

Poor People's Culture and Politics in Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum*

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Published in 1929, *The Gold Coast and the Slum* explores Chicago's social and geographical "worlds" and the "distances" (13) between them. Zorbaugh takes readers on a tour of different neighborhoods and areas of the city while emphasizing its "vivid contrasts" and "extremes" – "between the old and the new, between the native and the foreign, between wealth and poverty, vice and respectability, the conventional and the bohemian, luxury and toil" (4). In this short essay, I'd like to reflect on his views of "the slum" – its residents, its social (dis)organization, its culture, and, more importantly and relevant for our present time, its politics.

Zorbaugh has awfully disparaging things to say about the residents of the slum – views that we would now associate with the most ethnocentric of scholarly views (and, recently, with the words of the President of the United States). "The slum," he writes, "comes to be characterized...not only by mean streets and ramshackle buildings, but by well-defined types of submerged humanity.... The area of cheap lodging-houses is a jungle of human wreckage" (129). It "harbors many sorts of people: the criminal, the radical, the bohemian, the migratory worker, the immigrant, the unsuccessful, the queer and unadjusted" (11).

In Zorbaugh's rendition the slum is not so much a geographic and social formation, nor a product of capitalist urban development and state (in)action, but an area that, located in a rapidly changing city, is composed of a certain type of people: "Into the slum there drift, for similar reasons, a larger number of men and women derelicts, users of opium, drunkards, the 'queer', criminals and outcasts, men and women of unstable or problematical character who want to get away from their own communities to a place where they will not be known, or who are forced out and down into the slum by failure or unwillingness to adjust themselves elsewhere" (132).

We could dismiss all this as the views of someone disoriented by (and scared of) the rapid transformations taking place in Chicago and elsewhere – disoriented, as he says, the Sicilian migrants (or the Swedish folks seeing "negroes" coming closer to them) were. And yet, on a second reading – once our initial shock is over – we realize that the book is presenting readers the seeds of two ideas that would later come to inform the study of the urban poor in the U.S.: the notion of "the culture of poverty" and that of "disorganization" as defining features of destitute areas.

Much like how ideas about "anomy and radicalism" have dominated the study of the Latin American slum (Perlman, 1976; Portes, 1972), the trope of disorganization has governed the study of the American "dark ghetto" (Clark, 1965; Wacquant, 1995). Early

articulations of this idea are found everywhere in *The Gold Coast and the Slum*. *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – "community" and "society" – are more or less explicit categories of analysis that serve Zorbaugh to grasp the kinds of social ties present in the expanding city. Life in the city is "atomized" and the slum is an area that has "reached the limit of decay" precisely because of the disorganized, fractured, social bonds that prevail there. "The slum," he asserts, "is a distinctive area of disintegration and disorganization" (128). Families living there are "broken," "ineffective," and (again) "disorganized."

Alongside "disease," "failure," "vice," and "disorganization," a more subjective stance comes to define slum-dwellers: "[E]conomic misfortune or failure, physical inadequacy, drink, dope, or gambling, a loss of grip, and finally a *set of attitudes* that at last accommodates the family to the slum, and isolates it" (132, emphasis in original). There is a short step from this argument to the one that points to a set of values that allegedly traps the poor in their poverty (an argument first made by Oscar Lewis and later appropriated by conservatives to presumably explain poor people's "bad" behavior, and which is currently experimenting a bizarre revival in academic circles).

Recent scholarship on urban poverty has been moving away from an exclusive concentration on the properties of the populations trapped in relegated neighborhoods, focusing instead on the relations that produce urban marginality and centering empirical attention on policies and discourses, structures and experiences, forms and connections, the economy and the state (Desmond 2016, Gowan 2010, Wacquant 2009). Although most of Zorbaugh's attention lies on poor people's characteristics, there is one section (the one that describes slum politics) that merits closer scrutiny. His understanding of the "culture" and the social figuration of the slum has long proved to be wrong, but his detailed attention to the doings and sayings of grassroots politicians – the kind of politics prevailing in the slum – is something, I believe, should still be grappled with and, when possible, emulated.

"Far more influential in the currents of community life than any social agency," Zorbaugh writes, "is the local politician, the ward boss, and the precinct captain..." (178). Their influence, he stresses, comes from their way of being and acting: "These political leaders are not theorists; they are workers who set for themselves an objective, definite and alluring, and then go about organizing all the forces around them to work together for that goal. Their methods may seem crude and unscientific, but they are human; a United States congressman who hails from a ward of foreign-born citizens in a Middle West city seems to have a private key to the mint, so full are his pockets always of half-dollars available for friends in need" (178).

Note this description of an interaction between a local resident and a neighborhood politician (Stanley K.):

A Polish washerwoman in this man's district said to her employer, "I cannot come next Tuesday."

"Why not, Maggie?"

"It's election day and I must stand on the corner."

"What do you stand on the corner for?"

"For five dollars."

"But what do you do on the corner?"

"I do nothing – Stanley K. pins a paper on me." (179)

Almost 80 years separate that episode from this one (Auyero 2008):

[In 2003] Pedele ran for mayor in the primary of a center-left party that was, at the time, seen as representing the "new way of doing politics." On election day, a group of activists working in his campaign in a shantytown found that another group working for an opposing faction was standing on the corner by the school where voting was taking place. Pedele's opponents had a small bag with money in it; they would stop passers-by and offer \$50 for their votes. Pedele's campaign workers didn't waste any time; they got a gun and assaulted the opponent activists. They then moved to the opposite corner and, with the money recently obtained, they began to buy votes, this time for Pedele (who found out about this episode a month or so later when going over the surprising electoral results in the district where the shantytown is located). When, puzzled, I asked Pedele about the meaning of this episode he, sort of resigned, replied: "That's how things are now, that's how things are here..."

Back in the 1920s, local political "things" could not – and, in my mind, still cannot – be understood without paying empirical attention to the doings and dealings of the Mr. and Mrs. Ks of poor urban areas. Zorbaugh writes: "At local weddings and neighborhood funerals [Mr. K] is the outstanding social ornament....His objective – a seat in the municipal council, or in Congress, or a judgeship, or even a place on the precinct or ward committee – may not seem to us worthy of the coherent, enthusiastic following he is able to acquire, but he has it, and unless we have something better to offer, or take our place at the wire with him, he and his fellows will leave us far behind in the race for neighborhood organization and achievement" (179).

These local politicians have a "stock of detailed knowledge" about the lives of neighbors. "They are not trained social workers, these precinct leaders; they are just neighborhood people, and perhaps that is one of the secrets of their success" (179).

Zorbaugh presents in elementary descriptive form what Robert Merton elaborated years later in more theoretical terms – an approach to these central actors that, I would argue, should guide any micro-political analysis that seeks to understand and explain the working appeal of local political machines.

"The political machine," writes Merton (1949:74), "recognizes that the voter is a person living in a specific neighborhood, with specific personal problems and personal wants. Public issues are abstract and remote; private problems are extremely concrete and immediate. It is not through the generalized appeal to large public concerns that the machine operates, but through the direct, quasi-feudal relationships between local representatives of the machine and voters in their neighborhood. Elections are won in the precinct."

Politics, in the machine, "is transformed into personal ties...In our prevailingly impersonal society, the machine, through its local agents, fulfills the important social function of humanizing and personalizing all manner of assistance to those in need" (ibid:74). The machine can achieve this because of the specific practices of precinct workers who "in contrast to the gulf between the settlement house workers who so often come from a different social class, educational background and ethnic group [...] is 'just one of us', who understands what it's all about" (ibid:74)

Neighborhoods of relegation across the world are not only affected by formal state initiatives (infrastructural projects, housing policies, welfare programs, etc.) but also by the operation of informal institutions, and prominent among them is patronage or clientelism (machine politics). Politicians' and state officials' personalized distribution of goods and services in search of votes and/or participants for a political machine is, seen from the bottom up, one of the few available ways in which the poor relationally solve their daily survival problems. Zorbaugh (and Merton after him) identify one of the central (but still misunderstood) characters of local politics (and the material and symbolic reasons behind their appeal). Any attempt to construct an empirically based political sociology of urban marginality should take those insights seriously.