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The Underclass Up Close

The Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City

by **Elijah Anderson**

William W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1999, 352 pages, \$25.95

Reviewed by **Kevin R. Kosar**

Elijah Anderson's latest sociological treatise offers a first person yet analytical account of life in the inner city. What Anderson describes is disturbing- it's a world wracked by violence and a general lack of decency. Like Thomas Hobbes' state of nature, Anderson's inner city is a place where life is poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

The book begins with a stroll on Germantown Avenue. Chestnut Hill, located on the northwest edge of Philadelphia, is a mostly white area, with boutiques, clean streets, and polite people. Life has a happy buzz here; foul language, rude behavior, and violence are very rare. Anderson then walks readers further down Germantown Avenue toward the heart of Philadelphia. Slowly but surely the scene changes. The number of Whites decreases, the number of Blacks increases. Check cashing joints and liquor stores multiply; pricey brick townhouses give way to unkept, dilapidated buildings with barred windows. Graffiti tags are everywhere and trash blows about the streets.

The walk ends in the North Philadelphia ghetto, where crack zombies and drug-addicted prostitutes stagger the streets, children run amok and unsupervised, and people drink alcohol and smoke dope openly on the street. There's not a white man to be found. It's a great introduction to the book, for it shows the reader a spectrum of American life-from the 1990s white, wealthy, well-ordered, and urbane to the black, impoverished, chaotic, and inner city.

Most of the remaining 300 plus pages are devoted to describing life in this particular ghetto. In sum, a great number of inner-city residents appear to Anderson to be wholly uncivilized by engaging in obviously self-destructive, anti-so-

cial behavior. Though some families and people have life nurturing cooperative lifestyles, Anderson finds that most inner-city dwellers do not. They rob, they dope up, they brutalize. Young men father children and then disappear, pregnant girls drop out of schools and have child after child, but spend their days watching television and getting high instead of being attentive mothers. Armed young men with hair trigger temperments rule the streets.

One might wonder just how this self-destructive environment perpetuates itself. If people who live in the inner-city are so self-destructive, why don't they all simply die off? Obviously some residents bear children, but these children are not born drug dealers and crooks.

Anderson explains that the ghetto regenerates itself through "the code of the street." The code is a hierarchy of values that exalts impudence, machismo, and regular displays of violence while it denigrates manners, responsibility, and compassion. Children born in or brought to the inner-city face the inescapable "dilemma of the decent child"; either be a good kid like your parents and teachers tell you and get beat up by other kids, or start behaving like a thug or "gangsta." Understandably, a great many youths choose the latter path. Thus the "hood" lives on, transcending individuals and sucking in more and more children into criminal behavior, despite the best efforts of some parents.

Anderson devotes whole chapters to topics like drugs and violence, "the mating game," "the decent daddy," the increasing number of black inner-city grandmothers having to raise their children's children, and other facets of inner-city life. Though a few chapters come off as a little longer than necessary, on the whole, Anderson

sharply chronicles the bad, the ugly, and what little good is to be found.

Occasionally, his writing slips and the reader becomes painfully aware that Anderson has been in the academy many years. The effect can be comical, as his stiff descriptions bring to mind the image of an egghead in a pith helmet wandering the mean streets and writing feverishly in his notebook:

[T]he staging area is also a densely populated place where young people hang out and look to meet members of the opposite sex. Here young men and women out to be "with it" or "hip" smoke cigarettes or drink "forties" or other alcoholic beverages, or perhaps they are there to get high on "blunts" (drug-laced cigars). (p. 78)

Though Black like his subjects, Anderson, a renowned professor of social studies and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania with a slew of publications to his name, clearly isn't quite one of the people he is studying. Terms like "blunts" and "forties" appear to strike him as exotic, but they are common parlance among American teenagers— one need only turn on MTV or grab a copy of *Spin* or any other pop music magazine.

Though Anderson greatly adds to the stock of research about the urban underclass, he doesn't offer a serious discussion on the origins of the Black ghetto. He appears to subscribe to William Julius Wilson's theory (Wilson, 1996) that the ghetto is the result of the disappearance of heavy manufacturing jobs and racism, though he does not engage the subject and conspicuously ignores Lawrence M. Mead's research (1992) that indicates that jobs are available but the poor often don't care to take them. Thus, Anderson, in an unsatisfying three-page policy prescription at the end of the book, asserts that government can remedy the problem by creating "living-wage jobs." His logic is simple: healthy inner-cities minus jobs made for ghettos; thus, ghettos plus jobs will make for healthy inner-cities.

This policy prescription does not comport with Anderson's description of the inner-city.

Recall, Anderson says the ghetto is filled with folks who are living perverse, unhealthy lives—they break the law, they drink too much, do dope, and are hostile toward work and responsibility. Yes, creating jobs may help the decent individuals who have not gone bad— but how will this help those who are bad? Does Anderson think that the gangstas he saw will drop their blunts and forties, pick up a lunchbox, and march off to the 9 to 5 world?

This solution doesn't fly because it treats the pathologies as the outcome of a rational choice by individuals: they choose to behave as they do because the costs to behaving well are prohibitively low or the payoffs of behaving badly are so high. Considering that welfare reform has driven large numbers of the formerly nonworking poor into the workforce, one might well argue that disfunction and nonworking is not so much a matter of a lack of opportunity, but of the permissiveness of government aid programs (Mead, 1986).

Worse, creating jobs would appear to offer assistance only to those few who are willing to forgo the temptations of the street. Everyone else, presumably, would be free to continue living as they had— committing crimes, poisoning themselves with alcohol and drugs, and menacing those who try to live straight. So the very mechanism that perpetuates the misery, the code of the street, will live on.

Elijah Anderson has offered a richly descriptive text on life in the inner-city that should become canonical for those studying the ghetto and pondering ways to better it. He has painted in vivid colors this troubled world and the dangerous persons who rule it and the code of the streets which perpetuates it. The ghetto will not disappear until the code of the street is broken. Thanks to Anderson, policymakers may better understand the challenge they face. **WR**

References

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