this process, subjectivity is shaped and reshaped in ways that naturalize the objective relationships that organize personal experience.

In the case of wage labor, then, the average subject enters into an objective relationship of dependence vis-à-vis the employer and also, critically, embraces the identity and perceptions of one who is dependent. This latter feature of the experience is realized because the subject—pressured by economic necessity—must pour the energies of both body and mind into the task that has been put before him or her by the employer. In order to effectively accomplish the task and thus earn one’s daily bread, the person involved must embrace the task, and this embrace ensures that the subject reflexively identifies oneself as the worker, as the one executing these duties. It is this process of subjective investment in the task which ensures that the relationship is dialectical rather than merely coercive. And because it is dialectical—with subject and object evolving together through synergistic interaction—the underlying structural principles of the objective social formation are naturalized in consciousness, including the fact of working-class dependence. Without committed investment on the part of subjects, however, the relationship would be something less than dialectical, and the naturalization of the underlying structural relationships would not be as reliably assured. With naturalization taking root, however, the
conditions and possibilities representative of alternative forms of social organization appear as alien or are crowded out of consciousness altogether.\[^{62}\]

While all of this is true, the fact also remains that capitalism is an inherently volatile and contradictory system that continually produces conditions detrimental to its own reproduction, including the production of poverty and unemployment. The source of this contradiction lies in the universal capitalist imperative to continuously accumulate capital. Under competitive pressure, private businesses are driven to continually invest and reinvest in technologies and innovations designed to reduce the need for, and expense of, human labor power. Thus does capitalist business success frequently entail the casting of workers into the ranks of the unemployed. Poverty often follows for these people.

Moreover, a certain level of unemployment is structurally necessary in capitalist society in order to ensure the wage restraint that, in conjunction with other preconditions, makes the accumulation of capital possible. Taken altogether then, this means that, by ensuring structural

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\[^{62}\] This account of wage labor as a dependence-naturalizing praxis—which I take to be a faithful and illuminating application of praxis theory—speaks to a few prominent issues in the Marxist tradition. The relevant points of convergence and divergence ought to be clarified accordingly. As mentioned above, theorists in the Marxist tradition have long debated the question of how socialist consciousness might arise among workers in capitalist society. Marx's original treatment of the issue famously stressed the notion that the praxis of wage labor in the context of modern factory production would facilitate the development of socialist consciousness. This was so, argued Marx, because of the manifest contradiction between collective production and individual ownership. Whether that socialist consciousness would emerge spontaneously from within the shop floor or whether it would require an outside spark is an issue that is left ambiguous in his original writings. Lenin famously developed the latter line of thinking into his thesis that, by themselves, workers could only achieve trade union consciousness. By themselves, they would not grasp the full significance of the contradiction between collective production and individual ownership. Only through the intervention of a revolutionary socialist vanguard would workers come to penetrate the surface of bourgeois society and recognize the need for transcending the structural principles of capitalism. Vis-à-vis these contentious issues, the present account sides with the Leninist interpretation. The argument of the above section holds that, when workers engage individually with wage labor, then their praxis naturalizes the underlying structural features of capitalism at the subjective level. As atomized rather than organized workers—that is, as workers who partake of neoliberal norms—the contradictions of wage labor are not apparent at the superficial level. These are rendered visible only by political economic analysis. Absent the benefit of such analysis, however, individual workers are shaped by their dialectical engagement with dependence as an objective structural relationship via wage labor. And since this is the experience that they embrace dialectically, these are the principles naturalized within them as all but timeless truths.
unemployment at all times, capitalist social relations continually reproduce a population of people who are excluded from wage labor praxis—that is, excluded from the praxis that most commonly secures the naturalization of wage labor dependence among the working class. The contradictory tendencies of capitalism, the tendency to produce unemployment most of all, therefore weakens a form of naturalization that is absolutely critical to the ongoing reproduction of capitalist social relations.

iii. A Class-Based Interpretation of Conventional Recipient Praxis

The foregoing subsections have provided the background necessary to penetrate to the deeper political economic significance of FBOs as they operate in the context of hegemonic behaviorism. As described above, the naturalization of dependence among the working class is a prerequisite of stable capitalist reproduction and yet the logic of capitalist accumulation, by perpetuating unemployment and underemployment, continuously undermines the conditions that ensure the naturalization of dependence for a significance share of the population. A floating population for whom wage labor dependence is not a naturalized fact or unconscious axiom represents a potential threat to capitalist order, both through their direct action and indirect influence. A secure and smoothly functioning capitalist society will contain mechanisms and institutions for containing the potential danger of such a population.

Herein lies the deeper significance of FBOs like the SLM and the HOH: These institutions and others like them all over the country and the world draw unemployed and underemployed people into forms of praxis analogous to wage labor. In doing so, FBO praxis on the part of dependent recipients reinscribes the naturalization of working-class dependence at a moment in which the hold of such naturalization is otherwise tenuous. In a general respect, then, FBO operations complement the work of public welfare, mass incarceration, a large volunteer
military, a reigning ideology of meritocratic self-blame, and much more. Though each in its own way, all of these social configurations function, at least in part, to deter the unemployed and underemployed populations from presenting a serious challenge to the smooth reproduction of capitalist social relationships. For its part, the praxis involved in being an FBO recipient that performs worthiness as a response to the recipients’ dilemma facilitates the reproduction of capitalist social relations by shoring up the subjective naturalization of working-class dependence among the unemployed and underemployed.

In order to elucidate this point more convincingly, it is useful to compare FBO recipient praxis with the praxis of wage labor. As described above, the praxis of wage labor inscribes the subjective naturalization of dependence among working-class people through a dialectical process with two components. First, the worker enters into a relationship that, at the level of its underlying structure, is a relationship of objective dependence—the worker being dependent upon employer for his or her living. Two, owing to the necessity of keeping one’s job, the worker actively engages with the aforesaid objective relationship in a way that involves the exertion of both physical and psychic energy. In this way, the momentum of dialectical praxis is maintained in order to secure the subjective naturalization of the objective social relationship structuring the entire situation, which is the objective relationship of dependence.

In the faith-based context, conventional recipients—predominantly unemployed and underemployed—enact a parallel logic. First, they enter into an objective relationship of dependence between themselves (the unpropertied recipients) and the FBO (the propertied giver). As an objective property relationship, the recipient-giver dyad corresponds to the employee-employer dyad of wage labor. In both cases, one party needs the resources of the other while also lacking any formal, legally-supported right to said resources. The other side by
contrast—employer or FBO manager as the case may be—possesses both the essential resources needed by others and the formal, state-backed right to dispose of them as they see fit, even to the point of denying them to others in need.

Yet in the case of wage labor, a second element was needed to ensure the emergence of a truly dialectical relationship capable of subjectively naturalizing objective relationships: namely, the vigorous subjective engagement of the worker in question. If FBO recipient praxis parallels worker praxis on all of the essential points, then there must be some counterpart to this vigorous subjective engagement in the faith-based context. There is such a counterpart: namely, the performance of worthiness. Through performances of worthiness, conventional recipients embrace the objective relationship of dependence, identify with their place on the dependent pole, and dedicate their psychic and physical energies to enacting that part. This embrace ensures that recipients subjectively engage with the objective relationship of dependence. They perceive their own dependence on the propertied, and, as the unpropertied, they enact performances of worthiness as a result. They do so, of course, because of their need to subtly contest the recipients’ dilemma, for otherwise they risk being stigmatized as one whose poverty is a sign of fundamental unworthiness.

If not for the hegemony of behaviorism, the recipients’ dilemma would be absent and performances of worthiness unnecessary. As it is, however, the hegemony of behaviorism elicits performances of worthiness, and these, in turn, ensure that conventional recipients forge dialectical rather than merely unilateral relationships with FBOs. Being engaged in dialectical relationships with FBOs, then, ensures that the praxis of conventional recipients reinscribes the naturalization of the dependence of the unpropertied on the propertied, a foundational structural principle of capitalist society. If not for this kind of FBO praxis, these unemployed and
underemployed recipients might very well engage in alternative forms of praxis less hospitable to the capitalist status quo. Enmeshed in dialectical FBO praxis, however, the naturalization of dependence is reproduced among conventional recipient subjects, and alternative forms of social organization continue to be alien and unnatural, unthinkable even, despite their estrangement from the formal labor market. Thus do FBOs like the SLM and HOH effect outcomes that, vis-à-vis the relationship between conventional recipients and the political economic status quo, help to facilitate the reproduction of the capitalist social relationship of dependence.

Note also, as a final point here, that subjects who engage in performances of worthiness against the invidious recipients’ dilemma often see themselves as engaging in acts of contestation and resistance. In the FBO context, performances of worthiness are intended to demonstrate ones’ possession of personality traits and characteristics that are, according to the regnant liberal framework, considered laudable, a sign of one’s worth as a human being. At the interpersonal scale, performances of worthiness represent victories for poor people shamed and censured by a behaviorist culture. Yet, at the wider political economic scale, these performances actually help to solidify the structural relationships that produce poverty and necessitate behaviorist justifications in the first place (for comparable dynamics among undocumented workers in Chicago, see Gomberg-Muñoz 2010). The wider lesson here—one reinforced in the following subsection on worker recipients—is that contestation per se does not necessarily represent a genuine challenge to existing power relations, something anthropologists have long recognized (Gluckman 1954).
iv. A Class-Based Interpretation of Worker Recipient Praxis

The present subsection is devoted to analyzing the relationship between worker recipients and FBOs, also through the interpretative lens of Marxist praxis theory. In doing so, it complements the above analysis of conventional recipient-FBO relationships. For all of the differences between the two recipient classes, however, the dialectical relationship that links FBOs and worker recipients also produces an outcome that facilitates the reproduction of capitalist social relations, although by a process that differs from the one described for conventional recipients. In short, the role of worker recipient tends to attract unemployed and underemployed people of talent, perspicacity, and resourcefulness. When these people assemble for collective labor in the faith-based context, these traits come forth and their potential as effective working-class dissidents is evident. Because they operate in faith-based institutions formally governed by liberal norms, however, the dissident insights and energies of worker recipients are stifled before they can become socially efficacious. Without intention or design, then, FBOs function as political economic catch-basins that isolate and neutralize potentially potent sources of autonomous working-class organization.

The situation of worker recipients is unique in the FBO ecosphere. While worker recipients do, like their conventional peers, perform worthiness for others to see, they are embedded in FBOs in distinctive ways and their agentive conduct includes more than just performances of worthiness alone. Apropos the former point, the great majority of the laboring that worker recipients do unfolds in a cooperative, collaborative context within which formal egalitarianism reigns. Granted, FBO leaders like Martin and Pastor Bell sometimes use their authority to structure the work process or monitor progress, but within these broad parameters worker recipients organize and calibrate their own collective efforts by reference to a mutually
agreed upon set of customs and norms. This arrangement is formally egalitarian in the sense that segmentation and differentiation structure the work process without a corresponding pattern of hierarchy among worker recipients. In other words, the objective relationships structuring the worker recipient experience within the FBO context are collectivist and egalitarian. Viewed in this way, worker recipient organization and conduct compose small islands of primitive socialism within the larger liberal framework of standard FBOs.

As was evident throughout the six ethnographic chapters above, the everyday egalitarianism of worker recipient spaces—that is, the objective relationships within which they are enmeshed—encourages the proliferation of skimming among these people. Examples included using the van to scrap, appropriating extra grocery bags for oneself and others, happening to volunteer on days the HOH sponsors a costly outing, cooking the choicest cuts of meat for members of the in-group, and more. According to liberal standards, of course, skimming constitutes theft, for the skimmers take from the formal owners without permission or exchange. Yet skimming develops into the everyday norm among the people within the worker recipient collectivity. In other words, the egalitarian relationships of the worker recipient collective favor the development of egalitarian distributive patterns as well. This was true at both the SLM and the HOH. The anti-liberal organization of the worker recipient collective yields anti-liberal practices as well. To say that these collectives are small islands of primitive socialism, then, is to note that they are structured along the lines of objective relationships that are, in actuality, antithetical to the kinds of objective relationships that structure life in the wider liberal culture.

Moreover, in addition to simply adopting the practice of skimming, worker recipients at both the SLM and the HOH also imagine and articulate a positive ethical framework as a formal
justification for the practice. This framework—called the right to earn ethic here—developed independently among worker recipients at both the SLM and the HOH. The right to earn ethic was typically heard from worker recipients when they felt, for one reason or another, compelled to defend the practice of skimming. In such situations, one or more worker recipients asserted that they had actually “earned” that which they had taken over and above the charity offered by either the SLM or the HOH. At the SLM, for example, worker recipients often encouraged one another’s skimming with such remarks as “We worked for it!” or “Hey, we’re workers, aren’t we?” And when Big Doug resented Pastor Edley’s decision to crack down on Lester’s scrapping, he complained to me that “Lester does a lot. So I don’t think they should say a lot to Lester because if it wouldn’t be for Lester them vehicles would not run.” At the HOH, skimming defenses took the same form, as when Andy hollered “You worked for it!” at a volunteer who was feeling too sheepish to skim. And Will, after having made himself into a valuable HOH volunteer, approached Pastor Bell and demanded pecuniary compensation on the principle that, although not a formal employee, his contributions had still earned him the right to a paycheck. Though not technically a skimming incident, this demand of Will’s partakes of the same right to earn ethic.

The theoretical principle unifying these and comparable right to earn defenses is this: A person in need who demonstrates a willingness to labor productively has both an unqualified right to do so and also an unqualified right to be fairly compensated for the labor he or she performs. Also according to this alternative ethical framework, the right to earn supersedes all other claims on, or rights over, property. Those who are needy and show a willingness to labor possess the right of first disposition even over and against those who own property according to the conventional liberal criteria. The right to earn, for example, trumps the right of a property
owner to keep his or her property out of circulation for self-interested reasons. According to the right to earn ethic, then, skimming is not theft, for skimming represents the just compensation of the needy for their productive labors. Out of the anti-liberal organization of worker recipients and their practice of skimming, a cogent, experience-based, anti-liberal moral economy (Thompson 1971) or form of subjectivity arises.

Despite their willingness to offer vocal defenses of the right to earn ethic in the presence of sympathetic company, however, worker recipients were all but unwilling to do so in the face of SLM and HOH leaderships. Only Will, in his straightforward demand for a formal paycheck on the basis of work done in good faith, was willing to do so. Not one worker recipient at either institution was willing to defend skimming in this fashion in the face of someone in authority, such as Martin, who regarded skimming as out and out theft. In practice, worker recipients charted the prudent middle course of exploiting FBO tolerance toward skimming on the one hand and, on the other, forging discursive solidarity among peers around the issue via the right to earn ethic. As such, the right to earn ethic was never presented as a formal challenge to the liberal norms of these FBOs, nor did the right to earn ever form the basis of an autonomous, anti-liberal institution of its own.

On the contrary, when behaviors justified by the right to earn ethic either interfered with or jeopardized FBO operations, then leaders were quick to push back and assert the authority of liberal norms. Financial and practical pressures at the SLM, for example, pushed Pastor Edley to shut down Lester’s scrapping operation and then, ultimately, drive off nearly all of the worker recipients responsible for skimming. Despite their firm conviction that they had the right to earn out of the SLM stores, not a single worker recipient ever challenged Pastor Edley’s decision to reorient policy in these ways. More successfully, Will at the HOH managed to secure back pay.
from Pastor Bell, though it took the intervention of an officer of the court and ultimately ruined his relationship with the HOH for good. Will did not win the philosophical battle. His win, in other words, was not a win for the right to earn ethic. Pastor Bell acquiesced to Will’s demands for the sake of expediency, and that moment represented an HOH anomaly rather than the first stage in a policy shift. In every instance, then, practices founded upon the right to earn ethic, skimming in particular, eventually conflicted with the liberal norms of the FBOs within which they had been surreptitiously operating. And in every instance, the institutional arrangements that supported the right to earn ethic were smashed and erased as a social force.

In order to see the deeper meaning of these patterns, it is necessary to examine the issues surrounding the right to earn ethic through the lens of Marxist praxis theory. As summarized above, that theory defines truly dissident praxis as praxis that advances the social power or embeddedness of structural relationships that are antithetical to those that characterize the prevailing status quo, whatever that status quo is at a given point in space and time. Such a praxis is realized when the following conditions hold: One, institutional arrangements exist that are structured accordingly to objective relationships antithetical to the objective relationships characterizing the status quo. Two, subjects engage dialectically with these dissident spaces such that the antithetical objective relationships are inscribed at the level of consciousness as well. And, three, this dialectical relationship between subject and object evolves synergistically in such a way that the relationships characterizing the dissident mode of social life grow at the expense the relationships that characterize the status quo, up to and including the point of revolution. Out of a commitment to this theory, Marxist and Marxist-inspired political movements have everywhere stressed the principle that empirical praxis is a prerequisite of subjective transformation (Fantasia 1988; Thompson 1966).
This praxis theory provides a powerful interpretative framework for penetrating the deeper meaning of the FBO-worker recipient relationship. First note that, although small, informal, and nascent, worker recipient collectives in both the SLM and HOH constituted anti-liberal institutional arrangements that were based upon the dissident principles of collectivism and egalitarianism, with skimming being one manifestation of this matrix. Worker recipients, by dialectically engaging with these objective relationships, have the subjective iteration of these principles inscribed within their own subjectivities. Belief in, and espousal of, the right to earn ethical framework is one outcome of this process. Note, critically, that the right to earn ethic embodies a categorical repudiation of the principle of working-class dependence that represents one of the relational pillars of capitalist society. From a dissident praxis, dissident subjectivities flow. Given all of these considerations, worker recipient collectives of the sort described here appear to have potential as bases for a socially efficacious anti-liberal praxis.

Yet at both the SLM and HOH, worker recipient arrangements that presented substantive challenges to liberal norms were abolished by leaders who invoked the liberal property rights vouchsafed to them by both the FBO governing structure and the norms of the wider society at large. The emergence of an anti-liberal institutional base and praxis within the confines of liberal FBOs was only ever tolerated to the extent that these had little negative effect on organizational operations. As the anti-liberal transformative potential began to advance, however, as, that is, the dialectical praxis of anti-liberal norms began to build dissident momentum, the process was halted by the disproportionate power of the liberal establishment. The contradiction between the two logics was overpowering, and the weaker logic was easily overpowered. Note that conservative outcomes have not been achieved because worker recipients were converted, through their engagement with FBOs, into reliable neoliberal subjects.
(cf. Cruikshank 1999; Larner 2000; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:13). On the contrary, the collective agency they demonstrated through their engagement actually fostered their radicalization, but the power inequalities at play stifled their efforts. Only on the basis of autonomous organizations will dissident working-class praxis make strides vis-à-vis liberal structural relationships.

The relevant histories also, however, reveal the people attracted to the worker recipient role as people of talent and influence. As witnessed in the perseverance of Lester, the resourcefulness of Cynthia, the charisma of Will, and the confidence of Andy, worker recipients are people who, given different circumstances, might easily serve as organizers and leaders among the unemployed and underemployed peers who have also been excluded from the formal economy. When the objective relationships of the worker recipient matrix favored it, these people embraced an egalitarian praxis and championed an egalitarian ethic accordingly, one of their own making in fact. When that collapsed, however, they were cast back into a dislocated and atomized postindustrial city where opportunities for autonomous working-class praxis are, at present, nonexistent. Their objective circumstances incline them to forms of organization and subjectivity that constitute anti-liberal working-class dissent. By being drawn into liberal FBOs, however, these dissident energies are channeled into what cannot help but be political dead ends.

The net effect of the FBO-worker recipient relationship, then, is to retard the development of autonomous working-class institutions by siphoning off potential leaders and organizers. In this way, the FBO-worker recipient relationship ultimately functions without design or intent—like the FBO-conventional recipient relationship before it—to facilitate the reproduction of capitalist social relationships in environments where objective conditions might otherwise foster vigorous, transformative dissent. This conclusion complements the additional
observation of chapter six that FBO missions are, at the veritable behest of grant makers, designed in ways that prevent anything but conservative, individualistic orientations toward social problems.

f. FBOs and the Reproduction of Racial Inequality

Section e, with subsections devoted to conventional and worker recipients alike, advanced a series of arguments concerning the class-based significance of FBO operations in postindustrial America. The present section, by contrast, aims to develop from the Plainfield data a hypothesis of potentially equal significance regarding the relationship between FBOs and the reproduction of racial inequality. Doing so requires revisiting the pertinent ethnographic evidence of chapters three through eight, particularly the chapter seven data that concerns the uneven geographical development of Plainfield’s nutritional subsector and faith-based sphere more generally. The hypothesis advanced here (and awaiting the research of future scholars to confirm or disconfirm) is that, in situations where faith-based social capital plays a powerful role in shaping charitable redistribution, it is likely that, as in Plainfield, redistributive flows intensify rather than mitigate racial inequality.

As was evident throughout chapters three through eight, the Plainfield area is home to a vigorous community of FBOs and privately generated FBO resource flows. As a consequence, a robust groundswell of voluntary redistributive flows circulates throughout the county day in and day out. In the fall 2008 Community Night of Thanks, for example, private citizens and organizations raised several hundred thousand dollars for a faith-based homeless shelter in the city with extensive ties to affluent suburban megachurches. And for its part, the comparably privileged SLM was regularly deluged with valuable donations, often without solicitation of any
kind. So great were SLM inflows by the end of summer 2009, in fact, that Pastor Julie’s dream of being open seven days a week was approaching realization. As these examples indicate, Protestant Evangelicals—as individuals, churches, and parachurch organizations—play an especially prominent role in sustaining the local charitable groundswell. On account of the relative homogeneity of the local population, non-Christian involvement in the Plainfield charity scene is modest at best.

A host of other data sources and third-person observations support the present ethnographic description of the Plainfield area charitable community as an especially generous one (see Mohan et. al 2006 on the importance of subregional scale factors in driving high voluntarism rates). As detailed in chapter six, Charles County is home to scores of charitable foundations, the six largest of which have assets exceeding half a billion dollars. The chief beneficiaries of foundation largesse are the more than 1,400 registered 501©3s in the county and the people whom these organizations serve. Comparative voluntarism rates provide strong evidence of Charles County’s eleemosynary vigor. According to a United Way survey, nearly fifty-two percent of county adults served as a volunteer at least once between September 2007 and September 2008. Over roughly the same period, however, only twenty-six percent of all American adults did so.

Many well-qualified observers have commented upon the comparative vigor of Charles County voluntarism, as well. One journalist, filing an election report from Plainfield for a major national newspaper, touted the city’s “spirit of voluntarism” as one of its exemplary traits. Likewise, in early 2009, the Plainfield paper interviewed a woman who had relocated to the area in order to care for an ailing relative. “I do like the level of people in Charles County who want to get involved as far as volunteers,” she remarked. “I never saw that before in New York.
People really take the initiative to get involved and help out. That’s a wonderful thing about here.

In other words, then, the Plainfield area is a place where the Armies of Compassion prophesied by Marvin Olasky and summoned by George W. Bush have materialized (Olasky 2000). What the Plainfield data demonstrate, however, was that absolute charitable generosity does not necessarily entail the equitable distribution of charitable resources. On the contrary, in Plainfield, some working-class neighborhoods are far better served by the faith-based groundswell than others. The general neglect of Daletown, the city’s poorest and most heavily African-American neighborhood, showed this most clearly. At the HOH (the ethnographic window into Daletown dearth), shortages of all kinds harried program operations: too few volunteers to administer the tutoring program, poor turnout at the spring fundraiser, not enough grocery bags to meet existing needs, and more. Resource dearth at the HOH translated into a relative paucity of skimming opportunities for volunteers there vis-à-vis their SLM peers across town, as the case of Cynthia vividly showed. Complementing these ethnographic insights, the data organized and presented in chapter seven confirmed nutritional subsector unevenness at the scale of the city. When one African-American professional who was born and raised in Plainfield learned of these data, she responded knowingly that “Daletown has been left for dead.”

Chapter seven developed a schema for explaining the uneven geographical development of faith-based charity in Plainfield. The beginning premise there was that the scale of faith-based social capital possessed by the leadership of a given FBO shapes, more than any other factor, the level of private groundswell support that organization enjoys. FBOs high on the social capital metric enjoy robust support while the inverse is also true. At the scale of the neighborhood, well-supported neighborhoods are those which contain one or more FBOs possessing a high
degree of faith-based social capital. For a variety of reasons, both historical and contemporary, Daletown lacks FBOs that possess high levels of faith-based social capital. Yet because mobility constraints are common among the poor, faith-based resources must be proximate to be accessible. Without intentionality or even awareness on the part of donors, then, the uneven charitable groundswell of Plainfield actually exacerbates racial inequality and intensifies white privilege within the city’s working class (for other examples of faith-based activity exacerbating various forms of inequality see the following: Freidus 2010; Goode 2006)

The purpose of the present section, then, is to develop these Plainfield insights into a general hypothesis of potentially wider applicability, one that will perhaps apply in any setting where a private faith-based groundswell injects redistributive flows into an already-unequal social landscape. The approach taken here toward achieving this end rests upon interpreting private faith-based activity in light of its similarities to and differences from the capitalist marketplace. As one critical point of similarity, both capitalist markets and private faith-based spheres are constituted through the freely executed and largely uncoordinated actions of myriad private individuals and groups, hence the groundswell concept of the present account. Both the capitalist market and the faith-based sphere are, in other words, emergent totalities that exist over and above the individual actions and exchanges through which they are constituted. As an emergent totality, moreover, the faith-based sphere taken as a whole—like the capitalist market

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63 The argument of this section aims to present an evidence-based hypothesis ripe for further study, not a definitive conclusion. As such, the hypothesis is developed around ideal type conceptions of a laissez-faire capitalist market and an equally laissez-faire faith-based sphere. Although these ideal types ignore the messy realities of government intervention in the former case and public-private faith-based partnerships in the latter, the hypothesis here is meant to hold true only to the extent that such laissez-faire models obtain. If a given faith-based sphere, for example, shows a high degree of private faith-based redistribution, then the racially unequal impact of those redistributive flows will be higher there than in a place where, all other things being equal, a lesser scale of private charity prevails.
when taken as a whole—exhibits properties and produces effects that are separate from the properties and effects characteristic of any of the whole’s constitutive parts.

These important points of similarity notwithstanding, however, faith-based spheres and capitalist markets differ on the pivotal dimension of structuration. This is to say, in other words, that the forces or factors that structure, pattern, and give shape to the myriad actions constitutive of market economies and faith-based spheres differ in fateful ways. In the case of the capitalist marketplace, of course, the invisible hand of competition structures the maximizing behavior of individuals and organizations that operate in the context of commercial freedom. Competition plays no such role in disciplining or structuring the actions of individuals and organizations that constitute the faith-based sphere. What does serve as the faith-based counterpart to economic competition, however, is the distribution of faith-based social capital. As seen in the case of Plainfield, it is this, the distribution of faith-based social capital, that structures or gives order to the myriad individual and organizational actions that constitute and reconstitute the faith-based sphere on a daily basis.

It is important to note that, whether considering either competition or faith-based social capital, the role of these as structuring principles is apparent only at the scale of the totality, only, that is, when these principles are derived from patterns rendered visible by analysis of the whole. Whether with respect to either the capitalist market or the faith-based sphere, the sum total of the constitutive parts is greater than the parts themselves, and the whole has properties and effects that are entirely its own. In fact, the nature of the structuring principle is often invoked to explain attributes or effects of the totality. This mode of argumentation is especially common in economic analysis. Liberal (and neoliberal) economists argue, for example, that unfettered competition promotes efficiency and thus stimulates high overall growth rates. Social
Democrats frequently defend public spending on the grounds that free markets are unable to realize essential public goods on their own. And for their part, Marxist political economists argue that the universal imperative to accumulate capital ultimately renders capitalism an inherently crisis-prose mode of production. Also critically, as a model for the present account, are those Marxist analyses that explain the uneven development of economic activity as an outgrowth of the uneven geographical distribution of opportunities for capital accumulation (Harvey 2006; Smith 2008). All of these illustrations, whatever their differences, share an acceptance of the axiom that the principle responsible for structuring a totality can produce attributes that characterize only the system as a whole.

In the case of Plainfield, of course, the distribution of faith-based social capital constituted the charitable groundswell into a sphere that, at the scale of the whole, exhibited a particular form of uneven geographical development that actually exacerbated racial inequality within the city’s working class. The foremost contribution this dissertation has to make on the subject of faith-based activity and racial inequality is an evidence-based hypothesis that awaits future confirmation or disconfirmation and says this: There are strong reasons to believe that, rather than being anomalous, racially unequal outcomes similar to those evident in Plainfield are widespread throughout American cities.

To the extent that a given faith-based sphere is constituted by free individuals and organizations acting largely independent of one another, then the redistributive flows of that faith-based sphere will be structured by the distribution of faith-based social capital. And where this is the case, then it is more likely true than not that the redistributive flows of this sphere intensify rather than mitigate existing racial inequalities. It is more likely true than not, in other words, that faith-based redistributive flows reproduce the in the faith-based sphere the inequities
that characterize the preexisting social matrix from which they arise. This assertion is perfectly compatible with the obvious fact that specific instances of charitable redistribution always represent an improvement in circumstances for a given recipient, for it is still possible that a single act of charity is part of an overall pattern of charity that bestows more onto some than onto others. The former outcome represents an absolute improvement for a single recipient, while the latter outcome is a function of relative effects produced by the faith-based sphere taken as a whole (for additional citations showing that volunteer activity does not always correspond with levels of social need, see Fyfe and Milligan 2003; Wolch and Geiger 1983; Wolpert 1977).

The reasons accounting for the hypothesized tendency of redistributive flows to exacerbate racial inequality are relatively straightforward. Social capital is, like income and wealth, distributed unequally throughout all modern societies, America included. Moreover, the unequal patterning of social capital inequality mirrors the unequal patternings of income and wealth inequality (Lin 2000; Pichler and Wallace 2009). Those who are high on one of those dimensions tend also to be high on the others and vice versa. Thus, high income and high wealth donors are going to tend to direct their redistributive flows to institutions headed by people with high levels of faith-based social capital. In terms of the racial dynamics at play, this means that whites will tend to give to white FBOs, which is precisely the outcome that occurs in Plainfield. African-American FBOs, however, which tend to possess lower levels of social capital on average, will want for resource donations accordingly (Farnsley 2000). Furthermore, because of persistent racial segregation, African-American FBOs tend to be based in African-American neighborhoods. Thus, additional research is likely to show that, as in Plainfield, faith-based spheres heavily structured by the distribution of faith-based social capital will tend to favor
slightly better off working-class whites than working-class members of other racial groups, particularly African-Americans.

These observations validate both Robert Putnam’s assertion that “social capital, particularly social capital that bonds us with others like us, often reinforces social stratification” (2000:279) and the contention of others that the uneven distribution of social capital can compound other forms of inequality (Bourdieu 1985; Hall 2002; Lin 2000). According to the present hypothesis, the particular mechanism by which faith-based redistribution intensifies stratification—namely, the structuring power of unequally distributed faith-based social capital—is a property of the sphere as a whole and visible only at that scale. Contemporary scholars of voluntarism and FBOs would do well to keep this in mind. A number of leading figures in the subfield have recently been organizing around a theoretical lens that stresses the “progressive” character of individual FBOs (Beaumont and Cloke 2012). The lesson of Plainfield, however, is that, depending on the scale of analysis, one and the same redistributive act can simultaneously bring aid to a person and also contribute to the widening of inequality between that person and others.

Dealing with these contradictions will require faith-based policies that attend to redistributive effects at all geographic scales simultaneously. Policies that judiciously leverage the potential benefits of macro-level organizing principles such as centralization and coordination seem to be promising avenues for evidence-based experimentation (Campbell 2002; Kemper and Adkins 2005; Kline 2010; Pipes and Ebaugh 2002). If the present hypothesis regarding the relationship between FBO activity and the intensification of racial inequality turn out to be true, then such policies would be indispensable in the effort to craft faith-based spheres that are just as well as compassionate. Attempts in such directions will, however, have to
contend with the oft-observed fact that the best efforts of many well-intentioned FBOs have been thwarted by the racial, ethnic, and cultural cleavages that mark American cities (Berrien et al. 2000; Coffin 2000; Gamm 2009; Harris 2001; Hehir 2000).

g. Poverty and Competing Modes of Transformation

There remains, at this point, one final argument worth making, an argument that measures the ideology of behaviorism against the evidence from Plainfield. As was reviewed extensively in chapter one and covered ethnographically in chapters three through eight, the behaviorist ideology interprets poverty as an outgrowth of the supposedly dysfunctional and pernicious lifeways of the poor themselves. The popularity of behaviorist moralism did much to whip up support for the faith-based neoliberalization of American welfare policies in 1996 and 2001. In the imagination of Marvin Olasky, the leading theorist of faith-based neoliberalization, FBOs meet the essential “need” for “equipping and empowering” the poor, something that the mere “redistribution” of public welfare fails to produce (2000:31). FBOs would succeed where other models fail, in other words, because only the former promise to facilitate the transformation of ill-equipped and disempowered poor people into paragons of liberal vigor.

The evidence from Plainfield, however, exposes the disjuncture between the ideology of behaviorism and the fine-grained ethnographic facts of poverty in Plainfield and other American cities. It is hardly the first ethnographic account to do so (Goode 2009; Goode and Maskovsky 2001a; Leacock 1971). Many others have argued that, when poverty is examined through the lens of actual people rather than the lens of anti-welfare stereotypes, then behaviorism is discredited as a political economic explanation for why some have so little while others have so much. As a legitimate inference from the foregoing Plainfield data—and one that must,
moreover, continually fight against marginalization in American culture—this point bears repeating. Time and again, through their performances of worthiness, the poor recipients of FBO charity demonstrated that they possess the traits and abilities that behaviorist detractors continually fault them for lacking. None are so blind as those who will not see.

On the issue of work did recipients—mostly worker recipients but some conventional recipients too—make their point most clearly. Not only were these men and women widely eager to work for a living, many of them actually are employed in the formal economy, albeit in low-wage, insecure positions. Many others continue to doggedly seek out formal employment despite the abysmal odds and regular disappointments. Furthermore, many recipients of FBO charity use contacts they make there with middle class people, particularly the pastors and other organizational leaders, to solicit help in finding work. As an illustrative anecdote, Will’s short-lived attempt to operate a job referral service in Daletown resulted in a steady stream of young men, mostly African-American, making inquiries at his apartment door each morning. Like everyone else, poor people want to be interpersonally useful and socially relevant. The causal arrow tends to run from unemployment and alienation to behavioral crises rather than the other way around.

More important than even these encounters and attempted encounters with the formal economy, the present dissertation demonstrated that, habitual and productive work remains the norm even among the chronically unemployed. Respectfully, creatively, and determinedly, the poor are working day in and day out, irrespective of their relationship to the formal labor market. Lester and Big Doug are scrapping their way back and forth across Charles County, while Virginia collects the cans and pie tins from the SLM kitchen. Gene is digging postholes off the books, while Will is volunteering to build his résumé in order to be more employable following a
stint in prison. Cynthia sold food stamps and donated blood plasma until she was barred from doing so. Others are operating unlicensed daycares, hustling in the college loan game, doing odd jobs, selling drugs, and sometimes also their bodies. One of the unique contributions of this research has been to show that many poor people seize upon FBOs as spaces for productive, meaningful labor. The resilience and creativity of the postindustrial poor are achievements deserving of respect (Goode 2009:291). Day after day, despite the countless obstacles, these men and women prove themselves to be people of talent, energy, and worth. Day after day, that is, they prove the behaviorist ideology wrong.

Beyond merely exposing the fallacies of behaviorism, however, the Plainfield evidence also indicates that structural conditions rather than individual ones represent the leading cause of poverty in postindustrial America. Far more so than indolence or unwed motherhood, for example, the shortage of jobs that pay a living wage sustains perpetually high poverty rates in postindustrial America (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003:327). That a large number of people with useful skills and a willingness to work remain unemployed, underemployed, and poor betrays the local economy’s inability to absorb them. Many well-informed Plainfield civic leaders shared this view. The head of a local food nonprofit in the county remarked in 2009 that, “People think being poor is a choice. That’s the farthest thing from the truth. They’re working poor, with two or three jobs, and they still can’t make it. They’re the people making life comfortable, while making the least amount of money, with no benefits.”

Even Marvin Olasky, tribune of behaviorism, has in the past observed that a “strong economy” where “jobs are readily available” is valuable in helping people escape poverty (2000:37). Olasky and the worker recipients of Plainfield FBOs, however, differ over what the principles of distributive justice dictate as a response to poverty. In lamenting poverty while also
holding liberal property rights as sacrosanct, Olasky and many others in the mainstream favor a model in which the economy grows and the people compete to fill the finite number of opportunities thereby created. The right to earn ethic that was borne out of collective and egalitarian relations of production, however, resents and opposes the working-class dependence that is inherent in such an arrangement. That ethic, by contrast, aspires toward a radically different kind of society, one in which the right of working people to live supersedes the right of capital to accumulate. It will not be the transformation of poor people that resolves the poverty issue once and for all but the transcendence of those social relations that have poverty as their necessary consequence. And the latter project is something that, although unwittingly, the Evangelical FBOs of the present by and large impede.
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