The Uses of Culture

Christopher Clausen, a columnist for the *New Leader*, has discovered a cultural phenomenon that deserves some attention: the widespread and indiscriminate use of the term *culture*. Not only has a perfectly fine term been transformed into a buzzword, he observes, but it has been made to buzz for contradictory ends.

In an increasingly fragmented America, culture—in its familiar meaning of a community's way of life—has been stretched further and further, and sometimes beyond the breaking point. A *New York Times* reporter refers to the "the male-dominated culture" of the Pentagon, while a book reviewer complains about "the cultural demand for heterosexuality"; a *New Yorker* writer concerns himself with Russia's putative need for "a new economic culture . . . a culture of dealing with money"; and *GQ* declares that "the culture of booing . . . makes opera a special art form."

For academics in the humanities and social sciences, Clausen says, the term performs important ideological functions. Culture is thought of as an all-powerful yet infinitely malleable force. Because culture can be changed, so can society. In women's studies departments, for example, all differences between men and women are assumed to be "culturally determined," and thus subject to change. Heterosexuality is likewise regarded as a mere prejudice, a "cultural demand."

But, illogically, *culture* can also be "a rhetorical device" to ward off criticism and change, Clausen points out, a kind of intellectual stop sign. Political correctness rules out virtually any negative comment about any aspect of non-Western or minority "culture." At the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, China and other Asian dictatorships dismissed Western complaints about human rights violations as mere cultural imperialism. However, the fact that even American multiculturalists object to the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia or to female circumcision in sub-Saharan Africa suggests to

Clausen that "culture" is not quite so sacrosanct as some pretend. No one really believes, he says, "that every 'culture' and all of its expressions should be equally respected." That may be, but the word still makes a dandy flogging stick.

The Geography Of Ghetto Poverty

Like whites before them, many middle-class and working-class black families have been able to escape in recent times from poor inner-city neighborhoods. But their progress has had a price: the increasing isolation of the black poor left behind in destitute and crime-ridden urban ghettos.

In the vast majority of metropolitan areas, writes Jargowsky, a professor of political economy at the University of Texas at Dallas, the number of census tracts with a black poverty rate of 40 percent or higher increased during the 1980s. His conclusions are based on an extensive analysis of 1990 census data. "Greater and greater areas of many central cities are essentially being abandoned," he says. This has happened even though black poverty, at 29.3 percent of black families in 1990, was hardly changed after a decade.

Poor blacks became increasingly concentrated in ghettos during the 1980s: 45.4 percent of them lived in high-poverty tracts in 1990, compared with 37.2 percent 10 years before. Overall, the proportion of the total black population living in such areas increased from 20.2 percent in 1980 to 23.7 percent in 1990. Nearly six million blacks lived in ghettos in 1990; about half of them were poor.

Most large metropolitan areas reflected this national trend. Yet even in some areas where the concentration of blacks in ghettos fell, the number of poverty tracts grew. In the Philadelphia area, only 17.7 percent of blacks were stuck in ghettos by 1990, down from 23.6 per-