‘Cultural Matrix’ examines lives of Black youth

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BOOK REVIEW


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SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

Growing up in the projects of Crown Heights, New York was “normal living,” according to Juan, a 27-year-old African-American who works in the civil service sector. “I mean street drugs, bodies, murders, I mean to me all of this was the typical lifestyle out there.”

Of course, all African-Americans do not grow in such circumstances. Even in Black ghettos, Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology reminds us, a middle class constitutes about 25 percent of the population. That said, in “disadvantaged neighborhoods,” where so many Blacks live, school dropout rates, unemployment, and violence are endemic.

In “The Cultural Matrix,” Patterson and about two dozen other academics try to understand the persistence of segregation, social isolation, poverty and crime among Black youth.

16 essays
In 16 essays, on a wide array of topics, including hip-hop, the impact of religious participation, occupational schools, the West Indian “exception,” parental influence and self-respect, they acknowledge that structural forces, including discrimination, toxic stress, and the disappearance of blue-collar jobs from inner cities, help explain the crisis.

But, while they do not invoke the victim-blaming language of “pathology” and dysfunction” associated with the “culture of poverty” thesis of the 1960s and ’70s, these scholars maintain that the beliefs and attitudes of Black youth are relevant “to the major predicaments they face.”

Although the essays in the book are not always an easy read, “The Cultural Matrix” provides an important framework for understanding an urgent issue that should be a public policy priority.

Impact of hip-hop
The authors try to highlight some positive components of the cultural matrix. Although its “mix of cartoonish violence and self-proclaimed realism,” makes for “an intoxicating but toxic cocktail, Wayne Marshall points out, hip-hop’s “remarkable reign” over American popular culture is also testimony to its “uncontainable dynamism,” technical competency and media savvy, communal engagement around shared texts, and its call to individuals to produce or reproduce themselves (and their sense of self).

And a quartet of scholars demonstrate that religious participation mitigates some of the long-run negative impacts of living in a disadvantaged neighborhood: it has a buffering effect on educational outcomes but not on income.

Culture and structure
West Indians, Van C. Tran indicates, use parenting strategies and engagement with a local peer network to help their children create a family-friendly and shelter environment within their dangerous, segregated...
neighborhoods.

This approach meant that Mark, whose parents are middle-class professionals, barely realized that he lived five blocks away from public housing in East New York. A graduate of the City University of New York, Mark works as a system administrator for a bank.

Nonetheless, the authors seem to agree that “the interplay of culture and structure” often has a potent and tragic meaning. Exposed to the “numbing reality” of economic inequality and segregation, Robert Sampson indicates, many Blacks “become cynical about human cooperation and legal systems of justice – which can in turn lead to feedback loops that reinforce those very disadvantages.”

Demand more

Only a combination of substantial structural and cultural change, Patterson concludes, can end the vicious cycle.

Inner cities must be detoxified and restructured, with expanded provisions of prenatal, postnatal, and preschool care, better schools, working-class jobs that pay a livable wage, and an end to mass incarceration and the failed War on Drugs.

At the same time, Black teens and young adults must not only accept responsibility for their own condition, they must be willing to change “the socio-economic aspects of their lives within the limits allowed by their circumstances,” limits which are severe “but not totalizing.” African-Americans, then, must demand more from their government – and from themselves.

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