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Understanding Culture and Politics in Poor Places

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POVERTY IS ON THE NATION'S RADAR SCREEN again—and there is a consensus building across the political spectrum that we need policies that (1) encourage work and make it pay, (2) support working families, and (3) invest in educating poor children. We have good research that shows how important employment is, and how much parents need support when they work. But programs and policies that directly support working families and their children are not enough. We also need policies that strengthen community institutions and address the bundle of problems plaguing people in poor communities. This paper shows how culture and politics perpetuate poverty by undermining core institutions in chronically depressed communities. In this paper I briefly summarize what urban researchers have concluded about how neighborhoods affect poor children, youth, and families; discuss what I have learned in poor rural areas; and consider what these findings mean for policy to address poverty and place.

What is poverty? British sociologist Peter Townshend argues that "poverty is the lack of adequate resources to participate in the accepted ways in society." This definition reflects new thinking in the UK and Europe about "social exclusion" and the "marginalized"—people who are cut off from the mainstream and not participating in the wider society. Today some 37 million Americans live below the official poverty line of $20,000 for a family of four. Seventeen percent of all children are poor today, 24 percent of black children and 22 percent of children of Hispanic origin are poor; in rural America half of all Black kids and a third of Hispanic and Native American kids grow up poor. In some areas poverty rates are over 50 percent. In 1959, when we began measuring poverty, 39.5 million people were poor. Poverty declined in the sixties and early seventies, and in 1973 was at its lowest with 23 million poor. After World War II we had 25 years of widely shared growth, and policies like the GI Bill and mortgage assistance programs helped working class Americans join the middle class. Since 1973 we have seen growing inequality, and falling wages as well as an increase in single parenting have meant high poverty rates.

Social policies in some developed countries keep child poverty low and minimize how much a child's family affects his or her achievements. Government investments in child care, early childhood education, family allowances, maternal and paternal leave, and higher education all counter the tendency of pure market forces to increase inequality and produce poverty. This is not the case in America. While we support the elderly through Social Security and Medicare, our policies for low income families do not reflect broad public responsibility for child outcomes. We rely on the market and families themselves to provide opportunities. And we have not really addressed the strains created when mothers are in the workforce. Even after Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), we still approach social policy as a safety net (temporary assistance) rather than as public investment in our shared future.

Why does poverty persist? The "culture" explanations say "poor people are just not trying hard," and the "structural" explanations place the blame on racism or exploitation or the unfair outcomes associated with the way the free market works. In other words, some say poor people do not take responsibility for themselves and their families. Others say the poor face a lack of opportunity—too few jobs, bad schools, racism and sexism. Of course, our ideas about *why* people are poor influences what kind of policies we develop to help the poor. Many of the explicitly anti-poverty programs in America emerged during the 1960s and 70s. Kennedy was struck by the idea that those not "lifted by the rising tide" were trapped in "a culture of poverty." Lewis had originally introduced the notion of a "culture of poverty," a "way of life...passed down from generation to generation," characterized by apathy, hopelessness, and hostility and suspicion. He said persistent poverty occurred when the poor were not integrated into society. This lack of integration is similar to the concept of social exclusion.

In the 1980s de-industrialization and loss of manufacturing jobs available to people with limited education coincided with increasing suburbanization and the flight of the middle class from the cities. Poverty became more concentrated in the inner cities, and there were more teen pregnancies, out of wedlock births, increasing dropouts, gangs and drugs. These problems were attributed to "bad behavior." People began to talk about a new *underclass*—a group with a different "culture," different values. Wilson began his research on the underclass in Chicago during this period, and looked at both the *structure* (who gets what opportunities) and the *culture* in these neighborhoods. He argued there were two key changes: the black middle class left the ghetto as affirmative action opened up opportunities to do so, leaving neighborhoods with no role models; disinvestment in core community institutions followed. Work disappeared, especially for low-skill workers who had had good-paying, stable blue collar jobs.

Following Wilson a new generation of poverty studies emerged examining these "neighborhood effects." In a 1990 review Jencks and Mayer said at-risk youth in areas with concentrated poverty were influenced by collective socialization, the influence of peers, and failed institutions. Duncan and Brooks Gunn found that neighborhoods had a greater impact on child outcomes than families, and the key to better outcomes was not fewer poor neighbors, but rather more middle income neighbors. Anderson's work in Philadelphia documented the battle between "street culture" and "decent culture," and the declining influence of the "old heads" who used to guide young people into the mainstream. In the late 1990s Furstenberg studied poor families in Philadelphia's tough neighborhoods. While parenting effectiveness did not vary by neighborhoods, he did find that poor families benefit from strong community institutions and that communities with more middle income families have stronger institutions. His team concluded, "Our family-centered political culture does not recognize how much parental success itself is interwoven into a system of opportunity and inequality of life chances that are set by economic and political priorities." Similarly, Morenoff and Sampson's work on "collective efficacy" combines ideas of trust, social control and community institutions. So there is now a large body of research that shows community conditions make a difference for the poor, and the more they are mixed in with middle class people the better their chances for escaping poverty. These results resonate with my findings about poor rural families in *Worlds Apart*.[1]

Persistently poor rural places are divided into two classes: the haves and the have-nots. The poor are socially isolated, worlds apart from the haves. In persistently poor communities the middle class is a small group, and those with middle incomes hold themselves separate from the poor, investing in separate institutions like schools and churches. There is no middle class holding public officials and employers accountable, and the public sector is corrupt.

Two concepts are important here: cultural tool kit and civic culture. Over time the "culture of poverty" has come to be a way to blame the poor for their poverty. Swidler developed the idea of the *cultural tool kit*. She sees culture as a "tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views," skills and habits, not preferences and wants, what we know of the world, what people like us do. She gives the example of a young boy from the inner city who is asked why he does not want to be a doctor, and, because it is so far from what he knows and can imagine, says "who? me?" Your cultural tool kit is filled by your immediate world, your community. The second concept refers to how things are done in the community—the *civic culture*. What are the community norms? How does the community work? There are three key elements to civic culture: trust, participation, and collective investment—the intangible goods. This idea is like collective efficacy. Places with high levels of trust, wide participation, and real community investment have community institutions that offer greater opportunities for poor people to escape poverty. Recall that many of the culture of poverty concepts are just the opposite of these: distrust (hostility and suspicion one researcher said) and lack of engagement in society's mainstream institutions.

The community I studied in Appalachia has been one of the poorest places in America over a long time. Life in coal communities today is still shaped by what went on in the early days when coal mining was very competitive, and Appalachian historians describe how operators took over local politics in the early 1900s so they could control everything, fearful that participation in civic life would encourage unions. As one historian put it: "The operators are not only the miner's employer, they are his landlord, his merchant,

[1] I conducted a multi-year study of persistent poverty in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and for comparative purposes, a remote northern New England community with lower poverty. My colleagues and I conducted over 350 in-depth, open-ended interviews—not just with the poor, but with the rich and middle class as well. We collected and analyzed the interviewees' life histories and experiences in their community, looking for patterns that would help explain why chronic poverty plagued Appalachia and the Delta.

the provider of his amusements, the sanitary officer of the town, sometimes the source of police protection and the patron of his physician, his minister, and his school teacher. It is paternalistic, in some ways a feudal civilization." The result was control and vulnerability, distrust, and the suppression of any civic participation. When the mines mechanized after World War II, there were huge job cuts, and hundreds of thousands left the region. Those who stayed without good jobs pieced together a livelihood with odd jobs. Many relied on welfare. When I talked with people in the 1990s their refrain was how scarce jobs were—"you can't even buy a job."

People from all walks of life describe two classes: some joking there are the "good rich people" and the "bad poor people." Others distinguish between those who work and those who "draw" welfare. One man said, *People that want to work are the same as people that do work because they're still trying to work. And then there's people who don't want to work at all, never have and never will. We call them first-of-the-monthers because they come out of the mountains the first of the month with about ten kids and don't wash. When I worked at the grocery store, you could smell them coming. But they just draw food stamps and stuff like that. They live like that, and I guess that's the way they want to live."*

These are small communities where the great majority of people still live where they were born and grew up. Family name matters. *"A lot of times you can hear somebody's last name and before you even meet, you've already got the idea that they're either a good person or they're sorry as can be."... Those that have a family with a horrible name, when they come in, we know them, and they're not worth two cents. They're sorry as can be—Stealing, selling dope, bootlegging, picked up for driving drunk, in and out of bankruptcy court."* Everyone can identify the "families that run things," and people are wary of them. *You have to be very careful here. You have to be extremely careful. If you're not careful, you'll make enemies, and you don't want to make enemies-especially if you don't have importance. If they blackball you, you will not be able to get a job flipping burgers."*

Civic life is not "civic"—politics are corrupt, a well-oiled patronage system works for public jobs, with no accountability, and private jobs are based on who you know and what your family name is. Schools for the poor—county schools rather than the more elite "county seat schools"—are chaotic, with low expectations. Here teachers get their jobs by whom

they know and how they voted, not how well they teach. Life is family-based and church-based, and families and churches are grouped by social class. As one minister told it, *I see people very, very concerned about their own families, and their concern stops there. They're strongly family oriented here. And they would do anything for their family. Let's just say they are very defensive about the rights of their family. They don't want to be criticized. They don't want to be treated unfairly. They have a great concern for their own family. I've talked to my congregation. This concern ought to go beyond family.* The professional and business class families are insulated from the poor who make up the majority of their county. They live in the county seat, send their children to the city school where they are active in a Parent-Teacher organization and participate in school events, and attend the old established churches.

Let me describe one young mother, Gwen, whose story is typical in many ways. She grew up very poor, often without enough food. Her parents were strict and religious, and she eventually rebelled and ran with a bad crowd. She dropped out, got pregnant, then married at 17 after her child was born. When we talked she was a waitress and her husband ran a skidder—and the work was of course seasonal. They were struggling to get by, even with both of them working. The marriage was strained. Her hopes for her children are revealing about her own life and Appalachia itself: *I want them not to drop out, not to end up sitting on the porch all day. I want my girl not to marry and get pregnant too young, but to have a good family when she is ready. If she does marry, I would like her to have her own job and a car of her own, know how to drive, and not to be totally dependent on a man. And then my boys, I don't want them to have children and then go to work, and barely be able to feed them, or barely be able to put diapers on them, and just have to scrounge, like Billy and myself. My boys, I don't want them in the mines. I want them to do better for themselves. You know, they don't have to be doctors or lawyers. They can be teachers, nurses, social workers. Even like the restaurant work, maybe they may want to get to be the operator or owner of it, but not just work in it as a hard, scrounging, everyday job to get by."*

I found the same pattern of two classes, haves and have-nots, in the Mississippi Delta, although with a stark racial dimension. Again, everyone can name the few families who "run things." They are called "bossmen" by blacks, "farmers" by whites. But blacks and whites agree you do not want to "cross them."

"They will cut you out" or "run you out." Racism runs throughout these communities' institutions where longstanding patterns of segregation persist. There are two worlds. The white academy absorbs the white community's civic energy, fundraising and volunteering, and sports involvement. The largely black public school is chaotic and struggling to keep its accreditation. More than 1,500 black families live in poverty compared to about 200 white families. But these places include very wealthy farmers, and over the last thirty years farms have become larger. There is great wealth for the few, deep poverty for most, and virtually no middle class, white or black. *"There are four middle-class white families here, three or four,"* a storekeeper told me. As for the black middle class, most agree with the black school teacher who said, *"Our black middle class are those who have left for the city."*

Whites own almost all the property and businesses and control all the jobs; blacks must seek jobs, credit, and housing from whites, and sometimes from those blacks who act on whites' behalf. Blacks work for white families and farms as domestics, cooks, tractor drivers, field hands, and for white-run businesses as factory workers stitching at the apparel plant or cutting off fish heads at the catfish plant. Blacks' opportunities to work are always vulnerable to whites' decisions—for example one white truck driver's wife explained: *If one of the blacks was to piss Jimmy off—you know he drives for a farmer—he could make it hard on him if he said something to his boss. He could make it really hard on the boy, make him get fired. It's just over here the blacks don't have the opportunities that whites does. They're really disgraded."* The white elite control the political machinery, but also, with high illiteracy among poor blacks in the community, blacks vote with whites out of habit and deference. A black leader explained: *Blacks who have known only the plantation and a life in which they relied on the bossman will vote with him out of habit and deference. ... uneducated people need to go through someone, they need to get help from Toms that have been there for a long time and the whites have gained control of them.*

Caroline is a single mom who grew up in a family of 13 in a two room shack—hot in the summer, cold in the winter. At an early age she dropped out of school, encouraged to do so by the principal, to help at home and work in the fields. To escape, she married and went to Chicago. But it was hard: *He was terrible, awful. He started beating me. It was awful. Then one day—after we been there about a month—when he was* high, he put a knife to my throat, said he was going to cut my throat, going to kill me. See this scar here, buried down in my neck? Then he put a gun on my forehead, cocked the gun, said he was going to kill me. I just said, "I don't care. Go ahead." I was tired. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be rid of him.". . . I just left. And I was lost in big old Chicago. But being in the city! Think what that was like! You never been anywhere. Stayed in the country, hardly ever come to town. Come to town sometimes on a Saturday, taking turns, my sister would go one Saturday, I'd go another, my brother go the next Saturday. That's the way we'd do, the way we went to town. I hadn't ever come out of the country, and all of a sudden I end up in a big city.*

When she returned home to the Delta she got into a bad life of drinking, many men, no work, and had children out of wedlock. But a few years before we talked she had been converted by a local evangelist, and now she was trying to do right by her children, and her advice to them is telling about how she sees her own life: *"I use my life with my kids as an example. I say, "I'm a mother thirty-four years old. Here I got all five of you all." I say, "what do you all think?" I let them explain to me what they think about life. Do they think I should be married or have a husband? I have five kids that need me. "you got one daddy," I say to my son. I tell my older daughter that she has a different daddy. "You all ain't got the same daddy. Do you think that should be? You know, that's not right. And I don't want you to grow up like that thinking it is..." You can be married before you have a child. And before you marry, take time to know yourself and find yourself and grow. Go to school and do something that you want to do. Don't just jump in and marry.*

Like Gwen, Caroline wants her children to avoid her mistakes and be successful. But she lives in a poor neighborhood in this plantation driven county, with violence and vandalism all around her. Her children attend dysfunctional schools, where knife "cuttings" are common and there are few after-school programs or opportunities for sports or music. What her children see about how "people like us" act and fit in the community is shaped by that immediate community and its institutions. The poor black community lives separately from the well-to-do white community, and whites still have the power. It is hard to bring about change. As one black leader said: *"It's going to take years to change this. How can you defeat a guy that has got half of the people working for him or that benefit from him, whether through a job, living in one of his houses, or going through him to get loans? How are you*

going to defeat him? They feel obligated to him because they've worked for him or he's provided them jobs."

These patterns are anchored in the way the economy was organized a century ago. One day a coal operator set up a company store and required miners to shop there, or a plantation bossman told his workers their children would continue to pick cotton and miss school, even after the plantation schools themselves were closed. Maybe the owner of a coal company handpicked the sheriff during an election, who then ran out unruly laborers interested in organizing a union. Maybe a sharecropper who questioned the bossman's handling of his account in the plantation store was evicted and blackballed from employment. Over time these decisions, rules, and experiences defined how people relate to one another and became patterns that people expect, norms governing how things are always done. They form the civic culture. These relationships and norms are reinforced by overt action of those who benefit from them, but they are also maintained through memory and tradition, reputation and family history. People know each other's families across generations, their good deeds and bad, power and vulnerability, and successes and failures. The structure of daily life that takes shape over time is taken for granted. Because new ideas and new resources rarely penetrate this environment, people form their cultural tool kit in the context of the relationships and norms they know.

And while the poor are trapped in dead-end part-time jobs and ignored in disorganized schools, vulnerable to the internal politics and personal whims of managers, the *haves* live comfortably in a rural suburbia. In the Delta they send their children to the private school, in Appalachia their children go to the independent public school in the county seat. With their neighbors, they support school and church programs that benefit their own families. They know one another, look out for each other's children, and devote themselves above all to their family and church. In many ways their lives include all the good things we look for in small community life—familiarity, neighborliness, safety, and a good pace. When middle income families ally themselves with the rich and powerful and safeguard their privileges and control, there is no group that holds local politicians or private employers accountable for good, fair government or just labor practices. There is no group investing time and money to build strong public institutions like schools, recreation facilities and programs, or libraries. Potential middle class families look out for their

own children, accept the corruption and patronage, and do not challenge the status quo. The combination of distrust and the greed people see in public and private life prevents cooperation.

In the early days of Appalachia's coal economy and the Delta's plantation economy, operators and bossmen maintained tight control over workers—not just in the workplace, but in every dimension of social and political life. Poor people learned that the way to get along was to accept the way things were, to do what was expected, to not speak out or make waves. Those who did not accept the status quo found they were ostracized or openly encouraged to leave, forced to choose "exit" over "voice," to use development scholar Albert Hirschman's terms for migration and political activism. In most cases those who gained an education had to leave to find decent work. The climate was not welcoming to newcomers, so few moved in bringing new perspectives. The inequality and political grip of the powerful went unchallenged decade after decade, and in the 1990s you could see the result in high poverty and a weak civic culture.

Poor people grow up in social isolation from those who control opportunities in the Delta and Appalachia. With their own family and narrow networks as their social world, they have a hard time absorbing the habits, skills, and images that might help them enter the mainstream. Their lives are intertwined, they see each other every day, but they live in different worlds, worlds apart. There are some very important cases of individuals—teachers, aunties and uncles, grandparents—inspiring or guiding young people to a life outside poverty. Expanding the tool kits and overcoming the effect of the community. But this is not the pattern—most fall into making those bad decisions, and there are few mechanisms for building a good life and few chances for mobility.

The stories I heard in these rural communities give a firsthand picture of the way inequality can undermine the public sector, the "public or social goods," the community institutions the public sector supports—on which the poor rely to improve their life chances. There is limited investment but also limited accountability. Community institutions do not work. Generous individuals' actions matter, and can help a few escape, but without more widespread investment in community institutions those from poor families do not have much of a chance to achieve the American Dream. There is a door opening for better policy approaches to strengthen families and improve outcomes for children and youth. These

are encouraging signs. But I think there is also good research showing that the effectiveness of these policies also depends on how communities "work," and part of our policy agenda should be to preserve the middle class and strengthen the community institutions that provide pathways into the middle class. We need policies that recognize the intersection between culture (as tool kit that informs those decisions young people are making) and the civic culture that shapes community institutions. So as individuals we can be mentors and coaches who help those in poor families believe in themselves and make the decisions that lead to a better life, but as citizens we also must support good schools and strive to keep neighborhoods mixed rather than segregated by class, and support policies that truly provide equal opportunity.

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