

## **‘Poverty in America’ or poverty in American sociology:**

Review of ‘Poverty in America: A Handbook’ by John Iceland

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Iceland has written a standard text on US Poverty - ‘Poverty in America’. However when he comes to explain African American poverty he spends a page and a half focussing almost entirely on ‘history’.

He describes African American poverty as the result of :

‘.. the relatively high poverty rate is a function of lower black employment levels, wages, and differences in family structure. .... African Americans, who comprised close to 13 percent of the US population in 2010, historically had to contend with acute forms of discrimination, including a severely constrained labor market throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. After abolition of slavery during the Civil War, blacks in the South often worked as sharecroppers, primarily because they were barred by law or custom from most other full-time jobs outside the black community. IN addition, under the Jim Crow, most blacks who lived in cities were employed as common laborers or as domestic and personal servants. ...Economists have estimated that perhaps one-quarter of the Black-white wage gap is due to prejudice, suggesting that racism continues to contribute to African American economic disadvantage”

He then goes on to explain how much matters have recently improved.

So if we tabulate the causes :

1. Lower employment levels
2. Acute historical discrimination
3. Legal bars to certain forms of employment
4. Social discrimination
5. Residential segregation
6. Decline in unionisation
7. Individual racism
8. Stereotyping
9. Deindustrialisation
10. Lack of skills/human capital
11. Lack of education
12. Poor quality of local schools
13. High incarceration rates
14. Family structure i.e. non-family structure

Because of the multifaceted nature of African American poverty ‘means there is no single ‘cure’ for poverty ..’and this also helps explain why poverty among African Americans has been slow to decline’ (Note 1)

## CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES

Let us consider the conceptual structure. What strikes one straight away is that NO explanation is actually being offered and a description of the state of African American poverty is offered as an explanation. To say that someone is poor because he does not have a job is not an explanation but a description of his poverty. Traditionally following Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, Merton sociology takes institutions and social practices and ask what *functions* they serve or in materialist’s terms whose interests do they serve. Clearly to say African Americans are poor because they suffer from discrimination and segregation is a travesty of sociological explanation. This travesty is furthered by subtle sleight of hand. He writes: ..’the relatively high poverty rate is a function of ..’ but here the word ‘function’ is being used in a mathematical sense (Note X) not a sociological sense but masquerades as such to keep the text appearing to give a sociological functional explanation. (Note 2)

African American poverty and discrimination is a very substantial state of affairs, an institution which very great efforts were and are made to keep in tact. Violence, social coercion and political action were and are blatantly manifested in its defence. Such an institution must serve a purpose or meet some interest, but the discussion here renders these fundamental questions of sociology mute and must be revealed to be a travesty of sociological explanation. Frankly, this work constitutes a denial that the condition of Afro-Americans is a form of social stratification - a clear denial of the fundamentals of sociology and brazen denial of the evidence of one’s eyes.

Let us review of the foundational views of functional explanation in sociology.

### Durkheim

In Durkheim’s view of functional explanation:

“The word "function," Durkheim observed, can be used in two, quite different, senses:

1. to refer to a system of vital movements (e.g., digestion, respiration, etc.) without reference to the consequences of these movements; or
2. to refer to the relationship between these movements and the corresponding needs of the organism (e.g., digestion incorporates food essential to replenish nutritional resources of the body, while respiration introduces the necessary gases into the body's tissues; etc.).

Durkheim insisted on the second usage; thus, to ask "what is the 'function' of the division of labor?" was simply to ask for the organic need which the division of labor supplied”

(Note 3)

### R K Merton

“**Clarifying functional analysis:**

Merton argues that the central orientation of functionalism is in interpreting data by their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated. Like Durkheim and

Parsons he analyzes society with reference to whether cultural and social structures are well or badly integrated, is interested in the persistence of societies and defines functions that make for the adaptation of a given system. Finally, Merton thinks that shared values are central in explaining how societies and institutions work." (Note 4)

Merton clearly recognised that **persistence** of institutions require explanation. Merely referring to historical genesis of an institution does not explain its persistence.

Harold Kincaid provides a further detailed discussion of functional explanation in sociology. (Note 5)

## Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons was a doyenne of US sociology with his structure/function approach. (Note 6) There is the seminal paper of Kingsley Davies and Wilbert Moore which outlines the view shared by Parsons that social institutions meet social and human needs and their existence and persistence should be explained in these terms. (Note 7)

It has been held that Parson's approach tended to justify existing societal institutions: 'In general, Parsons tended to view these patterns as contributing to the relatively smooth functioning of society. The shared values and norms, the institution of the family, and the generally agreed upon means for accomplishing ends were viewed by Parsons as being functional for the operation of society as a system. ... Critics argue that this is not really social analysis but description and justification, because it makes the institutions appear to be necessary and the only ones that could exist. As a result, there appear to be strong conservative and consensus assumptions built into this approach.' (Note 8)

## REFLEXIVE UNDERSTANDING

If the approach taken by Iceland violates basic sociological principles we must then seek to understand this itself in terms of sociological explanation i.e. unmask the interest served and function of this explanation.

Here we have a proposed explanation that turns our attention to history and suggests that the present situation is a largely an issue of legacy. Obviously at a technical level this fails as an explanation of persistence but it is highly useful in diverting attention away from present purposes, creates a soporific atmosphere of 'well matters are improving and will continue to improve however slowly', and keeps us away from the question - what function does this institution play in contemporary society today to ensure its persistence? No other aspect of poverty is given such a historical focus and clearly it does not apply well to other ethnic groups.

One suggestion would be that the explicit avowal of the history gives an apparent plausible liberal slant and an easy presentation before liberal and Black audiences. Black audiences would assume that the text was sympathetic by its open recognition of racism, but this is not a proper or accurate reading. By focussing on the history and then delineating other ethnic groups who overcame similar handicaps there is a silent argument that the key factors here relate to Black people themselves i.e. its largely their own fault. However the majority of Black readers will fail to follow the sub text or if they do fail to understand how to challenge it.

## DOUBLE ENTENDRE

For example, where he writes 'Economists have estimated that perhaps one-quarter of the Black-white wage gap is due to prejudice, suggesting that racism continues to contribute to African American economic disadvantage' this will be heard by African Americans and many liberals as a recognition of the importance of racism affecting African Americans. But it can be heard another way: that  $\frac{3}{4}$  (i.e. the large majority) of the difference between earnings of whites and Blacks has nothing to do with race and is the fault of Black people themselves. Family structure refers to the extent of single female led households but no mention of the benefit legislation that forced unemployed males out of the household in order for the family to qualify for benefit. The discussion of historical events will be heard by African Americans as recognition of injustice but by high status others as 'they are always complaining about the past and never getting off their bottoms now that things have changed/improved'.

## A PROPOSED EXPLANATION

If we are stating that Iceland's text is a subtle apologia for the discriminatory system in America then we must delineate what a proper explanation might look like. An explanation would need to show why a system needed to ensure the continuation of racism and segregation, that there were significant benefits obtained and also to show why the system would prefer to allow other ethnic groups to progress while keeping the Black population behind.

Our suggestions would be as follows: the principle role of US racism is not to oppress Blacks but to control the white population first and foremost and then later other ethnic groups. Poor whites are kept in check with the understanding that at least they are better treated than Blacks and while this may play a divide and rule function the white population is significantly larger than the Black population and the control of the white population therefore far more important.

The means of enforcement are both positive acts but also and importantly quite frequently '*failures to act*', such that when a calamity occurs, as occurs from time to time, non-action allows the destruction of African American wealth and well being. We can compare the response to wild fires in wealthy California areas and the response to Katrina. Equally there is the case of STD epidemic . see article on Tipping point It had been well known that drug epidemics led to increased incidence of std as women offered themselves in return for drugs or money to buy drugs. When the drug crisis started in CXXXX the authorities should have *increased* spending on std clinics in anticipation. In this particular case just doing nothing would have constituted an attack on the African American population. In fact the authorities drastically *reduced* spending, cutting back on provision and consequently the std epidemic went out of control. This was clearly deliberate action and one must ask what purpose was served other than perhaps to demonstrate to other communities the importance of compliance with the status quo.

In general the patterns of exercise of power relative to the African American community are no different than elsewhere in society. As F Hunter put it:

“The method of handling the relatively powerless under-structure is through the pressures previously described—warnings, intimidations, threats, and in extreme cases violence. In some cases the method may include isolation from all sources of support for the individual, including his job and therefore his income. The principle of “divide and rule” is as applicable in the community as it is in larger units of political patterning, and it is as effective. “ (Note 9)

It is the racism against Blacks that creates a ‘white identity’ and a form of solidarity and implicit appearance of ‘shared values’. There is an implied threat that deviant behaviour could be punished by being treated like Black people therefore inducing social compliance and acceptance of the social order. Equally, once African Americans won the right to hyphenate their identity other ethnic groups rapidly followed and the pressure to Anglicise names and to distance oneself from one’s home country of origin promptly disappeared.

On the international stage the function of this racism promotes an international division of labour and an international social stratification. This was clearly demonstrated in Apartheid South Africa where the Indian and Coloured populations were kept in check by their being granted greater privileges than Black population. Many Indians including Ghandi were more amenable to accept their treatment on condition that they were treated better than Black people. As new waves of immigrants arrive in the US the Black population performs its role of enforcing obedience on condition of an implied threat of being treated like Black people if the ‘contract’ were broken. (Nixon explicitly offered Mexicans an opportunity to be treated differently from Blacks on condition they accepted their place in US society.) The fact that the new waves of immigrants achieve more than African Americans can then be used to show African Americans that they are the cause of their own poverty - a form of psychological warfare under the rubric of academic discourse.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no intention that this article presents a strongly argued factually documented alternative explanation for African American poverty. The proposed explanation is presented to show what a proper explanation might look like, that is an explanation that accounts for differential discrimination and explains why it serves a present day purpose. A proper explanation would accept that no matter what happened in history if an institution no longer served a purpose or conflicted with the interest of the majority power brokers it would cease. Women’s role have been established in Europe and US in a certain way for centuries but society has decided to change and regardless of that history women’s roles are changing with considerable rapidity. Once the old order no longer served a present purpose society changed it at speed.

Notes:

1. ‘Poverty in America: A Handbook’ by John Iceland

X

A mathematical function  $f$  can be described as  $f(x,y,b)=P$ , or in ordinary English the rate of poverty (P) is a function of variables x,y,b. We can then unpack these variables into levels of educations (x), employment skills (y), residential location (b) and so on. Next we run a regression on the data and with some luck and ‘fine tuning’ such as eliminating outliers and cuddling/smoothing the data we can come up with some results with some levels of confidence. The vacuity of this as an explanatory procedure is best shown by considering, being myself Jewish, the following function where the probability of ending up in a concentration camp in Germany in the period 1939-44 (P) is a function of being Jewish (x), being a communist (y), being a general nuisance or anti-Nazi (b) and so on, and we can unbundle variable x into sub -variables of being Jewish and living in a ghetto (Xi) or having no US friends (Xii) and being poor (Xiii) - here we need to recall the Wittgenstein family bought themselves out of concentration camps - being physically identifiable as Jewish (Xiv) and so forth. We can then apply our regressions on the data and no doubt come up with some serious values for the variables with high levels of confidence. None of this touches on ‘why’ these variables are acting this way or would suggest the tenets of National Socialism or the legislation and political environment of the Shoah and as none of the variables involve ‘racism’ we can conclude that ‘racism’ was not a material factor.

To be even more absurd we can ask what policy implications can we draw from a hard unbiased look at the results? Perhaps 1) the government should offer subsidised cosmetic surgery to the Jewish community (aka Barbara Streisand) to reduce the likelihood of identification as Jewish, 2) Jews should not live in close communities or openly attend Synagogues so that they are not recognised from their behaviour and residential location, 3) Jews should join the right of the Republican party or even the local Neo-Nazis etc.

2. **Causal Role Theories of Functional Explanation**  
(<http://www.iep.utm.edu/func-exp/>)
3. <http://durkheim.uchicago.edu/Summaries/dl.html>)
4. <http://www.sociologyguide.com/thinkers/RK-Merton.php>
5. Harold Kincaid “Functional explanation and evolutionary social science”  
<https://philpapers.org/rec/KINFEA>
6. <http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/n2f99.htm>
7. K Davis and Wilbert Moore  
**“Some Principles of Stratification”**  
Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore  
American Sociological Review  
Vol. 10, No. 2, 1944 Annual Meeting Papers (Apr., 1945), pp. 242-249
8. <http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/n2f99.htm>
9. Floyd Hunter “Community Power Structure” Chapel Hill 1953 p.300

