

March 15, 2007
EC 137, Racial Inequality in the US
Prof. Glenn C. Loury
Writing Assignment #3

For this assignment I'd like you to write 3-4 double-spaced pages on some themes that are treated in *The Code of the Streets*. This assignment is due next Thursday, Mar. 22.

Anderson seems to be making both a cultural and a structural argument in the book. On the side of culture he stresses the distinction between so-called "decent" and "street" values embraced by families in the neighborhoods he studies. There seem to be, on his telling, two different value orientations at war within the same space. On the side of structure, he constantly points to the effects of limited economic opportunities on the thinking and behavior of young people in these neighborhoods. Boys hustle because there's little legitimate and remunerative work. Girls have babies because they don't see any other future for themselves, etc.

There is a longstanding argument among social scientists over this issue. Two broad positions are discernible regarding the roles of structure and culture in accounting for the relative status of African Americans:

1. Structuralists: The effects of poverty, joblessness, segregation and discrimination cause most "bad" behavior in the ghetto. The main sources of the difficulties for poor black communities lie outside of African American society. The so-called "pathology" to be found in black lower class society stems from the debilitating effects of such structural constraints. Reform must, therefore, focus on changing the larger economic and political practices – practices of governments and corporations, for instance – over which black individuals and communal institutions exert virtually no influence at all.
2. Culturalists: Self-limiting patterns of behavior among many poor blacks are rooted in dysfunctional values and attitudes, which are largely to blame for the dire straits of these communities. Perhaps these attitudes and values originated from structural constraints, but they have since taken-on a life of their own, nurtured by pressures of conformity and peer influences operative within black society. Real change can occur only "from the inside out," so to speak, as a result of an acknowledgement and repudiation of the problematic cultural patterns.

Based on our reading in this course (including Anderson, of course, but also Meares, Traub, Loury, Western, Wacquant and Sugrue) I want you to take a position in this debate, defend it, and indicate why you think the other position is faulty. Or, if you reject both formulations, then tell me why, and develop and defend your own view. (in 3-4pp!).