MILLSTONES OR MILESTONES?

THE FAMILY IN THE CARIBBEAN: PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2ND CONFERENCE ON THE FAMILY IN THE CARIBBEAN, ARUBA, 1969. Edited by STANFORD N. GERBER. (Rio Piedras, PR: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico, 1973. Pp. 167.)

THE CARIBBEAN FAMILY: LEGITIMACY IN MARTINIQUE. By MIRIAM SLATER. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977. Pp. 264. $12.95.)

No area of sociological research on the Caribbean has received as much attention or has been the subject of as much controversy as the family. Much of the debate has centered around explanations offered for the prevailing trends observed in "lower class" black families in the New World and the dominant intellectual preoccupation has been to explain the features that many researchers took to be "characteristic" of the "Afro-American family." While certain differences were observed between the family patterns of the Caribbean and those of Afro-America (for example, the age at which marriage takes place is usually much earlier in the U.S. than it is in the Caribbean [Rainwater 1971, p. 82]), and though not all authors were equally preoccupied with all these features (for example, Smith 1973), there was a widespread concern in the literature with "matrifocality" and "male marginality," the low incidence of legal marriage (especially in the early years of the mating cycle among the Caribbean poor), and high rates of "illegitimate births."

First, there were offered historical explanations, placing the responsibility for these features on polygynous African survivals (Herskovits 1941) or on the experience of slavery which imposed certain modes of adaptation (Frazier 1948). On their own, such explanations are now largely discredited for their inability to account for the persistence of the features noted, the existence of similar patterns in societies that had not known slavery, and for the numerous exceptions to the stereotype which were able to emerge especially since Emancipation. Several variants of what were deemed functional or synchronic explanations were then advanced: some stressed as the first link in a causal/temporal chain the low status of the lower-class male in the society (Smith 1956); others the fact of poverty, which does not allow men adequately to support their families (Rodman 1971); still others, the environmental/occupational matrix of family life (Icken Safa 1964, Clarke 1957).

The Smith/Rodman variant of the argument, which received the greatest currency, could hardly explain the relative absence of these particular "characteristics" (or of matrifocality alone in Smith's case) among East Indians of similarly low status and living under similar conditions of poverty in the same societies. Smith recognized this and went to great lengths to show that the current explanations for matrifocality in Afro-Guyanese families could only be partial, since they did not seem to apply to East Indian families observed. He

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press

argued that the plantation per se was compatible with a whole *range* of family forms and, by extension, that purely economic explanations were inadequate (Smith 1959).

Commentators have also noted that the relative lack of research on other classes/races in the Caribbean made the validity of the functionalist argument questionable—to study the lower class only and to explain its behavior by the fact of being lower class was near tautology. It was shown too, that the very term matrifocality referred to aspects of the *composition* of households as well as to the *roles* of men and women within households (Hannerz 1969, ch. 4; González 1970), and that any given proportion of female-headed households could be accounted for in several ways. A few writers also noted that there were several forms of mating even within the black lower class; hence, it was the *variations* that needed to be understood and explained, rather than the features which were deemed deviant and pathological. Finally, the very terms of the debate, which produced a false dichotomy between historical and synchronic explanations, were called into question.

Perhaps the most telling refutation came from R. T. Smith himself (1973) who had for long been regarded as a leading exponent of the functionalist position on matrifocality. Smith argued that it was a mistake to consider matrifocality—which referred to role differentiation where men were largely excluded from child-rearing, cooking, washing and household decision-making—as necessarily linked to marital instability, high rates of illegitimacy, and female-headed and/or consanguineal households. Such role differentiation, he reasoned, was compatible with social strata where both men and women had high, dominant social positions as well as where they did not. He declared that there was no essential difference in the nature and quality of relationships between legal and nonlegal unions (where both parties are lower class), that the issue had nothing to do with *kinship*, that nonlegal unions were not distinctively lower class or folk practices, and that visiting relations embody the same core relationship as marriage. In his view, the nuclear family was not necessary for successful child-rearing, nor was legitimate paternity a prerequisite for the development of social personality, and he asserted that there was nothing anomalous about shifting of children between households or changing patterns of mating relations (pp. 125–42). Smith's conclusion was that stratification and poverty could not be the sole reasons for matrifocality. But, by implication, many of the issues that had so agitated social science writing between the 1940s and the 1960s were now being declared, in Smith's mature reflection, to be essentially trivial.

The debate also had its inevitable political dimensions: the work of Oscar Lewis on the "culture of poverty" listed matrifocality, illegitimacy, etc. among a host of traits that were supposed to be culturally transmitted among the poor in Western societies and, though this was never Lewis' intention, it was used to justify the argument that little could be done to eradicate poverty since the causes rested with the cultural traditions of the poor themselves. The now infamous Moynihan Report (Moynihan 1965) sought to translate this misconception into policy by arguing that the Afro-American family, caught in a "tangle of pathology," was the core problem to be tackled by the federal administration.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The report—really the distillation of the worst errors of social science research on black families—called on black Americans to mend their ways and conform to the standards of white (middle class) America. Moynihan thrust the responsibility for the oppressed condition of Afro-Americans on their family life and ultimately, on the *women*, who were seen as contributing to the emasculation of black men.* Thus, the strength of many black families, the women who had for centuries struggled to keep their families together in spite of structural constraints and obstacles, were now regarded as their major weakness. Today, after the furor from academic circles (for example, Valentine 1968, Leacock 1971, Ladner 1972) and from various publics (Rainwater and Yancey 1967), enthusiasm for this genre of explanation has noticeably waned. It did, however, raise a related debate about the autonomy of lower class culture and the extent to which the values of the poor are variations on those of other classes or have any ethnic distinctiveness (for example, Rodman 1971, Berger 1973, Blauner 1973, Hannerz 1973).

The black rebellion of the 1960s in the U.S. initiated a re-vision of essential issues. It unleashed a set of symbols, a rhetoric, and a militancy that were echoed among Caribbean people both in the New World and in the cities of the metropolis, in response to their own oppression. The movements' rejection of cultural impositions and insistence on the autonomy, authenticity, and creativity of the folk/working class traditions have *forced* the Caribbean Christian Churches, the very bastion of support for legal marriage, to reassess their position on the family, no less than on imperialism, racism, human rights, unemployment, and a host of issues. *Fambli* (Haynes 1972) was the first record of this soul-searching on the family among church people, followed by several others, among them *With Eyes Wide Open* (Mitchell 1973), *Caribbean Women in Communication for Development* (Cuthbert 1975) and *The Role of Women in Caribbean Development* (Cuthbert 1975).

Within the U.S. itself, the black rebellion opened up the way for a whole series of other rebellious movements—Puerto Rican, Mexican, American Indian, and (again with growing international resonances), that of women. Although the participation of black women in the women's liberation movements has been cautious and limited (Staples 1973, ch. 6; Hare and Hare 1973), within the past decade black women in the U.S. and in the Caribbean have, in their writing, begun to tackle the several aspects of their oppression. In so doing, they have added another set of voices to the chorus that has dismissed the painstaking theorizing of decades of research on the family:

> The rather tired cliché of the black matriarch perhaps contains some validity in terms of the number of women who head their own households (approximately one-third of Jamaica's adult females in 1972) and in terms of the moral strength they can, and do, exercise within the family. But one has to register considerable reservations about the assumption that to be a female head of a

*By the 1960s, partly because of the seminal influence of Franklin Frazier (1948), the social scientists' emphasis on matrifocality was taken, by academics and laymen alike, to imply the idea of matriarchy (for example, Bracey et al. 1971).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> household is to have some kind of natural access to authority. A considerable number of the single female heads are among the most powerless of the society. . . . (Mathurin 1977, p. 5)

From the U.S., Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Perry describe as "a popular and dangerous fiction: the myth of Black male emasculation and its descendant concept, myth of the Black female matriarchy" (in Cade 1970, p. 114). They continue: "We submit that in reality Black women, domineering or not, have not had the power in this male-dominated culture to effect a coup against anyone's manhood—in spite of their oft-cited economic 'advantage' over the Black man" (pp. 116–17). To crown it all, by the end of the 1960s, the women's movements in the U.S. had rejected forcefully many of the mores and sex roles which were held to be society's (read white, middle class) ideals—ironically, the same ideals by comparison with which black families have always been deemed pathological and deviant (Ladner 1972, p. 233).

I am suggesting from this brief overview that by the end of the 1960s, the central preoccupations of most social scientists writing on lower class black families in the New World had been opposed in several forums and, not least, by some of the "reluctant matriarchs" themselves: male marginality does not imply powerlessness; authority over children and housework ("women's work") is really not unusual; legal marriage is not the only legitimate type of union. And I am implying that events within and outside of the social sciences have long forced us to record the death of those issues which were hitherto taken to be the most salient on the subject. It is in this context that we must look at the discussions of the social scientists at the 1969 conference which sought to reevaluate existing research.

Bearing in mind the limited focus of much previous research, Vera Green takes a refreshing look at the possibilities of doing a nationwide study of families in Aruba. She raises the problem of defining the real Aruban population consistently with the definitions of the people of the island; for, like many Caribbean societies, Aruba has received several waves of immigration since the decimation of the Indians in the sixteenth century, and particularly with the construction of the oil refineries in the early twentieth century. To capture a complex reality, the sample design must be structured to represent length of residence on the island, differences by territory of origin, ethnicity, age, class, and rural/urban distinctions, among other factors.

Greenfield's paper begins by rejecting the *assumption* of male dominance and seeks to provide a theoretical paradigm with which to approach the study of sex/age roles in the Caribbean; for this reason, it is the most exciting part of the *Proceedings*. The argument goes that in any culture, certain activities are highly valued and those who perform them are rewarded with the highest status and prestige. The production and consumption of material goods and services are taken to be a primary index of activities that are highly valued and the writer seeks to examine households in areas with distinctive economic activities. The major hypothesis is that the type of economic activity in which the working members of the household engage will determine their status; and the author tentatively devises a typology of occupational groups—peasants/subsistence

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press

farmers, plantation wage earners, urban/industrial workers—and their corresponding family types. Some support is given in the literature to the idea of covariations between family types and economic activities (for example, Clarke 1957), but there are clear limits to the usefulness of the hypothesis. For example, as mentioned before, wage earning on plantations is compatible with a variety of family forms and the assumption that female-headed households, matrifocality, etc. are more likely to occur in such areas is not tenable, as least unless the conditions under which this contention holds can be clearly specified (on the basis of further research).

Greenfield himself illustrates this point when he states: "The urban centres contain a broad array of household forms, all adaptive variants of the nuclear family household" (p. 45). The writer seems to realize the difficulties of establishing a broad correspondence between economic base and household type (household = family?), and the basis for the idea that urban industrial workers will tend to have nuclear families is not really clear. Appealing as the paradigm may be, it needs greater elaboration after further research.

Moreover, the very process by which the production and consumption of goods and services are given value in the cultures under consideration needs examining. Why, for example, is household work—the production and reproduction of the worker and the family itself—often regarded as nonwork or is negatively valued? For in spite of the growth of public institutions that can provide many of the services and functions rendered by the family, household work remains a major aspect of social production. It took the women's movements to remind us of this.

An intelligent comment on family studies is offered by Anselme Remy's paper and his conclusion that the emphasis on mother-child relationships has blinded researchers to male/female relationships and male dominance (p. 61) is valid, as is the view that it has been difficult to relate family structure to social structure for the reason that the *systematic* study of social classes in the Caribbean has hardly begun. Anne Marie de Waal Malefijt and Marcia Hellerman expose some aspects of sexual inequality and double standards in Aruba. Most of the rest of the volume does not tackle its major theme. Helen Icken Safa attacks Lewis' culture of poverty thesis by showing that "the Puerto Rican poor"—her small sample of seven families who have struggled for upward mobility from the slums—are satisfied with the small gains they have made since 1940. The generalization is not entirely convincing and the theoretical background would have been strengthened if the thesis were linked to the burgeoning literature on urbanization, marginality, and the political sociology of slum settlements in Latin America.

The second theme of the conference was ethnicity, and two papers are included here. The first, by Gerber and Stanton, is very descriptive of stereotypes of different national and ethnic groups in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Safa then analyzes the differences in race relations between Puerto Rico and the U.S. and supports Carmichael and Hamilton's case for Black Power and "cultural pluralism." The wider implications for political strategy are not considered (cf. Cruse 1967); and the idea that racism in Puerto Rico is against individuals and is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not institutionalized really rests on what the latter term is taken to mean. Recent writings tend to suggest a systematic trend in the political life (Sagrera 1973) and in the culture (Zenon Cruz 1974–75) that cannot be ignored.

Slater's book is a publication of doctoral research undertaken in 1956. It argues, on the basis of participant observation supported by survey data, that matrifocality does not exist to any great extent in the Martiniquan agricultural community of Capesterre. What exists is a variety of families consisting of one, two, or three generations. Whether the conjugal unions are legal or consensual depends on a number of considerations—persuasion by the church missions, ability to afford a fête, the status of the partners, inheritance (a woman who has inherited a house will not normally live elsewhere, nor will her spouse live under her roof). The findings emerged from the questions in a fascinating way: often it was by going beyond the initial explanations given for living in consensual unions and observing the transgression or the questioning of the rules, the *taken-for-granted reality*, that the complexity of the reasons for marriage, or for the refusal to marry, became apparent.

For example, (p. 246), Slater is discussing the case of Mlle. Narcisse, forty years old, mother of four children, "all recognized by her *concubin*, a plantation executive who lives in a good cement house nearby:"

> "I keep house for my *mari* [husband], but we couldn't live together [let alone marry]." I asked why. "Naturally, I am not married because I live *here*," she said, indicating her small wooden house with pride. I looked blank.
>
> "But this is the *maison paternelle*," she finally explained, as if any idiot would know that. This was an inherited house, I later learned, and "The whites never abandon *la maison paternelle*". . . .
>
> "But why can't your *concubin* move into it with you?"
>
> "Because he is a big man with a good job," she answered. It turned out that no man with self-respect would move into such a house because it gave the woman too much authority. The problem rarely arises, for in most cases a son inherits a house, for the women have usually moved off to go into *ménage*.
>
> "But there are no problems," she said. "Isn't it simple to live so close together?"

Slater's argumentative analysis is marred by one major weakness—in spite of a lapse of at least twenty years since the research was conducted, the framework of her theoretical concerns does not go beyond the mainstream anthropology that has dominated writing on the family. Why else would the explanation for the variety of families observed rest on "an absence of the rule of legitimacy" as defined by Malinowski? The whole thrust of the evidence indicated that there *were* rules whose infraction was often considered a *totoblo*, a serious *faux pas*, and which were seen to be so self-evident as to require no questioning by the respondents themselves. This Slater elaborates at length, but the explanation would have gained greater validity were it derived from the context of the research, rather than viewed as "the organizational expression of an absence of [Malinowski's universal], the rule of legitimacy" (p. 248).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The building blocks that would enable us to derive an adequate theoretical understanding of Caribbean family patterns must be a series of studies cutting across class, race/ethnic, occupational, geographical lines and placed in historical context. It is through such a series that we would be able to understand the various factors that influence, determine, or covary with family life (and which may, in turn, be affected by the family). It would then be possible to understand more clearly the elusive but important role of economic activities in family patterns, and the extent to which family type may affect the life chances of individuals. Ironically, in spite of the focus on matrifocality for decades, social science research still needs to make its contribution to the serious study of the condition of *women* in Caribbean societies: for too long, the concepts have been discussed at the expense of the people and their autonomous reality.

The two books reviewed here indicate a great deal of questioning among anthropologists, but for the most part, it is questioning and cross-talk among members of the clan and within the framework of the tribe. It is to be hoped that they mark an end to the old preoccupations and constitute a bridge towards new directions for research.

SUSAN CRAIG
University of the West Indies, St. Augustine

REFERENCES

BERGER, BENNETT. "Black Culture or Lower Class Culture." In *Black Experience: Soul*, edited by Lee Rainwater. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1973.

BLAUNER, ROBERT. "Black Culture: Lower Class Result or Ethnic Creation?" In *Black Experience: Soul*, edited by Lee Rainwater. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1973.

BRACEY, JOHN H., JR., et al. *Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality*? Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1971.

CADE, TONI, ed. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New York: Mentor Books, New American Library, 1970.

CLARKE, EDITH. *My Mother Who Fathered Me*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1957.

CRUSE, HAROLD. *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1967.

CUTHBERT, MARLENE, ed. *Caribbean Women in Communication for Development*. Barbados: Cedar Press, 1975.

______. *The Role of Women in Caribbean Development*. Barbados: Caribbean Council of Churches, 1975.

FRAZIER, FRANKLIN. *The Negro Family in the United States*. New York: Dryden Press, 1948.

GONZÁLEZ, NANCIE SOLIEN. "Toward a Definition of Matrifocality." In *Afro-American Anthropology*, edited by N. E. Whitten and J. F. Szwed. New York: Free Press, 1970.

HANNERZ, ULF. *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.

______. "Another Look at Lower Class Black Culture." In *Black Experience: Soul*, edited by Lee Rainwater. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1973.

HARE, NATHAN and HARE, JULIA. "Black Women 1970." In *Black Experience: Soul*, edited by Lee Rainwater. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1973.

HAYNES, LILLITH, ed. *Fambli: Consultation on the Responsibility of the Churches to the Family in the Caribbean*. CADEC, 1972.

HERSKOVITS, M. J. *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). Republished Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1969.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ICKEN SAFA, HELEN. "Lower Class Families: From Shanty Town to Public Housing." *Caribbean Studies* 4, no. 3 (1964).
LADNER, JOYCE. *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman*. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1972.
LEACOCK, ELEANOR, ed. *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971.
MATHURIN, LUCILLE, "Reluctant Matriarchs." *Savacou* 13 (1977).
MITCHELL, DAVID, ed. *With Eyes Wide Open*. CADEC, 1973.
MOYNIHAN, DANIEL. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965). Reprinted in Lee Rainwater and William Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967.
RAINWATER, LEE. "Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower Class Family." In John H. Bracey, Jr., et al., *Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1971.
RAINWATER, LEE, ed. *Black Experience: Soul*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1973.
RAINWATER, LEE, and YANCEY, WILLIAM. *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967.
RODMAN, HYMAN. *Lower Class Families: The Culture of Poverty in Negro Trinidad*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
SAGRERA, MARTIN. *Racismo y política en Puerto Rico*. Editorial Edil, 1973.
SMITH, R. T. *The Negro Family in British Guiana*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956.
———. "Family Structure and Plantation Systems in the New World." In *Plantation Systems of the New World*. Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union Social Science Monograph No. 7, 1959.
———. "The Matrifocal Family." In *The Character of Kinship*, edited by John Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
STAPLES, ROBERT. *The Black Woman in America: Sex, Marriage, and the Family*. Chicago, Ill.: Nelson-Hall, 1973.
VALENTINE, CHARLES. *Culture and Poverty*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
ZENON CRUZ, ISABELO. *Narciso descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultura puertorriqueña*. 2 vols. Humanacao, P.R.: Editorial Furidi, 1974–75.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100032453 Published online by Cambridge University Press