

Book Reviews

Why the Poor Are Poor

Culture and Poverty. Critique and Counter-Proposals. CHARLES A. VALENTINE. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968. xiv + 216 pp. \$5.95.

One way of mounting a war against poverty is to attack the deficiencies of the poor by providing them with rehabilitative services: Raise their motivations and provide them with training, tutoring, and therapy so that they can hold good jobs. They will then overcome their incapacities and their poverty.

A second way is to attack the deficiencies of the society that perpetuate poverty: Provide the poor with more power, better job opportunities, and more money. In this way we will overcome the inequities and injustices of our society and the poverty that results from them.

It is easier to fight the poverty war the first way, and for the most part that is what we are doing in our small-scale war. Since the poor have little power and since many unfavorable stereotypes are attached to them, it is politically expedient to focus upon their inadequacies and to avoid asking sensitive questions about the power and privilege that perpetuate discrimination and poverty in our society.

When we introduce the concept of a "culture of poverty" (and when we deal with Negroes as well as the poor), we precipitate a tangle of debate, controversy, and misinterpretation. In *Culture and Poverty*, Valentine argues that the concept has had an injurious effect upon our efforts. It has provided support and rationalization for those who want to take the first route against poverty and has made it difficult to tackle the second and more important route. Valentine points to writings about the culture of poverty, by respected academics, which denigrate the poor, repeat the public stereotypes about the inadequacies of the poor, and imply that the best way to eliminate poverty is to get the poor to change their way of life.

Valentine argues convincingly that one should not infer cultural handicaps

from demographic data on the poor. Varying cultural forms may lie beneath the surface statistics. He also makes it clear that much writing about the poor and about Negroes is influenced by middle-class white biases and judgments. "The reports of life among the poor emanating from policemen, judges, and welfare workers are the domestic equivalent of portrayals and assessments of indigenous lifeways by colonial administrators or missionaries." The uncritical acceptance of such data explains why there has been so much emphasis upon breakdown and disorganization as characteristics of the family and community life of poor people.

Valentine is aware that the culture-of-poverty concept does not necessarily commit an investigator to the attitudes he decries, and his suggestions for further ethnographic research to learn more about the poor reflect that awareness. But the zeal of his attack on writers about poverty at times gets the better of him, and he then treats the concept as though it had these built-in limitations.

Throughout the book Valentine stresses the need to distinguish between the conditions of the poor which may lead to certain patterns of behavior, and the culture of the poor. Conditions may force the poor to behave in ways that they do not culturally value; one must therefore not be too quick to infer culture from behavior. Yet in the first chapter, in clarifying the meaning of culture, Valentine indicates that it represents an adaptation to conditions. It is clearly possible that the conditions of poverty influence culture as well as behavior, and that cultural developments among the poor are adaptive responses; it is also possible that these adaptive responses to the conditions of poverty and limited opportunity may be maladaptive when conditions change and opportunities open up. Valentine ignores these possibilities in his criticisms of various analysts, and that is one reason why his criticism is overdrawn. It is not until he presents his own hypotheses, toward the end of his book, that he deals

directly with the possibility that the conditions of poverty may influence culture as well as behavior.

Valentine's forthright discussions highlight a variety of issues centering around the concepts of culture and poverty and provide a good introduction to the subject. But occasionally he goes beyond bold assertion to caricature, particularly in his discussion of the position of some of the writers and proposals he criticizes. For example, he caricatures a scheme for family allowances by treating it as though it were completely exemplified by present Aid for Dependent Children payments in Mississippi. Because of tax considerations it is simply not true that "such a plan grants no relative advantage to the presently disadvantaged." Nor is it fair to discuss such plans as "disingenuous diversionary maneuvers rather than serious proposals" or treat them as though they intend to solve the whole problem of poverty with 30 cents per day per child. Indeed, since throughout the book Valentine argues for attacking poverty rather than the culture of poverty, the reader is prepared to see him support an income-maintenance plan such as family allowances or a negative income tax. Income maintenance would ignore the issue of whether there is a culture of poverty. It would put more money into the hands of the poor and allow them to use their own strengths to improve their condition. These principles are directly in line with Valentine's position—and, incidentally (although he does not make this clear), with the position of many other writers about poverty. Yet Valentine expects such an approach to fail because it does not get at "the basic problem of inequality," which involves "all the material and psychic benefits of membership in our society."

Valentine's own proposal is for a compulsory national program of positive discrimination in employment, with local enforcement agencies that would be under the effective control of the poor and unemployed. He concedes that the plan appears utopian, but thinks that given enough public pressure it would be workable. It ignores (i) the poor who are not in the labor market, (ii) the legal and constitutional question that could be raised by those who would be discriminated against, and (iii) the practice of noncompliance that would develop among employers. This is not meant as an argument against the proposal. After hundreds of

years of discrimination against Negroes some form of positive discrimination is in order. In the meantime, part of the American tragedy is that many whites look upon even the present creaky efforts at equal treatment as showing positive discrimination toward Negroes. All things considered, some type of full-employment plan, and an income-support plan as well, are essential in any overall strategy to eliminate poverty.

One of the central purposes of Valentine's book is to "evaluate existing interpretations of poverty." On Valentine's critical scorecard, E. Franklin Frazier, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel P. Moynihan get failing grades as interpreters; Kenneth Clark and Oscar Lewis get (barely) passing grades; and Herbert Gans (*The Urban Villagers*) and Elliot Liebow (*Tally's Corner*) get the top grades. Part of the reason for the high score of the latter two is that they have undertaken rounded urban ethnogra-

phies, using observation, participation, and informal interviewing in their approach.

Valentine stresses the need for further ethnographic research on the poor. His book includes interesting suggestions for such research, detailing alternative hypotheses that can serve as guidelines and explaining the advantages that such work would have. After such ethnographic research is carried out we will better be able to assess the contributions of Valentine and of those he criticizes.

In sum, the book is well written; the issues are clearly presented, although sometimes overdrawn; and the ideas swirling about the concept of a culture of poverty are discussed in detail, along with the implications of these ideas for national policies.

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The Transforming of Russian Science

The Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Communist Party, 1927-1932. LOREN R. GRAHAM. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1967. xviii + 255 pp. \$6.50. Studies of the Russian Institute, Columbia University.

There are two themes in this study of the fortunes of the Academy of Sciences, the chief research center of the Soviet Union, under the first Five Year Plan. One is the establishment of Communist control within the Academy, which until 1929 was largely autonomous and politically neutral. The other is the concomitant effort to transform scientific research into a planned, immediately useful part of the drive for rapid industrialization. Let us call the first the political transformation of the Academy and the second the "practical" reorganization, the quotation marks here indicating that there is a question whether or to what extent it was genuinely practical.

Graham is far more successful in dealing with the political transformation. This may seem surprising, for political history is much more dependent on archival research, and the archives were closed to him. He was confined to published sources and such archival material as Soviet historians have seen fit to cite in their works. Yet his political history is sharp and insightful, while his account of the practical reorganization leaves the

reader dangling with vague and platitudinous conclusions. The fault lies not with Graham, but with the state of the study of Soviet science. Soviet politics has been intensively studied for a long time, with the result that major questions and rival hypotheses have been clearly defined and the relevance of new data (the "significance of facts," to use the historian's favorite terms) can be readily established. Soviet science and its relationships to industrialization have been studied very little. Science leaves a voluminous public record of its development, but this record has lain unexamined, for it is not "significant" to the ordinary student of Soviet history. Loren Graham is one of the few pioneers trying to fashion the major questions and hypotheses that will make this record significant. Small wonder that he has difficulty with the practical reorganization of the Academy, for the issue of practicality is, in this reviewer's opinion, the most complex and far-reaching of all.

It is not only Western studies of Soviet science that are inchoate. The same holds for the work of our Soviet colleagues, who keep criticizing us for harping on political conflict and ignoring constructive achievement. Yet their massive compilations of scientific achievement, such as the recent multi-volume *Sovetskaia Nauka i Tekhnika: 50 Let* (Soviet Science and Technology:

50 Years), are catalogs rather than histories. They list institutions and eminent individuals with brief descriptions of their achievements and much briefer allusions to occasional difficulties. They make no serious effort to answer basic questions, or even to ask them. Why, for example, have Soviet mathematics and physics progressed more successfully than Soviet chemistry and biology? Serious engagement with such questions would involve the historian in the Soviet quest for practicality, not on the level of general talk about poor countries struggling for modernization but within the context of particular fields of scientific research as related (or unrelated) to particular fields of economic progress (or stagnation). Like their Western colleagues, Soviet historians have shied away from such labor, gathering their most significant data in political history. This is exemplified by the work of V. T. Ermakov, who gave Graham an important peephole into the archives with his dissertation, "The Communist Party's Struggle for the Reconstruction of the Work of Scientific Institutions in the Years of the First Five Year Plan." (In the Soviet Union scholarly titles still have such splendid amplitude.) The vivid, historically significant material that Graham found in Ermakov concerned not the practical reorganization of the Academy but the fight for political reliability—the loyalty drive, if we may borrow the analogous American phrase of the McCarthy era.

Why this preoccupation with politics? Are historians a variety of sensational journalist, obsessed with tales of brute conflict and domination? Certainly Graham is not. He makes a genuine effort to analyze the constructive cooperation as well as the political conflict between the Academy and the Party. He focuses on the discussions of the planning of science, and on the practical reorganization, as significant evidence of such cooperation. He declares that the discussions of planning were "intellectually interesting," but his own honest reporting shows that they dealt with such issues as how to take notes or how to measure a scientist's output. Indeed, most articles "were not much more than hortatory proclamations that 'science must be planned'" (p. 63). The single exception was a speech of Bukharin's in 1931, which is intellectually interesting largely by contrast with its meager competition. Willy nilly Graham leads