Commentary
Culture of Poverty: Don't Call it a Comeback!

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A recent *New York Times* article chronicled a "comeback" of cultural analysis in poverty studies among contemporary sociologists. The article states:

> "in the overwhelmingly liberal ranks of academic sociology and anthropology. …Now, after decades of silence, these scholars are… conceding that culture and persistent poverty are enmeshed. 'We've finally reached the stage where people aren't afraid of being politically incorrect,' said Douglas S. Massey, a sociologist at Princeton who has argued that Moynihan was unfairly maligned."

The article also pointed to the reluctance that many younger sociologists experience in being associated with the long-infamous culture of poverty framework, popularized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965. The *Times* got it wrong on one important count; the culture of poverty approach has never quite lost its footing within academia or broader policy circles. However, given the mountain of work refuting this discourse (see Ryan 1971; Katz 1990; Reed 1991; O'Connor 2001; Royster 2003; hooks 2004) we should give serious consideration to why the culture of poverty argument persists.

Though there's nothing particularly off-base about analyzing the cultural aspects of poverty, the culture of poverty framework scrutinizes the daily activities, lifestyle choices, behavioral patterns, in short, the *habitus* of poor communities as causal factors of poverty itself. It is worth noting that the original authors of the concept, Oscar Lewis (1961, 1966) and, separately, Michael Harrington (1962), did not in fact make a causal argument about culture perpetuating poverty. Both used the term to describe the coping mechanisms of poor people in response to the inequalities associated with capitalism, including bouts of struggle and resistance. It was in the interpretation of Moynihan's infamous report on the state of the black family in the US that the current meaning of the culture of poverty was recuperated for other purposes: to assign defects to the poor, and poor blacks primarily. This conceptual shift has had devastating consequences.

Pathologizing the poor, rather than critically engaging the structural causes of poverty itself, has justified myriad policies exacerbating inequality, including nearly four decades of urban disinvestment and subsequent gentrification, the erosion of household income supports for the most needy, and spending priorities that favor prisons over schools. An impressive turn of events considering that Moynihan's report originally called for a political antidote, including job creation, to rising numbers of blacks on welfare. Issued just after the launch of President Johnson's Great Society programs, including the War on Poverty (which owed considerable acknowledgment to Harrington), Moynihan's "The Negro Family" gave credence to the notion that the poor are to blame for being poor. Despite Moynihan's interest in strengthening the Great Society programs, the work was quickly and easily employed by conservatives to argue that the poor are beyond liberal rescue. The result has been the justification for dismantling state interventions, and to distinguish the supposed "deviant" poor from the "deserving" poor. Moreover, Moynihan's report, which used the term "matriarchal" to disparage female-headed African-American households, helped inspire a reverberating wave of anti-single-mother, "welfare queen," and "family values" rhetoric. Seen in this light, the revised culture of poverty framework has done irreparable violence to the most disenfranchised populations.

Why then might this theory, which woefully confuses effect for cause, continue to be embraced?

Part of the answer may reside in the analytic flexibility of the concept of culture itself; nothing social occurs outside of cultural conditions, and vice versa. Yet why focus on the cultural "inadequacies" of the poor to explain poverty? Solely cultural explanations tend to obfuscate systems of class, race, and gender as hierarchical structures: structures that change slowly over time yet are constantly in formation. In producing a cultural "other," the culture of poverty approach provides a presumably white, middle-class audience with an easily digestible narrative about why the poor, especially poor blacks, are different than you and me, in a sad reversal of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous phrase.

Which leads us to another possible reason for the argument's staying power: the maintenance of racism and white supremacy. Given that about half of impoverished Americans are white, the racialization of poverty needs to be continually re-theorized in order to survive in high places, like government and policy think tanks. We understand Moynihan's report as having happily provided such a conception at a time when it was sorely needed—smack in the middle of an era marked by anti-colonial, civil rights, Black Power and feminist struggles. The Moynihan report intrinsically normalized the nuclear, white, heterosexual family as the bellwether of personal success, children's future opportunity, and national political stability. This correlation, in other words, was not coincidental.

Theories are, in effect, stories about the world and how it works. The story told by the culture of poverty is not one of discrimination and inequality, but actually one about privilege – specifically what it is like to live without the privileges that "normative" families take for granted. It is a narrative that does not compel middle-class whites to question their own relationship to the gender, class, or racial

structure, which is one of privilege earned at the expense of "others." Relatedly, it is also a story about placing moral responsibility on the poor to act middle-class, disregarding the material means by which middle-class culture sustains itself. The secret to the culture of poverty's persistence, then, might best be located in its breathtaking ability to simplify, segregate, and shame – all in one fell swoop.

And here, possibly, is where social science may have also played a critical part in continuing the culture of poverty framework. Discussions of poverty – and its racialization – cannot be exsanguinated of class analysis, if only because poverty results first and foremost from the machinations of capitalism. That the culture of poverty framework—which argues for the independence of class and culture—constrains our ability to understand how the two are in fact conjoined is only more reason to abandon it. Class, as a social phenomenon and analytic category, has suffered from a period of "benign neglect" that Moynihan proposed would benefit the American discourse on race. But then class theorists have been too quick to analyze race and racism as merely outcroppings of capitalism. Just as scholars of imperialism are more likely to theorize race in relation to prevailing systems of political power and global economic supremacy, those who study poverty and its racialization would do well to contextualize their work from a similarly critical vantage point.

What is needed then is not the continuation of an arrogant liberalism that seeks to save the poor from themselves, but rather a sociology that disrupts isolated (and isolating) understandings of poverty as a social problem that can be analyzed apart from the process of stratification itself. This is particularly crucial now, as high unemployment and rising income inequality push more and more people into the "fear of falling" from increasingly insecure class positions. It is unfathomable that such large-scale political and economic shifts might go unexamined by scholars of stratification in the current climate. If anything needs to be "saved" here, it is a focus on the processes that gives rise to systemic poverty, to say nothing of the organizations and movements that seek to counter such processes.

As the *Times* piece attests, many young scholars do recognize the need to engage in cultural analysis – but not to pathologize poor people. Instead, a growing number seek to understand how people are coming together to question their abandonment, and to raise collective solutions to its systemic causes. Such analysis involves not just questions of culture, but also structure and agency, pointing us towards a more dynamic understanding of poverty within the larger social system. We stress here the importance of doing so within academic discourse and in plain view; in other words, through an engaged public sociology. The power of the culture of poverty argument owes much to Moynihan's considerable status as a public intellectual. And so while social scientists have done much to counter the legitimacy of his framework, its persistence (and apparent reemergence to *The New York Times*) suggests we need to be at least as concerned with winning arguments as we are with making them.

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