Welfare Policies and Racial Stereotypes: The Structural Construction of a Model Minority

Mary E. Kelsey
University of California, Berkeley

Whereas the economic mobility observed among Asian Americans is often attributed to their cultural values, this article demonstrates the importance of state aid to the economic mobility of a community of Southeast Asian refugees living in California. Using data from a lengthy ethnographic study of rural Laotian refugees, the content and administration of social welfare programs offered political refugees is contrasted with the social policies extended toward other poor communities. As variations in social policies can constrain or facilitate economic mobility, the concrete impact of welfare state policies on different ethnic communities is a topic in need of further exploration.

Culture, Social Mobility and Racial Stereotypes

Since the end of American military involvement in Southeast Asia in 1975, one million Southeast Asian refugees have sought political asylum in the United States. Although most refugees arrived with scant material resources, Southeast Asian communities have diversified to include pockets of prosperity as well as lingering pockets of poverty. Ironically, prevailing explanations for both the achievements and problems of Southeast Asian refugees emphasize the refugees' cultural background. In the popular press, for instance, one writer has proposed that the academic success of Asian American children is due to the "Confucian ethic" prevalent among East and Southeast Asians. Because believers in the Confucian ethic place a high value on education and family responsibility, they create an intergenerational support system. Parents encourage their children's academic endeavors in return for the

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comfort and care they will receive in their old age.[1]

Journalists have also used cultural ethos to explain the poverty which has plagued other Southeast Asian communities. In a feature article on California's Hmong communities, a second journalist claims the practices of early marriage and childbirth retard the educational achievements of the next generation, thus contributing to this community's high poverty rates. Although teenage marriage and parenthood are common throughout Southeast Asia, the author notes with implicit disapproval that the Hmong (whom he describes as "one of world's oldest and most primitive tribes") are especially "reluctant" to alter their cultural customs.[2]

Journalists are not alone in their proclivity to explain the economic trajectories of Southeast Asian refugees in terms of cultural factors. Academic articles on the Mien, Sino-Vietnamese, and Hmong argue that the cultural orientations of these ethnic communities have handicapped their economic advancement.[3] Most academic writers, however, echo the sentiments expressed in Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy's study of Indochinese refugees' economic and academic progress. These authors duly note several factors (including government aid) which have facilitated the achievements of Southeast Asian refugee communities. Despite their sociological insights, the authors ultimately embrace a cultural explanation for social mobility.

> [I]f asked how we could have identified [Southeast Asian refugees'] predisposition to success, our reply, *if limited to one factor would be cultural compatibility*. . . . Their values emphasize hard work, education, achievement, self-reliance, steadfast purpose and pride—values that closely resemble those viewed as traditional middle-class American prerequisites for success. The major differences between the Indochinese and American values pertain to identity and orientation to achievement. The American value system stresses independence and individualism, encouraging all to seek out competition . . . and to win. In contrast, the Indochinese value system places emphasis on interdependence . . . with a strong, family-based orientation to achievement. (emphasis added)

But is the success of Southeast Asian refugees merely the triumph of a cultural will to excel? When cultural factors are mobilized to explain both the presence and absence of social mobility within Southeast Asian refugee communities, then "culture" loses its explanatory rigor. Lieberson, in his comparative study of nineteenth century African Americans and European immigrants, has noted the thinly veiled circular reasoning often employed in cultural explanations of intergroup differ-

ences.

> Why are two or more groups different with respect to some characteristic or dependent variable? Presumably, they differ in their values or in some norm. How do we know that they differ in their values or norms? The argument then frequently involves using the behavioral attribute one is trying to explain as the indicator of the normative or value difference one is trying to use as the explanation. A pure case of circular reasoning! Obviously racial and ethnic groups may differ from one another in their values and norms, but an independent measure of such values and norms must be obtained to justify such an explanation. It is particularly dangerous to use circular forms of reasoning because they do not allow us to consider the alternative hypothesis that forces outside of the groups' own characteristics are generating these gaps: in particular, forms of discrimination or differences in opportunity structure rather than differences in either desire or goals or values.[4]

Lieberson implies that apart from issues of explanatory coherence, the assumed relationship between cultural orientation and economic mobility has important ramifications for American race relations theory. American scholars have historically measured the progress of racial or ethnic groups in terms of their economic achievements. Unfortunately, the most influential schools of American race relations (e.g., assimilation theory, ethnic pluralism, the culture of poverty) have emphasized cultural or behavioral models of social and economic mobility to the detriment of structural analyses of group progress.[5] Cultural approaches to social mobility hold poor racial and ethnic communities responsible for structural conditions beyond their control. Moreover, cultural explanations for the economic successes of Indochinese refugees reinforce contemporary characterizations of Asian Americans as a "model minority." The unspoken logic of this model is that if other poor people (the accusatory finger is tacitly pointed at poor African Americans) could adopt the same attitudes and behaviors as new Asian immigrants, they too could arise from the depths of their present squalor. Finally, because cultural explanations of social mobility do not consider the structural opportunities available to people in a given time and place, they shed scant light on the microprocesses behind economic advancement. Social mobility thus becomes an unproblematic event obscured by a Horatio Alger-like gloss of personal determination.

The Hidden Role of State Aid In Social Mobility

Any serious discussion of the microprocesses underlying social mobility (or its absence) must look beyond explanations of social mobility based on a single factor. Rather than assuming an extreme structuralist position which ignores human agency, this paper investigates the complex relationship between structures of opportunity and how individuals mobilize their resources.

The economic progress of a significant share of Southeast Asian refugees can be easily explained by their class background and its attendant human capital. The first wave of refugees admitted to the United States between 1975-76 was populated by former political, military, and educational leaders of Vietnam. This cohort also included some of the elite from Laos and Cambodia. Although these refugees were stripped of their material resources, their class background had equipped them with considerable educational and occupational skills. Over seventy percent of the 1975-76 cohort had held professional positions in their countries of origin and the majority arrived with some familiarity with English.[6] This first wave of Southeast Asian refugee secured competitive positions in the American labor market and made exceptional income gains. By 1987, the average income of Southeast Asian refugees who entered the United States in 1975-76 had exceeded the average national income.[7]

A second wave of Southeast Asian refugees, including many of the Sino-Vietnamese "boat people," were admitted to the United States between 1977 and 1979. Many of these asylees were former shopkeepers and small business people in Vietnam. Although the economic fortunes of this group have been modest compared to the Vietnamese elite, this mercantile class has been able to establish small enterprises in the United States to serve refugee enclaves.[8]

A third group of Southeast Asian refugees presents serious problems for class-based analyses of social mobility. Men from rural Laos had served as combat soldiers in an irregular army allied with American military forces. After the demise of the American-backed government in Laos, these men and their relatives fled to refugee camps in Thailand. Entering the United States in 1980 and after, rural refugees were the last group to be granted political asylum. Unlike earlier cohorts of asylees, refugees with rural origins had minimal education (e.g., the 1980-81 cohorts averaged six years of primary school)[9] and few skills to ease their incorporation into the American labor market. Studies on the income and employment status of the 1980-81 cohorts five years later show these cohorts made progress against their initially high rates poverty. Compared to the economic achievements of earlier refugee cohorts, however, the progress of the 1980-81 cohorts was modest.[10] Given the educa-

tional and occupational backgrounds of most rural refugees, the surprise is not that rural refugees made slower inroads against poverty, but that this disadvantaged community made any advancement against poverty.

In order to untangle the mystery behind the social mobility of rural Southeast Asian refugees, I followed the economic trajectories of twenty families from remote regions of Laos who had resettled in California.[11] I had become acquainted with several Southeast Asian refugee communities during the eleven years I taught English as a second language (ESL) at a local adult school. I was able to use my knowledge of this community to choose a sample which maximized variation in family and household composition. In addition to spending extensive time as a participant observer within these twenty families, I recorded data on their economic history from the time they entered the United States (1979-81) until 1993.

If asked to suggest the factor most critical to this group's social mobility, I would emphasize the astounding array of state resources which were granted this community as political refugees. Moreover, my research will demonstrate that different groups of state clients in the United States have confronted very different social policies. This insight not only reveals that the form of the American welfare state varies with the group targeted for state services, but that differences in state-client relationships have a significant impact on the social mobility of the group in question.

The Laotian families in my research sample arrived with little in the way of human or material capital. They did, however, enter the United States in years when more state benefits were earmarked for political refugees, i.e., 1979-81. Southeast Asian refugees furthermore concentrated in California, a state which had enacted considerable welfare reforms prior to the refugees' arrival. California's welfare reforms had already pushed the state's welfare system into a "family friendly" direction which not only increased poor families' chances of preserving the father's presence in the nuclear family but supported extended family structure.

The conventional wisdom in the refugee literature assumes that refugees settle into their final economic niche within four to five years after resettlement.[12] I, however, found that rural Laotian refugees took longer to enter the labor market. The members of my sample made their most significant gains against poverty within their fifth and tenth year after resettlement. In 1983, only one "family" (a single male living with his girlfriend) had earnings above the poverty level. By 1985, forty-five percent (nine families) had earnings exceeding the poverty threshold. By 1990, seventy percent (fourteen families) had incomes above the poverty line. Of the six families still in poverty in 1990, four families each included one member eligible for higher paying federal disability benefits (SSI). This member's disability benefits elevated the household's income close to the top of the poverty line. Only two families in my sample—each

headed by a single mother with three or more children at home—subsisted solely on their welfare stipends ten years after their admission to the United States. The twelve families in my sample who entered and remained within the formal labor market averaged four and a half years of welfare receipt before employment. These years of state support and access to state resources enhanced their opportunities for social mobility.

The basic set of state benefits for refugees was established as part of a wider agenda to reform American refugee policy in 1980. In the five years following the collapse of the American-backed military juntas in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, over a million refugees sought asylum in neighboring countries. With refugee camps in Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Malaysia overflowing with homeless exiles, the refugee problem teetered on the brink of becoming an international crisis. The American government had not anticipated this massive diaspora and did not alter its criteria for political asylum until 1980 when Congress broadened the criteria for political asylum.[13]

The number of refugees granted asylum in the United States between 1980 and 1985 was almost twice the number admitted in the previous five years.[14] In order to support this dramatic increase in asylees, Congress made radical reforms in its domestic refugee resettlement program. Prior to 1980, refugees were compelled to rely on private sponsors and voluntary agencies (usually religious charities) for their initial support. The costs of refugee resettlement, however, were prohibitively high. A 1979 study reported that the resettlement expenses of a single refugee averaged about $5,000. Few individuals or private charities could shoulder the burden imposed by the doubling of annual refugee admissions. Beginning in 1980 the federal government covered the initial costs of refugee resettlement by entitling political asylees to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or General Assistance (GA) funds from their state of resettlement for up to three years.[15] The federal government would repay states for their refugee-related welfare costs. The 1980 Refugee Reform Act also allotted money for English as a second language and job training programs. In theory, a newly admitted refugee could have up to three years of modest federal support in which to learn English, get job training, learn a new set of cultural conventions, and enter the labor market with reasonably salable skills.

While the federal guidelines for refugee support were generous, the Reform Act of 1980 allowed individual states considerable discretion in the implementation of local refugee policy. Because refugees were initially dispersed across the fifty states to minimize their impact any one community, their resettlement experiences varied widely. States could limit the time of public support offered refugees. If a state had a negligible welfare system, a refugee could be given immediate employment in lieu of public assistance. In locales with few refugees, local communities had

little incentive to establish ESL or job training classes for limited English speakers. Laotian families who first resided in southern states like Texas, Georgia, and Alabama were sent to work in low-wage jobs within the first weeks to months of their arrival. Limited economically and socially by their minimal English, these people saw no real way to improve their living conditions within their first communities of resettlement. One refugee offered the following evaluation of his initial resettlement experience:

> In Texas I couldn't speak English and I couldn't go to school. I was working ten hours a day in a rope factory and I still didn't have money to take care of my family. Besides, Texas is a pretty racist place. I didn't feel loved until I joined a church . . . but, I had to leave to learn English. . . . You can't get a good job without English.

Unlike many states, California implemented the full range of federally funded refugee benefits on top of its comparatively progressive welfare policies. Refugee networks spread word of California's remunerative social services and job opportunities to those living in other states. Not only did relative join relative in California, but village members reconnected with other village members reconstituting many small Southeast Asian communities within the state. By 1985, forty percent of the (then) 760,000 Southeast Asian refugees in the United States resided in California. While the initial advantages of reconstituted familial and regional ties were primarily social, these new communities would bear other advantages as ethnic businesses developed to serve ethnic enclaves and as employed community members used their networks to help others find work. But, before members of rural Laotian communities could shed their poverty, these most disadvantaged of refugees would need to take full advantage of state services.

The AFDC and General Assistance funds granted refugees provided a secure if modest monthly income. Cash entitlements were supplemented by food stamps. Refugees were quick to find stores which accepted their food stamps and sold basic commodities in bulk. They initially maintained an inexpensive diet by purchasing rice in 100 pound bags (for about twenty-five cents a pound) and consuming the grain at every meal. In addition to monthly welfare grants and food stamps, refugees had access to the federal Medicaid program for poor people. The state of California supplements Medicaid with additional benefits (MediCal) and special federal funds financed the creation of several clinics to serve Southeast Asian refugees in local hospitals.

In addition to these basic state-funded survival benefits, refugees received aid from private charities. Despite the increased financial role of the federal government in refugee resettlement, private refugee charities were *not* dismantled after 1980. Incoming refugees were still

admitted under the auspices of sponsoring agencies or individuals. Sponsors helped refugees find housing, often donated used furniture, clothing, and housewares for their first apartments, and connected refugees with appropriate social service agencies. Some of my informants reported that Catholic Charities gave them $1,000 upon their arrival in the United States in order to set up their apartments. While the high rents and security deposits of the Californian housing market consumed most of this money, this aid was crucial in helping people establish their first homes.

The refugees' first housing, found with the help of voluntary agencies, were usually small and inexpensive apartments. More often than not, the buildings were dilapidated and living quarters were crowded. State services soon made it possible for refugees to leave these humble first abodes and move into public housing projects. Public housing limited rents to twenty-five or thirty percent of the household's income. Three to four bedroom units thus became affordable for large families. While the housing arrangements of the families in my sample often changed, up to fifty percent of my sample lived in subsidized housing at the same time and three-fourths of the families in my sample had once lived in public housing projects or rented highly coveted Section 8 (rent-subsidized) housing. These rates of utilization far exceed the percentage of poor families (a quarter) who receive some kind of housing assistance nationwide. While I could not find written evidence of public housing policies which openly favored Southeast Asian refugees as new tenants, I have had conversations with public housing employees who expressed an interest in achieving racial balance among housing project occupants. The high utilization and relatively quick access to public housing granted Laotian refugees suggest an informal practice of using Indochinese tenants to integrate predominantly African American housing projects.

With government aid and private charities covering their immediate survival needs, refugees were able to enroll in adult education classes. Over three-fourths of the Southeast Asian refugee population enrolled in English as Second Language (ESL) classes.[16] In the particular adult school where I taught, waiting lists of students who wanted to register for ESL classes grew to several hundred names. In the early 1980s, a local community college created a special two year ESL program for refugees without denting the adult school enrollment.[17]

Despite their interest in learning English and other basic educational skills, rural Laotians were a difficult group of people to teach. As members of ethnic minorities in Laos, their indigenous languages only recently acquired written scripts (i.e., they were largely a "pre-literate" population). The adult men in my sample averaged about three years of education in Laos. None of the adult women in my sample had received any formal education in Laos. With this meager educational background there was little foundation on which they could quickly build English

language and literacy skills. Teachers were therefore expected to teach adults who had rarely or never been in a classroom, had limited or no literacy in their own languages, and arrived in class speaking almost no English. In order to reach this new population of students, ESL teachers were forced to make profound reforms in their educational curriculum. Teachers threw out existing textbooks and abandoned many standard teaching techniques. The extent of curricular reform was an unusual example of spontaneous institutional adaptation to the needs of a highly problematic clientele.

State educational aid was further extended by employment programs (Targeted Assistance Programs) for Southeast Asian refugees. Unemployed males accepting public assistance had to enter vocational training classes to maintain their family's eligibility for welfare. Through vocational training, however, Laotian men (and some women) learned to become machinists, welders, autobody workers, cooks, carpenters, custodians, skilled production workers, and assistant nurses. Refugee employment counselors helped refugees find their first jobs. By providing this population with vocational training and employment assistance, state aid helped Laotians refugees enter the labor market and eventually secure better paying jobs. Once state agencies helped rural Laotians secure their first jobs in California, Laotian refugees had the foundation for their own employment networks.

Welfare Paternalism

Anyone familiar with standard public assistance benefits would find the extent of aid offered political refugees exceeded the state assistance granted other poor people. Moreover, the administration of this aid deviated from the normal practices of welfare offices. Academic articles have documented the gap between legal entitlements to benefits and the amount of public aid actually dispensed.[18] When interviewing my informants I expected to learn of myriad problems with their welfare offices. Instead I found that Laotian refugees as public aid recipients had been encouraged to apply for a full range of state benefits. Moreover, refugees referred to their eligibility workers in surprisingly cordial terms. Questions about their relationship with their welfare workers often elicited enthusiastic responses like "he is very, very good to me."

I attribute Laotian refugees' unusual relationship to the welfare bureaucracy to two different factors. First, the context of political refugees eligibility for public welfare benefits was shaped by their unique relationship to the state. Because political asylees gained welfare privileges as an admissions right, their eligibility for state aid was assumed rather than questioned. Welfare workers had a mandate to distribute as many benefits to refugees as they were qualified to receive. Given this mandate, the welfare workers serving the refugees worked under a reorga-

nized system of dispensing benefits. Most California counties assign eligibility workers to different types of aid programs. A single mother who wants to apply for AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid benefits would go through three separate interviews by different eligibility workers.[19] Laotian families, by contrast, were assigned a single eligibility worker who could dispense several forms of aid to one family. The reorganization of labor for welfare workers serving refugees meant that an eligibility worker handled fewer cases, spent more time with individual clients, and had the opportunity to address the multiple needs of clients and their families. As the federal government reimbursed the state for its initial refugee-related welfare costs, refugees could be added to the state's welfare roles without depleting local state or county coffers. Given their access to federal resources, local welfare agencies did not have financial incentives to restrict aid to refugee clients.

A second source of the cordiality between Laotian welfare clients and their welfare workers is rooted in the employment of Southeast Asian refugees in welfare offices. Beginning as interpreters and assistants to welfare eligibility workers, many Southeast Asian employees eventually became eligibility workers themselves. Because most of these employees had once been welfare recipients, the Southeast Asian welfare staff understood the difficulties of their clients. Nor were Southeast Asian welfare workers able to separate themselves from their clients outside the welfare office. As members of close-knit ethnic communities, Laotian welfare workers and their Laotian clients shared a common circle of friends and acquaintances and attended the same social events. Were a Laotian welfare worker to treat a client unfairly, the worker could face community censure. Thus, the structure of community relations reinforced Southeast Asian welfare workers' empathy with their clients.

As most Laotian welfare recipients in California were not employed when their three years of federal aid expired, the state of California continued to pay their welfare benefits until families found employment.[20] Constraints on state and county welfare budgets meant that Southeast Asian welfare workers confronted intermittent pressure to eliminate longer-term, California-funded refugee clients from their case load. The ways in which the Southeast Asian welfare staff eased these clients off the welfare roles, however, showed consideration of their clients' different situations. Older AFDC recipients with health problems were encouraged to apply for federally-funded disability benefits (SSI). Younger AFDC or GA clients were placed under pressure to get job training and find work. One welfare worker explained her strategy as follows:

> If you are young and only have one child or no children at all, you have to find work. Welfare is good for people who need it while they are looking for work, but it's better

> to have a job. It's better for the *clients* if they have a job because they can get more money. . . . But it's difficult to find a good job, especially if you have a big family. . . . Some people really need welfare. (emphasis original)

By eliminating some younger and older clients from their welfare roles, Southeast Asian welfare personnel could better protect the AFDC status of clients deemed most worthy of public assistance. Southeast Asian eligibility workers typically tried to protect the AFDC status of middle-aged adults who cared for an ailing relative and/or several children at home. Not one of the six long-term AFDC recipients in my sample reported pressure from the welfare office to find work. One Laotian AFDC recipient told me that her eligibility worker "knows my situation [with my family] so she never tells me to get a job." Cognizant of these clients' time consuming family responsibilities, Southeast Asian welfare workers did not pressure these clients to enter the labor market.

Stretching the Margins of Survival

The timing of refugee admissions had an important impact on refugees' experiences with public policy. California had already enacted welfare reforms making its welfare program more progressive than the average state. Not only were its AFDC payments among the nation's most generous, but its aid regulations supported the integrity of nuclear and extended families. Until 1988, for example, twenty-four states denied AFDC aid to women and children if an employable father was living in the household. In California, however, recently unemployed fathers had long been eligible for three months of AFDC aid along with their wives and children. California's welfare rules also allowed a nuclear family of AFDC recipients to coreside with employed friends or relatives without losing benefits. This guideline permitted extended families to live together, sharing housing costs and childcare responsibilities.

Welfare rules which permit the father's presence in the household and support extended families redound to the economic benefit of the entire household. I found that households with a higher ratio of able-bodied adults to dependent members (i.e., young children and/or ailing adults) were the first to send family members into the labor market. Thus, household size *per se* was less significant to labor force participation than household composition. In households comprised of extended family members, the public aid received by unemployed family members supplemented the wages earned by employed relatives. By dividing housing and living expenses among several adults, public assistance recipients and workers realized significant reductions in their share of the daily expenses. Public aid recipients, however, made their biggest contribution to the household economy through the enormous energy

devoted toward the reduction of the family's reproduction costs. In a typical case, grandparents cared for their grandchildren, tended the house and cooked the meals while the parents attended school or worked. Where space permitted, unemployed relatives planted gardens and used the harvest to supplement many a family meal. Thus, adult members of extended family households not only paid a smaller share of their incomes toward rent and other fixed costs, but total expenditures on food and childcare were reduced by the domestic labor of the unemployed family members.

In some Laotian households, the domestic labor and public assistance income of unemployed relatives allowed younger family members to accept lower-wage entry levels jobs. With time, the male workers (but only about half the female workers) in my sample who had accepted lower wage jobs were able to find better jobs. Without the extraordinary domestic labor of unemployed relatives to reduce the family's reproduction costs, however, working families would have had fewer resources to buffer the hardships of entry-level employment. And, had welfare policies in California sharply reduced the benefits of state clients who resided with working relatives, extended family structure would have been undermined rather than supported by social policies.

Social Programs and Racial Stereotypes

While the 1980s were a decade of social mobility for Southeast Asian refugees, other poor Americans, especially poor African Americans, suffered economic stagnation and decline. If we are going to celebrate Southeast Asian refugees as examples of upward social mobility, then we must first laud the type of social programs granted political asylees. Laotian refugees entered the United States after the enactment of significant reforms in refugee and welfare policies. Refugees in California received extensive state aid in their neediest time of resettlement and benefitted from California's "family friendly" welfare regulations. Other poor Americans have lived through decades of economic exclusion and social policies which assaulted their families. Urban renewal programs have replaced cohesive communities with high-rise towers of social anomie. In communities with high unemployment, the deleterious impact of joblessness has been compounded by AFDC rules banning the father's presence in the home.

Yet, despite the negative impact of many social policies on poor African Americans, this community did realize significant economic mobility during the United States' most generous welfare era, i.e., the Great Society programs of the 1960s and 1970s. While the Great Society programs did not eradicate poverty, recent evaluations of anti-poverty efforts have shown that some education and job training programs (notably the Job Corps and CETA program) made significant improve-

ments in the employment and earnings record of its participants.[21] The poverty rate among African Americans fell from forty-eight percent in 1965 to thirty percent in 1974.[22] The American economy was expanding in the 1960s and early 1970s, but times of economic expansion do not automatically incorporate poor people--especially poor people of color--into the labor force. Given the present concentration of poor African Americans in urban areas with declining economic opportunities and the growth of blue-collar jobs in the suburbs, the notable years of economic expansion in the 1980s bypassed a significant proportion of the African American community.[23]

A careful examination of welfare state policies reveals that different groups of poor people in America have forged strikingly different relations with the state. For most poor people, the hostile welfare state of the 1950s and early 1960s was modified by a series of reforms under the Great Society programs only to return to hostile state-client relations under the social policies of Reagan and Bush. The 1980s were an era in which Reagan cut material aid to the poor, abolished the successful CETA job training program, and reduced state resources for education. Despite these general cutbacks in social programs, political refugees were offered a comprehensive array of resources. State aid raised Southeast Asian refugees' level of education, enhanced their job skills and ultimately increased their employability. These state-provided assets are overlooked by cultural explanations which reduce social mobility to a given set of attitudes and behaviors. Many Laotian refugees do in fact espouse the values of education, hard work, and family commitment. But, it was the favorable conditions surrounding refugee admission to the American economy that made it feasible for them to retain these praiseworthy values. Hypotheses of social mobility based on errant assumptions of equal opportunity falsely elevate the role of culture in social mobility. Poor communities have not all had access to the same resources and therefore should not be judged as if the playing field were level.

NOTES

[1] Frank Viviano, "When Success is a Family Prize," *This World Magazine, San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 October 1989.

[2] Mark Arax, "The Child Brides of California," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 1993.

[3] Cf. Jonathan Habarad, "Refugees and the Structure of Opportunity: Transitional Adjustments to Aid Among the US Resettled Lao Iu Mien, 1980-85," in *People in Upheaval*, eds. Scott Morgan and Elizabeth

Colson (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1987), 66-87; Jacqueline Desbarats, "Ethnic Differences in Adaptation: Sino-Vietnamese Refugees in the United States," *International Migration Review* 20, 2(Summer 1986): 405-27; and George M. Scott, Jr., "The Hmong Refugee Community in San Diego: Theoretical and Practical Implications of Its Continuing Ethnic Solidarity," *Anthropological Quarterly* 55(1982): 146-60.

[4] Nathan Caplan, John Whitmore, and Marcella Choy, *The Boat People and Achievement in America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 145.

[5] Stanley Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 8-9.

[6] Seminal works developing these views of race relations include Robert Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950) on assimilation theory; Nathan Glazer and Patrick Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970) on ethnic pluralism; and Oscar Lewis, *La Vida* (New York: Vintage, 1965) on the culture of poverty.

[7] Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Report to Congress: Refugee Resettlement Program* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Health and Human Services, 1981), 15.

[8] Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1990, 98.

[9] Desbarats, 405.

[10] Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1986, 107.

[11] For example, forty-six percent of Southeast Asian refugees who entered the United States in 1981 were in the labor force by 1986 compared to sixty-five percent of the U.S. population as a whole (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1987, 108). By contrast, fifty-four percent of 1975 refugees were in the labor force by 1979 compared to fifty-nine percent of the U.S. population as a whole [(Robert Bach and Jennifer Bach, "Employment Patterns of Southeast Asian Refugees," *Monthly Labor Review* (October 1980): 33].

[12] The federal Office of Refugee Resettlement records information on refugee earnings and employment rates during their first five years in the United States, making good longitudinal data on Southeast Asian refugees' economic trajectories scarce.

[13] Barry Stein, "The Experience of Being a Refugee: Insights from the Research Literature," in *Refugee Mental Health in Resettlement Coun-*

tries, eds. Carolyn L. Williams and Joseph Westermeyer (Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1986), 15.

[14] 166,727 Southeast Asian refugees were admitted to the United States in 1980 compared to 80,678 refugees in 1979 (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1981, 6).

[15] In the years from 1975 through 1979, 250,000 Southeast Asian refugees were admitted to the United States. Between 1980 and 1984, 463,000 Southeast Asian refugees were admitted to the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1990, A-1).

[16] Darrel Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 28.

[17] In 1986, federal reimbursement of refugee AFDC costs was reduced to thirty-one months. Federal reimbursement of refugee AFDC costs was reduced to twelve months in 1990 and to four months in 1991 (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1991, 27).

[18] *1992 Greenbook: Overview of Entitlement Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992).

[19] David Haines, "The Pursuit of English and Self-sufficiency: Dilemmas in Assessing Refugee Programme Effects," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1, 3-4(1988): 198.

[20] *Federal Adult Basic Education Report* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 1980-84).

[21] See Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Michael Lipsky, *Street Level Bureaucracy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980); Ida Susser and John Kreniske, "The Welfare Trap: A Public Policy for Deprivation," in *Cities of the United States*, ed. Leith Mullings (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 51-68.

[22] Alice Burton, "Dividing Up the Struggle: The Consequences of "Split" Welfare Work for Union Activism," in *Ethnography Unbound*, Michael Burawoy et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 85-107.

[23] Robert Bach, "State Intervention in Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement in the United States," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1, 1(1988): 50-51.

[24] See Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 70-91, and John E. Schwartz, *America's Hidden Success* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988) for succinct reviews of the Great Society programs.

[25] James Tobin et al., "Blacks in the Economy," in *A Common Destiny*, ed. Gerald D. Jaynes and Robin M. Williams, Jr. (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1989), 278.

[26] John Kasarda, "Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass," in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, ed. William Julius Wilson (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 26-47.