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## The Uses of Culture

"The Culture of Culture" by Christopher Clausen, in *The New Leader* (June 6-20, 1994), 275 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001.

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 boogie . . . 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

"Ghetto Poverty among Blacks in the 1980s" by Paul A. Jargowsky, in *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (Spring 1994), John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 605 Third Ave., New York, N.Y. 10158.

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-

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cent, yet the region's ghettos grew by nine tracts.

Still, Jargowsky takes encouragement from declining concentrations in such areas as New York City, Newark, N.J., and Tampa-St. Petersburg. The drops are the product of improved local economies, Jargowsky believes, and show that the vision of the black poor as totally alienated and indifferent to opportunity is wrong. If the economy is strong, many poor people will work their way out of the ghettos.

## ***A University's Decline and Fall***

"Downward Mobility: The Failure of Open Admissions at City University" by Heather Mac Donald, in *City Journal* (Summer 1994), Manhattan Inst., 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

To generations of talented New York City high school graduates, including many from poor and immigrant families, City College once was known as the "Harvard of the poor." It offered an excellent education, free of tuition. Hunter College, Brooklyn College, and Queens College did the same. But that excellence is gone, laments Mac Donald, a *City Journal* contributing editor. Ever since the City University of New York (CUNY) embraced "open admissions" 25 years ago, its four-year senior colleges have been on a steep downhill slide. Today, only about 25 percent of its students graduate within eight years, and many who do lack even basic skills.

CUNY dropped entrance requirements at its 10 senior colleges after a violent student strike in 1969 protesting "racism" and "elitism"—even though it had seven community colleges effectively open to all city students with a high school diploma.

The open admissions policy cost \$35.5 million in its first year. "Within months, City College alone created 105 sections of remedial English and hired 21 full-time faculty members to teach them," Mac Donald writes. Nearly nine in 10 of its students required remedial writing instruction. "Professors found themselves facing students who had never

read a book, some of whom had no experience with written language or standard English." Although the initial graduation rates of students in SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), the central remedial program, were only around 15 percent within eight years, the university did not reconsider the program but instead expanded it. "Today, its resources dwarf those of traditional academic departments," reports Mac Donald, but the graduation rate for SEEK students is no better.

There are still good students and good programs at the CUNY colleges, Mac Donald notes, "but it is harder and harder for those students to get the education they deserve, because CUNY's remedial functions are swallowing up all others." Open admissions has hurt some colleges, notably Queens, less than others, she points out. And many CUNY graduate programs retain good reputations.

Proponents of open admissions originally promised that the remedial students would be brought up to the colleges' high academic standards, Mac Donald writes. Instead, standards have been lowered. The original idea of keeping remedial students out of regular courses until they acquired college-level skills was soon decried as "stigmatizing" and abandoned. Now, the distinction between the two types of courses has been blurred.

Bad as things are, Mac Donald fears that they may get worse. "A new generation of writing teachers, forcefully represented in CUNY's English and SEEK departments, is arguing that [academic] 'deficiency' and 'remediation' are mere 'social constructs' designed to marginalize unwanted groups of people." If these teachers have their way, academic standards will be completely abandoned and replaced by the notion of "competence in one's own culture."

Mac Donald thinks it is time to scrap the whole experiment and go back to the colleges' original purpose: giving an excellent education to poor and working-class students who are prepared to benefit from it. The money saved could be used to help their less qualified peers in other ways. As things stand now, both groups are being cheated.