
Understanding Inner-City Poverty: Resistance and Self-Destruction under U.S. Apartheid

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I did not run fast enough out the door of the video arcade crackhouse to avoid hearing the lookout's baseball bat thud twice against a customer's skull. I had misjudged the harsh words Caesar, the lookout, had been exchanging with a drug-intoxicated customer to be the aggressive but ultimately playful posturing that is characteristic of much male interaction on the street. Pausing on the curb in front of the crackhouse, I tried to decide from the continued sound of scuffling inside whether or not I should call for medical emergency. Reassured when I saw the beaten young man crawl out the door amidst a parting barrage of kicks and howling laughter, I walked two doors down the block to my tenement where I was living at the time in the primarily Puerto Rican neighborhood of East Harlem, New York. Confused by my impotence in the face of the violence of my crack dealer friends, I ended my fieldwork early that night and tried to recover from my own anger and rushing adrenaline by rocking my newborn son to sleep. My baby's appreciative gurgles, however, did not erase from the back of my mind the sound of Caesar's baseball bat thudding on the drug addict's skull.

The following evening, I forced myself to return to the crackhouse where I was spending much of my time conducting research on inner-city poverty and social marginalization (figure 1). I rebuked Caesar for his "overreaction" to the obnoxious customer the night before. Caesar was only too pleased to engage me in a playful argument. Half way through our verbal jousting, he grabbed my tape recorder out of my shirt pocket, turned it on, and spoke directly into the microphone. He wanted to make sure I had a clear record of his riposte so that it could be included as a direct quote in the book on street culture and the underground economy that I was writing at the time:



FIGURE 1 The Game Room video arcade and crackhouse. (Photo by author)

Nah, Felipe, you just don't understand. It's not good to be too sweet sometimes to people, man, because they're just gonna take advantage of you.

That dude was talking shit for a long time, about how we weak; how he control the block; and how he can do whatever he wants.

I mean, we were trying to take it calm like, until he starts talkin' this'n'that, about how he gonna drop a dime on us [report us to the police].

That's when I grabbed the bat—I looked at the axe that we keep behind the Pac-Man but then I said, "No; I want something that's going to be short and compact. I only gotta swing a short distance to clock him.

[Now shouting out the video arcade doorway for everyone outside to hear] You don't control nothin', because we rocked your bootie. Ha! Ha! Ha!

[Turning back to me] That was right when you ran out the door, Felipe. You missed it. I had gotten wild.

You see, Felipe, you can't be allowing people to push you around in this neighborhood, or else you get that reputation, like: "That homeboy's soft."

Primo, the manager of the crackhouse, further confirmed Caesar's story and raised the credibility of his violent persona by noting with a chuckle that he had only barely managed to subdue Caesar after the second blow of the baseball bat to

keep Caesar from killing the offending customer while he lay semiconscious on the floor.

THE LOGIC OF VIOLENCE IN STREET CULTURE

Most readers might interpret Caesar's behavior and public rantings and ravings to be those of a dysfunctionally antisocial psychopath. In the context of the underground economy, however, Caesar's braggadocio and celebration of violence are good public relations. Periodic public displays of aggression are crucial to his professional credibility. They ensure his long-term job security. When Caesar shouted his violent story out the door of the crackhouse for everyone in the vicinity to hear, he was not bragging idly or dangerously; on the contrary, he was advertising his effectiveness as a lookout, and confirming his capacity for maintaining order at his work site. Another side benefit that Caesar derives from his inability to control his underlying rages is a lifelong monthly Social Security Insurance check for being—as he puts it—“a certified nut case.” He periodically reconfirms his emotional disability by occasional suicide attempts.

In short, at age nineteen, Caesar's brutality has allowed him to mature into an effective career as crackhouse lookout. Aside from providing him with what he considers to be a decent income, it also allows him on a personal and emotional level to overcome the terrified vulnerability he endured growing up in East Harlem. Born to a sixteen-year-old heroin addict, he was raised by a grandmother who beat him regularly, but whom he loved dearly. Sent to reform school for striking a teacher with a chair, Caesar admitted,

I used to cry every day; be a big sucker. I was thinking suicide. I missed my moms. I mean 'buela [Granma]—you've met her.

Plus I was a little kid back then—like about twelve or thirteen—and I'd get *beat* down by other kids and shit. I was getting my ass kicked. I used to get hurt.

It was a nasty reform school. I used to see the counselors holding down the kids naked outside in the snow.

Being smart and precocious, Caesar soon adapted to the institutionalized violence of his school and developed the skills that eventually allowed him to excel in the underground economy:

So then, I just learned. I used to fight so wild that they wouldn't bother me for awhile. I would go real crazy! Real crazy, every time I would fight. Like I would pick up a chair or a pencil or something and really mess them up. So they'd thought I was wild and real crazy.

I mean, I always got into fights. Even if I lost, I always started fights. That let me relax more, because after that nobody messed with me.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO POVERTY AND THE INNER CITY

Caesar and his immediate supervisor, Primo, were merely two members out of a network of some twenty-five Puerto Rican retail crack sellers whom I befriended in the more than four years that I lived and worked in East Harlem at the height of what politicians and the media called “the crack epidemic,” extending roughly from 1985 to 1991. As a cultural anthropologist engaged in the research methodology of “participant-observation fieldwork,” or “ethnography,” I can only collect “accurate data” by violating the canons of traditional, positivist research. We anthropologists have to become intimately involved with the people we study, striving to establish long-term, respectful, and usually mutually empathetic relationships. We attempt to suspend our value judgments in order to immerse ourselves in the common sense of the people we live with.

Researchers who are not cultural anthropologists have a hard time believing that useful, reliable data can be generated from the small samples of people that we study using participant-observation, qualitative methods. This is because quantitative-oriented researchers who collect data via surveys or by consulting published censuses do not understand the intensity of the relationship one must develop with each individual in one’s sample in order to obtain information that addresses the cultural contexts and processual dynamics of social networks in holistic contexts. Anthropologists do not correlate discrete statistical variables; rather, they explain (or evoke) the reasons (or accidents) for why and how social relations unfold within their indigenous (and global) contexts. Ideally, anthropologists develop an organic relationship to a social setting where their presence only minimally distorts indigenous social interaction. We must seek out a legitimate social role within the social scene we are studying in order to develop friendships (and sometimes enmities) that allow us (with informed consent) to observe behavior directly in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. A major task of participant-observers is to put themselves “in the shoes” of the people they study in order to “see local realities” through “local eyes.” Obviously, on an absolute level, such an achievement is impossible and possibly even dangerous, as it implies a power imbalance. Indeed, the premise that the “essence” of a group of people or a culture can be understood and described by an outsider and translated into academic analytic categories can lead to stereotyping. Postmodernists have criticized ethnography as being predicated on a totalizing modernist fantasy that is ultimately oppressive. Anthropologists risk imposing ethnocentric, power-laden, analytic

categories and exotifying images onto the unsuspecting people they study in the name of an arrogantly assumed ethnographic academic authority. To avoid imposing in the name of science images that “other” the people they study, ethnographers need to be self-reflexively critical and to recognize that no single, simple reality or essence of a culture necessarily exists. Cultures and social processes are inevitably both more—but also less—than what can be captured in one outsider’s attempt to reduce them into a coherent ethnographic monograph or article. Nevertheless, for the sake of defining participant-observation in a meaningful way, suffice it to say that cultural anthropologists, for all the problems that cross-cultural reportage implies, try to get as close as possible to local, everyday worlds without disrupting and judging them. The overall goal is to obtain a holistic perspective on the internal logics of and external constraints on the way processes unfold while at the same time recognizing humbly that cultures and social meanings are fragmented and multiplicitous.

In the case of my work with crack dealers in East Harlem, before even being able to initiate my research formally, I had to confront the overwhelming reality of racial- and class-based segregation in urban America. Initially, it felt as if my white skin signaled the terminal stage of a contagious disease sowing havoc in its path. Busy street corners emptied amidst a hail of whistles whenever I walked by as nervous drug dealers scattered in front of me, certain that I was an undercover narcotics agent. Conversely, the police made it clear to me that I was violating unconscious apartheid laws by throwing me spread-eagled against building walls to search me for weapons and drugs when they encountered me on their patrols. From their perspective, the only reason for a “white boy” to be in the neighborhood after dark is to buy drugs. As a matter of fact, the first time the police stopped me, I naively tried to explain to them in a polite voice that I was an anthropologist studying social marginalization. Convinced I was making fun of them, they showered me with a litany of curses and threats. They then escorted me to the nearest bus stop and ordered me to leave East Harlem, “and go buy your drugs in a white neighborhood ya’ dirty mother . . .”

It was only through my long-term physical presence, residing in the neighborhood, and my polite perseverance on the street that I was able to overcome these racial and class boundaries and eventually earn the respect and full cooperation of the dealers operating on my block. It helped when they saw me getting married and having a baby. By the time my son was old enough to be baptized in the local church, I was close enough to several of the dealers to invite them to the party at my mother’s apartment downtown.

In contrast, I was never able to communicate effectively with the police. I learned, however, always to carry a “picture I.D.” showing my correct local ad-

dress, and I always forced myself to stare at the ground politely and mumble effusive “yes sirs” in a white, working-class, New York accent whenever they stopped me. Unlike most of the crack dealers I spent time with, I was never beaten or arrested—only occasionally threatened and sometimes politely queried and advised to “find a cheap apartment in Queens instead.”

I am convinced that it is only by painstakingly violating urban apartheid that I was able to collect meaningful data on inner-city poverty. Methodologically, it is only by establishing lasting relationships based on mutual respect that one can begin to ask provocative personal questions and expect to engage in substantive conversations about the complex experience of extreme social marginalization in the United States. Perhaps, this is why the experience of poverty and social marginalization is so poorly understood. The traditional, quantitative-oriented survey methodologies of upper-middle-class sociologists or criminologists tend to collect fabrications. Few people on the margins of society trust outsiders when they ask invasive personal questions, especially concerning money, drugs, and alcohol. In fact, nobody—whether rich or poor—likes to answer such indiscrete, incriminating queries.

Historically, inner-city poverty research has been more successful at reflecting the biases of an investigator’s society than at analyzing the experience of poverty or documenting race and class apartheid. The state of poverty and social marginalization research in any given country emerges almost as a litmus for gauging contemporary social attitudes towards inequality and social welfare. This is particularly true in the United States, where discussions of poverty almost immediately become polarized around moralistic value judgments about individual self-worth, and frequently degenerate into stereotyped conceptions of race. In the final analysis, most people in the United States—rich and poor alike—believe in the Horatio Alger myth of going from rags to riches. They are also intensely moralistic about issues of wealth; perhaps this stems from their Puritanical/Calvinist heritage. Even progressive leftist academics in the United States secretly worry that the poor may actually deserve their fate. As a result they often feel compelled to portray the inner city in an artificially positive manner that is not only unrealistic but is also theoretically and analytically flawed.

This ideological context for inner-city poverty research in the United States is probably best epitomized by the best-selling books of the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the 1960s. He collected thousands of pages of life-history interviews with an extended family of Puerto Ricans who migrated to East Harlem and the South Bronx in search of employment. Some thirty years later, his culture of poverty theory remains at the center of contemporary polemics around the inner city in the United States. Despite his being a social democrat in favor of expanding govern-

ment poverty programs, his theoretical analysis offers a psychological reductionist—almost blame-the-victim—explanation for the transgenerational persistence of poverty. On some level it sounded the death knell for the Great Society dreams of the Johnson administration and helped disabuse the dream of the early 1960s that poverty in America could be eradicated. If anything, thirty years later, his theory resonated more than ever with the campaigns for individual responsibility and family values that were so celebrated by politicians in U.S. national elections during the 1990s. In a 1966 *Scientific American* article, Lewis wrote,

By the time slum children are six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic attitudes and values of their subculture. Thereafter they are psychologically unready to take full advantage of changing conditions or improving opportunities that may develop in their lifetime. . . .

It is much more difficult to undo the culture of poverty than to cure poverty itself.

In their anger and frustration over the way Lewis's family-based and Freudian-influenced focus on impoverished Puerto Rican immigrants confirms conservative American biases, liberal social scientists have often fallen into the trap of glorifying the poor and denying any empirical evidence of personal self-destruction. When I moved into the same inner-city neighborhood where the Puerto Rican families that Lewis studied had lived more than thirty years ago, I was determined to avoid his failure to examine structural inequality, while at the same time documenting the way oppression is painfully internalized in the day-to-day life of the persistently poor. Striving to develop a political economy perspective that takes culture and gender seriously, and which also recognizes the link between individual actions and social/structural determination, I focused on how an oppositional street culture of resistance to exploitation and social marginalization is contradictorily self-destructive to its participants. In fact, street dealers, addicts, and criminals become the local agents administering the destruction of their surrounding community.

THE DOLLARS AND SENSE OF DRUGS

Given the extraordinary economic importance of illicit drugs and the destructive impact they have on people's lives, inner-city researchers have to address the issue of substance abuse and the role of drugs in the underground economy. The easiest dimension of drug dealing for outsiders to understand is its economic logic. On a worldwide scale, illegal drugs have become an immense, multibillion-dollar business. Tragically, in the United States during the 1980s and through the 1990s, the crack/cocaine and heroin industries have been the only dynamically growing,

equal-opportunity employers for inner-city men. For example, the street in front of my tenement was not atypical and within a two-block radius I could obtain heroin, crack, powder cocaine, hypodermic needles, methadone, valium, angel dust (an animal tranquilizer), marijuana, mescaline, bootleg alcohol, and tobacco. Within one hundred yards of my stoop there were three competing crackhouses selling vials at two, three, and five dollars. Two additional retail outfits sold powder cocaine in ten- and twenty-dollar plastic-sealed packages, patented with a neatly carved, rubber stamp logo. Immediately above the particular crackhouse camouflaged as a video arcade where I spent most of my time, two legally registered doctors administered a “pill mill,” writing several dozen prescriptions for opiates, stimulants, and sedatives every day. This added up to several millions of dollars worth of drugs per year. In the projects opposite my tenement, the New York City Housing Authority Police arrested a fifty-five-year-old mother and her twenty-two-year-old daughter while they were “bagging” twenty-one pounds of cocaine into ten-dollar, quarter-gram “jumbo” vials of adulterated product worth approximately one million dollars on the street. The police found twenty-five thousand dollars in small-denomination bills in this same apartment.

In other words, many millions of dollars worth of business takes place within a stone’s throw of the youths growing up in East Harlem tenements and housing projects. Drug dealing in the underground economy offers youths—primarily males—a career with real possibilities of upward mobility. Like most other people in the United States, drug dealers are merely scrambling to obtain their “piece of the pie” as fast as possible. In fact, in their pursuit of success they are following the minute details of the classical Yankee model for upward mobility: up-by-the-bootstraps via private entrepreneurship. Perversely, they are the ultimate rugged individualists braving an unpredictable frontier where fortune, fame, and destruction are all just around the corner—and where competitors are ruthlessly hunted down and shot.

Despite the obvious economic incentives, most of East Harlem’s residents shun drugs and work nine-to-five plus overtime at legal jobs. The problem, however, is that this law-abiding majority has lost control of public space. They have been pushed onto the defensive, living in fear, or even in contempt, of their neighborhood. Worried mothers and fathers are forced to maintain children double-locked behind apartment doors in determined attempts to keep street culture out. Their primary goal is to save up enough money to move to a safe, working-class neighborhood.

The drug dealers in this book, consequently, represent only a small minority of East Harlem’s population, but they have managed to set the tone for public life. They force local residents, especially women and the elderly, to live in fear of being assaulted or mugged. Most important, on a daily basis, the street-level drug



FIGURE 2 Vacant lot next to the tenement where the author lived. (Photo by author)

dealers offer a persuasive, even if violent and self-destructive, alternative lifestyle—what I call street culture—to the youths growing up around them. The drug economy is the material base for street culture, and its expansion during the 1980s and 1990s unconsciously rendered street culture even more appealing and fashionable.

On a subtler level, street culture is more than economic desperation or greediness; it is also a search for dignity and a refusal to accept the marginalization that mainstream society imposes on children who grow up in the inner city. As noted earlier, it can be understood as a culture of resistance—or at least of opposition—to economic exploitation and cultural denigration. Concretely, this takes the form of refusing low wages and poor working conditions, and of celebrating marginalization as a badge of pride—even if it is ultimately self-destructive.

Once again, an argument with Caesar clearly illustrates this dynamic. In this particular confrontation, Caesar was responding to the chiding of a legally employed, undocumented, new-immigrant Mexican who was sitting on a stoop near the crackhouse accusing Puerto Ricans of being lazy. Caesar replied,

That's right my man! We is real vermin lunatics that sell drugs. We don't wanna be a part of society. What do we wanna be working for? Puerto Ricans don't like to work. Okay, maybe not all of us, 'cause there's still a lot of strict folks from the old school that still be working. But the new generation, no way!



FIGURE 3 Abandoned tenement repopulated by its former superintendent with stuffed animals. (Photo by author)

We have no regard for nothing. The new generation has no regard for the public. We wanna make easy money, and that's it. *Easy* now mind you. We don't wanna work hard. That's the new generation for you.

Now the old school was for when we was younger, and we used to break our asses. I had all kinds of stupid jobs . . . scrap metal sorting, dry cleaning, advertising agencies.

But not no more [putting his arm around Primo]. Now we're in a rebellious stage. We rather evade taxes; make quick money; and just survive. But we're not satisfied with that either, ha!

HISTORY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Caesar's words need to be placed in their historical and structural context lest they serve to confirm racist stereotypes and psychological-reductionist explanations for violence, substance abuse, and ultimately for poverty itself. Indeed, that is one

of the weaknesses of ethnographic accounts; they risk becoming voyeuristic constructions of a dehumanized, sensationalized “exotic” other in a political and economic vacuum. Upon closer examination, one can discern that Caesar’s celebration of unemployment, crime, and substance abuse is integrally related to labor market forces, historical developments, and even international political confrontations that are well beyond his control.

Most fundamentally, the unfortunate strategic geopolitical location of the island of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean has always made it a military prize for world superpowers, resulting in a particularly distorted legacy of economic and political development. This was as true under Spanish colonialism as it is under the contemporary United States-sponsored political control of the territory. An artifice of the Cold War to check the influence of neighboring Cuba, Puerto Rico continues to bear the ambiguous status of “Free Associated Commonwealth.” Puerto Ricans who remain on their native island are forbidden from voting in Federal elections, despite being subject to U.S. military selective service. Soon after the U.S. marines invaded the island in 1898, the economy was taken over by U.S. agro-export corporations and Puerto Rico was subjected to one of the most rapid and dislocating economic transformations that any Third World nation has ever undergone in modern history. To add insult to injury in the post–World War II decades, in an attempt to upstage the Cuban state-run socialist experiment, the United States dubbed Puerto Rico’s development strategy “Operation Bootstrap” and declared it to be a magnificent success of free market investment incentives. Perhaps the best index of the human failure of Puerto Rico’s economic model, however, is provided by the fact that between a third and half of the island’s population have been forced to leave their native island to seek work and sustenance abroad since the late 1940s. More Puerto Ricans live outside Puerto Rico today than inside. Like all new immigrants arriving in the United States throughout history, Puerto Ricans have been confronted by racism and cultural humiliation. This is exacerbated by the phenotypical fact that, unlike the Irish, the Jews, and the Italians who arrived in New York City before them, most Puerto Ricans do not have white skin.

In other words, New York–born Puerto Ricans are the descendants of an uprooted people in the midst of a marathon sprint through economic history propelled by realpolitik forces rather than by humanitarian or even by any straightforward economic logic. In diverse permutations, over the past two or three generations their parents and grandparents went (1) from semisubsistence peasants on private hillside plots or local haciendas (2) to agricultural laborers on foreign-owned, capital-intensive agro-export tropical plantations, (3) to factory workers in export-platform shanty towns, (4) to sweatshop workers in New York City ghetto tenements, (5) to service-sector employees in high-rise, inner-city housing proj-

ects. Over half of those who remained on the island are so impoverished today that they qualify for food stamps. Those who made it to New York City endure the highest family poverty rates of all ethnic groups in the nation, except for Native Americans.

FROM MANUFACTURING TO SERVICE
AND THE CRACK ALTERNATIVE

The Puerto Rican experience in New York City has been further exacerbated by the fact that most Puerto Ricans arrived on the U.S. mainland in the post–World War II period in search of factory work precisely at the historical moment when those kinds of jobs were leaving U.S. metropolitan areas. Over the past three decades, multinational corporations have restructured the global economy by moving their factory production facilities overseas to countries with lower labor costs. The personal disruption of living through the structural transformation of New York’s economy as an entry-level laborer was clearly articulated by the crack dealers in their life-history tape recordings. Almost all the crack dealers and addicts whom I interviewed over the years—especially the older ones—worked at one or more legal jobs in their early youth. In fact, most entered the labor market at a younger age than the typical middle-class American. This was the case for Primo, the manager of the video arcade crackhouse.

I was like fourteen or fifteen playing hooky and pressing dresses and whatever they were making on the steamer. They was cheap, cheap clothes.

My mother’s sister was working there first, and then her son, my cousin Hector—the one who’s in jail now—was the one they hired first, because his mother agreed: “If you don’t want to go school, you gotta work.”

So I started hanging out with him. I wasn’t planning on working in the factory. I was supposed to be in school; but it just sort of happened.

Teenage Primo’s marginal factory moved out of East Harlem within a year of his employment there. He became merely one more of the half-million manufacturing workers in New York City to lose their livelihood almost overnight as factory employment dropped 50 percent from 1963 to 1983. Of course, instead of understanding himself as the victim of a structural transformation, Primo remembers with pleasure and even pride the extra income he earned for clearing the machines out of the factory space: “Them people had money, man. Because we helped them move out of the neighborhood. It took us two days—only me and my cousin, Hector. Wow! It was work. They gave us seventy bucks each.”

Caesar, the crackhouse lookout, had a similar experience working as a high

school dropout in a metal-plating, costume jewelry factory. At this stage in their lives, had Caesar and Primo not been confined to the weakest sector of manufacturing in a period of rapid job loss, their teenage working-class dream might have stabilized. Formerly, when most entry-level jobs were found in factories, the contradiction between an oppositional street culture and traditional, working-class, shop-floor culture—especially when it was protected by a union—was less pronounced. In the factory, being tough and violently macho is accepted behavior; a certain degree of opposition to management is expected and is considered masculine.

DISRESPECT AT WORK

Manufacturing jobs have been largely replaced by service-sector employment in New York's expanded, finance-driven economy. At the entry-level, the fastest growing niche for high school dropouts, or even college graduates, is office support work in the administrative headquarters of the multinational corporations that have moved their production plants overseas. The problem, of course, is that the oppositional street identity that is so effective and appealing in the burgeoning underground economy does not allow for the humble, obedient social interaction that professional office workers demand from their subordinates. A qualitative change has occurred in the tenor of social interaction in service-sector employment. Workers in a mail room or behind a photocopy machine cannot publicly maintain their cultural autonomy. Most concretely, they have no union; more subtly, there are few fellow workers surrounding them to insulate them and to provide them with a culturally based sense of class solidarity. Instead they are besieged by supervisors and bosses from an alien, hostile, and obviously dominant culture. When these office managers are not intimidated by street culture, they ridicule it.

Obedience to the norms of high-rise, office-corridor culture is interpreted as overwhelmingly humiliating by street culture standards—especially for males. On the street, the trauma of experiencing a threat to one's personal dignity has been frozen linguistically in the commonly used phrase "to diss," which is short for, "to disrespect." One does not have to dig deeply to obtain stories of deep humiliation due to the loss of personal and cultural autonomy experienced by the dealers in their previous bouts of service-sector employment. This was the case for Primo when he worked as a messenger for a trade publication magazine.

When my boss be talking to people in the office, she would say, "He's illiterate," as if I was really that stupid that I couldn't understand what she was talking about, 'cause I'd be standing right there.

So what I did one day was, I just looked up the word, "illiterate" in the dictionary, and I saw that she's saying to her associates that I'm stupid or something.

I'm stupid! You know like [pointing to himself], "He doesn't know nothin.'" Well, I am illiterate anyway.

Although Primo resented being called illiterate, the most profound dimension of his humiliation was being obliged to look up in the dictionary the word used to insult him. In contrast, in the underground economy, he does not have to risk this kind of threat to his self-worth: "My boss, Papo [the crackhouse owner], he would never disrespect me that way. He wouldn't tell me that, because he's illiterate too."

When Primo attempted to show initiative and answer the telephone when his supervisors were busy, he was rebuked for scaring away customers with his Puerto Rican accent. Another crack dealer, Leroy, who operated his own independent sales point on a neighboring block (plate 2), had also been profoundly humiliated when he worked as a messenger because a white woman fled from him shrieking down the hallway of a high-rise office building. He had ridden in the elevator with the terrified woman and, coincidentally, had stepped off on the same floor with her to make a delivery. Worse yet, he had been trying to act as a debonair man at the time, allowing her to step off the elevator first.

She went in the elevator first, but then she just waits there to see what floor I press.

She's playing like she don't know what floor she wants to go to, because she wants to wait for me to press my floor. And I'm standing there and I forgot to press the button.

I'm thinking about something else—don't know what was the matter with me. And she's thinking like, "He's not pressing the button; I guess he's following me!"

Leroy struggles to understand the terror that his dark skin inspires in white office workers. He confided this to me early in our relationship, and I noticed that, like most Americans, he becomes uncomfortable when talking across class and ethnic boundaries about race relations:

It's happened before. I mean after awhile you become immune to it. Well, when it first happens, it like bugs you, "That's messed up; how they just judge you."

But I understand a lot of them. How should I say it? A lot of white people . . . [looking nervously at me] I mean Caucasian people [flustered, putting his hand gently on my shoulder]. If I say white, don't get offended, Felipe.

But those other white people, they never even experienced Puerto Rican or black people. So automatically they think something wrong with you. Or you know, they think you out to rob them or something.

It irks me; like, you know, it clicks my mind; makes me want to write a [rap] rhyme. I always write it down.

Of course, as a crack dealer, Leroy no longer has to confront these dimensions of class and racial humiliation.

POLARIZATION AROUND GENDER

In addition to their obvious racial conflict, service-sector confrontations also include a tense gender dynamic. Most of the supervisors at the lowest levels of the service sector are women, and street culture forbids males from accepting public subordination across gender lines. Typically, in their angrier memories of disrespect at work, many of the male crack dealers would refer to their female bosses in explicitly sexist language, often insulting their body parts, and dismissing them with street-slang, sexualized curses. They also specifically describe themselves and the other males around them at work as effeminate. Caesar was particularly incensed:

I lasted in the mail room for like eight months at this advertising agency that works with pharmaceutical stuff. They used to trust me.

But I had a prejudiced boss. She was a ho' [prostitute]. She was white. I had to take a lot of crap from that fat, ugly ho', and be a wimp.

I didn't like it, but I kept on working, because . . . [shrugging] you don't want to mess up the relationship. So you just be a punk.

Oh my God! I hated that head supervisor. That ho' was *really* nasty. She got her rocks off on firing people, man. You can see that on her face, boy. She made this one guy that worked with me cry—and beg for his job back.

This structural workplace confrontation that polarizes relations between young, inner-city men and white-collar, upwardly mobile women parallels another profound transformation in traditional gender power relations occurring within working-poor immigrant families. The loss of decently paid factory jobs that provide union family benefits for health and retirement makes it increasingly impossible for men to fulfill old-fashioned patriarchal dreams of being an omnipotent provider for a wife and several children. At the same time, dramatic increases in labor force participation among Puerto Rican women, as well as the broader cultural redefinitions of increased individual rights and autonomy for women occurring throughout all levels of U.S. society since the late 1960s, have thrown into crisis the traditional family model of the conjugal household dominated by an authoritarian man.

Males, however, are not accepting the new rights and roles that women have been earning over the past few decades; instead, they attempt to reassert violently their grandfather's lost autocratic control over their households and over public

space. This is exacerbated in the inner-city Puerto Rican case by the persistence of a rural-based memory of large, male-dominated, farming households “blessed” with numerous children. Males who are no longer effective heads of households often experience the rapid structural transformations of their generation as a dramatic assault on their sense of masculine dignity. In the worst-case scenario, as males become impotent economic failures in the service economy, they lash out against the women and children they can no longer support economically or control ideologically. Concretely, this takes the form of fists in the face at home and gang rape in the crackhouse.

IN SEARCH OF SOLUTIONS

The crisis that has accompanied the complicated historical rearrangement of gender-power relations over the past few decades is glossed by political leaders into superficial slogans such as “the crisis in family values” or “Just say no to drugs.” This kind of psychological-reductionist and blame-the-victim moralism obfuscates the structural inequalities around race, class, and gender that must be addressed if real improvements in the lives of the poor are to occur. Politicians and the media expect to find simple, quick-fix solutions to the persistent poverty that is increasingly concentrated in urban cores—whether it be in the teeming shantytowns of nonindustrial nations, the working-class public housing suburbs of European cities, or the postindustrial wastelands of U.S. inner-city neighborhoods.

Of all the industrialized nations, the United States is the most extreme with respect to income inequality and ethnic segregation. By the end of the twentieth century, only Russia and Rwanda imprisoned larger proportions of their populations than the United States. No other wealthy, industrialized country came close to having such a large proportion of its citizens living below the poverty line.

The inner city represents the United States’ greatest domestic failing, hanging like a sword of Damocles over the larger society. The only force sustaining this precariously suspended sword is the fact that drug dealers, addicts, and street criminals internalize their rage and desperation. They direct their brutality against themselves and their immediate community rather than against their structural oppression.

If the United States were to serve as an international model for political and economic development at the dawn of the twentieth century it should be as a model for what not to imitate. The balance of structural economic power that penalizes and humiliates the working poor and pushes them into the underground economy serves few people’s interests. The public policy response of building bigger and more expensive prisons is irrational from both an economic cost/benefit analysis and also a humanitarian perspective. Finally, the painful and prolonged

self-destruction of people like Primo and Caesar and their families and loved ones is cruel and unnecessary.

There are no simple, technocratic formulas for implementing the public policies that might provide equitable access to shelter, employment, sustenance, and health. The first step out of the impasse requires a fundamental ethical and political reevaluation of basic socioeconomic models. Anthropologists, because of their participant-observation methods and their culturally relative sensibilities can play an important role in fostering a public debate over the human cost of poverty. The challenge is clearly in front of us. Do we have the intellectual and political energy to confront it both at home and abroad?

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