Culture Contributes to the Cycle of Poverty

Cathy Young

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After Hurricane Katrina and the devastation left in its wake exposed to public eye the shocking levels of poverty in the mostly African-American neighborhoods of New Orleans, there was a lot of talk about America’s hidden shame and about the need to pay more attention to the plight of the poor when there isn’t a natural disaster to put them in the headlines.

Just over a month later, the poor are off the front pages, and the press is far more interested in whether Harriet Miers is a deep legal thinker [Miers was nominated for the U.S. Supreme Court on Oct. 3, 2005, and then President George W. Bush withdrew her nomination on Oct. 27]. Meanwhile, the poor are always with us.

Part of the reason we don’t talk much about poverty is that no one really knows what to do about it. Typically, the left wants to blame poverty on evil, racist Republicans and to advocate more redistribution of wealth and spending on social programs as the answer. Democratic congressman Charles Rangel of New York [has] stated that George W. Bush’s inattention to poverty made him “our Bull Connor,” comparing Bush to the 1960s Alabama police official whose name has become a symbol of racism.

The right, meanwhile, tends to blame bloated welfare programs for keeping the poor trapped in their condition, as well as the “culture of poverty” with its deeply entrenched social problems—which, all too often, translates into blaming the

poor themselves. After the catastrophe in New Orleans, several conservative websites ran an article by Ayn Rand follower Robert Tracinski, who not only decried the effects of the welfare state but also referred to New Orleans’s poor as “sheep” and “parasites.”

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Most decent people, whatever their politics, will recoil from such dehumanizing rhetoric. But the “culture of poverty” argument itself cannot be so easily dismissed. Yes, some people are poor because of bad luck or catastrophic illness; but chronic, multigenerational poverty is another matter. Yes, poverty in the African-American community results largely from the terrible legacy of a racism that, for generations, denied blacks not only equal opportunity but basic civil rights. But whatever its historical root causes, poverty also perpetuates itself (across racial lines) through a variety of self-defeating habits and behaviors: dropping out of high school, not acquiring marketable job skills, having children without means to support them, even running afoul of the law. In some poor neighborhoods, being a drug dealer is a source of higher status than working in a legitimate job.

The fact that poverty is a matter of culture, not just money, is illustrated by the immigrant experience. Many immigrants start from scratch when they come to the United States, and succeed in rising out of poverty. For them, the American dream is not a myth. Data from the Urban Institute show that while recent immigrants in 1980 and 1990 were twice as likely as native-born Americans to live in poverty, this disparity disappeared for immigrants who had lived in this country for 10 years or more. (In fact, in 2003, according to the Census Bureau, immigrants who were naturalized US citizens had a slightly higher median income than native-born citizens.) This success story includes black immigrants from...