Disadvantaged Minorities in Self-Employment

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TWO GENERATIONS of social scientists have described self-employment as an economic anachronism in the process of disappearance (Lynd and Lynd 1927: 60; Mayer 1947; Vidich and Benamun 1960: 305–306; Castles and Kosack 1973: 465; Weber 1947: 427). Following Marx on this point, they observed that urbanization and the concentration of firms into ever larger units has continuously reduced the once numerous class of free enterprisers in the last century (Corey 1964: 199). Indeed, a quarter-century ago, Mills (1951: see Light 1974) traced the numerical decline of agricultural and non-agricultural self-employment in the United States between 1900 and 1940. When Mills wrote, this lengthy decline had already transformed an eighteenth-century nation of farmers and artisans into a nation of wage-earners. Since Mills, the decline of self-employment has unchallengeably continued (Ray 1975). In 1973, a slim majority of American farmers continued to be self-employed, but only 6.7 percent of non-farm workers were. Given these trends, the presumptive odds against self-employment are poorer now than ever in the past, and its rewards are meager. On the average, self-employed men earn as much as wage-earners, “but they put in longer hours” (Ray 1975; cf. Bechofer 1974; Mayer 1953).

The realization of these well known predictive trends lends strong and desired support to the Marxist theory of capitalist development. Nonetheless, certain intriguing and ignored problems of development are still unresolved, especially in regard to the participation of ethnic minorities in self-employment. The theory of capitalist development has never been able to account for the clustering of some ethnic and status groups in the business population. This clustering has been a common but not invariant accompaniment of minority status in a host society (Bonaich 1975). Overseas Chinese, Japanese, Armenians, and Greeks, as well as Jews of the diaspora, are prominent examples of minority trading peoples (McElroy 1977). So, too, prior to their recent expulsion were East Indian sojourners in Uganda. The Bho of Nigeria were long overrepresented in the business population of that nation until the Biafran war. Certain religious groups have developed business prominence. Historical examples include the Jains and Parsees of India, the Quakers of England and North America, Hutterites of the Great Plains, and even the Divine Peace Mission Movement in black America during the great depression (Rainwater 1959: 43; Stryker 1959; Neva and 1973; Light 1972). In contemporary America, a number of
active sects and cults encourage the business activities of adherents. Among these are the Black Muslims, the Hare Krishna, and the Unification Church of Rev. Sun Moon (Fortune 1970; Woodward 1976). Why have the members of such ethnic, cultural or religious groups been recurrently overrepresented in the business population? This is a valid, absorbing sociological question to which the general decline of the business population of capitalist societies provides no direct answer.

The Cultural Theory of Entrepreneurship

Two lines of theory have developed to answer this question. Disadvantage theory began from the observation that exclusion of minorities from the labor market compels them to seek a livelihood in trade. The cultural theory of entrepreneurship has investigated the cultural life of trading minorities in order to identify the qualities which endow them for business success. The most momentous formulation of the cultural theory appeared in Weber's (1905) studies of the Protestant ethic and capitalism, but commentators often forget that demagogic fulminations against "Jewish capitalism" feat Weber's problem an ethnic urgency in his time. Against the popular anti-Semitic, Weber (1927: 356-360) argued that the origin of capitalism was in the religious ethos of sectarian Protestants (not the Jews), and that the developed market system had, in any event, outgrown its transitional dependence upon religious legitimations. As subsequently modified by Schumpeter (1950), McClelland (1961), McClelland and Winter (1965), Miller and Swanson (1958), and numerous others (see Kilby 1971), Weber's notion of a capitalist ethos turned into the cultural theory of entrepreneurship. This theory has many versions. But their leitmotif is the claim that cultural and psychological characteristics of groups incline adult members toward business enterprise as a mode of achievement. The attention of writers in this group fastened upon mores and shakers of big business, leaving far behind peripheral issues of business-minded minorities. The pessimistic conclusion of entrepreneurship research was the obsolescence of entrepreneurial values and personality in big business civilization (Sombart 1915; 1939; Riehn 1953; Whyte 1956; Bell 1976).

In contrast to these pessimistic conclusions, a peripheral literature on cultural entrepreneurship grew up around Chinese and Japanese Americans. These Asian minorities had been persistently overrepresented in business self-employment in this century. By means of this industry, they had achieved outstanding rates of intergenerational social mobility, apparently in vindication of the old-fashioned virtues. The cultural theory of entrepreneurship seemed to fit this Asian case at the small business level (cf. Sombart 1915: 189); Castillio and De Vos (1956), Kimito (1969), Loewen (1971), Hsu (1972), Light (1972), Petersen (1972; cf. Bonacich 1975), Levine and Montero (1975), and Wong (1977) called attention to the contributions which Asian cultural heritage had rendered to the business success and social mobility of these American minorities. Most writers emphasized the entrepreneurial values and personality of these Asian minorities (hard work, independence, thrift), but Light (1972), Petersen (1972) and Bonacich (1975) also called attention to the disadvantages of group solidarity. Although the range of explanations in this literature was broad, their leitmotif was the claim that Chinese and Japanese made a success of small business because their culture endowed them with useful resources.

Middleman Minorities

A related but situational explanation for the social mobility and business success of Asian minorities turned up in Blalock (1967) and Bonacich (1975) under the rubric of "middleman minority." Like the cultural theory of entrepreneurship, this approach starts from the overrepresentation of certain ethnic minorities in small businesses. However, the middleman approach ignores the cultural level of analysis, claiming instead that sojourning minorities awaken hostilities in the host population; these hostilities increase disadvantage in the labor market, thus compelling the excluded minority to survive by compulsive toil, penury, and ethnic solidarity in trades. An early version of this argument was in Sombart (1915: 161), who claimed that the medieval exclusion of Jews from Christian guilds compelled them to turn their nationalistic religious tradition to account for the purpose of making a living in trade. Of course, the subsequent middleman formulation greatly improves on Sombart's by pointing up common features in the occupational position of a number of trading peoples. In this sense, the unpopularity of trading Jews in Europe parallels that of trading Chinese in Southeast Asia and the West Indies, of the commercial Japanese in pre-war California, of East Indian traders in Uganda (Steinberg 1975); and so forth.

Because of its superior level of generalization and the recognition of inter-group dynamics, the sojourner theory improves and expands the literature on Asian entrepreneurship. But the evidence for a purely situational explanation of middleman minorities is only mixed. The sojourner theory holds that trading is a situational response because people who long to go home have a motive for hard work, thrift, and clumsiness. Cultural endowments play no role. Even if true, this formulation leaves unanswered the origin of the sojourn on which so much hangs. Sojourns may only reflect a group's sense of personality and reluctance to assimilate. But a sense of personality is prior in time and sociological importance to sojourn, its pallid reflection. A sense of personality is also a cultural attribute, as it is unclear whether the sojourner theory can escape cultural priority.

Moreover the sojourner theory confronts interpretive difficulties. The Jews of Europe were active in trade long before Zionism made repatriation in Palestine a practical possibility. In the preceding centuries of diaspora, the myth of repatriation was a strictly cultural phenomenon, intimately connected with the religious expression of Jews and their sense of peoplehood. On the other hand, Chinese in America planned their lives around a return to China, and most actually repatriated. When repatriation is an imminent reality it engenders
situational responses (hard word, penury, etc.) which sojourning as a religious attitude may indeed duplicate; but in the latter case a cultural rather than a situational explanation is necessary.

Finally, the sojourner theory faces empirical problems. Some non-sojourners outperform sojourners in business. Jews in America were always settlers, never sojourners; yet the Jews were represented in trade in higher proportion than other foreign whites among whom sojourning was pronounced. Alrich (1977) found that "strength of sojourning orientation" of foreign-born proprietors did not distinguish between more and less competitively operated businesses owned by Pakistanis or Indians in Britain.

Comparing native-born and foreign-born Americans of foreign stock in 1970, one also finds that native-born had higher rates of self-employment than the foreign-born (Table 1). But since one expects a sojourning attitude to predominate among the foreign-born, the observed levels of business activity of the foreign generations hardly support the sojourner theory. Moreover, the employment of unpaid family labor varies markedly among the foreign stock from the Soviet Union (heavily Jewish), Greece, China, and Japan. These are classic middleman minorities. But the Asians use more unpaid female labor than the Europeans (Table 1). The employment of unpaid female labor is an index of the style of business operation, and Bonacich (1972) identified the family firm as a typical sojourner device. East-West disparities indicate that regional cultures are affecting business management which cannot be, therefore, a purely situational response to a repatriation myth. On the other hand, the foreign stock of Chinese, Greek, and Soviet origin reduced their rates of self-employment in the native-born generation. This decline contradicts generational changes among foreign-stock Americans in general, and is fully compatible with the sojourner theory.

### The Disadvantage Theory

Despite these unresolved problems, the sojourner theory usefully brought into juxtaposition with the central symbols of a group's peoplehood the older, often unfocused awareness of the empirical connection between disadvantage in the labor market and self-employment. Even Weber (1958:39) commented on the propensity of those subject to religious discrimination in the labor market to turn to self-employment for a livelihood. But religious discrimination is only one form of disadvantage. When Collins (1964) and Newcomer (1961) examined small business owners, they found a tattered array of reticent, semi-literate, handicapped persons of whom many spoke no English, the "relicts of an organisational society" (Collins). They lacked "attractive alternatives" (Newcomer). "It can hardly be assumed that education beyond the grammar school level spoils young people for independent business except as it opens other opportunities for earning a living."

Among the many forms of disadvantage in the labor market, the worst is unemployment. Unpopular subgroups suffer chronic unemployment as a sanction. Some individuals then turn to self-employment rather than accommodate themselves to the repugnant life styles that outgroup employers demand of job-holders. For example, in the embittered cultural climate of the late 1960s, bearded hippies in San Francisco had to choose between shaving or unemployment with a beard. Most shaved; others became candle merchants with beards. Labor market discrimination against ethnic, racial, or religious subgroups has similar consequences, but the situation is more drastic because people cannot change their skin color to please an employer. Widespread unemployment also exerts downward pressure upon the general wage rate, thus accentuating a vulnerable group's isolation as a cheap labor threat to its neighbors (Bonacich 1972). In the intensified climate of interethnic hostility which results, the labor market offers vulnerable workers a choice between unemployment and low wages. This melancholy choice places an enormous incentive upon locating independent means of livelihood, and even marginal self-employment is likely to be acceptable to vulnerable workers.

Downings of the business cycle result in occasional unemployment among people of majority antecedents who never encounter discriminatory barriers of life-style, race, etc. Their response is augmented rates of self-employment. Many

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>All Employed</th>
<th>Self-Employed Rate per 1,000 Employed</th>
<th>Female Unpaid Family Workers: Rate per 1,000 Self-Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>76,805,171</td>
<td>78.20</td>
<td>40.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-born of foreign or mixed parentage</td>
<td>11,371,011</td>
<td>91.46</td>
<td>46.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-born</td>
<td>4,057,703</td>
<td>81.65</td>
<td>46.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union</td>
<td>305,854</td>
<td>150.30</td>
<td>41.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-born of foreign or mixed parentage</td>
<td>156,349</td>
<td>157.59</td>
<td>34.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-born</td>
<td>102,502</td>
<td>103.79</td>
<td>64.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>54,978</td>
<td>116.09</td>
<td>112.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-born of foreign or mixed parentage</td>
<td>49,490</td>
<td>110.59</td>
<td>115.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1972b; Tables 14, 48.
Overurbanization in developing nations offers another illustration of how unemployment can prompt self-employment. Overurbanization results from a massive migration of rural people to cities which have no jobs for them. Great unemployment causes (Berry 1973: 91). The outlandish size of petty trading populations of these cities (20-30 percent of the labor force) is attributed by Koo (1976) and Friedman and Sullivan (1974) to unemployment among migrants and the paucity of welfare benefits, without which impoverished migrants cannot afford idleness. As Koo also notes, trade is "highly congenial" to persons subject to discrimination in wage or salary employment.

Disadvantage thus offers a plausible explanation for the overrepresentation of religious or ethnic minorities in business. These cases do seem to precede. For example, the foreign-born have been more frequently self-employed than native-born Americans since the nineteenth century (Thernstrom 1966; Newcomer 1961; Light 1972: 13). Asians have also been more frequently self-employed than the foreign-born, a relation which one might attribute to the Asians' greater disadvantage (Table 1). But some disadvantaged minorities have been underrepresented in business, and disadvantage cannot explain that. For example, American blacks have been persistently underrepresented in business proprietorships in the last seventy years (Light 1972: 10-11). Disadvantage did not cause the underrepresentation of blacks and the overrepresentation of foreign whites and Asians.

Recent census publications show that various ethnic minorities still differ in their rates of self-employment (Table 3). Japanese and Chinese have high rates; blacks have low rates; and Mexicans (see Waldron 1956:25) fall between. rates; blacks have low rates; and Mexicans (see Waldron 1956:25) fall between. rates; blacks have low rates; and Mexicans (see Waldron 1956:25) fall between.

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### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Enterprise</th>
<th>Stores 1929</th>
<th>Sales 1929 ($000)</th>
<th>Stores 1935</th>
<th>Sales 1935 ($000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>1,375,509</td>
<td>1,474,159</td>
<td>909,909</td>
<td>826,826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>186,457</td>
<td>506,206</td>
<td>136,136</td>
<td>75,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Stores</td>
<td>1,561,966</td>
<td>1,980,365</td>
<td>1,046,046</td>
<td>902,583</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minority and Date</th>
<th>All Firms</th>
<th>With Paid Employees</th>
<th>Without Paid Employees</th>
<th>Firms with No Employees (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japanese, 1972**</td>
<td>30.15</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>23.35</td>
<td>77.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese, 1972**</td>
<td>30.04</td>
<td>9.91</td>
<td>20.12</td>
<td>56.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Asian and Indian*</td>
<td>23.18</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>18.05</td>
<td>77.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican*</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>6.08</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>12.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>20.35</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>13.80</td>
<td>67.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican*</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>13.96</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>8.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>23.18</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>18.05</td>
<td>77.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On the other hand, Table 3 indicates that disadvantage really does propel people into self-employment: the rate of minority self-employment increased in every group between 1969 and 1972. A countercyclical effect was probably the principal cause. In 1969 the rate of unemployment among nonwhite men was 5.3 percent. By 1972, it had increased to 8.9 percent. Among nonwhite women, the rate of unemployment increased from 7.8 percent to 11.3 percent in the same three years. Unlike the great depression, this downswing in employment did not accompany declines in retail sales or consumer prices, which actually

advanced. Increased unemployment and augmented business receipts created a favorable environment for a flow of minority workers into self-employment. Some of the growth in the number of non-employing firms might have arisen from reemergence of self-employed workers who nevertheless did not increase their employees, but the absolute growth in number of such firms proves that many new ones opened between 1969 and 1972. Overall, both the growth in proportion of non-employer firms and the reemergence of employer firms are compatible with depression-era business adjustments. Thus, the 1970s was a period of increased governmental solicitude for the commercial advancement of American minorities. No doubt federal subsidies assisted the growth in number of all minority firms, but subsidies were uneven. Asians complained that they received only token assistance (Levy 1975). Since all groups increased, but only some had subsidies, subsidies cannot account for the uniform growth.

How Many Self-Employed Are There?

Koo (1976; see also Friedman and Sullivan 1974) makes a useful distinction between small business and petty trade, with "ownership of a shop" distinguishing the two classes of self-employed workers. "Since it promotes a modest amount of capital investment and a certain scale of relatively stable enterprise," shop ownership represents a higher level of business than peddling, the much more common mode of self-employment. This distinction has very important implications for the problem of middleman minorities, for there is no reason why the forces which produce petty trade must be identical with those which produce small business. In fact, disadvantage is a satisfactory explanation for the overrepresentation of minorities in petty trade, and is not wholly adequate only when applied to minorities in small business. Unfortunately, official definitions of the business population exclude petty traders, so the size range of enumerated businesses over represents larger firms (Churchill 1949: 19). For example, the U.S. Commerce Department excludes non-employer firms from its enumeration of the business population, thus using a definition that eliminates three-quarters of the minority business population (cf. Table 3). Additionally, since more than a third of wage or salary workers who moonlight are self-employed on their second job, counts of primary employment always understate the number of non-employer firms (Wilensky 1963). When data are compiled on the basis of income tax returns—the basis of Table 3—the number of self-employed Americans is nearly twice that reported in Current Population Surveys (Ray 1975).

These oversight rates doubt about official estimates of the most marginal, the self-employed. Minorities are prominent in this ignored sector. Consider the recent situation on the main business street of the Harlem ghetto. Storeowners complained to the police that swarming sidewalk peddlers blocked traffic, created crosstown, and afforded customers (New York Amsterdam News, 1974). For every indignant stockkeeper, two or three black peddlers were hanging around his door. Yet, none of the peddlers will turn up in official statistics. If the peddlers were actually enumerated, black-nonblack differentials in rates of business self-employment would decline, possibly disappear. Even as it is, blacks and Mexicans are well represented in blue-collar self-employment in junk stores (Light 1972: 16), taxicabs, domestic service, and common labor (Table 4). The exceptional interest in self-employment which polls (Mayer 1955) have detected among black men also suggests that their underrepresentation in self-employment is probably an artifact of measurements.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Category</th>
<th>Non-Agricultural Self-Employed for 1,000 Employed Urban Males, 16 Years and Older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, technical and kindred workers</td>
<td>19.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers and administrators, except farm</td>
<td>23.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales workers</td>
<td>11.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and kindred workers</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operators, except transportation</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation equipment operators</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborers, except farm</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service, except private household</td>
<td>5.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private household workers</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All occupations</td>
<td>94.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1974: Tables 49 and 64.

Illegal enterprise, or traffic in prohibited commodities, includes gambling, prostitution, and the sale of drugs. Official enumerations routinely ignore this sector of the business population, but the overrepresentation of minorities in illegal business has been well documented (Light 1977; Bullock 1973; Ferman and Ferman 1973). The volume of prostitution and numbers gambling also increases during business depressions, as does the rate of some predatory crime (Sutherland and Crenley 1974: 225). Presumably illegal enterprise and predatory crime increase in volume during depressions because the unemployed are casting around for non-wage income. The growth of the self-employed class during depressions reflects the same pattern. This tidy covariation underscores the empirical relationships which knit together legally discriminable activities. A firm line between self-employment in illegal enterprise and self-employment in business is a legal rather than a sociological distinction. As for predatory crime, the purse-snatcher is indisputably self-employed although the employment is in no sense a business. Given the reservoirs of unmeasured self-employment in petty trade, illegal enterprise, and crime, the documentary conclusion that blacks or Mexicans are underreprented in self-employment clearly depends upon the definitional exclusion of those forms of self-employment in which their participation is heaviest.
Official statistics only confirm that blacks and Mexicans, among others, are underrepresented in the measured business population – that is, are less likely than Americans in general, the foreign-born, or Asians in particular, to wind up in firms large or legal enough for government enumerators to acknowledge. Since these disadvantaged are plainly trying to locate non-wage sources of income in petty trade, illegal enterprise, and crime, their underrepresentation in small business presumably reflects lack of success rather than lack of trying. After all, anyone in need has the option of becoming a peddler, prostitute, or thief. If need were the only criterion, then disadvantaged blacks, Mexicans, and similar underlings ought to be as well represented in small business as they are in the more marginal forms of self-employment. Since they are not, need for non-wage income is evidently insufficient to create a small business. Resources are also necessary. Needy people who lack resources cannot establish small businesses, but they can readily become self-employed in marginal pursuits requiring no resources. What, therefore, distinguishes entrepreneurial minorities from other disadvantaged minorities must be the availability of collective resources which permit individuals to translate a compelling need for non-wage income into an income-generating small business.

The common belief is that the only relevant resources are capital and education. These certainly help. Upper-class refugees from South Korea and Oshawa have turned these resources to advantage in small business (Bonacich, Light, and Wong 1976). But cultural resources also exist (Light 1972). These resources include: information, skills, values and attitudes, motivations, institutions, and contact networks. Unlike the simply disadvantaged, middleman minorities have developed cultural resources which equip members for business. Precisely these resources explain why disadvantaged middleman minorities find their way into small business rather than, as do the unemployed, abandoning self-employment as soon as a wage-earning job becomes available.

**Conclusion**

Unemployment encourages people to seek non-wage income. Some find it in petty trade, illegal enterprise, or predatory crime. Disadvantage is a reason to be satisfied with an explanation at this level, although disadvantage does not explain why a needy individual seeks income from crime, peddling, or illegal enterprise. There is, however, no reason to assume that all the disadvantaged unemployed have the same cultural resources for translating a need for non-wage income into a small business. The cultural theory of entrepreneurship addresses this second-stage issue. Cultural resources (information, skills, social networks, etc.) affect the manner in which people run their businesses. Some prove more successful than others (Sowell 1971: 164). This distinction clarifies the position of the world’s marginal trading peoples. These excluded, non-assimilating minorities have elaborated a way of life which endows members for business success. These cultural resources permit these groups to move beyond peddling into small business.
labor force choose any form of self-employment, they reduce unemployment and underemployment, and thereby alleviate downward pressure upon the wage rate. This relief improves the bargaining position of employed workers. The criminal populations augmented from illegal enterprises and predatory crime pose sometimes severe threats to social order and business climate (Light 1977). Attractive jobs at high wages reduce this threat because they encourage petty criminals to work for wages in legitimate industries. In this manner, self-employment in illegal and marginal pursuits becomes a part of societal bargaining (cf. Bendix 1964: 76-77; Benshel 1974: 100ff; Piven and Cloward 1971) over wage rates and labor standards for disadvantaged workers.

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