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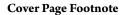
John Muller

Book Review: The Roots of Urban Discontent: Public Policy, Municipal Institutions, and the Ghetto

Cover Page Footnote
John Muller, F.S.C., is an Associate Professor of Government at Manhattan College.

BOOK REVIEW

THE ROOTS OF URBAN DISCONTENT: PUBLIC POLICY, MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS, AND THE GHETTO. By Peter H. Rossi, Richard A. Berk, and Bettye K. Eidson. New York: John Wiley & Sons. 1974. Pp. xxv, 499. $15.75.

Published six years after the *Report*[1] and *Supplemental Studies*[2] of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *The Roots of Urban Discontent* extends significantly the analysis of opinion and attitude surveys undertaken pursuant to the Commission's mandate. It is a major addition to the literature comparing urban institutions in American cities; it is also a significant contribution to the study of interactions between urban political and civic leaders and the black population and between blacks and "street-level" agents of selected public service-providing and commercial institutions in American cities in the later 1960s.

Rossi and his collaborators attempt to assess the "fundamental processes" by which American cities operated in relation to the black population of urban ghettoes. The processes surveyed included services of municipal agencies—police, education, and social welfare—and services provided by the private economic sectors—retail merchants and hiring personnel of large urban industries. The authors succeed in identifying significant variations among American cities in the ways in which the various sets of intersections were critical to urban existence.

Three separate sets of interview responses obtained in surveys of fifteen selected cities form the principal sources of this totally data-based work. The cities surveyed were major cities—Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Gary, Milwaukee, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. The authors admit the arbitrary manner in which these particular cities were selected as subjects for study. Gary, for example, was selected because of its having a black mayor. On the other hand, Los Angeles was omitted purely because it had been the subject of much previous analysis. Nevertheless, the fifteen cities considered represent a sizable portion of the urban population of the United States, and the validity of the sampling is therefore not suspect.

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1. NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS, REPORT (1968).
2. NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS, SUPPLEMENTAL STUDIES (1968).

The authors essentially build upon their previously published preliminary analysis of one set of interview-responses, namely, the attitudes and practices of occupational groups providing public services and hiring ghetto residents.[3] A large part of this work is taken up with group by group analysis and intercity comparisons of the groups' responses. Interview responses of civic and political leaders are analyzed with reference to governmental decision-making processes and leadership styles with reference to the black population.

The principal findings are derived from statistically significant correlations among the aggregated responses of each interview set. Detailed data analyses of attitudes and dimensions of public policy and institutional practices, using standard statistical techniques, are presented in one hundred forty-nine tables, and rank-order comparisons of the fifteen cities are presented in forty-seven instances. The format provides a unique research contribution to the comparative study of urban institutions.

In contrast with other published explanations of the causes of alienation and discontent evidenced among black urban populations in the 1960s, the authors assume that the environment of the black ghetto areas was conditioned to a large extent by the quality of the relationships between (1) the local political regime and the black population, and (2) the institutional agents[4] taken together and the black residents. These assumptions proved to be most valuable for comparative analysis.

The authors found significant attitudinal differences from city to city among blacks toward the political regime. Of especial interest is the great difference in these perceptions between black and white residents. It frequently appears, in the words of the authors, "as if white and black residents were referring to entirely different officials."[5] For example, in the perception of whites, Milwaukee's mayor is "trying hard to solve problems." In this regard, Milwaukee ranks highest among thirteen cities. Compare, however, the opinion

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3. P. Rossi, R. Berk, D. Boesel, B. Eidson, W. Groves, *Between White and Black: The Faces of American Institutions in the Ghetto*, in SUPPLEMENTAL STUDIES, *supra* note 2, at 69.

4. The institutional agents are those instruments of the local government who have the most contact with the urban population. See note 11 *infra* and the accompanying text.

5. P. ROSSI, R. BERK & B. EIDSON, THE ROOTS OF URBAN DISCONTENT: PUBLIC POLICY, MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS, AND THE GHETTO 393 (1974).

of blacks on this issue, in which Milwaukee ranks fourteenth out of fifteen cities.[6] Similar race-based dichotomies, albeit to a lesser extent, are seen in St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati.

The study also reflected significant differences in the assessment of the mayor's effectiveness among the civic elite of the various cities. Within these cities, the study further compared the black population's and the civic elite's views of the mayor's effectiveness. Surprisingly, the correlation between the views of these urban office-holders and the black population is rather high.[7] Only in New York was a serious difference observed. Here, the elite regarded then-Mayor Lindsay as much more responsive to problems than he had appeared to blacks. The authors attribute this situation to the fact that all black samplings were taken in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section, while the center of government is in Manhattan.[8]

The black population and the governing elite also showed a very high correlation on their response to the question "Do you think city officials pay more, less, or the same amount of attention to a request by or a complaint from a Negro as from a white person?"[9] The authors draw upon these heartening results to buttress their conclusion that the attitudes of the governing elite permeate the institutions they control, and filter down to the population, which, in turn, responds in a negative or affirmative fashion.

This responsiveness is seen in other sections of the study. The self-perception of political competence and efficacy among black residents in each city was closely related to the quality of municipal services and the openness and responsiveness of the institution to local needs.

The study also provides a revealing picture of how the civic elite view the black community. Wide variations between the sampled cities were observed. In Newark, Brooklyn and Detroit, the black "civil rights" movements are characterized as "radical goal oriented."[10] These cities, of course, were the sites of severe racial disturbances during the last decade. The elite in these cities also view

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6. *Id.* at 392.
7. *Id.* at 55.
8. *Id.* at 55 n.15.
9. *Id.* at 56-57.
10. *Id.* at 58.

the black movement as autonomy- and participation-oriented. In the more peaceful cities, however, the movements are viewed as being aimed at integration or resolution of particular grievances.

Wide variations were similarly found among the cities in the attitudes and behavior of each cities' institutional agents taken in the aggregate. Institutional agents include police, welfare workers, retail merchants, major employers, educators, and political party workers,[11] in short, those who have the most contact with the black community on a daily basis. There emerges a picture of distinct attitudinal communities among the groups of institutional agents within each city and also between the black and white populations. The most reliable predictor of attitudinal difference was the race of the respondent.

Perhaps the most visible of these institutional agents is the police officer. The study offers various sets of statistics bearing upon the work of the police, in addition to their attitude towards the ghetto populace. As an example, this data reveals that a sizable minority of the force rejects positive stereotypical statements about their clients.[12] Only a small minority completely endorses such statements, while the majority of those questioned are ambivalent. Once again, the race of the policeman may be said to be determinative.[13]

Data on educators, on the other hand, reveals an awareness of black problems in the urban environment, a satisfaction with their occupation, and good relations with students' parents. These results lead the authors to characterize educators as the "most liberal" of institutional agents.[14] Again, results for all institutional agents, their perceptions, and their effect on the community, varied widely from city to city.

While these findings are important for both public and private municipal service agencies, the analysis fails to distinguish the relative impact on the black population of the service provided by each occupational grouping. In treating each occupational group equally, an important distinction based on frequency of contact is overlooked.

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11. *Id.* at 73m
12. *Id.* at 166.
13. *Id.*
14. *Id.* at 363.

The principal difficulty, however, concerns the timeliness of the data on which this research is based. While the findings present an accurate, detailed portrayal of attitudinal trends in American cities in the late 1960s and are important from a comparative perspective, they serve only to underscore what has been previously reported elsewhere.

More recent surveys of specific urban populations indicate that programmatic and attitudinal changes have occurred and have had a positive impact on the population of urban ghettoes. Comparative analysis of more current survey data is needed to assess the success or failure of efforts intended to address the causes of urban discontent identified in this work and in publications of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

John Muller, F.S.C. *

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