The Persistence of Lower Class Subculture

Stability and Adapтивity Processes:

The Mechanisms of Subcultural Persistence

Previous sections have examined the nature of a persisting articulation among several broad features of Midcity’s socio-economic adaptation—focusing primarily on economic patterns, residential patterns, and certain customary forms of behavior of its resident population. It now remains to address the question of persistence itself: how did these features and their mutual articulation maintain so high a degree of continuity in the face of substantial changes in size, technology, and the backgrounds of the resident population? This complex issue will be approached through an examination of three persistence-enhancing mechanisms—economic-ecological flexibility, class stability via ethnic replacement, and the exodus of higher status population elements.

Economic-ecological Flexibility: Generalism and Intermittency

In the classic evolutionary model of biological persistence, species become extinct when they have developed a specialized adaptation to environmental
conditions that change (e.g. dinosaurs); species survive either when they have
developed a specialized adaptation to environmental conditions which persist (deep
sea marine life), or when they maintain a highly “generalized” structure which can
survive under a wide variety of environmental conditions (e.g. rats, man). Midcity’s
adaptation falls into the latter category. Within the orbit of one sector of economic
enterprise—the production of goods and services involving low skilled labor—
Midcity maintained a flexible and responsive adaptation which proved capable of
accommodating substantial changes in its ecological “environment.” The nature of
this adaptation may be approached through a brief examination of two of its central
features—generalism and intermittency. These designations may be applied both to
the economic system as a whole and to the work behavior of those at the lower skill
levels. The following sections will discuss generalism and the economic system,
generalism and the labor force, intermittency and the economic system, and
intermittency and the labor force.

The economic system of Midcity, viewed as a whole rather than in terms of
particular component units, was highly generalized, or, conversely, minimally
specialized. Its economic output, as has been seen, was extraordinarily diverse—
both with regard to the scope of its economic product and the types of goods and
services it produced. While the demand for particular products and services had
diminished or disappeared during its long history, at no time did the demand for all
or most of its products slack off at once, nor was this at all likely, considering the
diversity of this product. The contrast here is to the “one-industry” town which
stands or falls with the fate of its primary employer, (New England Cotton Mill
Towns), or the “one-product” region, whose economic well-being is directly
dependent on the current state of the market for its product (Appalachian coal
mining areas). Early in its history Midcity had adapted the “diversification”
principle which became so popular among American corporations in the 1950’s; the
less the viability of your concern is predicated on a continuing market demand for a
particular product or type of product, the better are its chances for continuing prosperity.

The relatively low degree of economic specialization, moreover, made it possible for Midcity’s economic system to be quite responsive to new market demands, and to change accordingly. This was accomplished either by changes in the output of existing concerns or the establishing of new ones. An early example of the former process has been noted for the post-Revolutionary War period, when a concern manufacturing leather breeches switched over to the production of woolen products when their original product began to pass from fashion. This same type of adaptivity was also shown during the 1920’s when many of the breweries switched over to carbonated beverages on the advent of national Prohibition.

The operation of the latter process was evident in the rapid growth of “service” (at the expense of manufacturing) enterprises during the post-World War II period, and by the advent during the same period of many enterprises based on the “new” technology. At the same time, traditional Midcity products with continuing market demand (luggage, clothing, rope) continued in production. Thus, in the 1950’s one might find on the same street enterprises dealing in such space-age products as two-way radio communication and plastic products, and such Colonial-age products as shoes, brooms, and ink. This quality of adaptivity was facilitated by the relatively “low-risk” nature of entrepreneurial enterprise in Midcity, described previously. With low rents and low labor costs it was possible for an enterprising entrepreneur to test out the potential of a new product or service with a relatively low investment; thus, by a kind of “natural selection” process, concerns for those whose perception of a new demand was accurate continued in business, while those whose perception was inaccurate failed.

Generalism was also a characteristic of the work behavior of those at the lower skill levels. The bulk of workers of lower class III status, and many of lower class II, possessed low or moderate skill in a variety of pursuits rather than high skill in one or a limited number. Like the jack-of-all-trades traditionally derogated
by lower class I and middle class III workers whose ideal is the “steady job” these people were equipped, by capacity and predilection, to move quite readily from one occupational situation to another, and to accommodate varying periods of unemployment between jobs. The key to the difference between higher and lower status workers was specialized training; for higher status workers this was greater, and for lower, less. This did not mean that the more generalized workers were untrained or unskilled. Rather, it meant that the kinds of tasks they were equipped to perform were those which are routinely taught, in some form, to all members of a society in the course of their general enculturation. Many of these skills, for both males and females, involve cleaning of various kinds, and thus many lower class III persons held jobs whose duties involved sweeping, washing, scrubbing, laundering, dusting, straightening, polishing, and the like. The average member of society also learns in the course of normal enculturation to carry, to wrap, to dig, to drive cars. Thus many lower class II and III persons held jobs which involved carrying loads of various kinds, wrapping and crating, pick-and-shovel work, and driving of trucks, taxis, and other vehicles.63

Equipped thusly to perform a set of generalized readily transferable and widely required tasks, the lower status workers of Midcity manifested a degree of flexibility in the world of work analogous to that of the economic enterprises which employed them. If a job folded in one place, one could generally find a similar job in another, usually after varying periods of non-work during which one availed oneself on non-job-derived economic resources of various kinds.64 Their situation was in marked contrast with that of the lower class I workers, who were generally “specialists” whose employment fate was tied to that of particular concerns or lines of work. As shown in the discussion of the skilled cabinet makers and piano craftsmen of the 1910’s, these men were “locked into” particular trades, and if market demands decreased or plants failed for other reasons, were confronted with

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63 Structural characteristics of lower status occupations are authority position, intermittency, degree of training, examined elsewhere.
64 See Theft and Family School and Work chapters for sources of “non-legitimate-job” income.
serious and often tragic consequences. It was these men for whom technological change produced the necessity of extensive “re-training”; the job skills controlled by lower class III workers tended to a much greater degree than those of higher, to transcend particular technologies, and to remain a consistently marketable commodity. Like the commercial concerns of Midcity, then, its low-skilled workers, unspecialized and moving readily from job to job, could roll with the economic punches, weather a variety of social and economic changes, and maintain a flexible and adaptive accommodation to changing technological and economic circumstances.

The second persistence-enhancing element which characterized both the economic system and low skilled laborers of Midcity was that of intermittency. The “here-again-gone-again” complexion of Midcity’s commercial face, described earlier, reflected a pattern whereby commercial enterprises could come into being at relatively low cost and concomitantly low risk, and “test out” the marketability of a new product or service as well as their own capacity to sustain a viable organization. Some of these succeeded and others failed. Thus, at any one time, on a rough estimate, something like 85% to 90% of Midcity’s commercial facilities would be housing ongoing concerns, and 10 to 15% would be vacant or “in transition.” There were, of course, as described earlier, a substantial number of commercial enterprises which remained in business for long periods of time. The duration-pattern of Midcity’s commercial enterprises might be likened to a current conceptual model of the atom which represents it as a sphere comprising a large inner zone of stable or long-term components, a volatile surface zone which admits and discharges components at a rapid rate, and a near-the-surface zone in which the life span of components is longer at the surface but shorter than at the core.

Viewed from the surface, or in a short-term perspective, the commercial complexion of Midcity might appear to represent a situation of chronic economic instability, with a relatively high rate of business failure. Viewed in wider perspective the system could be seen as a responsive and adaptive arrangement
whereby the inner zone of long-term enterprises provided elements of continuity and stability, the surface zone the capacity to adapt rapidly to short-term conditions, and the intermediate zone the capacity to accommodate medium-term developments. These enterprises which moved from outer to inner zones were those which had successfully gauged the nature of new technological, market, labor, or other economic developments; enterprises which, terminated in any zone, were generally those which had unsuccessfully gauged new trends or had failed to accommodate changing ones. The degree of “intermittency” characteristic of Midcity’s economic adaptation thus provided elements of flexibility which contributed directly to its persistence.

Intermittency was also a characteristic of the work behavior of Midcity’s low status residents. The gang boy who said, “Work a few days, goof a few days—that’s my motto…” (See Chapter Five) was articulating, in condensed and simplified form, an orientation to the world of work which was prevalent among workers of all ages and both sexes. For many lower class III persons, the “steady job,” viewed as a central life objective by their lower class I fellows, not only ranked relatively low in the priority of life goals, but was often viewed as a distinctly distasteful prospect. The lives of many lower class III persons were so organized that they would typically hold a job for awhile, quit or arrange to be fired, spend a period of time “between engagements” during which they would pursue a set of life activities outside of the “legitimate” work world, avail themselves of a variety of non-job sources of support, and then go out and find a job again. While this pattern was of course related in some degree to the availability of low-skilled jobs, it was also in large part a matter of preference on the part of the worker himself. As will be shown in a more extended discussion of the intermittent employment pattern (Chapter Five), intermittency and generalism were closely related aspects of a coherent pattern of work behavior.

As shown in Chapter One, during non-depression periods like the 1950’s, something like 5% or 10% of those who reported themselves part of the labor force of
Midcity were generally out of work at any one time; among the lower class III populations this figure ranged from about 8% to 15%. It is important to note in this connection that the “unemployment rate” derived out of this situation by census tabulations did not indicate the existence of a hard-core cadre of permanently unemployed persons; rather, as a consequence of the intermittent employment pattern, the composition of the 5-10% “unemployed” was constantly changing as different persons moved in and out of “employed” status at varying rates.

As will be discussed later, the pattern of intermittent unemployment entailed a particular organization of one’s living schedule, a particular set of capacities, predilections and orientations which represented far more than simple resignation or a despairing acceptance of an unhappy fate engendered by inexorable economic forces. The intermittent employment pattern, it is evident, articulated well with the pattern of intermittent housing—as recurrent changes in job locale, income level, and other job-related factors induced corresponding changes in housing arrangements. This pattern was also articulated, of course, with the intermittency characteristic of Midcity’s commercial life—fitting in with the seasonal nature of certain commercial enterprises, the here-again-gone-again duration pattern described above, and other characteristics of Midcity’s economic system.65

Class Stability via Ethnic Replacement

A pointed illustration of the principle of “stability through adaptive change”—a principle which runs as a common thread through the persistence process under discussion—is furnished by the historical material as to population movements in and out of Midcity. This material documents two trends which appear at first to be mutually inconsistent; a continuing process of in-movement and out-movement by groups of different ethnic and national backgrounds, and a

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65 The set of reciprocal relationships among regional economies, ethnic groups, and social-status subcultures is discussed on a more general level by economist Martin Katzman in “The Ethnic Geography of the United States” in 1967.
figure for the proportion of manual laborers which, despite some periods of fluctuation, remained close to 75% for over three hundred years.

How did the social class composition of Midcity remain so stable in the face of so much population movement? There are essentially two ways in which the population of a community may remain predominantly lower class; an indigenous lower class population remains resident, and new lower class people move in to replace those who move out. The latter process was dominant in the case of Midcity, and raises two questions: what was the character of those who left, and what was the character of those who took their places? The historical experience of Midcity provides abundant documentation for a fundamental tenet of the American dream—the notion that it is possible for a family, in the course of time, to elevate its social status. Each of its major groups of immigrants—English, Negroes, Germans, Irish, Jews, provincials—came to the community with the bulk of their numbers in low status circumstances. In each case, over the course of one or more generations, some portion of each group was so able to alter its financial status and/or customary mode of behavior as to elevate, in varying degrees, its general social position. However, another tenet of the same dream—the notion that through this elevation process a lower class would disappear from society—was not realized.

The related processes responsible for this circumstance—removal at the top and replacement at the bottom—both reflect traditional characteristics of American society. It is customary for those who are able to elevate their social status in a given particular community to detach themselves from it and move away to a “better” one, rather than remaining to elevate the status of the community as a whole. This process will be discussed further in the next section. What of the “replacement at the bottom”? Low status populations in American communities may have their origins in the same or different nations, in the same or different classes. The great bulk of “new” lower class immigrants to Midcity came, as has been seen, from outside the country. English, Irish, and Jewish peasants and laborers left their
native lands and came to Midcity both because of dissatisfaction with the old country and attraction to the new.

A second and very substantial proportion of lower class immigrants came from other parts of the United States. While the bulk of these represented the relatively gradual but ultimately very substantial movement from country to city, some additional number of migrants came from other American cities. The two major representatives of this group were the Provincials and the Negroes. While technically nationals of another country, the Provincials were in fact mostly rural and small-town residents of a region with essentially the same national culture as that of the United States, and for whom the “big city” which beckoned the laborer was Port City. The “internal migration” of the Negroes during the post-slavery period was complex; the earlier migrants came mostly from the rural south, but later ones, during both the World War I and World War II migrations, came, in various combinations, from other parts of Port City, other Northern cities, Southern cities, and the rural south.

Two other sources of Midcity’s resident lower class should be noted. Little is known as to the nature and volume of “downward mobility” in the United States, and no systematic information in this area was obtained in the course of the present study. It is evident, however, that a fair number of persons who had achieved higher status and could not maintain it moved into (or back into) Midcity, seeking circumstances more congenial to their altered positions. Two such groups were lower class I and II females without husbands who found that the low rents and general cultural climate of Midcity facilitated the task of raising children without a father. Another major group was of course those members of in-moving lower status groups, which maintained a stable lower class position rather than altering their status. In Midcity the ethnic groups which contributed most heavily to this category were the Irish and the Negroes. Virtually all of the “old” English lower class, and most of the new (the Provincials) had moved out by the 1950’s; the bulk of the

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66 Ref. to Duncan.
Germans and Jews had also gone. Still well represented were Negroes of the earlier regional migrations, and Irish. The latter were in the process of altering their ethnic homogeneity by extensive intermarriage with other Catholic groups such as Italians, Poles, and French Canadians, but retained, in this mixed-ethnic form, their low social status.

What attracted the immigrants to Midcity and why did many of them stay? The economic, ecological, and subcultural climate of the community was, as has been shown, hospitable to the general way of life of low status persons. As a consequence of the historical processes discussed here, its housing, employment, commercial, and other circumstances were directly geared to the life circumstances of low skilled manual laborers, who were comfortable in the company of others in similar circumstances and with similar outlooks. By the same token, as will be shown, the subcultural climate of Midcity was inhospitable to the way of life of higher status groups. A fundamental question here, which cannot be examined in the present context, is that of the future. Will the economic, ecological, and subcultural climate of Midcity continue to be hospitable to low status populations, and what will be the size and character of such populations in coming years?

It seems unlikely that the assumption by mechanical devices of many traditional white and blue collar jobs will substantially affect the occupational circumstances of Midcity’s lower class III, and perhaps II, residents in the near future. It would appear that the number of work slots available for low-skilled manual workers will continue for some time to be equal to, or perhaps even in excess of, the number of persons equipped and available to fill them. Will the present lower status populations of Midcity exhibit the same propensity to move upward and outward as did their predecessors, and if so, what will be the source for the “replacement at the bottom”?

The virtual cessation of foreign immigration in the 1920’s dried up a major source of new low status citizens. The few true foreign populations still migrating to Midcity—principally Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Spanish Americans—exhibit
social-status characteristics very similar to those of the earlier immigrants, and are in the process of the social-class separating-out process experienced by their predecessors. As yet, however, they have not come to Midcity in substantial numbers. In some respects the rural-urban movement of the Negroes resembles the immigration of the earlier national groups, and the Negro community of the 1950’s included a substantial number of ambitious persons in the process of moving to higher status positions. What of the capacity of the “still-theres” of the earlier migrations, and of the non-mobile Negroes, to elevate their status in the future? This would appear to be diminishing, and might portend the continuing existence of a “stable” low status population with little mobility potential.

Despite this, the prospect remains that by 1985 the number of low status persons residing in Midcity would in fact be lower than at any time in the past—due not to any substantial changes in their mode of life, but rather as a consequence of simple physical removal. The massive “urban renewal” or “urban redevelopment” movements of the 1950’s and ‘60’s gave evidence of continuing success in eliminating large numbers of low status persons from the community by the simple expedient of tearing down dwelling places, factories, shops, bars, and other structures, which provided the physical basis for Midcity’s traditional economic-ecological adaptation, and replacing them with structures designed neither for the residential, occupational, or recreational circumstances of low status persons. This process of massive structural removal and replacement showed promise, for the first time in Midcity’s long history, of achieving a substantial reduction in the size and proportion of its low status population. The people themselves, of course, would not disappear, but would instead move away to other sections of the city which were, or would become, hospitable to the circumstances of lower class life, and there attempt to reconstitute the basic patterns of lower class existence developed over the centuries in Midcity.
The Exodus of Higher Status Populations

Like its companion process, “replacement at the bottom,” the process of “removal at the top” which contributed to the stability of Midcity’s social class composition involved populations of several different kinds. Four categories may be distinguished—the “emergent” white middle class, the older English middle class, the “introduced” middle class, and the Negro middle class. The influence of a fifth category—the “visiting” middle class, will also be considered.

Why did higher status populations so consistently and recurrently leave Midcity? Despite differences in the nature of these groups and the circumstances of their departures, each departure appeared too responsive to a common and relatively simple principle; residents of higher status communities are uncomfortable living in close proximity to lower status communities. This “discomfiture” principle, which is of course mutually experienced, will be discussed further. The very set of factors which made the social climate of Midcity “hospitable” to the life ways of lower status groups made it “inhospitable” to that of the higher. The historical experience of Midcity would indicate that it is extremely difficult for lower status and higher status populations of substantial size to live in spatial proximity with one another in the absence of well-developed “insulating” devices—psychological, physical, or both. This principle of “mutual discomfiture” will be returned to later.

The most dramatic and recurrent type of out-movement was, as has been shown, that of those ambitious and aspiring families who were struggling toward middle class status. The Jews were the outstanding example of this process, with the Germans a close second; substantial numbers of English, Irish, and Provincials also followed the path upward and outward. As their economic circumstances improved, the upwardly mobile families sought to relocate in what were known as “better” neighborhoods—that is, those whose general subculture was closer to that of the middle class. Such a move, if successfully made, could serve further to enhance the process of upward mobility, in that the character of the schools,
customary practices of the neighborhoods and related conditions supplied a learning environment conducive to the adoption of new forms of class-related behavior.

But the exodus of these people was impelled not only by an attraction to the conditions of the “better” neighborhoods, but also, and perhaps with greater force, by repulsion against those of Midcity. To those families in the process of elevating their social status, the residential proximity of persons still practicing the lower class style of life was an active threat. The sense of threat was experienced most acutely by parents of young children—children who were attracted, not surprisingly, to characteristic aspects of the lower class living patterns—the excitement of street life, the relatively low esteem granted to formal education, the risk of law violation, the tough manliness of lower class heroes. Frightened lest the pull of this attractive subculture nullify all the gains of a lifetime of striving, these parents reacted logically and understandably; they got out.

It was, therefore, to those in the process of emerging from lower class status that the proximate and visible existence of a vital and active lower class subculture posed the greatest threat. Understandably, it is persons in this category who are, with some exceptions, the most actively intolerant of this way of life, the most prone to condemn its characteristic practices, the most insistent that it is not a “way of life” at all, but rather a series of regrettable lapses by discrete individuals or families who bear personal responsibility for their failure to behave in a different and morally supportable fashion. The model here is of the newly westernized indigene whose rejection of the traditional customs of his people is active, angry, and intense.

The departure of the older English middle class, those who frequented the shaded streets and flowered knolls of Midcity Highlands until the turn of the century, reflected a rather different process, and a rather different kind of “discomfiture.” The life style of these people—particularly those who had moved to Midcity after having achieved success in Port City—was secure and well-established, and they experienced little of the sense of vital danger that threatened
the emergent middle class. These people cherished an ideal of a life style which revolved around a comfortable and gracious mode of existence, an atmosphere which accorded a place of prominence to learning, cosmopolitan perspectives and the fine arts, and the well-ordered and rational conduct of community affairs. Despite the fact that lower class persons comprised a clear majority in Midcity for many decades, it was possible for the residents of Midcity Highlands to pursue this ideal so long as their lower class fellow townsmen continued to live at some remove on the flats below, and so long as their power in community affairs was modest.

The physical insulation of the Highlands community was destroyed when the newly emerging middle class began to move in around the base of the Highlands, and its hegemony was shattered when the lower class Irish began to gain political control of Midcity. These and related events made it clear to the older English middle class that the conditions necessary to their way of life would soon vanish from Midcity, and despite the fact that the agents of this dissipation were of higher rather than lower status within the lower class, saw little alternative to relocation. The older English middle class was less threatened by the possibility that lower class behavior would provide a bad example for their children than by the impossibility of maintaining their accustomed life style in a predominantly lower class milieu. The type of life they desired, and which they found or made in the communities to which they moved, involved well-financed and competently run schools, well-kept dwelling units of ample size and with ample grounds, retail outlets catering to the middle class tastes in clothing, household, furnishings, and the like, and, of particular importance, a local government sympathetic to the maintenance of conditions congenial to middle class life, and relatively free of the patronage practices, budgetary preferences, and general administrative conduct of the lower-class political style.67

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67 Discussion of lower class political style in Miller et al “Delinquency and Organizational Relations” in S. Wheeler, ed. Controlling Delinquency, John Wiley, 1962. See also Banfield and Wilson, City Politics.
At various times during the history of Midcity attempts were made to induce middle class populations to take up residence in the community. Several such attempts occurred during the post-Civil-War period, when developers utilized newly-filled land in Lower Midcity to build houses designed to attract what Sam Warner calls the “lower-middle class.” As has been said, Midcity offered many advantages as a residential community, and the convenient location and newness of these units attracted to Lower Midcity a substantial group of non-lower-class persons. It did not take them long to discover that they had moved to middle class islands in a lower class sea, and to realize the consequences of this circumstance. For these people residence in Midcity involved liabilities similar to those which affected both the “emergent” and the older English middle class. Less “secure” in their status, as was the “emergent” group, parents felt vulnerable to the perceived influence of the local lower class subculture; desiring a community geared to the middle class life style, as did the older English middle class, they were dissatisfied with the schools, shops, and political climate of Midcity, and displeased with the ubiquity of bars, factories, and other physical manifestations of lower class life. As these people moved away to communities better suited to their life pattern, the developers rapidly began to alter the vacated units so as to accommodate the tastes and income levels of low status populations (subdividing single units, and the like). This process accelerated the out-movement, and in a surprisingly short time, according to Warner, the middle class islands became submerged in the lower class sea.

During the “urban crises” period of the middle 1900’s, the introduction of middle class populations into Midcity was proposed as one solution to its problems. For reasons beyond the scope of this study, a major form of voluntary immigration of middle class persons which occurs in some lower class communities—the settlement of adolescent and young-adult middle-class artistic-intellectuals—never developed in Midcity. As of mid-century, such proposals had not come to fruition. With the exception of new housing for the Negro middle class, to be discussed...
shortly, the major middle-class in-movements involved a “visiting” rather than a resident middle class, also to be discussed. In the perspective of Midcity’s historical experience, prospects for the process of “reverse-tipping” would not appear good.

The circumstances of Midcity’s Negro middle class residential community in the middle 1900’s would appear, at first, to run counter to the “discomfiture engenders distance” principle. For many decades Midcity contained both lower and middle class Negroes. Many of the middle class Negroes of the 1950’s were descended from the “emergent” group of a generation or two before, and had moved from Lower Midcity to substantial single family dwellings in Upper Midcity and Midcity Highlands, vacated by the out-moving English and Jews. Prior to World War II, these middle class Negro communities had been quite effectively isolated from the lower class areas by the physical features that had served the same purpose for their predecessor populations. Following World War II substantial groups of lower class Negroes began to move toward and into this area; why didn’t the Negro middle class follow venerable precedent of their white status-mates and flee the district?

The simple explanation “racial barriers to free residential movement” is not enough. It is certainly true that the middle class Negroes encountered greater difficulty in obtaining suitable housing in higher status communities than did their Irish and Jewish predecessors, but this was not the whole story. The study of middle class Negroes cited in Chapter One showed that Midcity had a positive attraction for many and that some important element of preference combined with elements of restriction in determining their choice. It would appear that relative to whites, the Negroes had a greater toleration of residential proximity to persons of different social status. The discomfiture principle suggests competition between two forms of social distinction—race and class. Did middle class Negroes feel less uncomfortable as racially-different residents of class-similar communities, or as

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68 See the discussion in Chapter Four of the wide range of social status in the Negro corner gangs relative to the white.
racially-similar residents of class-differentiated communities? With the factor of housing discrimination as one important fact in weighting their decision, the bulk of Midcity’s middle class Negroes apparently chose the latter alternative.

Given the fact that the Negro sections of Midcity in the 1950’s contained an unusually wide range of social status levels and an unusual degree of physical proximity among the several levels, it remains to inquire as to the influence of the “discomfiture engenders distance” principle. Was it minor or non-existent? By no means; two rather striking kinds of evidence may be cited. The first is the existence of an unusual degree of explicit class antagonism among Midcity’s Negroes. Physical separations, a major device for insulating classes, result in a relatively low level of direct interaction among persons of different social positions. Low interaction engenders less direct hostility. In the absence of the degree of physical separation which ordinarily mutes direct class antagonism, Midcity’s Negroes were constrained to confront these feelings directly. Higher status Negroes not infrequently referred to their lower class fellows in terms of derogation and disdain, and pursued a variety of practices designed to maintain the maximum degree of social separation. Lower class Negroes wrote furious letters to the local newspapers excoriating what they called “The Black Bourgeoisie” as smug, supercilious, exclusionist, and class-prejudiced. One distillate, therefore, of the unusual degree of inter-class residential proximity was an unusually intense manifestation of inter-class hostility.

The second kind of evidence of the operation of the “discomfiture” principle involves the use made by the Negro middle class of the urban redevelopment movement of the 1950’s. As has been shown, prior to World War II the Negro neighborhoods in Upper Midcity and the Highlands were relatively isolated geographically; after World War II, the growing lower class Negro community began to infiltrate these neighborhoods, destroying the earlier pattern of physical isolation. Just at this time federal funds and enabling legislation made it possible for the Port City Urban Redevelopment Authority to propose the razing of large
sections of lower class housing areas, and building, in their place, new garden-type
developments of the kind so prevalent in the middle class suburbs. Midcity’s middle
class Negro community enthusiastically supported these proposals and by the
1960’s several new housing developments, inhabited almost exclusively by middle
class residents, once more appeared as middle class islands in the lower class sea.
The residential developments made possible by Federal Urban Redevelopment thus
enabled Midcity’s middle class Negroes to recover some degree of the residential
insulation they had been in the process of losing. In the 1960’s, the Midcity
neighborhoods best approximating the designation of “ghetto” were not lower class,
but middle class.

The ethic of “salvation by good works” is deeply ingrained in the subculture of
the American middle class. Increasing secularization of this ethic appears to have
strengthened rather than weakened its force. From its earliest days the existence in
Midcity of a substantial lower class population provided for middle class persons a
clearly distinguished and conveniently located target for social reform. As has been
shown, at that point in time when the last descendants of the 18th century founders
of the Midcity Charitable Society were moving away, other socially-similar persons
began to move in from the outside to minister to the poor in various forms and for
various periods. Most conspicuous among these were those who actually “settled,”
on a full-time basis, among the poor (the first “settlements” were established in
1895); more significant, in the long run, were the myriads of workers, professional
and amateur, who “visited” Midcity during the day in connection with a wide
variety of services categorized, in the 1900’s, under the designation “health,
education, and welfare.”

In earlier years the bulk of these middle class visitors were either affiliated
with formally-organized health, education, or welfare organizations, or represented
private charitable ventures; in later years they were joined by many more affiliated
with a host of “projects,” often supported by federal funds, whose objective was to
induce changes in customary modes of lower class behavior. These enterprises
themselves, however, seldom formulated their objectives in these terms; rather they spoke of producing “improvements” or “amelioration” in patterns of language, child-rearing, formal education, health behavior, housing, use of leisure time, occupational behavior, religious practices, and the like. On a gross and general level, the impact of all these efforts over all these years may be evaluated most directly by the well-documented fact that in the 1950’s a well-developed lower class subculture still flourished in Midcity. On a more specific level, it is evident that many of these enterprises had significant impact on the population, and contributed, along with other factors, to the movement out of lower class status which characterized so many of Midcity’s residents.

Of the constituent enterprises of the “social service” trio of health, education, and welfare, the impact of the first two was most evident. Health services in Midcity contributed to substantial reductions in infant mortality, deaths from diseases such as tuberculosis, and a generally improved level of physical health. The contribution of the schools in altering patterns of behavior was also substantial. Particularly during the high immigration periods, the educational system bore the major responsibility for “Americanizing” Midcity’s new citizens, and discharged this responsibility with considerable effect. It was also during this period that the settlement houses played their most direct role in exposing Midcity’s lower class residents to the perspectives, values, and behavior patterns of the American middle class, and many a parent or grandparent of the middle class suburbanites of the mid-twentieth century had absorbed, in the settlement houses, experience of the most direct utility to the achieved status of their descendants.

Had the residents of Midcity—thus made more healthy and set firmly upon the road to social elevation by their visiting middle class mentors—chosen to remain therein, the character of population in the 1950’s would undoubtedly have been far different. Since, however, the bulk of those thus enabled to elevate themselves adopted the common practice of converting status into separation by moving away, a major effect of the more successful behavior change enterprises was to facilitate
the “exodus of the higher status,” and thus to enhance the general process by which
the community remained predominantly lower class. The continuing propensity of
the socially-reformed to depart the community was reflected in the bitter
complaints of many of the “project” workers of the mid-1900’s: “Whenever I finally
succeed in developing a good ‘leader’ in a neighborhood, they leave!”

If one assumes, then, that a major objective of the visiting middle class was to
make Midcity less lower class by enabling its residents to alter their customary
modes of behavior, it would have to be said that the greater their success in
effecting the latter part of this objective, the greater their failure in achieving the
former. Given the persisting tendency for Americans to convert social-status change
into residential change, along with the other “stability” process discussed here, the
long-term cumulative impact of the social-reform activities of the visiting middle
class was to make Midcity more rather than less lower class.

Lower Class Subculture as an Intrinsic Component
of a Viable Societal Adaptation

The historical materials of this chapter as well as its more general analysis
bear directly on a set of questions posed at the beginning of this chapter—questions
of central relevance to the understanding of gangs and gang delinquency in Midcity.
Why do lower class people behave as they do? Why is there a lower class? How can
one explain its long-term persistence? Although these questions have engaged
thoughtful men for many centuries, they are being asked today with a sense of
urgency which indicates that available answers have failed to provide sufficient
understanding. Today, as always, there is a press for answers which are simple and
unitary—qualities which do not characterize the present explanation. Abstracted
from an extensive body of historical, demographic and field-collected materials and
reflecting their complexity, the present explanation is not readily susceptible to
simplification. This final section will, however, at the cost of some distortion,
attempt such a simplification, along with a comparison of the explanation with several others. In simplified form, the explanation derived from the historical experience of Midcity might be phrased as follows: A lower class subculture came into being and persists because it comprises an intrinsic component of an intricately organized and viable socio-economic adaptation. Over the course of many centuries, in Europe and elsewhere, men developed a solution to the problem of containing masses of persons within a supervening social order which incorporated, as a major structural feature, a device whereby the enormous range of differentiated occupational pursuits required by such societies were distributed among specific subsectors of the society. Within this system, those subsectors whose occupational pursuits involved lower levels of skill developed a subculture centering around the conditions of low-skilled labor, and which involved, among other things, mechanisms for accommodating to subordinancy, residential and kinship practices geared to the requirements of low-skilled labor, and systematic adaptations to the circumstance of being assigned low social prestige.

When persons enculturated under this type of social system migrated to North America they constituted a social order which incorporated its essential features. During the intervening three centuries there have been many changes of actual or potential relevance to the functioning of this system. Principal among these have been a major shift in the dominant national political ideology, massive alterations in the national and ethnic composition of the population, and dramatic changes in the technological bases of the economic adaptation. It is of central importance to note, however, that none of these changes, profound as they might appear, have thus far sufficiently altered the basic shape of the established social and economic adaptation as to significantly modify its reliance on a set of occupationally-differentiated social status levels, and the concomitant existence of a low-skilled, low-status population of substantial size.

The major shift in the national political ideology (often called a “revolution”) which occurred about half-way through this historical period placed the nation in
explicit opposition to inequalities based on social class position, and aroused in many the vision of a classless society. Hard reality—in the form of the operational requirements of a viable multi-status-level social and economic system—proved far more powerful than the egalitarian vision, and the continuing existence of social classes differentiated by prestige, reward and behavior continue to discomfort those who are more than ordinarily discomforted by discrepancies between the actual and the ideal. The incorporation into the population of the United States of vast numbers of persons with national backgrounds and traditions quite different from those of the earlier English settlers also had limited influence on the basic shape of the system. Despite their divergent backgrounds, these people proved highly educable in American ways, and among these ways were the skills, perspectives, and customary practices of lower class life. In the process whereby millions of immigrants became “Americanized,” some significant number learned to become lower class Americans.

Changes in technology which occurred during the three centuries of Midcity history are seen by some, with reason, as the most revolutionary in human history. Since the area of technology has a most immediate relation to the economic adaptation of any society, one would expect changes of this magnitude to carry a powerful potential for altering the basic shape of the system. Surely the cumulative impact of thousands of technological and technologically-influenced developments such as electrical power, massive population shifts accompanying the spread of the mass-produced gasoline automobile, and the vast coverage made possible by electronic communication could be expected, if anything could, to more closely align the social class ideology of the United States with its social class reality. And yet, as of the present time, these technological developments appear to have strengthened rather than weakened those elements of status-differentiation which lie close to the core of the socio-economic system. Instead of eliminating low-status populations by providing mechanical substitutes for muscle power, the increasing mechanization of the economy appears to have brought into being a system of specialized training far
more extensive and far more differentiated than heretofore, a system whose consequences appear to be intensifying rather than mitigating the traditional distinctions between persons at different skill and status levels.

It would thus appear that major changes in ideology, technology, and population composition which produced marked alterations in external manifestations of Midcity’s social and economic adaptation, failed to alter materially those “core” features of the system which involve status differentiation, and a lower status population. The adaptability-flexibility model discussed in connection with Midcity’s economic adaptation would appear to serve as a more general model as well; the key to persisting viability—biological, social, or economic—would appear to adhere in the capacity to maintain a core of relatively stable elements while at the same time maintaining sufficient flexibility to change many of its extrinsic characteristics in response to environmental and/or internally-generated changes. One intrinsic component of this larger system, Midcity’s lower class, while changing in many external respects over the centuries, retained the essence of its “core” characteristics, and the essence of its relation to the larger system.

This explanation for the existence and persistence of a lower class, the practitioners of the lower class subculture, differs in important respects from others which are currently fashionable, were fashionable in the past, or both. Three of its characteristics are of particular relevance for purposes of comparison with other explanations. First, it derives from a “general” explanatory model which applies to the total social system and its full range of social classes rather than seeing the lower class as a special case requiring a special explanation (this will be discussed further). Second, the urban lower class and its associated subculture are seen as a “normal” component of an organized and viable social and economic adaptation, rather than as “abnormal,” “deviant,” or “disorganized.” Third, changes in the external aspects of lower class life during the recent and less recent past are seen primarily as changes of degree rather than kind, with evident changes in
technological, residential, and ethnic circumstances failing to transmute the “essential” nature of the established social and economic adaptation. These characteristics contrast with those of other explanations; four major explanatory traditions will be cited here—those of Supernatural Determination, Inherent Human Characteristics, Organized Exploitation, and Disorganization-Pathology.

The continuing propensity of Midcity’s Colonial lower class residents to drink, brawl, steal, and remain poor may have disturbed its authorities, but it did not perplex them. The basic explanation for the phenomenon of the lower class, as for many other phenomena, lay in the concept of Supernatural Determination, or divinely-ordained fate. As applied during Colonial times, this explanation conceived “good” and “bad” forms of human behavior as a consequence of a struggle for the souls of men waged outside human society by supernatural partisans of good and evil. Engaging in acts such as theft or assault represented a victory of the forces of evil; one was “seized,” or possessed of the devil. While the postulation of powerful extra-human forces removed from human volition much of the responsibility for behavior, this explanation managed to combine both external causality and individual responsibility by granting to the individual a measure of choice as to which side he allied himself with. Those living under circumstances of penury or hardship were seen as suffering divine retribution for having succumbed to the forces of evil. This type of explanation, in one of its several forms retained currency among many Americans in the mid-1900’s, but most scholars sought to place the locus of causality in the human rather than the extra-human sphere.

The Inherent Characteristics explanation has been and remains one of the most popular. It is simple, and frequently appears to be substantiated by direct experience. In some forms it resembles a secularized version of the Supernatural Determination position. According to this explanation, people practice customary forms of lower class behavior because of an inherent predilection to do so. In one version these propensities are assigned to particular individuals or family lines; in a more prevalent version, to certain broad categories—particularly racial, national,
religious, and regional. It has been convincingly argued, for example, that the propensity to practice lower class forms of behavior is intimately related to being Negro, Irish, Catholic, or Southern. This explanation experienced its greatest popularity among serious scholars in the United States and elsewhere during the post-Civil-War period; the passages from Woods and his collaborators attest vividly to its strength.

This explanation was still widely held in the mid-1900’s, applied most generally, perhaps, to the Negroes, but also seen by many as applicable to groups such as the Spanish Americans, Southern Appalachian “hillbillies,” Sicilians, and Catholics. Among most serious scholars, however, this position had lost currency, due in part to the fact that it comprised a major tenet of the ideology of those considered “racists,” as well as to the evident fact that many persons (including many scholars) who belonged to groups at one time categorized as inherently predisposed to lower class behavior had come, in time, to behave quite differently. There were signs, however, that the Inherent Characteristic explanation was experiencing a revival among some scholars, with the idea of “subculture” taking the place of “race” or “ethnic status.” As the attribution of lower class behavior moved from the devil to race to subculture, some scholars took the position that a “permanent underclass” was developing, differentiated by race, religion, region, and so on, but maintaining in common a “culture of poverty” or “culture of delinquency” as a quasi-inherent characteristic.

Although the classic Inherent Characteristics type of explanation had fallen into disrepute among most scholars of the mid-1900’s, another equally classic explanation, the Disorganization-Pathology approach, still enjoyed high favor. At the root of this explanation is the premise, generally implicit and unexamined, that the idealized (rather than the actual) forms of middle class life represent a state of “order” and “health,” and that other forms, to the degree that they deviate from idealized middle class standards, represent “disorganization” and “pathology.” Two main variants of this explanation are the psychological and sociological. Taking
idealized middle class personality attributes as its primary measure of “normality,” this school characterizes as “abnormal” masses of persons whose behavior with regard to sex, drinking, family life, economic activity and other areas deviates significantly from the postulated norm, quite independent of their social status. The sociological version of this explanation, maintained most firmly by those with a commitment to certain types of social reform, perceives as “organized” those ways of life which accord with official idealized middle class standards, and “disorganized” those which do not. The approach, which characterizes characteristic forms of lower class behavior as “deviant,” combines both the psychological and sociological versions of this explanation in seeing such behavior as simultaneously lacking the attributes of health and order. A fourth category of explanation, perhaps the most ancient of all, enjoyed a tremendous revival in mid-twentieth century United States. This explanation centered on the concept of “organized exploitation.” This classic thesis, propounded in its most eloquent, persuasive, and massively-documented form by Karl Marx in the mid-1800’s, holds that the existence and life circumstances of the lower class are a direct consequence of a deliberate, organized, and highly effective policy pursued by higher status persons.69 These persons, the theory goes, impelled by motives not considered admirable, in a concerted drive to maximize their own power, stature, and wealth—particularly wealth—have developed an economic system wherein low status persons provide a cheap and tractable labor supply. Since this reservoir of low-skilled labor provides the major underpinning for the system from which those of higher status achieve their position, they mobilize their extensive resources--financial, political, administrative, in a continuing and deliberate effort to maintain the conditions seen to sustain the lower class—low income, poor housing, little education, and all the rest.

The appeal of this explanation rests upon essentially the same basis as the “supernatural determination” explanation; it divides the society into two clearly distinguished classes of persons—the “evil” (malicious, conspiratorial,

69 See, for example, Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto.”
monumentally-selfish capitalistic exploiters) and the “good” (good-hearted, sacrificial, long-suffering, cruelly exploited workers)—although the two explanations do reverse the assignments of good and evil. As in the case of most popular explanations of human behavior, it is apparently hard to conceptualize a “social problem” independent of heroes and villains. The mid-twentieth-century American vogue for the organized exploitation explanation centered on the concept of “opportunity.” This version for the most part avoided classic Marxian terminology, using instead the eminently American and currently acceptable concept of “denial of opportunity.” Instead of “capitalistic exploiters” this school spoke of “slumlords,” “the white power structure,” and the “Washington-Pentagon Wall-Street Establishment.” The formulation in terms of “opportunity” was so palatable to most Americans—even to legislative officials hardly sympathetic to classic Marxism—that the term was used to designate a major governmental agency established to deal with the problems of the American lower class.

The several types of explanations wax and wane in popularity during different historical periods, often in response to particular historical circumstances. Generally several are applied at the same time, with varying emphases, to account for lower class populations of different kinds. Differing applications during the post-Civil War and post-World War II periods are instructive. During the earlier period, when the “unassimilated” state of several national groups was seen as a primary cause of lower class conditions, the latter three explanations were brought to bear, with Disorganization in a dominant position, Inherent Characteristics a strong second, and Exploitation third but running well. Midcity’s lower class subculture of the 1880’s was seen primarily as a result of the intergenerational dislocations attendant on cultural transition, but also as reflecting particular inherent Irish or Jewish “racial” characteristics, as well as the exploitative policies of employers, particularly with regard to child labor and opposition to labor unions. In the 1960’s despite the enormous growth of unions and the legal abolition of child labor, the “exploitation” explanation became the front runner, with “disorganization” running
a close second, and “inherent characteristics” a poor third among scholars, but running well for most others.

The situation of the highly publicized “urban poor” of the 1960’s was attributed most widely to deliberate discriminatory policies aimed primarily at lower class Negroes, designed to deny them the opportunity to better themselves with respect to income, education, occupation, and housing. This circumstance, along with others, was said to result in an unhealthy and disorganized mode of life, with a catalogue of social ills—dilapidated houses, broken homes, illegitimacy, desertion, dependency, delinquency, and ill-health—adduced to support the characterization. While most scholars, as previously stated, (except for some who postulated a “culture of poverty” which was transmitted from parent to child), placed major stress on organized exploitation by higher status whites and belittled the influence of inherent characteristics, most other people reversed this emphasis, assigning causative primacy to something inherent in being Negro (or Southern Appalachian, or Puerto Rican).

The present explanation, which represents the lower class subculture as one intrinsic component of a viable, “total-society” social and economic adaptation, has had little or no currency. Some of the reasons for this may be adduced by comparing the several explanatory traditions with respect to three characteristics similar to but not identical with those cited earlier in this section: the attribution of blame, the use of particular evaluative frameworks, and the use of “special-case” explanations.

The tendency to blame someone for disapproved human conditions remains strong among scholars and non-scholars alike, despite one tenet of modern social scholarship which supports the notion of “objective” social analysis. The four explanations cited here differ in the degree to which they ascribe blame for the existence of the lower class, and who is blamed. The explanations in which blame is most unequivocally ascribed are those of Supernatural Determination and Organized Exploitation. Despite some conceptual ambiguity as to the degree of
individual responsibility involved, the supernatural determination explanation severely blames the “undeserving” poor for their drinking, stealing, wenching, and the like, since this is a manifestation of their regrettable surrender to the forces of evil. In Colonial Midcity the ascription of blame was sufficiently impelling as to subject the objects thereof to burning, hanging, and torture. The Organized Exploitation school also assumes a quasi-religious quality in its ascription of blame. Here the partisans of evil are the higher status exploiters and their (sometimes lower status) accomplices, who, out of the most reprehensible motives of greed, selfishness and social irresponsibility, deliberately induce and foster the conditions which produce and sustain the lower class. Blame is not a dominant feature of the Inherent Characteristics explanation; the behavior of those inherently predisposed to lower class behavior is disvalued, but seen in general as essentially beyond individual volition. The Disorganization-Pathology approach assumes a rather curious position with respect to blame. On the one hand, children and/or the current generation are seldom held to account for their behavior, but rather are objects of compassion and sympathy; on the other, parents and/or the preceding generation are blamed, often with passion, on the grounds that policies and choices on their part are responsible for the plight of the succeeding generation. In the present explanation the question of blame is essentially irrelevant; the circumstances of the lower class are seen as one feature of an intricate social invention contrived by humans struggling to develop viable adaptations to a difficult environment—an eminently collective invention involving millions of persons, each contributing, according to his own light, to the achieved adaptation.

In most cases, again despite the “objectivity” ethic of some scholarship, it is not difficult to discern particular value perspectives underlying the several conceptual frameworks used to explain the lower class. The first four explanations are similar in incorporating well-developed value premises; they differ, however, in the degree to which these premises are made explicit.
The Supernatural Determination explanation is, of course, the essence and prototype of value-incorporation. Those lower class people whose behavior stems from the surrender to moral temptation embody the evil which engineered that surrender. The value premises of the Inherent Characteristics explanation are fairly close to the surface. These generally center on the assumption that the national, racial, religious, and/or regional characteristics of particular categories of persons render them especially suitable for low status positions. In the United States, Protestants of Northern European background have traditionally been seen as inherently less predisposed to lower class behavior, and groups such as Southern Europeans, Catholics, and Africans as inherently more. Lower class people not infrequently subscribe to this explanation in much the same terms as do the higher; the latter will say “He can’t help drinking; he’s Irish;” the former “I can’t help drinking; I’m Irish.”

The value premises underlying the Organized Exploitation position are quite explicit, and derive more from a set of abstract philosophical principles than from class- or ethnic-centered values. These premises center on the concept of “justice”—a traditional preoccupation of social philosophers. Proponents of this position perceive a social order in which wealth, power, and prestige are unequally distributed as a violation of justice, which appears in this context as an absolute and universal standard. It is the intensity of their disapproval of those elements of injustice associated with lower class life which animates the powerful evaluative stance of this school. It is of interest to note in this connection that despite their conception of justice as an absolute and universal standard, the proponents of this position devote considerable attention to circumstances in which lower status people appear as victims of injustice, and rather little to those in which they may be the authors thereof.

The Disorganization-Pathology position is distinguished in both the thoroughness with which it incorporates a particular value stance and the thoroughness of its denial that it is doing so. This value position, as already
mentioned, centers on a largely implicit assumption that forms of behavior which accord with official middle class ideals embody the qualities of abnormality, pathology, disorganization and deviance. The psychological variant of this position is rather less ambivalent with regard to values than its sociological counterpart; characterizations of lower class persons by terms such as “premature independence,” “defective impulse control,” and “emotional immaturity” reflect a model of healthy personality development which approaches the status of formalized doctrine.

The works of sociological proponents of this position, on the other hand, reflect a far more deep-seated ambivalence with respect to values. These works characteristically combine two categories of concepts of markedly different character. The first set is defined with a relatively high degree of precision, has explicit operational referents, and enjoys a high degree of scholarly consensus as to meaning. Examples are “population,” “statistical significance,” “sampling procedures,” and “error variance.” The second set of terms incorporates a complex congeries of unexamined assumptions, value premises, and implicit connotations whose existence is seldom admitted, let alone being subjected to critical examination.

Some of the terms in this category frequently applied to lower class forms are: unstable family structures; broken homes, poor educational attainment, inadequate parental practices; inferior job performance; inefficient expenditure patterns; defective inter-personal communication; apathetic life outlook; and excessive intra-community involvement. Were the proponents of this position to apply to this latter set of terms the same criteria of definitional rigor they demand of the former, they would hold without hesitation that adjectives such as “unstable,” “broken,” “poor,” “inadequate,” “inferior,” “inefficient,” “defective,” “excessive,” and “impaired” can have meaning in the scholarly sense, only in connection with the

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70 The Disorganization-Pathology explanation as applied during the immigration-assimilation period of the late 19th and early 20th century is discussed in Chapter One.
question—with reference to what? In point of fact, the “what” which serves almost invariably as an unexamined standard of comparison is an idealized normative concept of middle class behavioral forms.

Since the sociological scholars who subscribe to the Disorganization-Pathology explanatory framework for the most part exhibit a high degree of sensitivity to scientific rigor with respect to the first set of terms, it is of some interest to note the degree of casualness exhibited with respect to the latter. These unexamined concepts are widely used in scholarly reports, frequently in direct conjunction with terms of the first category, apparently with little or no awareness that such admixture is occurring, nor of the markedly contrasting nature of the two categories of terms.

Many of those who use the Disorganization-Pathology explanation have little awareness that a distinctive set of value assumptions are implicit therein, since they are so seldom subject to systematic examination. Those who are aware that this position rests on something more than universally valid premises generally forward a well-developed argument to explain away the class-linked nature of its underlying values. This argument postulates that the bulk of society shares a common or universal set of values, often termed “conventional”; that these values are “internalized” in such a way so they have a direct and compelling impact on behavior; that the values of those sectors of the society which customarily pursue behavioral practices at variance with these standards have drifted or shifted or stretched away from the “conventional” values; and that this set of commonly internalized standards coincides with the official idealized values of middle class life.

The value premises underlying the present explanation fall less readily into a conventional pattern. Those who subscribe to the Disorganization-Pathology explanation and who share the sense of urgency for extensive social reform which generally accompanies this position regard this explanation as embodying a “conservative” ideological position. This is due in part to the fact that the major
thrust of the explanation goes to an intensive examination of currently-functioning social forms and places relatively little emphasis on issues on directed social change. It might be more accurate to say that the present explanation takes as a base value the continuing viability of human societies, conceived as a set of highly complex, multi-component social systems. The position in no way argues against the necessity of adaptive social change but rather by implication, casts doubt on the potential effectiveness of programs of social reform which derive largely from particular ideological convictions and which fail to take into account the extraordinary complexity of the modern national state, and the intricate fashion in which its vast multiplicity of constituent components are related to one another.

According to one of the values of modern scientific method, an explanation which accounts for its relevant universe according to a general and uniformly-applicable set of principles is superior to one which must adduce separate and special principles to account for “deviant” cases. While none of the explanations discussed here remotely achieves this estimable ideal, the several explanations differ in the degree to which it is actualized. The “Supernatural Determination” and “Organized Exploitation” explanations resemble one another in that both look to a “total system” explanation; the “Inherent Characteristics” and “Disorganization-Pathology” explanations are closer to “special-case” explanations. The former two explanations delineate a universe wherein the circumstances of lower status populations arise directly from the actual character of persisting relationships between higher and lower sectors of the system; the latter two delineate “dominant” sectors which function in a “normal” and “organized” fashion, and must then adduce a wide range of discrete and special explanations (bad parents, emotional immaturity, etc.) to account for the “non-conforming” behavior patterns of the numerous “deviant” sectors.

The “Disorganization-Pathology” approach, as in the case of the utilization of values, forwards a special-case explanation while claiming a total-system explanation by reliance on arguments already cited; the relevant universe, “society,”
is defined so as to include those whose behavior is regarded as normal and organized according to middle class ideals, while the large numbers of persons whose behavior apparently accords with differing standards are regarded as outside the system (non-social, asocial, or even anti-social). Special explanations must then be adduced to account for the myriad forms of deviancy (sexual, economic, educational, vocational, etc.) pursued by persons operating outside the normal and dominant universe.

The present explanation, like the former two, includes the behavior patterns of both lower and higher sectors of the society within the same explanatory system, and also like them derives these patterns from the character of persisting relationships among the several sectors. The concept of a total social system containing subpopulations differentiated by occupation and social standing, with each making some useful contribution to the viability of the whole, allows for the explanation of status and subcultural differences in terms of different but complementary contributions to the viability of the total system. This explanation requires a more complex delineation of social status levels than is encountered in the traditional upper-middle-lower or Marxian capitalist-bourgeoisie-workers scheme, and a concomitantly complex delineation of the nature of their mutual relationships (see, for example, the analysis of relationships among lower class III, II, I, and middle class workers in Midcity’s economy). Despite this complexity, the present approach does afford an opportunity—still far from realized—for including explanations of the lower class and its subculture within a more general explanation of the functioning of a total society, conceived as an organized and viable social system. Within this system, each of a range of social status levels manifests a subculture which, while sharing important elements in common with other levels, at the same time maintains a set of subcultural elements of sufficient distinctiveness as to permit clear differentiation among levels, with the differentiated elements of each subculture directly and intimately related to the customary occupational circumstances of persons at that level.