

April 29, 2004

**Economic Issues and Problems III  
Poverty, Genteel and Brutal**

Read: Edin: *Few Good Men: Why Poor Mothers Stay Single*  
Karla and the Armstrongs: *Two Oral Histories of Homeless American Families*  
Begin Stack: *Call to Home*: 1-44

I. Structural Oppression: Analysis of the urban poor

A. What do we mean by the phrase “structural oppression”?

1. All of the ways in which political and economic structures in a society oppress groups of people within it

a. We have already spoken of some of these in class and you’ve read a great deal by now

B. What are the “structures” of structural oppression?

1. The economy moves from a manufacturing economy

2. To one where the good jobs require much more education

3. And the bad jobs are more numerous

a. Minimum wage

b. No chance for advancement

c. No job security

1) Coontz’s figures on the growth of temp companies

2) Manpower, Inc., an employment agency for temps, is now the country’s largest employer

d. No benefits

1) Some companies lay off employees right before benefits are to kick in—5 months and 28 days

4. Where real wages—what a paycheck could actually buy

a. Is less

- 1) Note: this is *not* inflation
  - 2) These measures are determined after adjusting for inflation
5. When such conditions characterize an entire community, it can look like a third-world country
    - a. If a factory that supplied a lot of jobs pulls out
    - b. Some communities have such a low tax base they can't afford to pay police or firemen
  6. Or a whole region deteriorates: "the rust belt"
- II. The notion of "structural oppression" does not include every variable we need in order to be able to study poverty
- A. Culture is an important additional one
    1. What role does it play?
    2. Some authors writing about families and poverty assign it a lot of importance<sup>1</sup>
    3. The notion of "the culture of poverty"
      - a. The idea that somehow people "learn" to be poor
        - 1) Or the idea that their culture doesn't provide them with the right knowledge and skills to get out of poverty
    4. A well-known anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, coined this term to describe the people in Spanish Harlem in the 1960s
      - a. Published a book titled *La Vida*
        - 1) Is compellingly written, became a best seller
      - b. Life-history accounts: thousands of pages of notes on one extended family
        - 1) Most of the women were involved in prostitution

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this discussion is taken from Philippe Bourgois, 1995: *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- c. Lewis “explained” their situation
    - 1) By focusing almost exclusively on the intergenerational transmission of destructive values and behaviors among individuals within families
  - d. His notion of culture was one of micro-culture—*within* an extended family
  - e. Saw poverty as more a function of thought processes than of opportunities, physical environment
  - f. He didn’t specifically claim that other factors were not important, he just didn’t address them
5. Important effects of his work:
- a. Scared a generation of social scientists away from working in the inner city
  - b. Not all: Carol Stack’s earlier book
6. Lots of politicians and scholars found the theory extremely useful
- a. The most famous was Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan
  - b. Who published a report in 1965 mentioned by Coontz and other authors
  - c. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, US Dept. of Labor
    - 1) Concluded that the black family—its structure, its culture—explained the problems Blacks were facing
    - 2) In particular female-headed families robbed men of their self-esteem because such families were “matriarchal”
  - d. Book was enormously influential
  - e. Allowed people to assign blame to Blacks themselves
7. The legacy continues to this day in positions that argue:
- a. Restore family values—it’s their culture at fault

- b. On the surface this explanation may seem reasonable: we know that children learn the values, etc. from their parents
  - 1) We certainly can see people choosing to behave in ways that are clearly self-destructive, criminal, unreasonable, etc.
- c. So we explain poverty, family structure, welfare, unemployment, and out-of-wedlock births using this model
- d. We can come up with a long list for inner cities:
  - 1) Gangs
  - 2) Drive-by shootings that kill children
  - 3) Drugs—HIV
  - 4) Crack-addicted newborns
  - 5) Prostitution and promiscuity leading to
    - a) More HIV
    - b) Very early sexual activity
    - c) Cases of incest
    - d) Unwed teenagers giving birth to unwanted babies
  - 6) An indifference that makes the neighborhood more dangerous
    - a) For example, people not reporting criminal behavior they observe to the police
    - b) Remember in the Rubin article the Tomlinsons' worries for their children in the projects they had to live in?
  - 7) High levels of many kinds of violence
    - a) Domestic abuse
    - b) Rubin's comment that the black families she interviewed reported much higher rates of violence, including that experienced by children

- e. Even the families that *aren't* abandoning their children or engaging in criminal activities
    - 1) Like those described by Newman
    - 2) Don't look like middle-class ones
    - 3) They look "matriarchal" and disordered
  - B. Easy to see how "culture" can be seen to be the cause:
    - 1. Because clearly people are choosing to do these things
    - 2. Clearly *we* don't do these things, and so
      - a. Must be a different "culture" in Lewis's and Moynihan's sense: the values, etc., taught by the older generation to the younger
  - C. This kind of explanation is appealing for a number of reasons:
    - 1. We want clear explanations, we want to assess blame, and we want quick fixes
      - a. Remember the talk radio interview of Coontz: a caller asked: "then whose neck *should* I wring?"
      - b. Remember Baca Zinn's point about "culture-as-villain," "family as villain," or "welfare-as villain"?
    - 2. And if at all possible, we don't want to have to blame ourselves
- III. Structural oppression and culture interact in complicated ways
- A. Something like inner city poverty is produced by a multitude of factors
  - B. Racism
    - 1. Tomlinson's (the black man interviewed by Rubin) explanation for why his father-in-law was shot by a policeman
      - a. As Coontz says, she has a teenage son and she doesn't worry about his being shot when he's out at night
      - b. But black parents in cities do, and they're justified in doing so

2. Racism is part of our culture, and it has structural consequences
    - a. Prices are often higher in grocery stores in the inner city
      - 1) No competition because there's no transportation
      - 2) So the price is determined by what the market will bear
      - 3) Store owners will justify higher prices by pointing to danger of being shot, higher insurance premiums, etc.
    - b. Racism results in some people of color paying more in inner cities, for insurance and mortgages, and higher rates of unemployment
  - C. Latino culture: some of the values immigrants bring with them are singularly maladapted for life in Spanish Harlem
  - D. Structural economic dislocations working class people have faced in the last generation
    1. Shifts in the economy to information and service sectors
    2. When combined with racism:
    3. Will have a greater impact on non-whites than whites
- IV. Example of Spanish Harlem and the rest of NYC's "inner city" neighborhoods
- A. Nationwide, economists have documented that the restructuring of the US economy around service jobs
    1. Has resulted in
      - a. Unemployment
      - b. Income reduction
      - c. Weaker unions
      - d. Dramatic erosions in worker's benefits at the entry level
  - B. What are the cultural dislocations of this new economy?
    1. Office-work service jobs have multiplied

2. Dramatic expansion of the finance, insurance, and real estate sector of NYC (FIRE)
  3. Work in professional offices is the best route for inner-city youths to find entry-level jobs if they want to be upwardly mobile
    - a. But these jobs—mail-room clerks, photocopiers, messengers in the corridors
    - b. Require a wrenching cultural confrontation with the upper-middle-class white world
    - c. Require obedience to the norms of high-rise, office-corridor culture
    - d. In direct contradiction to street culture's definitions of personal dignity, especially for males who are socialized not to accept public subordination
  4. Can these young men succeed? Yes. But it's extremely hard
    - a. Simply learning what is proper clothing for the office isn't automatic from looking at subway ads and watching TV
    - b. You don't wave a magic wand and get rid of your culture, exchanging it for middle-class taste, values, knowledge, feelings
  5. When they fail, our reaction is it's their fault: they're lazy, they're flashy, they've got attitude, they've got Puerto Rican machismo and so won't work under a woman boss
    - a. They can't speak properly, they're functionally illiterate
    - b. It's their culture
- C. But they *want* jobs; all the crack dealers Bourgois studied had held jobs, wanted steady employment (didn't make that much money, and highly dangerous)
1. Especially hard for young men to get traditional unskilled work because
    - a. Many middle-class and stable working-class families have moved out
    - b. Factory jobs difficult to get to—lousy public transportation
    - c. Many institutions that used to help have left

- 1) The Church remains, and those are desperately poor
- d. So the way most of this sector gets jobs—through informal methods, connections and networks—is lost

V. Final points on cause versus correlation

A. If different families move in and out of poverty while the rate remains the same

1. Then we cannot conclude that a cultural “pathology” is inherited over generations
2. The occasional success stories
  - a. Don’t allow us to conclude that structural factors aren’t making such successes much less likely

B. If, unlike whites, 2/3 black female-headed families were part of two-parent families which were already poor before the breakup

1. We cannot conclude that the breakup caused the poverty; more likely, the poverty contributed to the breakup
2. Feminization of poverty is the other cause

C. *Do you understand the difference?* Correlations as opposed to causes

1. Yes, if you are a mother and get a divorce, chances are that your family income will decline
2. Poverty following divorce does not mean that divorce *causes* poverty
3. Any more than disabled children *cause* divorce or desertion
  - a. Even though there’s a correlation between having disabled children and greater likelihood of the father leaving

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