

as those needed to run it.” One exception is the case of William Hewlett and David Packard: Hewlett became the “heart” of their business machines firm, while Packard was “the hard-nosed businessman.”

Even Welch and Gates came to share power with others. In his two decades at the helm of General Electric, Welch had two or three vice chairmen (“elder statesmen”) in his office to complement his own skills. At Microsoft,

Gates turned over his CEO job to collaborator Steve Ballmer but remained chairman of the board and head of software research.

Dividing responsibilities may be the easy part. The bigger challenge, say the authors, is deciding how to split the credit. “Coleadership has worked at Intel and TIAA-CREF because executives . . . are able to share the credit, and it has failed at Disney and Citigroup because of the egos rampant in the executive suites.”

The Right to Bear Checks

“Why Do We Use So Many Checks?” by Sujit Chakravorti and Timothy McHugh, in *Economic Perspectives* (2002: Third Qtr.), Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, 230 S. LaSalle St., Chicago, Ill. 60604-1413.

Every month in the United States, more than 15 checks per person are written. That’s more than three times the number in Canada and at least 15 times the number in Italy and several other European countries. What happened to America’s commitment to the brave new checkless world?

Checks may be less efficient than electronic payments, according to Chakravorti and McHugh, a senior economist and a senior analyst, respectively, at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, but American consumers don’t see much individual benefit in quickly switching to the new format. While credit cards are now more popular than checks for point-of-sale transactions, total check volume went *up* in America during the 1990s, while it declined in most other industrialized countries. Of the nearly 50 billion checks written in the United States in 2000 (total value: \$48 trillion), consumers wrote slightly more than half.

Consumers perceive each check as virtually free. Instead of per check transaction fees, most prefer bank accounts with fixed monthly fees, or minimum balance requirements and no fees. In any case, the costs are hidden.

Checks are easy to use, widely accepted, and provide more control over the timing of payments, permitting better budgeting.

With the rapid increase in the use of check verification systems, most merchants now have little reason to stop accepting checks. The systems cut the cost of accepting checks to 60 cents per \$100 of sales, which is less than for any other form of payment, including credit cards (\$1.80) and even cash (90 cents).

And check services are a big business for financial institutions. “On average, they charge customers 21 cents and merchants five cents to process each check.” In 1995, they collected \$8.1 billion in fees for bounced checks while losing only \$400 million on bad checks. Even if banks wanted to discourage check usage by imposing a small fee for each check (as Norwegian banks did, thereby cutting check usage about 90 percent), competitive pressures might keep them from doing so. There are a few signs that consumers may be changing, but most seem to act as if the only way anybody will get their checkbooks away from them is by prying them from their cold, dead fingers.

SOCIETY

Debating the Black Family

A Survey of Recent Articles

The charge was to explore, in the words of *Salmagundi* (Winter–Spring 2002) editor Robert Boyers, “the situation of Afro-

America,” or, in Harvard University sociologist Orlando Patterson’s more specific ones, “the gender, family, and sexual problems of

African Americans,” at the dawn of the 21st century.

The ultimate issue was the plight of black children, 60 percent of whom grow up in fatherless households. Patterson, whose *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (1999) was assigned reading for the 18 panelists gathered by the journal, acknowledged that he had changed his outlook since a similar roundtable almost a decade earlier. Then he had stressed unemployment and the absence of available jobs as the reason marriage was so unpopular among blacks; but now he suggested the reverse: “Men do not have jobs because they’re not married.”

At the root of the contemporary black reluctance to marry or cohabit in a stable union, said Patterson, is “the most profound tragic experience in Afro-American history, namely slavery and its aftermath.” Slaves did not even own their children, and fathers were especially irrelevant. Jim Crow and “the nightmare of lynching” carried on the emasculation, he said. The whole experience “was devastating culturally and psychologically.” This past, he said, “gave us the [gender] attitudes which largely account for our present problems.”

Kendall Thomas, a law professor at Columbia University, protested that “black people of all classes” in America today “continue to be menaced, threatened, subjected to violence of all sorts”—victims of “the ideology and the institutions of white supremacy.” He objected to the idea of “normative masculinity and normative heterosexuality” as a solution to “the perceived gender crisis in the black community.” Patterson was also faulted for slighting gay and other unions.

But Jacqueline Rivers, executive director of the Boston-based National Ten Point Leadership Foundation, which seeks to combat violence among inner-city youths, pointed out that homosexual unions are not the issue. “Clearly, what we have in the inner city are mostly short-term, heterosexual unions without any affiliated commitment to raising the product of those unions. That is what we have to deal with.”

Speaking “as a black woman and as a feminist,” Jill Nelson said she felt “ambushed” by

several panelists’ alleged implication “that black women’s commitment to feminism has to somehow be subverted to save the black man and the family.” Nelson, a journalism professor at New York’s City College, also said she was offended by “the whole notion of the so-called ‘nuclear family’ . . . I think we’ve got to expand and become inclusive about family.”

Most unmarried black women struggling to raise their children undoubtedly regret the absence of support from the fathers, observed Kendall Thomas. But “many young black men have not one, not two, not three but as many as four children by four different young African American women. They can only go home to one of them, if any, which leaves the rest of these kids with nothing.” He suggested that black churches and community centers should do more to help mothers.

“In most lower-class, working-class neighborhoods” there is a correlation between church attendance and marital stability, noted the Reverend Eugene Rivers, pastor of Azusa Christian Community in Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood (and Jacqueline Rivers’s husband). Any practical program to aid the black poor, he said, will require a fresh appreciation of the functional role religion plays in their lives.

“It would be the height of bad faith,” commented James Miller, editor of *Daedalus*, for individuals without religious convictions, such as himself, “to suggest to other people that they should hold a religious belief . . . because it is sociologically convenient.” He wasn’t sure what can be done. “I suppose that if you’re fully committed to the principle of dyadic coupling, you might favor a state policy making it punitively difficult to divorce once you’ve coupled to raise children. But beyond something as drastic as that I don’t know where you’d go.”

Patterson, however, maintained that cultural attitudes often can be changed more readily than economic realities. “Over the past 50 years, America changed significantly from the system which we know as Jim Crow. Peoples’ attitudes do change.” It’s not enough, he admonished, to just “keep on saying it’s jobs, it’s jobs, it’s jobs.”