

The Culture of Poverty Reconsidered

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A special issue of the journal *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* edited by the American sociologists David J. Harding, Michèle Lamont, and Mario L. Small examines the relations between culture and poverty. The authors return to “the culture of poverty,” a concept that became taboo in the 1970s because of its conservative and racist recuperation. Their pluralist and supple view of culture allows them to untie the knot between culture and race that feeds conservative rhetoric.

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The anthropologist Oscar Lewis defined the concept of the culture of poverty as the set of norms and attitudes that have the effect of enclosing individuals in what was originally formed as a reaction to unfavorable external circumstances, but which, when transmitted from generation to generation, perpetuates the state of poverty regardless of how those circumstances change. This anthropological thesis was soon appropriated by conservatives in the United States, who imputed poverty in the major cities to the disorganization of the black family, suspected of producing a veritable culture of dependence on welfare. This appropriation had the counter-effect of banishing for decades any reference to culture in research on poverty. In effect, anyone who attributed poverty to cultural causes was accused of blaming the victim and of automatically dismissing any social policy.

Today the journal *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* devotes a special issue to the relations between culture and poverty, which testifies to the revival of the theme of the culture of poverty among liberal researchers who nevertheless want to distance themselves from the conservative hijacking of this theme. Moreover, it tests

the idea of a homogeneous culture of poverty against the many empirical studies and strongly deconstructs such a simplification. This reinvestment is accompanied by a call for qualitative sociology in the field of poverty studies, which has been until now dominated by economics and the quantitative social sciences.

The culture of poverty in America

In order to understand what is at stake with this renewal, it might be useful to recall that the relations between culture and poverty were long conceived within the framework set by Oscar Lewis' thesis. This anthropologist, whose monographs on poor families enjoyed worldwide success, defined the culture of poverty as a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that are essentially different from those of the middle class, and which are adopted in reaction to circumstances that do not allow the poor to be integrated into society.¹ Having to live from day to day, the poor fall back on the present; having few opportunities for social promotion, they lower their aspirations; men cannot feed their household, which become kept by women, etc. Later on, children appropriate these ways of living and these attitudes, and so adaptation to external circumstances is transformed into a perennial lifestyle that prevents descendants from benefiting from a possible transformation of external circumstances.

This thesis was the subject of passionate debates, because in proposing a definition of culture, it situated itself at the heart of theoretical issues that were bitterly disputed. However, it aroused much passion chiefly because of its political considerations. As a matter of fact, whatever Lewis himself might have thought,² while it is difficult not to observe the specificity of the behavior, attitudes, and values of poor people, it is undoubtedly even more difficult for progressive intellectuals to accept the conclusion that since poverty is not explained by a deficit of opportunities but rather by culture, then even an improvement in the institutional offer will not improve the situation of the poor. Thus the thesis contained an incitement to fatalism, if not a tendency to "blame the victim," according to an expression that cropped up at the time,³ by locating in people the mechanisms producing their disadvantaged situation, even when it did not simply naturalize the behavior of an ethnic group.

In the United States, the favor enjoyed by "the culture of poverty" is inseparable from

¹ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York*, New York: Random House, 1966.

² Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Scientific American* 215, October 1966.

³ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

the profound deterioration of the black ghettos in the 1960s and 1970s,⁴ with an increase in the number of illegitimate births and the growing recourse of single mothers to the principal provision of American social assistance, the *Aid to Families with Dependant Children* (the very same measure that was radically transformed by the welfare reform of 1996).⁵ The notion was boosted by the publication of the report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for Public Action*.⁶ Moynihan's ambition was to explain how slavery had led to a crumbling of the institutions of the black community. He maintained that the social disorganization noted in the inner cities was due to the dissolution of institutions, foremost the family, in which now women increasingly held the prime role. The idea of a black ghetto sub-culture had already been appropriated by the conservative critique of the welfare state that had become dominant. Thus this culturalist interpretation of poverty was disseminated together with the conservative rhetoric of the Reagan era that was reaffirming American moral values. The *culture of poverty* became the *culture of welfare* inasmuch as the latter was being criticized. For the critics of welfare, benefit checks were being considered as their due by people who had lost any sense of social responsibility; welfare was encouraging them not to work and to have children outside of marriage. The idea of an urban *underclass* was adopted to describe – and explain – the stream of violent crimes and drug trafficking that had risen to unprecedented levels in the downtown ghettos in the 1980s and 1990s, before ebbing – and shifting to the suburbs – in the 2000s. This appropriation of the culture-of-poverty thesis by a violently reactionary rhetoric⁷ even led sociologists to conceal the proximity of their results with those of Oscar Lewis.

In this context, the publication of William J. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*⁸ marked a turning point. It led a new generation to seize upon this issue, but now rethinking

⁴ The social disintegration of black ghettos noirs precipitated its own scholarly literature. See especially the work of William Julius Wilson, notably *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). Ethnographic studies also documented ghetto life. Sudhir Venkatesh has recently revived these approaches in *Off The Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁵ For a perspective on this fundamental reform that abolished the right to welfare and applied the principle of “workfare,” see Jean-Claude Barbier, “For an assessment of workfare and activation” (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Pour-un-bilan-du-workfare-et-de-l.html>) and Isaac Martin, “Which direction for the welfare state?” (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Legacies-of-welfare-reform-in-the.html>).

⁶ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington D.C: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965. For contextualization, see William Julius Wilson, “The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black community,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2009, 621 (1): 34-46.

⁷ Albert O. Hirschmann, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of University Harvard, 1991).

⁸ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner-city, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

culture in a movement that converged with changes going on in the other social sciences, especially anthropology. Even though this current – as the editors of the *Annals* state in their introduction – is not structured and has not adopted a coherent research program, the results produced by various researchers are sufficiently significant to mark a reorientation in the problematics and themes in the field of poverty studies.

For the journal's authors, abandoning the question of culture was regrettable from both scientific and political standpoints. However, their efforts bear on the scientific dimension alone, neutralizing the political dimension.⁹ From a scientific standpoint, researchers ought to be concerned with culture in order to understand how individuals respond to poverty, how they cope with it and how they escape it. On the first point, while research has identified various resistance strategies, the authors of the introduction stress that the issues remain open: for example, why do the immigrant poor create an associative network that is denser than that of the indigenous poor? This theme invites delving into what has already been demonstrated by Michèle Lamont:¹⁰ the poor's capacity of resilience, including the capacity to resist the stigma of poverty, is linked to their cultural identity and to their social participation. On the second point (how the poor escape poverty), the editors call for investigating variations and the heterogeneity of behaviors and decision-making processes among the poor. This issue is all the more important because studies imply that it is not sufficient to identify groups that have a "good" set of values (meaning values that are socially defined and valorized as suitable), since "good" values in the wrong context may be counter-productive. The Manichean opposition between the deserving and undeserving poor is re-examined by questioning the pertinence of socially promoted values in the context of poverty (p. 9-10).

For a plural approach to culture

To better define the notion of culture, the authors propose using a set of concepts, and their introduction distinguishes seven concepts that would enable a better understanding of poverty by refining previous analytical categories. Taking up the theme of an article they published in 2008, Michèle Lamont and Mario Luis Small¹¹ differentiate between values,

⁹ "Whether, when, and how cultural tools and cultural constraints matter is ultimately an empirical, not a political question," p.12.

¹⁰ Michèle Lamont, "Responses to Racism, health, and social inclusion as dimensions of successful societies," in *Successful Societies: How Institutions and Culture Influence Health*, ed. Peter A. Hall & Michèle Lamont, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Michèle Lamont and Mario Luis Small, "How Culture Matters: Enriching our Understanding of Poverty," in *The Colors of Poverty*, ed. Ann C. Lin and David R. Harris, p. 76-102, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation,

frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institutions.

To apprehend anew the relations between poverty and culture, the importance of the values that conservative rhetoric use in order to ethnicize the poor, by showing that they lack any empirical validity, should first and foremost be put into perspective. The poor do not have fundamentally different values from the rest of society, but they do not always possess the repertoires of action and strategies that would enable them to put these values into practice. This perspective strongly pluralizes culture and highlights contradictions among various repertoires of actions with which everyone must deal. However, Michèle Lamont signals that the idea of repertoire does not in itself explain why certain of its elements are chosen in the course of the action.

Important in a different way is the idea of a framework: “how people act depends on how they cognitively perceive themselves, the world, or their surroundings.” Drawn from the interactionist tradition, the notion of a framework enables showing the *practical effects* of different perceptions of the same events by individuals or groups who have acquired both different understandings and experience. The frameworks of interpretation of a neighborhood influence the participation of its residents. This insistence on frameworks shows the internal heterogeneity of poor neighborhoods in terms of behavior and results, and it invalidates the idea of a ghetto culture that is supposedly shared in a homogenous way by the inhabitants of disadvantaged neighborhoods. Apprehending poverty through the concept of framework makes it possible to break with a rigid view of the causal relation between culture and behavior; the notion of framework suggests that culture may make an action possible or probable, but never necessary. It extends into the idea of the narratives that in a certain way individualize the determination of behavior by cultural factors. If individuals act in function of socially constructed frameworks, they also do on the basis of the narrative they have elaborated on their own experience.

The concept of symbolic boundaries as formulated by Michèle Lamont and Marcel Fournier articulates lived experience at the micro-sociological level, studying the way individuals give meaning to their situation, along with more structural aspects like the political and cultural traditions of different countries. The authors review the results of

previous studies that showed that in the United States workers distinguish themselves strongly from the poor, due to the individualism that prevails there; this is less the case in France, partly due to the Catholic and socialist traditions that provide grounding for the republican idea of solidarity. The problem that results from national comparison is that the cultural categories of merit correspond to political differences in the struggle against poverty in the two countries. Here the concept of symbolic boundary plays the role of interface by proposing a cultural definition of the formation of social structures.

Symbolic boundaries, social boundaries

According to Lamont and Fournier's definition, symbolic boundaries are "conceptual distinctions performed by social actors to categorize objects, people and practices as well as time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classification" (Michèle Lamont et Virag Molnar, "The Study of Boundaries across the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2002, 28, p. 168). These symbolic boundaries are to be distinguished from *social boundaries*, which are "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (*ibid*). However, whereas social boundaries are institutionalized, symbolic boundaries characterize the classification struggles by which the majority of groups try to maintain the privileges attached to their status. (See Paul Lichterman and Nina Eliasoph, "Culture in Interaction", *American Journal of Sociology*, 2003, 108: 735-94.)

Finally, the concepts of cultural capital and institutions complete this theoretical apparatus by attaching the achievements of the first distinctions to the effects of social stratification. The transmission of tastes – and distastes – enables a reproduction of the advantages of middle class families. Pursuing such an analysis foregrounds a *cultural mismatch* between the tastes necessary for inclusion in the peer group and for integration in the school milieu. This dimension enriches the analysis of skill and spatial mismatches used by Wilson in his study of the unemployment of poor ghetto residents.

Culture, poverty, and politics

The first part of *Reconsidering Culture and Poverty* is the most important in terms of length, but also thanks to its new approach to culture on the basis of lived experience. It deals with various themes: the relation to employment, the representation of family roles, and aspirations linked to education. The analyses respond to previous field studies of poor young men. Here I will concentrate on the two articles devoted to work, which demonstrate the plurality of possible approaches to an almost identical subject. These two contributions illustrate a re-reading of research traditions combined with the presentation of an empirical case study. “A Test of Sincerity” by Sandra Susan Smith tests the idea that cultural factors play a crucial role in the mobilization of social capital. In so doing, she renews the sociological analysis of networks by reviving this method’s founding theme. Her study bears on the service personnel at the University of California at Berkeley where she teaches. On the basis of in-depth semi-directed interviews, she tries to understand the ways in which African-Americans and Hispanics put members of their group into relation with a potential employer – in other words, situations when strong ties play the role of weak ties. She shows that Latinos tend to help more, and more explicitly, the members of their group to get jobs. This relates to the fact that they belong less often than do African-Americans to networks with a significant number of unemployed persons. While this parameter could have – or even should have – worked in the opposite direction, the reason it does not is that black employees consider poverty in moral terms, meaning they have appropriated the dominant beliefs. Therefore they interpret such requests as attempts to save appearances by adopting in a purely external way an expression of being motivated to work. Assisting someone else is performed in a passive and selective manner. There is a major difference between the black ghettos and the barrio: the former are hit by unemployment, the latter by under-employment, resulting in greater social trust among the inhabitants of the barrios. This perspective, underpinned by groundwork that is well conducted and recounted, deepens rather than challenges the results achieved in twenty-five years of research on black unemployment from the perspectives of the sociology of networks and of social capital. Moreover it exposes the mechanisms of statistical discrimination within the very ethnic group that it affects the most. These mechanisms perpetuate the stigmatization and exclusion from which blacks suffer.

Alford A. Young is interested in the concept of framing. He details the way in which low-paid workers interpret and present the images of their social reality and then review the literature on the culture of poverty. Young believes that the way in which disadvantaged African-Americans make sense of opportunities has been neglected in favor of a binary moral

logic: either they should be encouraged to seize the economic opportunities and prospects of educational advancement ... or else they should be sanctioned for not having done so. His framing perspective help distance the study of the cultural dimensions of poverty from its normative and moralizing dimension. Hence researchers must pay attention to the particularities of life experiences in order to take into account the diversified representations of these people's social world. The article relies on interviews with twenty-six Afro-American young men in Detroit, a city particularly marked by poverty – in 2002 it was the poorest in the United States¹² – and where blacks are particularly hard hit by urban under-employment. It specifically bears on the meaning they may give to the notion of a “good job” in order to understand how these individuals elaborate a sense of order and hierarchy when they consider the economic world. Unsurprisingly, those who have been to school give more importance to gratifications linked to autonomy and expressivity. The elasticity and changing nature of the very notion of *framework* spring from this analysis, going beyond the pluralism of representations within a group considered *a priori* as homogenous.

The second part, composed of two articles, focuses on the relations that are shaped between culture and poverty in the conception and implementation of public policies. If not offering an international comparison, the volume is at least open to an international approach thanks to the contribution by Vijayendra Rao and Paromita Sanyal, “Dignity through Discourse: Poverty and the Culture of Deliberation in Indian Village Democracies.” This article studies the impact on the culture of the poor of the procedures of deliberative democracy established in two million villages in India. Its resolutely communicational approach to culture belongs to the normative perspective of Amartya Sen and the sociology of recognition. But the empirical work of analyzing the minutes of village committees that were charged with selecting the beneficiaries of social aid shows the limited impact of such procedures to construct a “political culture of poverty”: a discursive competition is established in place of deliberative democracy. However, it is a shame that the relational definition of culture that stresses communication does not really revisit one of the aspects relating the populations observed (those who suffer the disadvantage of belonging to the lower castes on top of suffering from socio-economic inequality – this double oppression is further reinforced by the one of gender) to the culture of poverty thesis whose importance had been underlined in the introduction and is here mentioned again through the paradoxical formula of “the

¹² See the article by Sylvie Laurent, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Clint-Eastwood-ou-les-grognements.html>

political culture of poverty.”

In the second article, Joshua Guetzkow studies the way in which elites represent poverty in speeches on fighting poverty made in the United States Congress in two key periods: first, the Great Society, when President Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty” (1964-1968), a key moment in the mobilization of a set of experts on poverty,¹³ and the “neo-liberal” period of the backlash against Great Society programs (1981-1996). Summarizing research on the relation between social ideas and policies, the author finds that they share this common trait: they correlate the breadth and generosity of the social security net with the representation of the deservingness of the poor. While this point is important, the author says it does not address two key issues: first, how to understand the change in social policies, and second, how to develop instruments to fight poverty. For example, mentioning the reform of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and its transformation into TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), Guetzkow recalls that its promoters not only described the poor as undeserving but also represented them as victims of a security net whose generosity had supposedly pushed them into dependency. From this perspective, it was an act of compassion toward these poor people to impose strict temporal limits on aid benefits. It is necessary to reconsider the political conceptions of poverty thanks to more refined “cultural categories of value.” Analysis of the political discourse by going back to its source enables Guetzkow to move beyond the polarity *deservingness/undeservingness* as the most important categories for the social sciences when they seek after the fact to ascribe meaning both to changes and to political actors.¹⁴ Starting from the concept of frame, he shows that in both periods the answers corresponded to the way in which legislation framed the causes of poverty and the capacities and motivations of the poor. In the 1960s, it was the crumbling of the community that was held responsible for poverty, but the psychological problems encountered by blacks were seen as connected to their limited opportunities to become integrated into the mainstream. The poor were seen as unarmed and desperate victims of economic transformations and of discrimination; society was responsible for their fate; those who wanted to escape could not do so. Those who did not want to escape were victims of a context that prevented them from developing values convergent with those of the rest of society.

¹³ Romain Huret, *La fin de la pauvreté. Les experts sociaux en guerre contre la pauvreté aux États-Unis (1945-1974)*, Editions EHESS, “En temps et lieux,” 2008, 240 p.

¹⁴ As support for this thesis, the author mentions that the political elite – including Republicans – quite simply does not use deserving.

By contrast, in the neo-liberal period it was individuals themselves who were held responsible for their poverty, and the values that would allow them to make good choices were simply lacking. The dissolution of the family was considered to be the result of government action, because generous benefits produced dependency on social assistance – meaning that it produced maintenance of poverty in addition to other evils (deficits, slowed growth, etc.) In the 1980s and 1990s, then, welfare itself and no longer poverty became the problem, the sickness to be cured. Increasing illegitimate births among black teenaged girls were the index of a culture of dependency whose intergenerational reproduction was feared (although nothing attested to this).¹⁵ While poverty was perceived as the absence (or loss) of mainstream values (family values and the work ethic), the poor were described as rational actors who adapt to the perverse incitement of welfare, which invited them to conceive children outside marriage and to shirk work.

The final part, composed of an article by William Julius Wilson and reflections by political actors who look back on their contributions, returns to the articulation between structure and culture in the understanding of – and the fight against – poverty. Wilson's article echoes the theses defended in his last book *More Than Just Race*.¹⁶ A sociologist known for having stressed structural economic and social forces that determine the fate of young blacks in the ghetto, he focuses on the importance of cultural issues in this book. He tries to articulate structural factors with cultural ones, not confining himself to a simple juxtaposition of structural and cultural effects (the way in which social positions, roles, and networks are organized in institutions),¹⁷ and not neglecting the hierarchy between the two types of force. For him, structural factors prevail.

Despite his attention to cultural factors – which he perceives not just as the results of race and poverty but also as producing their own effects in the form of responses to poverty, including responses that help perpetuate poverty situations – Wilson's argument is unequivocal: structural factors are the most important. And it is all the more essential to reaffirm this because the United States is distinctive in its belief in the individual

¹⁵ William Julius Wilson & Robert Aponte. 1985. "Urban Poverty", p. 231-258 in *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 11.

¹⁶ William Julius Wilson, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner-city*, (New York: Norton, 2009).

¹⁷ Social actions and social processes, direct or indirect, are the structural forces at work, p. 201.

responsibility of the poor. This explains the American preference for explaining poverty by cultural factors, which social science arguments should be careful not to feed. If cultural factors were indeed the most important, the inhabitants of neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated would not have been able to benefit from the economic boom of the 1990s. But they did and urban poverty considerably diminished. Wilson's argument is deployed in the course of a detailed examination of neighborhood effects. Properly understood, the specific effects linked to the fact of living in a neighborhood where poverty is concentrated (which should not be confused with the effects of individual variables) – are not merely structural. This kind of environment also lessens cognitive and verbal competences. Discrimination (and its reproduction over time) exposes individuals to psychological states that analysts may wrongly consider as norms inasmuch as they seem to govern behavior – resignation, for example. The psychological effects of racial discrimination and economic status are condensed in behavioral models that in turn reinforce the difficulty of integrating into mainstream society.

In this collection the diversity of themes and approaches, going from micro dimensions and the impact of cultural factors to a plurality of methods, is remarkable. Its breadth enables a dialogue between qualitative cultural sociology and the results from quantitative research. It affirms the autonomy of qualitative sociology and assures its insertion into a field of research on poverty that on the far side of the Atlantic has been largely dominated by studies using quantitative methods. Finally, the editors have given space to contributions that nuance the analytic framework they are offering: Stephen Vaisey returns to the differences in educational aspirations in various groups, and Wilson works on cultural factors from the perspective of an articulation between culture (understood as norms and values) and structural factors. These contributions allow the reader to evaluate the limits of the proposed paradigm, and they open up new fields of research.

Possible comparative applications

This anthology is principally aimed as an intervention in the American debate on poverty but it also offers renewed analyses of culture within European sociology.¹⁸ To my

¹⁸ On very different levels, we may mention Jean-Claude Barbier, *La longue marche vers l'Europe sociale*, (Paris: PUF, "Le Lien social" 2008) and more recently, Hugues Lagrange, *Le déni des cultures*, (Paris: Seuil, 2010). *La vie des idées (Books and Ideas)* will soon give an extended review of the latter book. Here I simply signal the gap between the thinking about culture in the articles in the special issue of *Annals* and that in Lagrange's book. Although he defines it as the product of a group's history, Lagrange considers culture as a

mind there are several advantages in resituating the evolving relations between culture and poverty within global processes that Peter Wagner has called enlarged modernity.¹⁹ It is characterized by individualization and globalization, and it succeeds a modernity organized around the nation-state (or more exactly the national and social state). This reintroduction of concepts from the sociology of modernity in order to detach the object under study (the relation between culture and poverty) from any national sociology offers various advantages for comparisons.

First, when resituated in the grand categories of the sociology of modernization, the cultural manifestations of the concentration of urban poverty in the United States and in Europe²⁰ may be analyzed in the same dialectic of cultural de-segregation (or extraversion) involving a spatial dimension since the jobs have left the city centers (*spatial mismatch*)²¹ and a dimension linked to competences since service jobs demand that workers adopt social skills close to the *habitus* of the middle classes (*skills mismatch*). The least qualified workers and their families are confined to the service sector by segregation (a new kind of racism that is cultural or differential) and by self-segregation (adoption of street codes²² or neo-traditional behavior), itself strongly determined by phenomena that produce unemployment or underemployment among city youth, especially among visible minorities. In short, if there is a specific culture of the poor (in the strong sense of a set of shared meanings and attitudes), it is a “defense mechanism against the domination being imposed.”²³ This means that far from

much more substantial and homogeneous reality for the group than do the American authors cited in the collection under review here. The view of the black ghettos he offers is therefore much more culturalist than that of the contributors to *Annals*; their sociological imagination draws more heavily on the interactionist and pragmatist tradition than on anthropology. However, Lagrange’s culturalist perspective is counterbalanced by a pronounced constructivism, especially in the first chapters of his book.

¹⁹ Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity. Liberty and Discipline*, Routledge, 1993, 288 p.

²⁰ Despite colossal and persistent differences of degree in the manifestations of social disorganization. See Loic Wacquant, “Red Belt, Black Belt : Racial Division, Class Inequality, and the State in the French Urban Periphery and the American Ghetto” in *Urban Poverty and the “Underclass”: A Reader*. Edited by Enzo Mingione (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1996/1995) pp. 234-274. Yet the decline in urban poverty and criminality and the suburbanization of poverty that occurred in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s, combined with the reinforcement of ethno-racial lines and urban segregation that occurred in Europe may invite us to think of a convergence between contexts.

²¹ This dimension was the subject of a comparative study by Sylvia Fol, *La mobilité des pauvres. Pratiques d’habitants et politiques publiques (The Mobility of the Poor: Inhabitants’ Practices and Public Policies)*, Belin, “Mappemonde”, 2009. It should be added that the spatial explosion of the lifestyle of the least qualified workers in the tertiary sector is accompanied by a temporal explosion having major consequences on the family, since a) service jobs are located close to the places of residence and/or work of the higher consuming categories, and b) the work schedule is often out of synch with the “standard” working hours of these same categories. On these points, see the study by Laurent Lesnard in France, *La famille désarticulée*, (Paris, PUF, “Le Lien social”, 2010).

²² Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner-City*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

²³ Olivier Schwartz, *La notion de “classes populaires,”* Sociology Dissertation, Université de Versailles-Saint-

being passive, “the group actively participates in the production of its own insularity” (*ibid.*), with all the counter-productive effects of such an attitude. “Even if that [attitude] is primarily a way of resisting, it also contributes to the confinement in which the group was first installed by the mechanisms of domination.” (*ibid.*) From this perspective, even the most radical forms of cultural separation and apparent homogeneity are liable to an analytical (re)construction that might be aided by the concepts offered in the introduction to the *Annals* volume. A view of the culture of the poor from below, starting from the meaning of the lived experience of actors, could thus assess the role played by global processes and national frameworks within which these practices are inscribed.

Second, identifying the traits common to different societies should assist in an account of how the culture of the poor develops in each country, as well as its institutionalization by social practices (scholarly and social discourses, the conception of social policies, etc.) The importance assumed by “the culture of poverty” theme in the United States might then be explained: it was within the framework of the enlargement in mid-1960s America of the sphere of voluntarism (revealed in a rich study in the sociology of modernity applied to the United States)²⁴ that the Lewis thesis became so important. As soon as institutional barriers like segregation – obviously not the only barriers – imposed on African-Americans had been dismantled (like those that prevented women from entering the labor market), then dependency – a notion that would become central in the conservative analyses of poverty as welfare dependency – would assume a strictly individual and psychological meaning. From that moment, one could correctly assert that no kind of dependency was perceived as positive in American society,²⁵ meaning that no structural explanation was legitimate to account for social disadvantage.

Finally, this new analytic framework seems to suggest convergences between different countries. As Lamont’s many comparative studies have shown, while the representations that workers have of the poor in France and in the United States are very different, representations quite similar to American ones are developing in France. The cleavage between workers and the poor is increasingly sharper in France, even if to a lesser degree and mitigated by enduring

Quentin-en-Yvelines, 1997, p.77.

²⁴ Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 528 p.

²⁵ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U. S. Welfare State,” *Signs*, vol. 19, n°2, 1994 (Winter), p. 309-336.

socialist, republican and Christian heritages.²⁶ This evolution is characteristic of a transformation in attitudes to poverty in European countries. This objective rapprochement between Europe and the United States opens the way to a circulation of expertise in both directions. Firstly, European sociologists would have much to gain from appropriating the body of work produced on relations between culture and poverty. It would put them on their guard against the tendency to “blame the victim” that develops as equal opportunity progresses in European societies. But they should not neglect the cultural dimensions of poverty. In return, the changing social configuration of European countries is capable of contributing to the research program opened by the editors of the *Annals* volume. In effect, even if one comes from a sociology that is Durkheimian in inspiration (hence theoretically reticent about apprehending the cultural dimensions of poverty because anchored in the study of social norms), one might be able to show how in certain circumstances the promotion of individual autonomy could lead individuals (as a function of their frames or trajectories) not to accept the new type of social policies whose conception, if not realization, is close to workfare. They might go so far as to refuse to use them. More fundamentally, to describe the way in which individuals perceive social norms, especially as relating to individual autonomy,²⁷ there might indeed be a nascent cleavage (or rather a set of cleavages) among the poor themselves along ethno-racial lines.

To summarize, the contributions of American sociologists help to untie the knot between culture and race, while showing to what extent culture plays a role in poverty. They help us understand why society is making culture ethnic. My final observations argue for an enlargement of the research program opened by Michèle Lamont and Mario Small, of which the ensemble of contributions coordinated with David Harding offer a first synthesis as well as an invitation to the development of empirical studies on culture *within* poverty. It is to be hoped that this invitation will lead to many vocations in the United States and elsewhere, since it offers a theoretical and empirical enrichment of the issue of poverty that is in phase with the current political issues.

²⁶ Olivier Schwartz, “Vivons-nous encore dans une société de classes? Trois remarques sur la société française contemporaine,” *La vie des idées*, 22 September 2009:

<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Vivons-nous-encore-dans-une.html>

²⁷ Nicolas Duvoux, *L'Autonomie des assistés. Sociologie des politiques d'insertion*, (Paris: PUF, « Le Lien social », 2009).

A previous version of this article contained the following sentence: "Thus William J. Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged* does not even cite Lewis, even though his description and analyses of the lifestyles of the urban underclass intersects with a number of elements highlighted by Lewis." After lavedesidees.fr received a message from William J. Wilson mentioning that five of Oscar Lewis' publications are cited in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and that he devotes no less than three full printed pages discussing Lewis' work, including one page (p. 137) that distinguishes his own notion of "ghetto subculture" from Lewis' notion of "culture of poverty", the author of the article acknowledged his mistake and accepted its removal.

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