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Lemann, Wilson and Anderson: Marking the Synonymical Rise
and Fall of the "Culture of Poverty" Conceit

David W. Boles

NJIT/Rutgers-Newark/UMDNJ

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This essay will examine the “culture of poverty” conceit created and perpetuated by scholars and economists and the effect of that conceit on the urban Black population over time using Lemann’s *The Promised Land*, Wilson’s *When Work Disappears*, and Anderson’s *Code of the Street* as an argumentative core. This essay will also argue how the “culture of poverty’s” presumed putative values, beliefs and have mislabeled the Black experience in America and that the conceit of the “culture of poverty” as an intellectual argument is falling in popular scholarship even though the underlying theme of the phrase survives untouched. To understand the present one must first briefly frame current experience against the context of what has already been argued in the “culture of poverty” timeline.

In 1891 Richard Ely and General Amsa Walker founded the *American Economics Association* (AEA) where they put forth the idea that migrants from the south and east European immigrants were genetically inferior to the majority White race and the association fought to restrict migration and immigration in order to end what they believed was “race suicide” for Whites (Cherry, 1995). The Progressive movement, led by John R. Commons in 1919, brought about the first application of the “culture-of-poverty” (1995, p. 1120) idea that grew out of the AEA era and it was applied to the Black community as a reason for their disenfranchisement from mainstream society. Commons believed Blacks would only get out of that “culture of poverty” by changing their genetic structure with “crossbreeding... to rise up to the standards of European Americans.... Amalgamation is their door to assimilation. Frederick Douglas, Booker Washington, Professor Dubois are an honor to any race but they are mulattoes” (1995, p. 1121).

In 1944 Gunnar Myrdal broadened the “culture of poverty” thesis beyond Commons and the AEA in his book, *An American Dilemma*, where he rejected any genetic link to the “culture of poverty” conceit because he felt cultural deficits for the “Southern Negro” were self-created from illegitimacy, racism, family disorganization, laziness and the lack of rural work that led to the loss of family income (Myrdal & Bok, 1996). There are several historians (Nightingale, 1993) who believe Myrdal’s stereotypes were the inspirational predecessor for Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s “culture of poverty” report in the 1965 and “conceptually, the Moynihan Report was little more than an update of Myrdal’s analysis” (Cherry, 1995).

Oscar Lewis, discussing the “culture of poverty” in a 1963 treatise of the same name (Lewis, 1998), was discussing “culture of poverty” framed by Latino and Mexican experiences in that essay but his argument, augmented by the *Moynihan Report* in 1965, soon came to define the urban Black experience in America:

People with a culture of poverty have very little sense of history. They are marginal people who know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own way of life. Usually, they have neither the knowledge, the vision nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of others like themselves elsewhere in the world. In other words, they are not class conscious, although they are very sensitive indeed to status distinctions. When the poor become class conscious or members of trade union organizations, or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world they are, in my view, no longer part of the culture of poverty although they may still be desperately poor. (p. 7)

This short history of the “culture of poverty” conceit in America has a 60 year tradition in the lives of urban Blacks but in the last 10 years the “culture of poverty” phrase, but not necessarily the idea, has started to fall out of intellectual favor as demonstrated by the three core books that center this essay.

Part One: Nicholas Lemann

The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America uses the exact phrase “culture of poverty” in the book proper five times on pages 150, 151, 176, 177 and 286 (Lemann, 1992) and that “culture of poverty” count, compared to the other two books analyzed in this essay, suggests Lemann believes, on some level, in the archaeology of the past that migrant Blacks in Chicago claimed that label through bad behavior and low expectation of life that stemmed from the Southern sharecropper mentality (Lemann, 1991). Lemann begins his book along the Delta and explains how White owners in the South used to have to compete with Northern businesses seeking cheap labor. However, with the advent of mechanization in the fields, the Southern elite had to change their mode of thinking to find a way to get rid of Black laborers who, jobless and homeless, would turn to welfare and crime as a way of life. The Black migration from South to North happened quickly with the adoption of mechanization and the unprepared workers who arrived in the North were culturally and socially damaged (Weiss, 1992) in that accelerated transition.

A critic in *Commonweal* (Wycliff, 1991) has this to say about Lemann’s book:

Lemann is at his weakest when he is prescribing solutions to the dilemma of the urban underclass. It’s not that what he proposes is foolish or off-base. His ideas are pretty much the standard litany of unreconstructed poverty warriors. Rather, it’s that there is a wistful, vaguely naïve quality in the way he addresses the issue. For example, he writes... ‘if we can heal the ghettos, which are the part of the country most hurt by our current fragmentation, it will be a sign that we are on the way to a restoration of our spirit community.’ (p. 334)

Lemann was sensitive to his critics and wrote a response for *Public Interest* (Lemann, 1991) after the publication of *The Promised Land* where he defended his migration “culture of poverty” take on Black relocation into Chicago. “Black sharecropper life, by all accounts, was characterized by very high rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and violent crime, a nearly

nonexistent educational system, and a corrupt economic arrangement with plantation owners that encouraged cynicism, instability and dependency” (1991, p. 108). The Urban League, Lemann writes, was “founded on the assumption that the social problems of the ghettos could be solved in part by helping rural southern migrants adapt to city life” (1991, p. 112).

Lehman also argues that migration from South to North helped create the urban ghetto because the population of Blacks in Chicago in 1940 was less than 300,000 and by 1970 it was over a million (Lemann, 1991) and that influx of migrants led to redlining and residential segregation as migrant Blacks struggled to make the change from being 75% rural workers to 75% urban residents in the 50 year span between 1910-1960. In an answer to Lemann’s article defending *The Promised Land*, critic David Whitman wrote *The Migrants’ Tale and Ghetto Culture* (Whitman, 1991) where he accuses Lemann of being disingenuous and short on hard research: “I still conclude both that the sharecropper-underclass link is an important, dubious tenet of *The Promised Land*, and that many readers will close the book with the understanding that the great migration backfired [because it did not]” (p. 114).

Critic Albert S. Broussard, in a *The Journal of American History* review (Broussard, 1992), expands on Whitman’s concerns with Lemann’s book:

Lemann’s argument that the urban black underclass was essentially the product of the culture of southern black sharecroppers is too thinly documented to serve as much more than a hypothesis and not a particularly good one at that, since several studies have illustrated the stability of these family units, their low welfare rates, and the strong work ethic among southern rural migrants. Equally troubling is Lemann’s reliance on the use of gossip, innuendo, and black urban folklore in his narrative to explain the behavior of his subjects (pp. 1510-1511).

Lemann’s book is a marker for the beginning of the end of the “culture of poverty” conceit as the next two books in this essay will suggest. Lemann helped start a long-overdue national dialogue about Black urban poverty on a scholarly level that continues today.

William Julius Wilson took up the “culture of poverty” conceit (Wilson, 1987) from where he left off in *The Truly Disadvantaged* in *When Work Disappears*.

Part Two: William Julius Wilson

When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor uses the exact phrase “culture of poverty” in the book proper only three times on pages 72, 175 and 176 (Wilson, 1996) compared to Lemann’s five uses and that difference begins to mark a new sensitivity to that phrase – but not necessarily the idea behind the phrase – and that phrase was slowly becoming a hackneyed argument in scholarly thought and in the mainstream media. However, the phrase “urban poverty” appears 41 times in the book proper and that also signals the “culture of poverty” was being replaced with an institutional economic city argument instead of an argument that blamed a person’s cultural upbringing for their employability.

In chapter three Wilson confronts the “culture of poverty” conceit by suggesting it is blocked economic opportunities, not cultural upbringing, that create the mentality of the Black ghetto and that is why isolation (Nightingale, 1993), drugs and crime are such a big part of urban life (Wilson, 1996) “these circumstances also increase the likelihood that the residents will rely on illegitimate sources of income, thereby further weakening their attachment to the legitimate labor market (1996, p.53). Wilson believes work is more than just a way to earn money. Wilson claims a non-sharecropper economic shift happened that the Black community missed – cities used to be where goods were created but they rapidly changed into centers of information processing (Tomaszewski, 1999).

Wilson views work is the way a person structures life by creating predictability. That predictability creates a tethered reliance on a community and a city. Wilson, however, prefers a class argument for the state of Blacks in America instead of a racist explanation and that hurts

his book because by ignoring institutional racism (Massey *et al.*, 1997) he opens his book up to picking apart by those who, like Massey, contend:

Wilson cannot simply avoid the issue of race by relegating it to the background. If race is a fundamental cleavage in American life and a latent weapon against any program intended to improve the welfare of the poor in general and the black poor in particular, then social analysts ignore it at their peril.... Wilson's decision to abjure race-based policies in order to avoid political opposition strikes me as disingenuous. He is clearly prepared to promote class-based remedies that are unrealistic under current political conditions (p. 418).

Wilson wants governments to invest more heavily in the health and educational futures of children (Wilson, 1996) and he believes if the urban core can be reunited with the suburbs each side will benefit by creating common goals, but Wilson is not specific enough on how that plan would go into effect and why it is really needed. Transportation to the job is vital for the working poor but Wilson doesn't offer a plan to make the work of getting to work cheaper (Tomaszewski, 1999). Wilson knows people matter and that the long term survivability of city governments relies upon the urban poor getting up and out of poverty and into the middle class. Wilson finishes the argument of his book that WPA-like jobs can return cities and their urban poor into vibrant members of the community but he fails to address the political barriers that would likely defeat even the mention of a second WPA generation. Wilson believes "Class trumps race and gender... and *preferential racial policies* [emphasis not added] such as affirmative action, are not likely to solve the problems of joblessness and growing income inequality" (Massey *et al.*, 1997).

In a *Nature, Society and Thought* review one of Wilson's critics also claims his qualitative analysis and quantitative data are limited because "race does matter" and the disparity between Black and White employment proves that point and "affirmative action has worked" because through legislation employment for Blacks in public employment verifiably rose and

“sites of struggle must transcend the workplace” (Kerr-Ritchie, 2001) because education must be more about just a job, it must also focus on morality and values.

Wilson differs from Lemann in that he believes urban poverty is created by economic conditions and not a “culture of poverty” affectation that Southern sharecroppers brought with them to the North. Lemann and Wilson both share the desire to learn why Blacks have a disadvantaged station in life and Elijah Anderson takes the “culture of poverty” conceit to a new and curious level in his book.

Part Three: Elijah Anderson

Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City uses the exact phrase “culture of poverty” in the book proper zero times (Anderson, 1999). The disappearance of the “culture of poverty” phrase compared to Lemann and Wilson is telling because Anderson is trying to mark a shift away from the “culture of poverty” argument that permeated the national political and economic dialogue on Black Americans over the last 60 years but his attempt is disingenuous because one can argue “code of the street” is nothing more than another synonymic phrase for “culture of poverty” because if one lives in an urban core one can be “decent” and “street” but “street” is never “decent” and that one-way code-switching argument suggests a deeper level of racial and cultural stratification beyond catch phrases like “culture of poverty” and “code of the street.”

Another example of this intellectual “phrase playing” takes form in the work of Annette Lareau, author of *Unequal Childhoods*, who told me in a telephone interview (A. Lareau, personal communication, February 10, 2005) that the first round of reader feedback for her book resulted in over 90 accusations that she had written another “culture of poverty” book. Faced with that peer review, Lareau rewrote her book to bash the middle class in a “converted

cultivation” (Lareau, 2003) thesis instead. Lareau used the antonym approach to the “culture of poverty” race conceit by creating “concerted cultivation” class argument.

While Anderson did not use the “culture of poverty” phrase he does employ a variety of cultural misnomers ranging from “entrenched culture” and “street culture” on page 211 to “drug culture” on page 111 to “crack culture” on page 121 to “ghetto culture” on page 166 and “inner-city culture” on page 178. Anderson, unlike Lemann and Wilson, is breaking apart the “culture of poverty” idea into its insidious bits and pieces and some may consider that intellectually having it both ways. However, Anderson curiously goes even further in the naming game by using the phrase “persistent urban poverty” three times in the book proper on pages 147, 176 and 178. Anderson then uses the phrase “persistent poverty” – yet another synonym for the “culture of poverty” – a total of 10 times in the book proper on pages 46, 77, 93, 94, 121, 145, 156, 166, 210 and 211 (Anderson, 1999). Is there a difference between “persistent poverty” and “culture of poverty” in the way Anderson presents history and present as themes of his argument? One could contend the phrases mean the same thing and that Anderson is claiming the same ground of an old argument without using the out of favor phrase.

In his book Anderson argues “persistent poverty” in the inner city has perpetuated joblessness and created a loss of hope. Older residents who helped establish the neighborhoods, Anderson believes, have no opportunity to advance through work for the welfare of their children and they then become unable to model proper mainstream behavior for their children (“Book review: Code of the street”, 1999) and that inability to achieve successes leads to a street culture of violence, drug use and fragmented families. Unlike Lemann and Wilson, Anderson claims that surviving in the city relies on a knowledge of and an expression of the “codes of the street” that, on the “street” level, must signify a lack of education and a willingness for violence

and where morality is equated with “Whiteness” (Duncan, 2000). Anderson’s “code of the street” conceit is another synonym for “culture of poverty” – as almost exactly expressed by Myrdal in 1944 – where poor many Black residents, no matter their status in the community, are disenfranchised, broken and isolated and must forever code switch between being “street” and being “decent” while the rest of their community remains “street” and no one is ever able to leave behind ghetto expectation.

One critic in *Justice Quarterly* (Ismaili, 2001) has this to say about Anderson’s book:

Collective indifference to the plight of the truly disadvantaged has fostered the emergence of a ‘street culture’ that stands in opposition to basic norms of decency. In the most impoverished pockets of the inner city, interpersonal relations are now governed by informal rules that emphasize threat and the use of violence than civility” (p. 233)

Anderson believes people and their governments should not blame the poor living in urban ghettos for their economic condition. Anderson, like Wilson, wants to take the argument beyond the morality of cultural behavioral differences and into an economic examination of public policies and values that have created a chasm between the Black community and the mainstream White strata.

Conclusion

All three books examined in this essay emphasize, on a genuine level, the human cost Black alienation perpetuates in the forms of violence, poverty, helplessness and despair. Each book ponders the greater heights we might reach together as a nation if everyone could at least earn a living wage while claiming an equal share of the American dream. The “culture of poverty” phrase is a blanket conceit used for 60 years as an attempt to elementarily define complex issues of Black America and that phrase, and all its synonyms expressed in these books, has no real application in understanding the lives of the Black urban poor because the strange mixture of race, work, education and class disparities must ultimately first find cure beyond

negative labeling and predetermined outcomes. Only by accepting the complexity of creating a solution for problems in the urban core can we begin to have a dialogue to heal all cultures with community investment in each other's successes... at least until the next 60 year catch phrase hooks the interest of scholars and economists and a new conceit is born.

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