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Author

Mueller, Elizabeth

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POVERTY, THE UNDERCLASS, AND IMMIGRATION: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE DEBATE ON POVERTY

Elizabeth Mueller

Abstract

The current popular debate on poverty focuses on the underclass. Poverty is considered, in this context, a problem of unskilled, uneducated individuals or of groups of people whose lifestyles mire them in poverty. In this article, the author argues that the focus on the underclass, and subsequent use of individually and culturally focused explanations for poverty, skew our understanding of the problem and divert our attention from appropriate policy responses. Using evidence from four different periods of immigration into American cities, an argument is presented for the importance of structural and institutional factors in understanding the success or failure of each group to find work and move up. The author concludes that these factors are better able to account for poverty and justify increased attention to structural conditions in poverty.

Introduction

In recent years, the debate around poverty in this country has been commandeered by the conservatives. Using the language of liberals, they have reframed the problem of poverty. It has become (once again) a problem of behavior: The poor have been reduced to the underclass, a small segment of the poor said to exhibit a pathology that mires them more deeply, and across generations, in poverty.¹ It has become a problem of misbehaving individuals or culturally impoverished groups for which the community bears little or no responsibility. Some argue that policies have exacerbated poverty or at least contributed to the pathologies mentioned above.² Others stress the proposed link between poverty and migration, implying that, with time, African-Americans and new immigrants will move up, as other migrants to the city have.³ In either case, conservative theory suggests a role of "benign neglect" for the state.

This essay will attempt to argue that this definition of the problem of poverty diverts our attention from its basic causes and, therefore, from appropriate policies meant to alleviate its generation as well as its consequences for people. I will argue that to best understand the successful integration -- or the exclusion -- of certain groups in American cities, it is imperative that structural and institutional factors be examined. To illustrate this point, I will first introduce basic evidence concerning the magnitude of poverty in this country and then proceed to a brief discus-

sion of different theoretical perspectives on the causes of poverty. In order to test the usefulness of these theories, I will then try them out as explanations for the experiences of four waves of migrants to American cities.⁴ This will put the present debate in a historical context.

Basic Facts on Poverty and the "Underclass"

The number of poor people has increased substantially in the last fifteen years in the United States, even as the economy has grown.⁵ The most recent peak in the number of poor occurred in 1983, when those counted as poor numbered 35.3 million, or 15.2 percent of the population. This was the first time such a height had been reached since the early 1960s. By 1987, the number had decreased slightly to 32.5 million, or 13.5 percent of the population. Both figures represent an increase from the historic low reached in 1979, when 9 percent of the population were poor.⁶

Who is poor among us is also changing. Poverty is increasingly a phenomenon of racial and ethnic minorities. While the majority of the poor continue to be white, poverty is increasing at a much more rapid rate among African-Americans and Hispanics. In 1987, the poverty rate for African-Americans was 33.1 percent, an increase of 6.5 percent over the previous year. For Hispanics, the rate was 28.2 percent, an increase of 3 percent.

Some groups have shown decreasing rates of poverty. In 1987, the poverty rate for whites was 10.5 percent, representing a decrease of 4.5 percent from the previous year. Poverty among the elderly -- both African-American and white -- has decreased since the introduction of Social Security. In contrast, poverty among elderly Hispanics remains high (22.5 percent in 1986) and shows cycles which may be related to recessions, reflecting their decreased access to the Social Security system.⁷

Most poor families were headed in 1986 by white males (32.2 percent), followed by African-American females (22.9 percent), white females (17.8 percent), Hispanic males (10.7 percent), African-American males (8.1 percent), and Hispanic females (8 percent). Overall, just under half were headed by women.⁸ However, female-headed households are much more likely to be poor than are those headed by males. More than one of three families headed by women was poor in 1986, while the rate for those headed by single males was 11.4 percent and for married couples only 6.1 percent.

Families with children under 18 are also more likely to be poor. In 1986 their poverty rate was 16.3 percent. Families with children which were headed by women fared the worst, with 46 percent in poverty, followed by families headed by single men (17.8 percent). These

figures contrast with the much lower rate of 8 percent for married couple families.⁹ In 1986, 20.5 percent of all children were poor.¹⁰

Although they dominate the public debate, the persistently poor (the so-called underclass) do not dominate statistically. While many people pass through poverty at some point in their lives, few remain poor for long periods of time. For the ten year period between 1974 and 1983, *only 5.2 percent* of the population were poor for eighty percent of the time.¹¹

Of this 5.2 percent, a substantial number lived in households with intact families (24 percent) or where the head of household was either disabled (33 percent) or elderly (21 percent). In 22 percent of such households, the head of the household worked for a substantial portion of the year.¹² On the other hand, the persistently poor were often characterized by traits commonly associated with long-term poverty, such as welfare dependence (49 percent), unemployment (74 percent), or being a high school drop out (78 percent).¹³ African-Americans are overrepresented among this group, accounting for 66 percent.¹⁴ Persistently poor households were most often headed by African-American women (33 percent), followed by African-American men (21 percent). Heads of households were generally poorly educated, with close to half dropping out before the eighth grade. Children accounted for 45 percent of the persistently poor.¹⁵

Where the poor live has also changed. There has been a marked shift from rural to urban poverty. The poor have been increasingly concentrated in the central city and, to a lesser extent, in the suburbs. Within cities, the poor are especially concentrated in certain neighborhoods. This trend is increasing: a poor neighborhood is now more likely to be very poor; the majority of those living in it -- or close to it -- are likely to be poor.¹⁶ So, the poor in cities are increasingly isolated from others and, perhaps more significantly, *the non-poor are isolated from the poor.*

In summary, while poverty is increasing, it is growing fastest among certain groups. Minorities, women, and children are more often poor than in the past. Whites and the elderly are less often poor. Among families, those with children which were headed by a single woman were most often poor. Spatially, the poor are more often urban and are increasingly concentrated in extremely poor neighborhoods within cities. Contrary to popular accounts, few people remain poor most of their lives.

Explanations for Poverty

Arguments about what to do about poverty reflect differing assumptions about what the problem actually is. Is it a problem of individual

decisions, attitudes fostered by one's culture or environment, lack of appropriate jobs, or lack of access to those that exist? These differences in focus mirror intellectual debates which have their roots in classical political economy and philosophy. I will make no attempt to review these debates here. My purpose is simply to lay out the factors upon which each group relies in order to explain the continued existence and growth of poverty.

The best test of most explanations of poverty is how well they explain poverty historically -- for different groups -- rather than in one case alone. Why is it that some groups have moved up and others have not? Before proceeding to our discussion of the cases, I will briefly characterize three types of explanations below. The three explanations to be considered will be labelled individual, cultural, and structural.

Individually Focused Explanations

While in the last century, the poor were often considered morally defective individuals, the current debate uses the language of economics to legitimize its focus on behavior.¹⁷ Poverty is explained at an individual level; no attempt is made to explain the poverty of groups. It is an approach most easily employed in data analysis at a highly aggregate level. The general premise is that it is the characteristics of the individual -- rather than the race, ethnicity, or other group characteristic or experience -- that explain poverty.

At heart, this type of explanation relies on an assumption that individuals make irrational decisions: they decide not to invest in themselves or not to participate in the labor force, and therefore, must accept the low wages or lack of wages that result. In this, individually and culturally based explanations coincide.¹⁸

Most typically, education (the determinant of wages, in orthodox theory) is the key variable in these arguments.¹⁹ In my evaluation of the mobility of four groups of migrants, I will examine the usefulness of this focus on the level of skills and education of the immigrants.

The implications of relying on individually focused explanations are profound. If individuals are acting irrationally, that puts them beyond the realm of public policy in a democratic society. Society cannot tell them what to study, what job to take. By implication, those who make poor choices, it could be argued (and often is), do not deserve public assistance: they are the "undeserving poor." Only those seen as poor temporarily -- due to a temporary crisis in their lives over which they had no control -- are deserving of aid; programs such as unemployment insurance are aimed at them. In contrast, the undeserving poor are today's underclass. Programs aimed at the underclass barely pro-

vide for their subsistence: they do not deserve any help they get. There is a strong stigma attached to aid.

The Culture of Poverty Revisited

The second group of theories I call the "culture of poverty" approach. Extrapolating from the work done by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, which documented the strategies that poor Mexican villagers had developed to cope with their poverty, later researchers and policy makers emphasized the permanence of such behaviors across generations. Rather than a coping response, these behaviors were seen as perpetuating and institutionalizing a group's poverty.²⁰

The factors most commonly associated with a culture of poverty revolve around family life, orientation toward the future, and rejection of societal values and norms.²¹ The poor are assumed to lack certain middle-class values such as the ability to defer gratification, adequate economic or social aspirations, sexual regularity, mainstream child-rearing practices, and, in general, orderly family lives.²²

The discussion resonates with the current emphasis on the African-American family in debates over the "underclass." These families are described using much of the same language invoked by Edward Banfield and Daniel Moynihan more than twenty years ago and which caused an uproar in the African-American community at the time.²³

Focusing on cultural factors to explain the persistence of poverty has several important consequences. Again, it places the focus on the behavior of the poor, making policy intervention very difficult. Also, it again distances the poor from the rest of society: since it places the blame for their poverty squarely on the shoulders of the poor themselves, the rest of society is under little obligation to help them.

Structural and Institutional Explanations

In a structural or institutional approach, poverty is seen as part of the larger economic system. It is seen as integral or even functional (in Marxist theories) to the system since the presence of a group of marginal people is seen to keep wages lower. The focus is on the process -- how does poverty serve the system at different points in history?²⁴ How do institutions uphold unequal relationships between different classes or sectors of the economy?²⁵ And how do institutions frame the choices made by individuals? Within this perspective, the same individual actions and choices seen as irrational under the Human Capital theory may appear rational when placed in their historical and institutional context.²⁶

It is thus a dynamic, explicitly historical approach. The relative power of groups is expected to change over time. Following this approach, in

each wave of immigration it is important to see how workers are divided by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other factors and excluded or incorporated into the labor force differently.²⁷

The policy focus of such an approach is the distribution of wealth in the nation. It focuses on how jobs are distributed. More radical theorists call for a change in how wealth is generated and distributed. Less-radical theorists focus on incorporating excluded groups within the current system, trying, for example, to include groups through such programs as Affirmative Action.

Theory in Historical Context

To compare these three approaches, I will consider four different periods in the history of the United States when large numbers of people entered cities. I will argue that an explicitly historical approach, which takes into account the structure of the labor market at the time migrants entered the nation, will be most useful in explaining the poverty or ability of various groups to move up the economic ladder.

First, let me introduce the four time periods. Each one represents a wave of migration to U.S. cities.²⁸ For each wave, evidence will be presented on the reasons groups had for migrating, their general skill level, cultural problems, and the conditions they met upon arriving in American cities.

Table 1

Four Waves of Immigration

1. 1840s to 1870s -- Western European immigrants
2. 1880s to 1920s -- Eastern and Southern Europeans
3. Early- to mid-1900s -- Blacks from the Southern US
4. 1965 to present -- Latins and Asians

The First Wave: 1840s-1870s

In the first wave of mass migration from Europe to the United States, eight million migrants entered the country, mostly from the British Isles and the states that would later form Germany. The reasons migrants in this period had for leaving their homes and coming to the United States all revolved around the process of industrialization. In Europe, industrialization set off a chain of dislocations among both the rural and urban populations, pushing both to emigrate. In rural areas, improved farming

methods reduced the demand for labor, transforming the rural economies. Small farms were consolidated into larger estates. Competition from foreign producers of grain led some to shift to sheep. The rural landless were displaced.²⁹ Mortality rates were falling and the population was exploding: cities were overcrowded. The development of the steamship both facilitated trade in grain and movements of migrants across the Atlantic.³⁰ So, migrants left their homes both because they needed to and because they could.

As the above explanation implies, these migrants were largely poor people from rural areas. They were similar ethnically to those already here at the time of independence. They were largely English-speaking and held many of the same cultural, legal, political, and social values as those already here. Ninety-nine percent were Protestant.

The first large group to clash with existing culture (especially religion) and experience widespread discrimination was the Irish.³¹ Arriving at the end of the first wave, they were largely from rural areas and had come fleeing famine. They differed from earlier immigrants in that they were poorer, more often from rural areas, less educated, and Catholic. They became the low wage factory workers and domestic workers.

The lack of tolerance for differences was based in a belief that homogeneity was a value associated with the very conception of the new nation. As stated in *The Federalist Papers*:

Providence [had] been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people -- a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs . . .³²

Even so, the strong demand for unskilled labor overshadowed any objections employers might have had to immigrants perceived as incompatible with the culture of the original colonists. Literature on migration in this period consistently stresses the strong pull of labor demand in the United States and the ready availability of land. As a Department of Labor report on immigration states:

...Ample opportunities for land settlement in the United States, and the almost insatiable demand for labor to build the U.S. physical infrastructure and to fuel industrial growth became an attractive alternative to repeated economic and political upheavals.³³

There is general agreement in the literature on migration that in this period migrants were often unskilled and uneducated. This, however, did not prevent them from acquiring factory jobs (in the case of the

Irish) or land (in the case of many other ethnic groups). The structure of the economy -- which determined the quantity and type of workers employed -- appears most important in explaining the economic conditions of immigrants and their ability to readily acquire and maintain employment.

The Second Wave: 1880-1920

The migrants who came in the second wave -- 24 million in all -- were mostly Eastern and Southern Europeans, especially Italians, Poles, and Russian Jews. Among this group were also included migrants from the same ethnic groups as those in the first wave, especially after 1890.³⁴ While migrants continued to leave to escape harsh conditions or poverty at home, they were also often recruited by migration agents sent to Mexico, Ireland, southern Italy, and the Austro-Hungarian empire for jobs in canal companies, the railroads, or, later, industry.³⁵

In contrast to the first wave, migrants in this period were increasingly employed in large capital development projects such as canal or railroad construction.³⁶ The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 closed off the previous source of labor for such projects. As transportation costs between Europe and the New World decreased, poorer immigrants from the more distant areas of Southern and Eastern Europe increased.

More than in the first wave, second-wave migrants were drawn to this country by demand for unskilled labor for industry. Even industries that had traditionally employed skilled workers began using more machinery and less-skilled workers. Despite their peasant background, second-wave immigrants gained jobs; their rural roots didn't hurt their chances of moving up.³⁷

By 1910, immigrants comprised one-quarter of the labor force. In the mining and manufacturing sectors, 58 percent of the labor force were foreign-born. Moreover, ethnic groups were associated with various industries, and could help other immigrants to enter the labor force. Ethnic groups had locks on certain types of public-sector jobs which were allocated by political machines in cities.³⁸

At the same time, due to prejudice, migrants of color were most often relegated to more menial jobs in the early years of industrial development, regardless of their level of skill.

. . . America has used African, Asian, Mexican and, to a lesser degree, Indian workers for the cheapest labor, concentrating people of color in the most unskilled jobs, the least advantaged sectors of the economy, and the most industrially backward regions of the nation. In an historical sense, people of color provided much of the hard labor (and the

technical skills) that built up the agricultural base and the mineral-transport-communication infrastructure necessary for industrialization and modernization, whereas the European worked primarily within the industrialized, modern sectors. The initial position of European ethnics, while low, was therefore strategic for movement up the economic and social pyramid. The placement of non-white groups, however, imposed barrier upon barrier on such mobility, freezing them for long periods of time in the least favorable segments of the economy.³⁹

Table 2

*Immigrants, as Percent of Labor Force, Selected Industries, 1910*⁴⁰

Coal mining	48%
Iron	67%
Clothing factories	76%
Slaughter- and packinghouses	46%
Car and railroad shops	46%
Tanneries	53%
Steel mills	51%
Textile mills	49%
Road building	46%

Immigrants were employed in the industrial sector in this period, a fact which benefitted them by placing them in the most dynamic sectors of the economy. In contrast, racial minorities were concentrated in the pre-industrial sectors of the economy and, in this period, were denied access to industrial jobs.

Immigration in this period was driven by the demand for unskilled labor and was tightly tied to fluctuations in the business cycle.⁴¹ The characteristics of the labor supply appeared to have little to do with chances for employment and subsequent mobility. Differences among groups were explained mainly through reference to networks and historical conditions linking groups to jobs in different industrial sectors rather than by significant differences in skill.⁴² Within industries, employers often rotated hiring among different nationalities in order to create competition among ethnic groups and reinforce the emerging job differentiation.⁴³ The growth in national industry looms large as

the most important factor in explaining the ready absorption of immigrants into the labor force in this period.

Resistance to Immigration

Resistance to immigration also grew during this period. This occurred for several reasons. First, there was racism on the part of nativist groups. Second, there was opposition from organized labor (and even other immigrants), since mass immigration helped spur mechanization, kept wages low, and made industrial unionism very difficult.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, drastic changes in the immigration laws limited the number of immigrants to the United States. By the 1920s, the rate of growth of the economy had declined, and the use of labor-saving machinery further reduced labor demand. Legislation passed in 1921 imposed quotas on immigrant groups based on the ethnic distribution of the population in the 1910 Census. The numbers coming from Europe were sharply reduced. Immigrants were required to pass a literacy test as well. This legislation was backed by both labor and "nativist" groups.⁴⁴

In 1924, an even more restrictive law was passed, reducing the annual quotas, basing them on the earlier 1890 Census, and totally excluding some groups, such as Asians. Overall, the changes favored English, Irish, German, and Scandinavian Europeans, and discriminated against Southern and Eastern Europeans (and the excluded groups).

Due to lobbying from agricultural interests, Mexicans were still allowed in. Mexicans, however, were considered explicitly inferior and therefore not expected to meet the same immigration standards as other groups; they were not seen as suited for industrial work and were explicitly targeted as agricultural workers.⁴⁵

The immigration laws effectively cut off European immigration as a source of labor. As a result, a new group of migrants -- within the country -- had to be recruited. African-Americans, mostly from rural areas in the south, became the new industrial labor force in northern cities.

The Third Wave: Early to Mid-1900s

With the advent of the First World War and after the limits placed on European immigration, African-American migration to northern cities increased. While in 1890, 90 percent of the nation's African-American population lived in the southern states, by the 1960s, 40 percent lived in the North.⁴⁶ Most migrants ended up in the central city.⁴⁷

Employment in northern cities was seen as better than sharecropping, poverty, disease, and ignorance in the South. It was a first step into the industrial labor force. Yet African-American migrants, although also

of rural origin and unskilled, were incorporated into the industrial labor force differently than were earlier groups of migrants. They were concentrated in unskilled jobs in the secondary sector of the labor market and used to undermine the labor movement (from which they were excluded).

It is important to note which type of jobs African-Americans filled as they moved north. Before the immigration limits of the twenties, they had been virtually excluded from industrial work, being employed principally as strikebreakers.⁴⁸ According to a study done by Bodnar, by 1920, African-Americans comprised the highest percentage of unskilled workers of any racial or ethnic group and began to experience much lower rates of occupational mobility than other groups.⁴⁹

There was great resistance on the part of northern workers to the hiring of African-Americans in the factories. Ironically, the same nativist groups that backed anti-immigration legislation provoked the entrance of African-Americans into the industrial labor force. They did not welcome them. African-Americans were effectively excluded from industrial unions until recent years.⁵⁰

Probably the most positive period of African-American incorporation into the labor market occurred during the Second World War, but it was to be short-lived. With the rise of the so-called "core" firms following the war, African-Americans were pushed into peripheral industries and the corresponding lower-wage secondary labor market.⁵¹ Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the African-American share of employment in the secondary manufacturing sector continued to grow. Wages rose more slowly and prospects for moving up in these industries were dim.

Similarly in the service sector, African-Americans increasingly filled jobs which were isolated from ladders of promotion even in growing sectors.⁵² Not until the 60s did some of these patterns change: due to a more prosperous economy and increased protests, African-American employment in primary manufacturing rose between 1960 and 1970.⁵³

Unlike earlier waves of migrants, African-Americans faced various obstacles to their successful integration into the industrial labor force. As alluded to above, the jobs open to African-Americans offered them less mobility than those open to earlier groups. The most obvious reason invoked for this is discrimination. The improvement in conditions following the legislation of the 1960s supports this view. Additionally, they faced segregation; their ability to receive an adequate education was limited by residential segregation, among other factors. An analysis of their "human capital" would find that they had chosen to invest

little in education. But as many historians have argued, their educational and occupational choices were limited.

Third-wave migrants were faced with obstacles that earlier ethnic migrants were not. Some have argued that the very fact that they continued to migrate long after legislation had cut off the flow of foreign migrants in a time of labor surplus made them the target of white antagonism. Their numbers also mitigated against the way up favored by earlier migrants; they were too large a group to create the occupational niches earlier groups had carved out for themselves. By coming in such large numbers in a time of labor surplus, they undercut the position of other African-Americans competing for the same jobs.⁵⁴

Segregation kept third-wave migrants in cities, with those moving out in recent decades ending up mostly in largely African-American suburbs.⁵⁵ Some writers argue that anti-discrimination programs have exacerbated problems by allowing the middle-class African-Americans to move, further isolating the poor.⁵⁶ The implications of this dead end -- both spatial and economic -- have been far-reaching. It is important to note, in light of the debate over a "spatial mismatch" between jobs and people, that space is only a symbol of a larger exclusion from opportunities. It is not coincidental that the jobs and the people are not in the same place.⁵⁷

Looking solely at education or other individual characteristics to explain the economic attainment of African-Americans would only tell part of the story. Exclusion from neighborhoods with good schools and exclusion from jobs that provided training and upward mobility are more pertinent factors. While African-American migrants fed the factories of the north, the fact that they were kept in low-end jobs is not explained by their own skills or culture.

The Fourth Wave: Latin Americans and Asians

Rising expectations and higher demands on the part of African-Americans in the 1960s and 1970s led employers to look elsewhere for cheap labor. Other groups -- especially illegal migrants -- began to fill the most undesirable jobs at the bottom.⁵⁸

Several important changes precipitated a shift in the sources of low-wage labor after 1965. First was an important change in the immigration legislation, which replaced the quota system with a new system which emphasized family reunification and which gave preferences to professionals and other workers with skills needed in the labor market. The family-reunification clause dramatically increased the numbers legally admitted from Asia and Latin America. Yet at the same time a ceiling was placed on immigration from the Western Hemisphere for the first time. A large portion of those arriving from south of the

border were thus rendered illegal. Asian immigration, previously quite restricted, increased dramatically.⁵⁹

In contrast to the experience of earlier groups, fourth-wave migration did not respond to the aggregate rate of unemployment in the United States.⁶⁰ Migration appeared more directly linked to push factors and has become self-perpetuating.⁶¹ For foreign-policy reasons, the federal government became actively involved in the movement and resettlement of some migrants (refugees).

As a result of these changes and due also to political and economic pressures in Latin America and Asia, immigration reached its highest point ever, reaching 6.6 million in the 1970s.⁶² This wave of immigration was much more diverse, both in national origin and the socioeconomic background of the migrants, than earlier waves had been.⁶³ I will focus here on the experience of unskilled migrants.

Due to changes in the structure of the economy and legal and institutional barriers, the experiences of fourth-wave migrants have been quite diverse. While, for some groups, explanations based primarily on education seem appropriate, for others they clearly fall apart.⁶⁴ The specter of an immigrant underclass has been raised by some conservative writers.⁶⁵ The different experience of various groups of fourth-wave migrants can be explained by reference to the same factors cited in earlier waves: the structure of the labor market, their reasons for migration, institutional factors such as legal status, as well as skill and education levels.

While migrants continued to move into the country at a rate beyond anything seen before, the economy experienced major shifts in the organization, composition, and location of industry. There was a shift away from the heavy manufacturing industries located in the northeast to lower-wage service industries and low-wage manufacturing industries as well as some high-technology-based sectors.⁶⁶ These changes led to a new spatial pattern of growth, both nationally and within cities. Largely, this was a shift out of the central cities of the heavily unionized northeast and into the suburbs and -- sometimes -- central cities of the southwest.⁶⁷ Migrants are known to prefer to settle in central-city locations in order to make use of spatially concentrated job and service networks.⁶⁸

While shifting out of certain regions and industries, labor markets were reconfigured to exclude groups seen as expensive or uncooperative. New groups were incorporated into the labor force, while others were cast aside. Traditional members of the blue-collar workforce -- white ethnic males and African-American males -- were passed over in

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Third-wave migrants were faced with obstacles that earlier ethnic migrants were not. Some have argued that the very fact that they continued to migrate long after legislation had cut off the flow of foreign migrants in a time of labor surplus made them the target of white antagonism. Their numbers also mitigated against the way up favored by earlier migrants; they were too large a group to create the occupational niches earlier groups had carved out for themselves. By coming in such large numbers in a time of labor surplus, they undercut the position of other African-Americans competing for the same jobs.⁵⁴

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While shifting out of certain regions and industries, labor markets were reconfigured to exclude groups seen as expensive or uncooperative. New groups were incorporated into the labor force, while others were cast aside. Traditional members of the blue-collar workforce -- white ethnic males and African-American males -- were passed over in

favor of women, new immigrants, and younger workers in the rising industries.⁶⁹

Paralleling these changes were shifts in the occupational structure. As several studies have argued, the middle rungs on the economic ladder were considerably weakened, if not removed, in the recent and ongoing reorganization of industry.⁷⁰ There are plenty of jobs at the bottom but they lead nowhere. And some groups are even excluded from these. Those who were in the middle tier during the industrial boom of the 1960s face the prospect of moving down.

Some immigrants, many of whom have fled rural poverty as did earlier groups, have been willing to take these lower-tier jobs.⁷¹ Others have been forced to do so, because they are undocumented. Yet others, who are skilled, legal, and speak English, have joined the upper tier of the economy. All of those groups who would hope to find jobs in the middle face a variety of barriers to their successful incorporation into the economy.

In sum, several structural and institutional factors have helped to entrap many African-Americans and Latinos in poverty. The change in the sectoral composition of the economy has created a bottom-heavy job structure. The shift out of the central city as a place of employment reflects a shift toward new sources of labor in the suburbs. The change in the occupational structure reflects this downgrading and the preponderance of service-industry jobs. Finally, legal and other institutional factors bar immigrant workers from certain jobs. There are fewer "good jobs" available and fierce competition for those left.

Conclusion

In our discussion of immigration to the United States since the nineteenth century, the importance of economic and institutional factors is clear. The incorporation of groups has been shaped by forces larger than individuals or their cultures. At some points uneducated peasants are successfully incorporated; at others, relatively better-educated African-Americans or women are excluded. We must go beyond individual or cultural factors to see why.

Early groups were able to move up since they faced rising demand for their largely unskilled labor power and faced fewer ethnic, religious, or racially based conflicts. By later periods, jobs were rationed by race as well as by other factors. Access to jobs was controlled by networks tied often to ethnicity, first through political machines and patronage, later through informal social networks (the jobs distributed became less secure in this process). Racism and lack of legal documents became important barriers to employment and mobility.

The plight of individuals should be seen as a result of structural factors that shape available opportunities. Individual choice exists, but within a larger economic, structural framework. A culture-of-poverty approach fosters the idea that some ethnic groups were more able to move up the economic ladder because they didn't have a self-destructive culture. This approach is used to blame current groups for their own poverty.⁷² The characteristics associated today with the culture of the underclass – crime, unstable families, disorganized communities – have been associated with all previous waves of immigration, not just the current underclass. They are a function more of poverty than of ethnicity or race.⁷³ What are seen as causes are in fact outcomes of poverty.

Therefore, efforts directed at controlling the internal disorder of poor communities *rather than the roots of economic inequality* are not enough. They are not meaningless to those individuals helped but they won't prevent others from moving into their place. They should not be the *only* programs implemented. The social causes of poverty, i.e., the question of how *groups* of people come to be poor, must be addressed.

NOTES

¹See Michael B. Katz, 1989, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon), especially Ch. 1. Katz argues that the most conservative version of the culture-of-poverty thesis has been resurrected. See also Herbert Gans, "Deconstructing the Underclass: The Term's Dangers as a Planning Concept," *APA Journal*, 56, 3 (Summer): 271-277.

²See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) for an example of this argument. Others with this viewpoint include George Gilder and Lawrence Mead.

³This thesis, known as the "last of the immigrants" thesis, states that the problems of African-Americans were simply those of the last "low income migrant to reach the city from a backward area." Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City Revisited* (Boston: Little Brown, 1974) p.54, cited in Katz, op .cit., p. 32.

⁴The four waves are those presented by Thomas Muller and Thomas Espenshade in their book, *The Fourth Wave: California's Newest Immigrants* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1985).

⁵The poverty line is defined as the amount of money needed to purchase a basket of goods deemed necessary for survival and is adjusted to reflect price changes annually. Currently, the line is set at an annual income of \$5,800 for one person, \$11,600 for four people, and \$23,000 for a family of nine people (*New York Times*, 9/1/88). For discussion of definitions of poverty see Sharon Oster, et al., *The Definition and Measurement of Poverty* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1978).

⁶U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Money, Income and Poverty Status of Families and Persons in the United States: 1986," *Current Population Reports*, Consumer Income (Washington, D.C.: GPO, July 1987), Series p-60, No. 157.

⁷US Dept of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Table 2, "Poverty Status of Persons, by Age, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 1986," CPR.

⁸Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Table 3, "Poverty Status of Families, by Type of Family, Presence of Related Children, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 1986," CPR.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Dept of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Table 2, "Poverty States of Persons, by Age, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 1986," CPR.

¹¹Adams, Terry, Greg Duncan, and Willard Rogers, *Persistent Poverty* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Survey Research Center, 1988), Figure 1.

¹²Adams, Duncan, and Rogers, op. cit., Figure 4.

¹³Ibid., Figure 3.

¹⁴Ibid., Figure 2.

¹⁵Ibid., Table 1.

¹⁶Michael G.H. McGeary and Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., eds., *Urban Change and Poverty* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988), Figure 1-1, "Percentage Distribution of United States Poor by Residence: 1959 to 1985," and Figure 1-4, "Percentage Rate of Poverty in Metropolitan Areas and Central Cities: 1970-1986."

¹⁷In the field of economics, this writing is represented in the work of Human Capital theorists, who portray labor as a factor of production comparable in many ways to other factors.

¹⁸Examples include the work of George Gilder and many cited in the next section. Popular press accounts often follow this perspective, relying on stories of individuals unable to make the right choices, welfare mothers, etc.

¹⁹See Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital*; Lester Thurow, *Investment in Human Capital*; see also Lester Thurow, *Dangerous Currents*.

²⁰For example, Edward Banfield, in his research on the southern Italian town of Montegrano, developed this approach. See Edward Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

²¹For excellent reviews of the literature on the Culture of Poverty, see Katz, op. cit., especially Chapters 1 and 2; also Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), Chapter 4.

²²See William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Random House, 1971), especially Chapter 5, "Learning to be poor: The culture of poverty cheesecake."

²³See Banfield, op. cit.; Rainwater, Lee, and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967).

²⁴Examples of explanations for unemployment in the recession of the 1970s include Ernest Mandel, *The Second Slump: A Marxist analysis of recession in the seventies* (London: Verso, 1980); for more theory, Claus Offe, *Disorgan-*

ized *Capitalism: Contemporary transformations of work and politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

²⁵A useful review of this approach is provided in David Gordon, *Theories of Poverty and Underemployment* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1972).

²⁶See for example the study of educational choices among the poor done by John Ogbu, *The Next Generation: an ethnography of education in an urban neighborhood* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

²⁷There is a vast literature on labor market segmentation ranging from theory to case studies. See David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Wilkinson, F., ed., *The Dynamics of Labor Market Segmentation* (London: Academic Press, 1981); in planning, Doreen Massey, *Social Division of Labor: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

²⁸The four time periods are taken from Thomas Muller and Thomas Espenshade, *The Fourth Wave* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1985).

²⁹See Muller and Espenshade, op. cit.

³⁰The exception to the economic explanation for European emigration were Jews who still came because of persecution.

³¹See Charles Anderson, *White Protestant Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 2. While denominational differences were important, protestant immigrants united against "the Papist threat" represented by the Irish.

³²From *The Federalist Papers*, quoted in Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p.39.

³³U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, "The Effects of Immigration on the U.S. Economy and Labor Market," Immigration Policy and Research Report 1, 1989, Chapter 1, p. 6. See also H. Jerome, *Migration and Business Cycles* (New York: NBER, 1926).

³⁴Muller and Espenshade, op. cit.

³⁵See Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record Since 1800* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 39. Cited in Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

³⁶See Alejandro Portes and R. Bach, *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

³⁷Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 73.

³⁸See Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

³⁹Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 62.

⁴⁰United States Immigration Commission, *Immigrants in Industries* (Washington, D.C., 1910).

⁴¹Jerome, op. cit.

⁴²See Gordon, et al., op. cit.

⁴³See John Commons, et al., *History of Labor in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), Vol. III, pp. xxv; and Gordon, et al., op. cit., p.141.

⁴⁴See Steinberg, S., op. cit.

⁴⁵See Muller and Espenshade, op. cit.

⁴⁶John J. Harrigan, *Political Change in the Metropolis* (Boston: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown, 1989), Chapter 2.

⁴⁷See Harrigan, op. cit., Chapter 5.

⁴⁸The most infamous case is the Chicago steel strike of 1919. See David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The nonunion era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁴⁹John E. Bodnar, "The Impact of the 'New Immigration' on the Black Worker: Steelton, Pa., 1880-1920," *Labor History* 17 (Spring): 214-229. Cited in D. Gordon, et al., op. cit.

⁵⁰See James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), Chapter 2.

⁵¹See D. Gordon, et al., op. cit., Chapter 5.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵³David Gordon, "Segmentation by the numbers: Empirical applications of the theory of labor segmentation," New School for Social Research, 1982.

⁵⁴See S. Lieberman, "A Reconsideration of the Income Differences Found between Migrants and Northern-Born Blacks," *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1978): 940-66.

⁵⁵See Eunice S. Grier and George Grier, "Minorities in Suburbia: A Mid-1980s Update" (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1988).

⁵⁶See William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵⁷D. Ellwood found that comparable black and white teenagers fare just as differently when they live next to each other as when they live in areas with dramatic differences in job accessibility. D. Ellwood, "The spatial mismatch hypothesis: Are there teenage jobs missing in the ghetto?," in *The Black Youth Employment Crisis*, R. Freeman and H. Holzer, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁵⁸Gordon, D., et al., op. cit.

⁵⁹Muller and Espenshade, op. cit.

⁶⁰Portes and Bach, op. cit.

⁶¹See W. Fogel, "Twentieth-Century Mexican Immigration to the United States," in *The Gateway*, Barry Chiswick, ed. (Washington: AEI, 1982); Douglas Massey, et al., *Return to Aztlan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁶²Versus 5.4 million between 1900 and 1910.

⁶³See Portes and Rumbaut, op. cit.

⁶⁴For example, well-educated legal immigrants (Cubans) have been more readily absorbed than have educated -- but illegal -- Salvadoreans.

- ⁶⁵See particularly the work of Linda Chavez, "Tequila Sunrise: The Slow but Steady Progress of Hispanic Immigrants," *Policy Review*, Spring, 1989; and G. J. Borjas, *Friends or Strangers: The Impact of Immigrants on the U.S. Economy* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1990).
- ⁶⁶There is a vast literature on this in planning. Examples include The work of Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone; also William K. Tabb and Larry Sawers. For theoretical explanations see Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labor* (New York: Methuen, 1984); Allen J. Scott and Michael Storper, *Production, Work, Territory* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986); Michael Storper and Richard Walker, *The Capitalist Imperative* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
- ⁶⁷See John D. Kasarda, "Jobs, Migration and Emerging Urban Mismatches," in *Urban Change and Poverty*, McGeary and Lynn, eds. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988).
- ⁶⁸See Douglas Massey, "The Social Organization of Mexican Migration to the United States," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (1986): 102-113.
- ⁶⁹See Lowell Turner, Ph.D., dissertation, Dept. of Political Science, UC Berkeley, 1989.
- ⁷⁰Bluestone and Harrison, *The Great U-Turn* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Nancey Green Leigh, "National and Regional Change in the Earnings and Household Income Distributions: What is Happening to the Middle?," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1989.
- ⁷¹Several studies have concluded that immigrants do not compete with native workers for the same jobs. See Department of Labor, op. cit.
- ⁷²See S. Steinberg, op. cit.
- ⁷³The current emphasis on the African-American family has culture-of-poverty overtones. Steinberg document how poor Jews in New York City were thus characterized in the early twentieth century.