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REVIEW ESSAY

Poverty, culture and social capital in Puerto Rican urban communities

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Understanding Mainland Puerto Rican Poverty
By Susan S. Baker
235 pages; $24.95 [paper]

Growing Old in El Barrio
By Judith Noemi Freidenberg
New York: NYU Press, 2000
310 pages; $22.00 [paper]

Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos and the Neoliberal City
By Arlene Dávila
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004
260 pages; $21.95 [paper]

Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio
By Mario Luis Small
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004
226 pages; $20.00 [paper]
High poverty levels among Puerto Rican populations living in the mainland and on the island have been serious public issues and the subject of a considerable number of research publications and policy reports. According to Census data, Puerto Ricans have one of the highest rates of poverty and substandard living conditions among Latino residents in the United States. While in early 2000s the poverty rate in Puerto Rico was about 45 percent, that of Puerto Ricans residing in the mainland was close to 26 percent; and that of Puerto Rican children under 18 years of age was about 33 percent. The poverty rate for this ethno-national minority is only exceeded by the poverty rate for Dominicans (about 30 percent)—together both groups are considered the poorest among Latino subgroups in this country.

Endemic urban poverty among racial and ethnic minorities has been explained from different theoretical perspectives in the social sciences. For instance, the so-called culture of poverty’s approach became popular in the 1960s with the publication of Oscar Lewis’s books about Puerto Rican and Mexican families living in deprived socioeconomic conditions. According to this view, urban poverty among Puerto Rican families reflects certain normative orientations and cultural values that predispose them to live in marginality, lacking essential social and cultural resources needed to break out from self-reproduced circles of poverty. During the 1970s and early 1980s other approaches inspired by political economy and Marxist analyses became popular. These radical views focused on structural inequalities rather than cultural explanations and presented a different set of structural explanations to account for the material disadvantages of Puerto Ricans. Within that context, one can recall the dual labor market and under-class theories that have explained severe poverty and socioeconomic inequalities suffered by minority racial and ethnic groups in America. These inequalities have occurred as an outcome of structural discriminatory mechanisms embedded in the labor market and reproduced in the class structure of a capitalist economy. From that perspective, Puerto Rican workers are poor and earn lower wages because they have been concentrated in low-paid, unskilled jobs in a segmented labor market in which income and wage differentials reproduce patterns of structural socioeconomic inequalities. In recent years we have seen a redefinition of these structural explanations and the emergence of interdisciplinary analyses that address the contentious question of Puerto Rican urban poverty from new angles, grounding their analyses on both quantitative and qualitative data sources.

In this review essay, I examine four books that address, in one way or the other, the problem of urban poverty in Puerto Rican communities located in the United States. These books present thought-provoking ideas about socioeconomic issues affecting these communities and advance exciting interpretations about social, economic and cultural questions that are vital for the critical understanding of the Puerto Rican populations residing in the United States. 

*Understanding Puerto Rican Poverty* analyzes the socioeconomic experiences of Puerto Rican populations located in the United States, concentrating its analysis on the last two decades of the 20th century. Focusing on aggregated data from Census sources, the book examines the complex situation of a colonized minority group, which historically has been excluded from most of the benefits of the speciously named American Dream. The book is divided in three interrelated parts that interconnect the themes and issues discussed by Susan S. Barker in a systematic way.

In the first part, Barker frames Puerto Ricans in a comparative historical perspective by making pertinent socioeconomic comparisons between them and
Mexicans and Cubans in the United States. To summarize Barker’s point of view, let’s point out that she disagrees with sociological analyses that have lumped together Puerto Ricans and other Latinos without taking into consideration the peculiarities and specificities of each group. In essence, Barker argues that significant differences among Latinos cannot be ignored when analyzing each group.

While the first section of her book examines the Puerto Rican experience vis-à-vis other Latinos, and how Puerto Rican immigration processes have shaped their early integration and current socioeconomic stratification, the second part seeks to map geographically the Puerto Rican community. Mapping data by regions, the book makes an important contribution to the sociological understanding of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. by highlighting how and why their situation varies across the United States. Grounding her analysis on primary and secondary data, the author argues that, in general, the socioeconomic situation of Puerto Ricans in the South and the West (the so-called Sun Belt) has been much better than that of the communities located in the Northeast region, where the strong Puerto Rican enclaves have been historically rooted. In this part, Barker examines the distribution of median-income family incomes and poverty rates tabulated by regions. Using data from 1990, she argues that:

The average median family incomes for Puerto Ricans in the Northeast and Midwest (Rust Belt) are much lower than those in the South and West (Sun Belt). The Northeast’s average Puerto Rican family income was only $18,708 and the Midwest’s was $19,740. However, the South’s was more than $23,000 and the West’s was above $26,500. (p. 75)

This section of the book explains why regional and geographical differences are important variables for interpreting and analyzing aggregated statistical data. The author documents how the transformation and decline of traditional manufacturing industries located in the metropolitan urban areas around New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago and other urban economies of the Northeast and the Midwest are significant factors that explain the continuing deterioration of the socioeconomic situation of Puerto Ricans living in those places. In addition, Barker argues that local conditions are important elements that should be added to a sound statistical analysis. For instance, regarding poverty rates the book shows how local conditions cannot be overlooked when trying to explain differences in poverty rates in Puerto Rican communities. And in each one of the regions examined, the author has found significant variations. She stresses that, “...it has become increasingly clear that Puerto Ricans fare quite differently from metropolitan area to metropolitan area within the same region and even within the same state” (p. 80).

Other questions examined by Baker are nativity or place of birth (mainland versus island); English proficiency; educational attainment; patterns of internal migration; residential segregation; family structures; and labor force participation of Puerto Rican women. These questions are analyzed in relation to socioeconomic indicators, regional differences, patterns of income distribution and poverty levels.

Regarding the ecological concentration of Puerto Ricans in the U.S., the author indicates that this is an urban population (almost 99 percent live in urban areas), and most are concentrated in central cities and surrounding metropolitan areas. On the other hand, in the South and the West the proportion of Puerto Ricans living in middle-size cities and smaller semi-urban towns tend to be higher vis-à-vis
the rest of the country. Remarkably, Puerto Ricans moving out of New York City (and other central cities) have increased steadily during several decades. While this pattern of geographical dispersion accelerated during the 1990s, Barker points out that many Puerto Ricans are moving to places like central Florida where a vibrant community has almost tripled in a relatively short period of time.

Another important finding of this study is how patterns of residential segregation for the Puerto Rican population diverge depending on the region in question. Specifically, the degree of residential segregation (called dissimilarity index) for Puerto Ricans tends to be higher in the Northeast and the Midwest and less intense in the South and the West parts of the country. On this issue Barker says:

...we conclude that the unexpected high levels of segregation between Puerto Ricans and whites is continuing but is not uniform and it confined to the Rust Belt regions. (p. 112)

In the last part of the book, Baker focuses on the dynamics of the labor market and on the structural position of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. economy. The author examines different theories of labor economics and segmentation of labor markets across racial and ethnic lines. After a brief discussion of issues related to modes of incorporation and ethnic niches in the U.S. economy, Barker makes a historical connection between the current socioeconomic situation of Puerto Ricans and their immigration processes since the early 20th century. While chapter nine discusses the analytical framework used to interpret the specific mode of incorporation of Latino immigrants to the U.S. economy, that model does not explain the specific case of Puerto Rican immigrants. Regrettably, the book does not articulate well an adequate theoretical framework to account for the “uniqueness” of the Puerto Rican experience. In the following two chapters, Baker looks at different patterns of incorporation in other urban areas of the Northeast. She argues that relatively high poverty rates for Puerto Ricans should be explained in relation to the kind of low-skill, low-wage jobs that have been disappearing in the Northeast urban economies, where the majority of Puerto Rican workers have been concentrated.

Though this book lacks a well-developed theoretical framework, it offers important information about the current socioeconomic situation of Puerto Rican populations in the mainland. In general, the book is well organized and clearly written. And it makes ingenuous comparisons between Puerto Ricans and other Latino groups, highlighting the diversity of Puerto Rican populations across the United States. The author emphasizes that in order to fully understand why Puerto Ricans have suffered from high poverty levels vis-à-vis other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. any sound analysis should take into consideration the colonial subordination of Puerto Rico and its political and economic dependency in regards to the United States.

To conclude, let’s stress that the theoretical weaknesses of Understanding Puerto Rican Poverty should not discourage potential readers who may be interested in reading the book. Regardless of its shortcomings, this book makes a significant contribution to the existing scholarly literature about Puerto Ricans, and it compensates by providing a solid empirical analysis of statistical and empirical data. Though the complex relationship between urban poverty and culture is not the focus of Baker’s analysis, she criticizes conservative culturalist pseudo-explanations that have been used to explain endemic social problems affecting Puerto Rican
Judith Noemi Freidenberg's *Growing Old in El Barrio* is an ethnographic research about the aging Latino residents of East Harlem, the historical Puerto Rican ethnic enclave in New York City. While the book discussed previously examines poverty at the macro-level of analysis, presenting a quantitative analysis of aggregated data, Freidenberg looks at poverty at the micro-level and from the personal perspectives of her informants. Methodologically, this anthropologist follows a qualitative approach that privileges the ways people define their personal experiences and give meaning to their life stories. The author believes that her role is to let informants construct their own definitions and cultural understandings rather than using standardized measures of poverty or relying alone on “objective” socioeconomic indicators.

This is a fascinating book, relatively easy to read and coherently organized. In the beginning Freidenberg frames her study historically, discussing some aspects related to the way East Harlem has evolved during the 20th century. Though the historical introductory chapter lacks historical depth, it gives a basic framework to understand the life stories of forty-six Puerto Rican elderly people who constitute the core of the research.

This is a book about life stories and immigration experiences of aged Puerto Rican residents of El Barrio. Most informants interviewed were women; men represented about a third of the total sample. Informants migrated from different regions of Puerto Rico to New York City (NYC) between 1910 and 1969; the majority (two-thirds of the sample) arrived in NYC between 1940 and 1960, a period of high Puerto Rican immigration to the United States. According to informants’ accounts, economic or family reasons were their main motivations for leaving Puerto Rico and moving to this country.

A woman named Emiliana Moreno is the principal character of this ethnography. Reading the book, you find her name mentioned throughout the entire work. Emiliana came to El Barrio in her forties at the end of the Second World War. Born in 1902 in Rincon, a town located on the west coast of Puerto Rico, this woman tells us her fascinating life story from childhood up to her living in old age in East Harlem. In a general sense, Emiliana became the “central voice” of the study. Despite the emphasis on Emiliana, other Puerto Rican elderly informants shared sociological characteristics and similar migratory experiences. According to Freidenberg:

> The narrative of the central figure, Emiliana, who lived in El Barrio from her arrival in 1948 until her death in 1995, is compared to that of the other forty-five informants, highlighting similarities and differences in qualitative and quantitative analyses of their experiences. (p. 9)

The collection of data and the ethnographic fieldwork for the book took five years to be finished. In effect, Freidenberg tell us how the daily lives of her informants intermingle with social, religious and cultural practices of El Barrio.
A close connection between the ethnographer and her informants can be strongly felt across the entire book. Her emotional connection to Emiliana is explicit, to the point where Freidenberg describes it as “friendship.” Noticeably, the author feels a strong commitment toward this community, and especially toward the old people with whom she has been involved as part of her study. She is concerned with their health, general well-being and the quality of their social and personal lives. Describing the research process, the author says:

The people conversed while developing a friendship; responding to photographs of themselves, of their homes and the neighborhood; answering interview questions about specific dimensions of their lives in El Barrio. The informants also drew me into their daily lives and culture; reciting poetry, teaching me to pray, pointing out the joys and dangers of the streets of El Barrio, instructing me on the meaning of valued possessions sheltered in their homes, and inviting me to share their food. (p. 8)

The research took place during a period of rapid transformation of local urban economy in El Barrio, after a decade in which crack-cocaine drug addiction among youth and crime were epidemic problems in this community. The elderly Puerto Ricans interviewed by Freidenberg expressed serious concerns about the danger of living in East Harlem. Many were distrustful of other people living in their neighborhood, and some informants had been victims of diverse types of crimes. The ethnography documents how aging people develop social strategies and community networks that serve as support systems helping them to cope with uncertainties and real or imaginary dangers. Though many of these elderly Puerto Ricans suffered from different illnesses, in general the impression that you get reading numerous excerpts from interviews that are part of the book narrative is that they have aged well and have been able to keep a relatively active life even during their old age. As expected, religion plays a significant role in the everyday life of aging people. Attending religious services, participating in social gatherings, praying together and keeping religious artifacts and erecting small home altars are some of the religious practices mentioned.

Though many informants complained about loneliness, lack of family support and relative isolation, the detailed picture about their social life seems more complex. According to the author:

...no one in the study population was found to be totally isolated: saying one lives alone is far from saying one lives unconnected. I observed various types of household arrangements that disputed census data to which 39 percent of the elderly in East Harlem live alone. (p. 166)

One of the most important findings of this ethnography is about the relationship between the strength of social networks (or social capital), medical needs and general well-being. The author suggests that informants who have had stronger social support networks are the ones with fewer medical needs. On the basis of these findings Freidenberg makes a series of policy recommendations focusing on the primary connection between old people’s good health and social networks. In addition, the author indicates that the majority of old people living in El Barrio live in substandard conditions and that reality requires innovative socioeconomic policies and a different approach from public agencies. What are needed are policies...
that really take into account the needs of elderly residents and their particular cultural and social conditions.

At the end of *Growing Old in El Barrio*, Freidenberg presents a series of policy recommendations, intending to contribute to the development of a more complex understanding of the elderly Puerto Rican population residing in a rapidly changing urban space. Within that context, she stresses that this is a heterogeneous group of people and that government policy-makers should “listen” to what Latino aged citizens have to say. Regarding poverty and socioeconomic difficulties, the author says:

Using cross-sectional and longitudinal methods, this case study shows that generalizing elderly Puerto Ricans in El Barrio as uniformly poor is misleading. Thus, while we can safely state that being Latino and elderly in a low-income urban enclave [result in] equal risks of being poor, we should note that important differences among subgroups by age, gender and living arrangements, which are significantly enough to qualify the initial statement to more accurately describe the subpopulation at highest risk of poverty: elderly minority females living alone. (pp. 262-3)

As indicated above, during the time in which this ethnographic study was undertook, El Barrio was in an intense process of demographic, economic and sociocultural change. The title of chapter eleven, “Nadie Sabe Donde Va a Parar El Barrio” (Nobody Knows Where El Barrio Will End Up), suggests that this urban enclave was facing vicissitudes and uncertainties that worried many of its residents. Among recurrent social problems, decrepit housing, unemployment and lack of education for the youth ranked high according to informants. Though Freidenberg’s *Growing Old in El Barrio* brings up these and other public issues, the book does not expand enough on such themes. On the contrary, the book that I will examine next, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos and the Neoliberal City*, has analyzed superbly how this urban ethnic enclave has been transformed during the past twenty years.

Arlene Dávila’s interdisciplinary analysis on the demographic, socioeconomic and cultural transformation of El Barrio presents a solid critical account about how this urban enclave has undergone rapid structural changes that have reshaped its multiple identities while displacing its most vulnerable residents. The book has been built on ethnographic research carried out during 2001-2002, a period in which the author attended community board meetings; participated in activities organized by diverse cultural and civic organizations; interviewed artists, activists and key informants; analyzed public murals and commercial advertisements; and studied complex processes of gentrification and urban change.

*Barrio Dreams* is organized in six interconnected chapters, in which Dávila discusses the cultural significance of identity and the meaning of place for East Harlem’s residents; social, economic and political issues related to housing and gentrification; interethnic and interracial tensions among groups living in this area; the effects of globalization and neoliberal economic policies on local urban transformations and cultural politics; the diversity of cultural signifiers that Latinos have produced in this urban space; the complex articulation of class, race and panethnicity as fluid social markers among Latinos; the marketing of culture and space and other important questions that the author examines thoroughly.

One of the outstanding contributions that should be highlighted in Dávila’s book is the way she interconnects culture, urban space with economic and political processes. Her approach underlines how economic and political processes do have
contradictory and unexpected effects on cultural dynamics and community life. Within this analytical framework the author indicates:

I am specially concerned with the intersections between current development initiatives and people's dreams and aspirations to place. I suggest that veiled in culture—and intricately invested in issues of class and consumption—proposals for tourism, home-ownership programs, and even the EZ become implicated with people's ethnic and class identities in multiple and contradictory ways. (p. 3)

Arlene Dávila frames her analysis historically, linking ongoing struggles for affordable housing and better living conditions in El Barrio with earlier mobilizations and past memories. This urban enclave in the early 2000s was no longer the one that Freidenberg's ethnography has described, yet was still suffering from the same economic disadvantages and inequalities that have affected East Harlem's poor residents for a long time. Dávila stresses this point when she writes:

Once known as a decaying neighborhood, East Harlem is no longer an overflow of vacant lots and buildings. Nevertheless, poverty rates in the area have remained high, at 36.9 percent in 2000, as opposed to 21.2 percent for the city, with 36.7 percent of population in income support, as opposed to 19.3 percent for the entire city, and unemployment at 17.1 percent as opposed to 8.5 percent for the city. (p. 7)

Regardless of deep economic drawbacks, living in El Barrio has become less and less affordable for the kind of residents who traditionally have concentrated in this neighborhood, especially poor Puerto Ricans. Ironically, the arrival of a new wave of professional Latinos has accelerated the gentrification of the neighborhood. Given that rents are still low vis-à-vis what you pay in other parts of Manhattan many artists, students and young urbanites have increasingly moved to this part of town. In conjunction with other gentrifying processes, the result has been the continuing displacement of poor residents who cannot afford to live there any more. Dávila looks closely at the relationship between culture and urban space and its use by competing groups, from developers to resident organizations. These contending groups have reproduced similar cultural representations of East Harlem, which have encouraged the ongoing dynamics of gentrification. The demographic changes described in chapter one and the arrival of a new wave of middle class Puerto Rican and Latino residents have deepened social cleavages, supporting a project of urban renewal that in the long run may exclude the poor Latino population from this enclave.

In the following section, “El Barrio es de Todos,” Dávila talks about what the historically rooted Puerto Rican population is doing to keep alive claims for space and place in East Harlem. This chapter examines thoroughly complex linkages between culture, space and gentrification. Using informants' representations of cultural and ethnonational identities and claims for space and culture, the author presents grassroots activists' views and the concerns of Puerto Rican and Latino residents, who feel that they are being displaced by the ongoing gentrification of El Barrio. Dávila's informants see themselves as the genuine claimants of East Harlem. In that sense the author affirms:

El Barrio is seen by many of my informants as having “inalienable” value as space of cultural assertion, a shelter and respite for identity, that should be maintained as protected and is not quantifiable by standards or speculators in the market. (p. 65)
In this part of the study, Dávila addresses questions such as the historical disadvantages of Puerto Rican and Latinos in housing, their subordinated status in labor markets, limited access to social and cultural resources and the symbolic value that El Barrio has for them. This is one of the best constructed chapters of the book, one that articulates superbly the relationship between multiple material processes that produce increasing socioeconomic inequalities for Puerto Ricans and Latinos living in urban areas and what Dávila calls cultural representations of the “symbolic economy” of contemporary cities.

The following two chapters examine specific cultural projects that have been attempted in East Harlem. One is the “Cultural Industrial Investment Fund for the Upper Manhattan”; the other is the failed “Edison Project” that proposed to move the Museum of African Arts from Soho to this area of NYC. Dávila discusses how these culture-based initiatives have triggered racial and ethnic tensions by promoting gentrification, local tourism and the marketing of culture for economic development. The author records the voices of those residents opposed to the EZ Cultural Industry Investment Fund. In Dávila’s words:

Namely, the EZ business of culture represented a direct challenge to the dominant definitions and uses of culture in East Harlem, where cultural initiatives have been recurrent resources for struggles over rights, representations, and identity, and where most cultural institutions had been funded as part of such struggles. (p. 99)

Afterward, the author addresses issues and questions related to cultural politics and the unintended effects of gentrification in social and cultural institutions. According to her analysis, traditionally defined Puerto Rican cultural institutions, like the Museo del Barrio, have been reconfigured to reflect class demands and social tastes of a different urban population. In that context, Dávila discusses the “We’re Watching You” campaign and other kinds of protests led by community organizations concerned with the potential “expunging” of Puerto Rican history and culture from these local institutions. Summarizing, let’s say that according to this analysis the cultural projects and initiatives mentioned before have sought to undermine local expression of Puerto Rican and Latino culture for the benefit of private interests. And by doing so have played a vital role in legitimating exclusionary urban policies that promote what she calls “marketable ethnicities.”

Patterns of interethnic relations between recently arrived Mexican immigrants and long-established Puerto Rican residents are the topic of chapter five. It is well known that Mexicans are the fastest growing Latino group and that they are reshaping the urban landscape of East Harlem. Though Mexican residents account for a significant segment of the local population, they have been absent from local policy debates regarding urban and socioeconomic change in El Barrio.
Barrio. In effect, the emerging Mexican community has sought the reaffirmation of its cultural and national identities establishing local organizations that pursue those objectives. The main mission of one of these local community groups, named Centro Comunal Mexicano en Nueva York (CECOMX), is the organization of the Cinco de Mayo Festival in East Harlem. Dávila discusses the role of this festival in the context of local cultural politics and in relation to the kind of transnational cultural identities that these local organizations nurture and promote. In that context, the author looks at the clashing webs of social relations that have unfolded between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. In this regard, Dávila highlights how a contradictory dynamic of tension and cooperation shapes patterns of interethnic relations between the two groups. On this question the author says:

Yet acknowledgements of cooperation in the past and continued collaboration across groups do not imply a lack of conflict or competition between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. A Latino identity does not pervade the scope of identity of Mexican groups in El Barrio. After all, the context in which they operate is one of assertion and self-definition, processes that parallel and even work against the everyday exchanges and personal relationships across and among El Barrio’s ethnic and racial groupings. (p. 170)

Regarding the notion of Latinidad, Dávila shows why there is not such a thing as a “natural alliance” among Latinos, suggesting that any sound analysis should look at both commonalities and differences simultaneously. In a certain way, ongoing interethnic tensions between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in East Harlem are a reflection of past and current conflicts between Puerto Ricans and African Americans. However, one cannot exclude the possibility of common struggles for better housing and other forms of political and social mobilization in favor of the poor East Harlem residents across ethnic and racial boundaries. And Dávila acknowledges how important Puerto Rican participation has been in political coalitions with blacks. Though Mexican local organizations lack the political resources that other groups have accumulated, one cannot discard that in the near future this emerging ethnic group could play a stronger role in local urban politics.

Besides ethnic and racial differences, class and socioeconomic inequalities are important elements that Dávila underlines in her analysis. After all, this is a highly heterogeneous urban community and, sociologically, ethnic and racial groups are not homogenous. In that sense, middle-class Puerto Ricans who have been moving to this neighborhood during the past two decades may share social tastes and class interests with other newcomers from similar social and cultural backgrounds. In this gentrifying context, characterized by an exclusionary model of economic and urban development, local cultural institutions have sought ways to accommodate new demands and expectations from new middle class residents. The emergence and consolidation of a “marketable neighborhood” is the topic of the final chapter.

In chapter six, Dávila examines popular and street art, as well as artistic forms of outdoor advertisements, and how cultural expressions can be used to articulate new representations of Latinidad in El Barrio. Echoing her previous research about commercial culture, marketing and advertisement, the author seeks to “problematize” how the commercialization of urban spaces plays a significant part in the redefinition process of cultural meanings attached to the places where people live. Cleverly Dávila asserts:
The marketing and commercialization of urban space in El Barrio is not a contest over the signification of outdoor surfaces, or of East Harlem’s public identity as a Latino neighborhood, as much as it is a confrontation over who is involved in the El barrio’s definition, and for what ends. (p. 183)

Other questions discussed in this part of the book are popular expressions of street art that have been used to encourage a commercial culture. Paradoxically, the same artistic expressions have been key elements in the process of reaffirming ethnic and national identities for the people living in East Harlem. An important idea that Dávila seeks to convey is that not all kinds of culture “are profitably or economically viable.” In effect, she says that the marketability and ethnicity and culture “never come without a cost” (p. 211); and the people paying the highest price for the so-called urban revitalization and socioeconomic transformation of El Barrio are the impoverished Puerto Rican and Latino residents.

As a final point, Arlene Dávila’s *Barrio Dreams* is a timely contribution to the existing literature on gentrification in urban Latino enclaves. By stressing how urban and cultural processes cannot be completely understood without taking into consideration the wider political and economic contexts, the book makes a significant contribution to the field of urban studies. By linking the analysis of Puerto Rican urban poverty to the dynamics of global markets and the effects of neoliberalism as the ideological framework for ongoing processes of gentrification, Arlene Dávila has written an outstanding account about the current transformation of El Barrio in New York City.

While the two ethnographic studies reviewed before have focused on the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem, *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio*, examines a Puerto Rican urban community in a different location in an urban center of the Northeast. Let’s start saying that this work is neither a “traditional” ethnography nor a “community study” but a theoretically ambitious research combining different sociological methods and analytical perspectives. Sociologist Mario Luis Small describes his own work as a “historically informed ethnography,” stating that the following: "Readers expecting a traditional “ethnography’ of Villa Victoria are likely to be disappointed” (p. xvii).

The book is organized in an unusual way. Some chapters can be read independently from the others, and sometimes parts of the narrative are not clearly interconnected with the rest of the study. The book’s focus is the complex—and not always well understood—relationship between concentrated poverty and social capital. Hence, the case of Villa Victoria is used as the empirical setting to test new hypotheses and critical reformulations of current theories about the relationship between poverty and the weakening and decline of social capital in urban communities.

Small’s analysis questions misconceived interpretations about the social and cultural dynamics characteristic of poor urban communities associated with the work of Julius Wilson Williams’ *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (1987), and other studies about urban poverty, social isolation and the absence of social and cultural resources in inner-city poor neighborhoods. In the last chapter, the author presents an alternative analytical framework that he defines as a “conditional approach”; it seeks to overcome some theoretical flaws of what he has beforehand defined as the “universalist” and the “particularist” perspectives. To summarize (and simplify) core ideas one must say that the universalist approach searches for structural traits and sociocultural elements that are conceptualized as characteristics of all poor urban neighborhoods regardless of the specific and peculiar
characteristics of each one. On the other hand, the so-called particularist approach searches for specific mechanisms that produce unique outcomes in particular cases. The theoretical assumption of this perspective is that one cannot generalize from single case studies and that each poor neighborhood has unique local characteristics that cannot be overlooked when the researcher is seeking to explain social and cultural dynamics in that specific community. According to Small, both analytical perspectives search for patterns and regularities across poor neighborhoods, without addressing which mechanisms play a greater role in each situation.

Using the metaphor of a “black box,” the author says that he intends to unpack this “black box” by advocating a perspective that dismisses the erroneous idea of a “typical poor neighborhood,” considering such a notion as analytically unsound for the critical understanding of social capital in poor urban communities.

In one way or the other, the so-called conditional approach embraced by this study represents a middle point between the other two. The author makes explicit this assertion when he says:

In common with the particularist perspective, a conditional approach focuses on context and intermediary factors; however, it does not aim to explain all the factors leading to a particular outcome in a given case. Rather, it tends to focus on those conditions at least theoretically capable of manifesting themselves in different neighborhoods settings. (p. 184)

To understand theoretical criticisms vis-à-vis the existing scholarly literature in this field (and Small's innovative ideas about key topics in urban sociology and the study of urban poverty and social capital), one should go back to the first part of the book, given that Small’s theoretical scheme is grounded on data and materials presented across the entire work.

In the first two chapters, the author frames historically and sociologically the community that he is studying. Before the construction of Villa Victoria in the late 1970s, there was a vibrant Puerto Rican urban enclave in that part of Boston’s South End. Poor Puerto Rican residents lived in what at that time was Parcel 19, an area that Small describes as an extremely deprived urban enclave with 70 percent of families living on public assistance, high unemployment rates, 73 percent of family incomes under 150 percent of the poverty line in 1970, and a high proportion of households headed by single unmarried women. Boston’s South End was an area that had already experienced waves of spatial ethnic successions, and Puerto Rican migrants who moved into the neighborhood after World War II were the most recent wave of several immigrant cohorts who had been living there since the early 20th century. The decay of the neighborhood accelerated during the 1950s and 1960s, according to Small:

Several notable sections of the neighborhood, once beautiful landscapes accented by iron railings, fountains, well-designed public spaces, and numerous parks, had degenerated into dirt and mud pits, garbage dumps and worse. (p. 30)

Facing down the decline of the area, city agencies decided to implement a comprehensive plan for urban renewal and redevelopment of South End. The initial project of urban rehabilitation triggered anxieties among longtime residents and other affected groups that opposed the idea of leaving the area and move to a different location. In the late 1960s a group of concerned Puerto Rican residents of Parcel 19 organized and started a public campaign in favor of their community.
Chapter two examines this process and how previously apathetic Puerto Rican residents joined grassroots organizations, gaining momentum with the support from other constituencies such as college students and community and religious groups. A residents' group named Emergency Tenants' Council (ETC), assisted by volunteer urban planners and architects, developed its own proposal for urban renewal that after a while became a viable alternative to the official city plan. The alternative housing project developed by ETC was conceived as a reconstructed community evocative of Puerto Rico’s traditional ways of life. At the end, a new revitalized neighborhood was erected, with an appropriate architecture, green areas and a central plaza inspired on the one of Aguadilla (one of the islands' towns). This process of urban change occurred without displacing longtime Puerto Rican residents, and a modern housing complex replaced Parcel 19. After all, Villa Victoria has been designed to promote conviviality and affordable housing for working class people. According to Small:

Villa Victoria was an overwhelming success. Most of the families that had been moved out for rehabilitation and construction of the neighborhood returned to the Villa (as residents call it) after each phase of the neighborhood was finished. In their new apartments, most families paid 25 percent of their income (most families now pay 30 percent of their income). As a result of the efforts of ETC, the Puerto Rican residents of Parcel 19 were among the few groups of residents of the South End who were able to remain in the South End after urban renewal. (pp. 41-2)

Most of Small's book examines current social and cultural dynamics of Villa Victoria. This subsidized housing complex has experienced significant changes during the past decades while the surrounding urban area has undergone extensive gentrification, making South End one of the most expensive places to live in Boston. Ironically, since the mid-1980s after a period of high social involvement in community affairs and grassroots activism, Villa Victoria residents' participation in community affairs declined, a process that accelerated in the 1990s. Furthermore, the residents of Villa Victoria became increasingly isolated and cutoff from the socioeconomically affluent neighborhood surrounding their housing complex.

What factors do explain the decline of social involvement and residents’ participation in community affairs at the Villa? That is one of the key questions that Small has sought to answer in his book. Nonetheless, he addresses the issue from a different angle, stating that the real question should be: could high levels of residents' participation have lasted for a longer period of time? In essence, the answer(s) to these questions constitute the focus of chapters three and four. At this point of his narrative, Small examines diverse sociological explanations making specific assertions that challenge established theoretical paradigms. He rejects social disorganization and structural theories by focusing on demographic and cultural variables that for him seem to account better for what has taken place in the Villa. On the one hand, the original cohort of actively involved residents has been replaced by a second and a third cohort of new residents who have not shared the same experiences since they never lived in the decayed urban enclave that Villa Victoria has succeeded. In a few words, these new cohorts do not attach the same social, cultural and emotional meanings to their housing complex, and many of them see the Villa as a “ghetto” and not as a great place to live. The new cohort of residents has a different cultural framework to assess and value their community. Their perceptions and ideas have been filtered by a different set of cognitive categories, and unlike the original cohort, they do not feel the same emotional and cultural attachments to Villa Victoria. While original
residents framed their neighborhood as a beautiful place to live (in comparison to the infamies of living in decrepit buildings in Parcel 19), most of the new residents do not see things the same way. To explain those cognitive differences between cohorts of residents, Small introduces the concept of “neighborhood narrative frames” seeking to base his interpretation about the decline of social capital on different theoretical grounds. Addressing structural misconceptions about poverty, as the only significant variables to account for lower social participation, he points out:

Contrary to common assumptions about poor neighborhoods, residents do not merely see and experience the characteristics of their neighborhood “as it is”; their perceptions are filtered through cultural categories that highlight some aspects of the neighborhood and ignore others. Their perceptions become part of an often explicit narrative about the neighborhood’s role and significance in residents’ lives. Residents’ framing of the neighborhood will, in turn, affect how they act in or toward it. (p. 70)

Certainly, Small’s framing perspective advances a different interpretation about the complex relationship between poverty and social capital in low-income neighborhoods. Largely, this approach seems to explain to a certain extent why the first cohort of Villa residents (with a positive perception of the place) had a higher degree of community participation than the new cohort of residents who lacked the experience of living in the old crime-ridden neighborhood composed of deteriorated brownstones, which, ironically, have become luxurious renovated buildings at the time of the study.

Though social capital has declined, some forms of community participation have subsisted and Small discusses them. The ecological setting and physical organization of the Villa, the proximity of green areas and public parks, etc., have created an urban environment that encourages healthy daily social interactions among residents keeping alive a sense of community. And the Villa is well known for its musical and cultural events. One of these events, called the Betances festival, brings over many Latinos living in the Boston metropolitan area to the Villa every year. But the success of this festivity also serves to reinforce the social and cultural boundaries that segregate Villa Victoria from white affluent surrounding communities. As Small indicates:

...although the festival celebrated life, equality and the beauty of diverse musical and artistic cultures, the combination of inside and outside circumstances in that section of the South End gave the impression of an invisible fence, drawn neatly around the Villa, that kept residents (and Latinos) in an nonresidents out. (p. 98)

The process of gentrification of South End has played a key role in the increasing relative social isolation of the Villa’s residents from local institutions and local businesses. Small documents racial and social tensions between Puerto Rican and Latino residents of Villa Victoria and the middle and upper class neighbors concentrated in the vicinity. One thing is certain: class and racial cleavages have remained, and poor residents from the Villa have been stigmatized as drug-dealers and ghetto people. In the eyes of the middle and upper class residents of the affluent immediate area, Villa Victoria and its residents are seen as potentially dangerous. Regarding these perceptions the author points out:

Many South End residents living on cross streets between Tremont Street and Columbus Avenue see Tremont as a natural border not to be traversed. (p. 119)
Widespread negative images about the Villa have influenced some of the residents’ gloomy views about living there, sentiments that have been reinforced by comparing the situation of Villa Victoria with the exquisite living conditions of the upper middle class professionals of the surrounding South End.

The alleged relative social isolation of the Villa’s residents is examined in depth in chapter seven. Small found that not all poor Puerto Rican and Latino residents were socially isolated. Indeed, some residents were strongly connected to people from other racial and ethnic groups and maintained diverse degrees of interaction and social exchanges with middle class residents from different areas of Boston. This study suggests that one cannot assume that all poor people living in low-income communities are marginalized and without social and cultural resources. Presenting a complex and dynamic picture of residents’ participation in social networks and outside groups, Small shows that these residents have developed multiple external and internal social loyalties and a diversity of expectations and aspirations in life. In reference to his informants, Small poses the question: Are Ernesto, Eugenia, Gloria, Melisa and Oscar socially isolated? His own answer is:

...by conceiving of the relationship between neighborhood poverty and social isolation as dynamic, a process that changes over residents’ lifetime and depends on intermediary conditions, such as generational status (including age, language ability, and immigration status) and being employed or in school. (p. 173)

Small’s well-timed book shares concerns and questions with Dávila’s Barrio Dreams and Freidenberg’s Growing Old in El Barrio. In different ways, these scholarly publications challenge the so-called cultural deficiency perspectives that have blamed poor Puerto Rican and Latinos for the inequalities and poverty that they have suffered for decades. These studies question the validity of approaches that have intended to analyze and explain urban poverty through normative notions of culture. The truth is that Puerto Rican residents of El Barrio in East Harlem and Villa Victoria in Boston have developed ingenious mechanisms to cope effectively with adverse socioeconomic living conditions in one way or the other. While Small’s study emphasizes what he calls cohort effects and differences in cognitive frames to make sense of people narratives while explaining variations in levels of social capital in a poor urban enclave, Dávila’s research seeks to articulate economic, political and cultural factors in an original way by analyzing how poor Puerto Rican residents of El Barrio have dealt with the destructive effects of neoliberal pro-market policies and the gentrification of their community.

Concluding Remarks
In this review essay I have looked at four different academic works that examine diverse aspects of the living and socioeconomic conditions of Puerto Ricans in the United States. While Baker’s Understanding Puerto Rican Poverty presents its arguments grounded on statistical data, the three others explore issues of poverty, cultural and urban life by focusing on specific communities in which Puerto Ricans are the majority of the population. Many studies of urban poverty in Puerto Rican and Latino communities have emphasized either structural constraints or normative and cultural orientations of the residents of these communities as the key variables to explain why these urban communities are the way they are. And until very recently this was a predominantly problem-oriented field in which researchers have sought
practical solutions for recurrent social and economic problems such as high rates of crime and delinquency; drug addiction; single motherhood; unemployment and underemployment; lower levels of education; and so on.

Most important, the qualitative data-based studies discussed in this review essay depart from simplistic interpretations about urban poverty by paying attention to fluid social processes and other specific mechanisms that account for complex relations between individual agency, cultural understandings and social capital (or social networks) in relatively deprived ethnic enclaves. Each one of the mentioned works has contributed to the scholarly literature in the field by posing pertinent questions and advancing perspectives that challenge methodologically and theoretically taken for granted assumptions in the field of urban anthropology (and urban sociology) and urban studies in general. One common element linking these studies together is the shared concern among the authors who question current theories of urban marginality by looking at the ways poor Puerto Ricans have developed ingenious strategies to challenge their own disadvantageous living conditions. In each case, one sees that regardless of existing material constraints and the erosion of living conditions due to gentrification and other socioeconomic variables, Puerto Ricans have been able to maintain primary forms of solidarity and a strong sense of community among themselves.

In the fields of urban and Puerto Rican/Latino studies no one denies that culture is a significant factor for the analysis of urban community life and social participation in organizations and in local institutions. In that sense, these studies pose pertinent questions about how to conceptualize culture as part of the critical analysis of urban poverty and residents’ participation in local institutions and groups. While culture has been conceptualized in many ethnographic investigations as something limited to norms and values, books like Villa Victoria and Barrio Dreams go beyond that narrow viewpoint by using culture as a “cognitive framework” for Luis Mario Small or as a “contentious term” that embodies multiple and contradictory meanings for Arlene Dávila, an anthropologist who shares Appadurai’s view of culture as articulation and boundary of differences.

The other significant contribution of these books is to fuel the public debate about the destabilizing effects of gentrification on poor ethnic urban communities. In one way or the other, the spatial transformation and gentrification of East Harlem in New York City or in the South End in Boston have affected the quality of social life among residents and the economic and cultural dynamics of these Puerto Rican and Latino urban enclaves. While in El Barrio one has witnessed processes of displacement of longtime poor residents and of urban restructuring that have reshaped cultural meanings and the demographic and class profile of East Harlem, in the case of Villa Victoria the gentrification of the surroundings has played —perhaps circuitously—a part in the weakening of community institutions and the decline of social capital.

To conclude, I can say that in the social sciences we need more academic like the ones discussed in this review essay, critical analyses going beyond the simplistic interpretations of Puerto Rican urban poverty as a pathological manifestation of human communities lacking social and cultural resources. Without hesitation, I strongly recommend these books to people interested in Puerto Rican and Latino urban poverty, economic restructuring of ethnic enclaves in the context of gentrification and urban change, and on issues related to urban culture and social capital in Latino and Puerto Rican communities.