Who is to blame for the underclass?

The Underclass: Who is to Blame?

Upper class, middle class and working class; these are the traditional classifications of social classes in nearly all societies in the world. But, what if a group of people proves to be unable to fit into one of these social stratums and creates a need for establishing an additional lower class? In this case, one of the most prominent problems will inevitably surface. Such a problem was and still is a major issue that enters into the American society especially with the emergence of the ' underclass'. This term that is generally used to refer to people " at the bottom of, or even below, the rest of society" (Alcock, 1997). However, some details about the underclass are still a subject of controversy. While some associate the underclass with those who could not integrate into the mainstream societies due to their behavior and different culture, others just ascribe the emergence of the underclass to certain structural and situational factors. In this respect, the first part of this essay will discuss both approaches: the one that puts the blame on the behavioral characteristics of the underclass and the other which is oriented towards the structural process that led to the creation of the underclass. The following part will deal with blacks as a case of study. And the last part will cover one possible solution for this issue.

Some sociologists argue that people belonging to the underclass are excluded from society due to their inappropriate attitudes, improper behavior and wrong choices. Adherents to this view agree that the underclass " includes only the undeserving poor" (Jencks, 1988), since this group of people often displays distinct behavioral characteristics that lead them to be " socially isolated from mainstream patterns of [society]" (Wilson,

1987). In this light, Ken Auletta (1991) divides the underclass into four elements stressing the boundaries that separate them from the rest of society. In his classification, he includes: " the passive poor, usually long-term welfare recipients, " the hostile street criminals", " the hustlers" i. e. those who rely on underground economy and " the traumatized drunks, drifters, homeless shopping-bag ladies and released mental patients. " To these people, " violent crimes, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy [and] joblessness" (Sawhill, 1992) become distinguishing hallmarks. The underclass, in this respect, is depicted as living by a code of jungle (Marks, 1991); a code that is fueled by the breakdown of a paramount institution which is the family and characterized by the loss of any " tangible incentive to learn" (Murray, 1984). In this context, Murray points out the common issues that mark the underclass including: the breakdown of families, illiteracy and single-parent household. All these attributes not only set the underclass apart from the mainstream American culture but also make welfare dependency their preferred choice. For instance, the emergence of the underclass is often associated with " an ' overgenerous' [system] that encourages such a ' dysfunctional' behavior"(Heisler, 1991). Taking the example of unemployment, Lawrence Mead says " The problem is not that jobs are unavailable but that they are frequently unacceptable, in pay or conditions, given that some income is usually available from families or benefit programs" (Mead, 1986). This means that underclass dependency on governmental support would create disincentives to work.

Another causal factor of the existence of the underclass in the American society is the failure of the structure in providing a just society. In defining

structure, sociologists analyze the complexities of social institutions and organizations in dealing with matters of integration and high trends of inequality. Hence, from a structuralist approach society is the one to blame for the emergence of an underclass.

The American Sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987) argues that the ' tangle of pathology of the inner-city' is represented in structural factors: Among these inter-related factors, historical segregation and discrimination of the minority groups in America led to the emergence of large underclass communities in the cities. A persistent interaction between high poverty rates and rising level of residential segregation explains Segregation role in concentrating poverty. In their study of segregation in the U. S, Nancy and Douglas (1998) depicted an Apartheid-American style in dealing with minorities in Urban areas. Indeed, segregation has negative socio-economic impacts. Consequently, underclass was the result of profound structural economic shifts that have marginalized inner cities positions and displaced the industrial sectors that were supposed to provide employment for the minorities and for the working poor. (Darity, Myers, Carson, & Sabol, 1994). This prevents the population from achieving its full potential in the labor market.

Besides, Gender Discrimination is one key feature of the structuralist causation. The high rate of poverty among women may be viewed as the consequence of a patriarchal domination. Women were fighting to resist the exclusion in a society that has been historically dominated by men. Welfare programs have been designed in some ways to stigmatize public support for women. Indeed this tends to reinforce patriarchy. (Abramovitz, 1996)

Moreover, social isolation was behind the inadequate human capital of the labor force that resulted in lower productivity and inability to compete for employment. (Darity, Myers, Carson, & Sabol, 1994) William Wilson (1985) defines social isolation as follows " the lack of contact or a sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society. " Indeed, urban poor suffer from the lack of assistance, resources and community safeguards. As a consequence, the difficult interaction between culture and behavior has produced an isolated-population from the labor economy. (Wilson, 1985) the isolation was linked to a growing concentration on poverty. Another major factor in the structuralist approach is that of Migration of the successful members of the community that leads to the reduction in social capital. (Wilson, 1987) This phenomenon essentially created a geographic polarization. Inner-cities are getting poorer and suburbs getting richer. The process of regeneration helped mobile individuals but was proved harmful for the ones who were not able to leave the urban areas.

One perspective refers to the political factor adopted by Republicans (in America particularly) the welfare programs that have removed any desire to work, thus creating a culture of poverty and the underclass. Inner-city poverty is the unanticipated consequence of public policy that was intended to alleviate social problems but has, in fact, caused them to worsen in some ways. (Wilson, 1987). Public policies including federal aids and programs indirectly affected poverty. Public housing for example did not aim at improving or rebuilding slum dwellers but rather at eliminating poor housing (Gautreaux case in the 1970s)

In an attempt to define the underclass, Time Magazine reported that it " is made up mostly of impoverished urban blacks who still suffer from the heritage of slavery and discrimination" (1997). Because Blacks constitute the majority of the underclass, we chose to apply on them the two perspectives previously analyzed.

According to the culture-of-poverty thesis, blacks " do not possess those traits or values that are conducive to individual achievement and success " (Zargouni, 2007). Minority groups, such as Chinese, Japanese and West Indians suffered from discrimination and yet they were able to " ris[e] to affluence" because of their " effort, thrift, dependability, and foresight that built businesses " (Sowell, 1981). Because these traits are absent within African-American's culture, blacks remained " trapped" in the " same inner cities ", other races were able to " escape" (Lemann, 1986). Lemann (1986)asserts that " the greatest barrier " for blacks is their " culture". Within this same line, Chuch Robb suggests that the barriers of segregation and racism were abolished and it is time for blacks to get rid of their " self-defeating patterns of behavior " (in Jackson, 1988). Thus, according to this first perspective Black's cultural traits are the reasons behind their failure in " some of the richest cities on earth " (Hamill, 1988).

One major critique for this perspective is that the years following the Civil Rights Movement witnessed the rise of a black middle class (Wilson, 1990). That is, Blacks proved that when given equal opportunities and decent living conditions, they can defy the stereotypes and achieve success. Following the same line and in an attempt to distance himself from the " culture of poverty" thesis, Wilson (1990) insists that although blacks were living in poor

conditions before the mid-twentieth century, unemployment, crimes and perverseness were not as prevalent as they are today. According to him these changes were due to two main reasons. First, many blacks lost their jobs in the manufacturing sector which was contracted and could not catch the new opportunities in the suburbs (Wilson, 1990). Second, the departure of the black middle class meant the removal of " role models" who used to show for the less advantaged " that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm, not the exception" (p. 56).

In his assessment of the situation of blacks, Wilson does not deny that they have " ghetto-specific cultural traits" (p. 137); but he acknowledges that they are but the consequences of unemployment and social isolation, rather than the reasons behind them. He also insists that these traits are " not self-perpetuating" and would disappear if faced with proper care (p. 138).

The government's reaction to the underclass was in the adoption of some welfarist measures. These policies were criticised by many who believe that they only encourage dependency.

Goodman, Reed and Ferrara (1994) argue that welfare can only be successful if based on the"- determination of the amount and type of aid case by case. The private sector " would be able to do so since it may reduce the level of assistance, or withdraw assistance altogether, if recipients do not show behavioral changes" (Goodman, Reed, & Ferrara, 1994).

We think that such a system would be more beneficial than the traditional welfare system for it encourages people to work hard to deserve and preserve the assistance they are getting.

At the end of this research, it is worth to mention that Underclass is a major problem in the American society. Despite all the advancement and the principles on which this nation is built upon, the appearance of an underclass indicates that there is a notable failure in implementing the right measures to better the situation of minority groups. Blacks were chosen as a case of study in this report due to their high population and their difficult integration comparing to other races. Whether behavioral factors or Structural causes (Wilson, 1987) were behind the emergence of this distinct class, serious reforms should be adopted to overcome this phenomena.

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