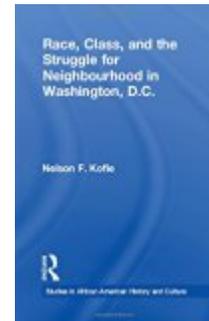


Nelson F. Kofie. *Race, Class, and the Struggle for Neighborhood in Washington, DC*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1999. xvi + 239 pp. \$62.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8153-3114-8.

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An Ethnography of Poverty in a Market Society

An Ethnography of Poverty in a Market Society

No one chooses poverty. But poverty in Washington, D.C. points to historical, socio-economic, political, and ideological factors in a nation that still limits some people's choices, whether it is how they earn a living or where they live. Our nation's capital is riddled with poverty that cripples its majority African American population. Nelson Kofie situates his ethnography in Washington, D.C., but the implications of his analysis reach beyond the city to fundamental issues of social and economic inequality in today's global society. In order to examine the forces shaping the emergence and perpetuation of poverty and the urban black ghetto, he selects a Washington "community which was home to reputable middle and working class blacks between the 1950s and 1960s [but] was transformed into a crime-ridden, impoverished neighborhood of predominantly low-income people" (p. 10).

Countering earlier institutional racism and behaviorist "culture of poverty" analyses, Kofie agrees with Richard Meister's premise that "[t]he urban experience has not been the same for the Black American as it had been for the white."^[1] Following Meister, Kofie argues that "predominately impoverished black neighborhoods were, and continue to be sustained by a white culture of segregation. The culture of segregation, by plan or default, determined where they lived, the kinds of employment open to them in the segment economy, and the inflated interest rate loans which financial agencies were willing to offer them to buy a home or start a business.

The culture of segregation was, in effect, another structural blockage thwarting the upward mobility of urban African Americans" (p. 3). However, Kofie argues that race alone cannot fully explain urban poverty; in order to pinpoint the source of poverty, we also need to examine discriminatory practices of our market society. In other words, the culture of poverty is a product of the dominant, profit-driven market culture. Kofie writes that "Poverty is not endemic because of characteristics of individuals; it is a product of the environmental factors, including declining employment opportunities, de facto racial and class discrimination and under-education" (p. 211).

Kofie draws on what he calls the "sociological imagination," by which he means an analytic approach that seeks to make connections between the private and the public, between individual stories and larger social patterns. As he explains, this paradigm provides him with "an elaborate, panoramic framework by which to illuminate the intricate relationship among individuals, social institutions, social structures and ideologies" (p. 11). His case study is a detailed ethnography that focuses on how these dynamic micro/macro relations play out in the lives of the people in a northeast Washington neighborhood, which he calls Sun-Hope, and that has come to be called "Little Beirut." Kofie chooses to use a practice common to sociological and anthropological ethnographies by replacing the names of people, places, and organizations with pseudonyms except when they are "well-known elite" (p. 11). Although Kofie lived in the suburbs while conducting his research, he fully involved himself

in community activities. He participated in most community meetings and in a neighborhood watch program. He was an intern, a project manager, and a tutor in an after-school program. He explains that being a young black male college student and foreigner (he is from Ghana) helped him gain community acceptance.

Kofie begins with the history of this neighborhood in the 1930s, before desegregation, when black evangelist Father Jonas (Washington historian Constance McLaughlin Green identifies him as Elder Lightfoot Michaux) arrived in Washington and established his Faith Church of Christ (or Church of God as identified by Green).[2] A self-made businessman, Jonas was one of the first black entrepreneurs to design, build, and manage an apartment complex in Washington. Sunrise Apartments provided housing for some of the black elite while Hope Mansions offered affordable dwellings for low-income and working class residents. Predating these units in the same neighborhood were Eden Estates and the Park Dwellings housing project. Families in Eden Estates owned their homes, while Park Dwelling, built as temporary housing during World War II, housed low income, working-class renters.

The segregated mixed-class community that emerged in the Sun-Hope neighborhood provides an ideal springboard for Kofie's central argument. He suggests that to better understand the process of ghettoization we should focus on the practices of our market society rather than on those of racial segregation. In fact, he argues that this process began to take place in this relatively stable community as a result of changes in public policy to combat racial discrimination. The community had its share of class conflict and tension but managed to resolve its problems through mediating institutions and effective leadership. However, as Kofie argues, the seams in its social fabric began to unravel as early as 1948 when the Supreme Court decisions declaring restrictive housing covenant illegal facilitated the flight of black elite to more affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods. Further destabilization of the community and ghettoization of the neighborhood followed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act, both of which hastened the flight of the black middle class to de jure and de facto desegregated neighborhoods in the suburbs. Kofie argues that racial desegregation resulted in class segregation, which accelerated the ghettoization of the neighborhood. With the middle-class professionals who left the community went the education and the leadership skills Kofie finds essential for establishing the mediating institutions that insure a community's stability. Implicit in Kofie's analy-

sis is his unexamined value judgment of what constitutes "education" and "good leadership," which unnecessarily biases an otherwise effective presentation of his argument in the introductory chapters. As I will argue later, this unexamined bias leads to the book's major flaw.

In the chapters that follow, Kofie unfolds a rich and detailed ethnography of a community struggling to change its environment, improve its neighborhood infrastructure, and build neighborhood organizations. He describes how the drug market filled a vacuum as the community disintegrated and how residents withdrew in fear. He details the ineffectiveness of the city government and police in controlling the drug market and the eventual success of the Fruit of Islam in retaking public space. He continues with the community's unsuccessful efforts to form cooperatives and to secure job training and employment. He concludes that the community is thwarted by a market culture that devalues and marginalizes individuals lacking education, skills, and political and economic networks. He seems to say that the people left in these developments are not seen as worthy of investment by the ruling forces that he calls the market culture and so no investments are made in these neighborhoods by the city, federal government, or private sector.

Kofie's ethnography works best in the chapters on the struggle with the drug trade that he sees as coming into the community from outside. Value judgments aside, the drug market he describes would seem to exemplify some of the leadership, organization, and job market opportunities that he found otherwise lacking in the community since racial desegregation and de facto class segregation policies came into being. Of course, he implicitly lets his reader know that this drug market society is bad for the community and is the epitome of lawlessness. It is this unexamined value judgment that prevents Kofie from carrying out a deeper critique of all the players involved in the ghettoization process. This prevents his ethnography from reaching beyond description to an explanation of the process of ghettoization. A next step would be a critique of the dominant market society and its social service agencies compared to alternate systems including those represented by the Fruits of Islam and by the drug lords. I also wish he had given us something of the diverse cultural backgrounds of the community's residents and had discussed community resources and strategies that might counter the larger society's marginalizing effects. Finally, I can appreciate protecting individuals interviewed by not using their real names; however, in cases of historical figures, use of pseudonyms impover-

ishes his contribution to D.C.'s history.

I commend Kofie for his contribution to Washington, D.C. studies and for choosing a community and a topic often overlooked in our nation's capital. It is difficult to study a ghettoized community without victimizing it, but his personal ethnographic approach successfully grants residents an active voice in their struggles for a better life.

Notes

[1]. Richard J. Meister, *The Black Ghetto: Promise Land or Colony?* (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1972), vii.

[2]. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: A History of the Capital, 1800-1950*, vol. 2, *Washington: Capital City, 1879-1950* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1962), 403-5.

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