

# Street Corner Voices

TRANS-ACTION

FEBRUARY 1969

TALLY'S CORNER by ELLIOT LIEBOW  
*Boston: Little, Brown, 1967*

260 pages. \$5.95 Hardback; \$2.25 paperback

PROTEST AND PREJUDICE: A STUDY OF BELIEF IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY  
by GARY T. MARX

*New York: Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 228; \$8.95*

Reviewed by AUGUST MEIER

It would be no exaggeration to say that the two most important sociological studies of the Negro in America to appear in at least a decade were published last year—Gary Marx's *Protest and Prejudice* and Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner*.

Liebow is an anthropologist, and to many, this study of a group of street-corner men will appear as a quaint throwback to the 1930's. In actual fact, the volume is an extraordinarily illuminating study of an important type of ghetto-dweller.

Liebow's research, conducted in 1962 and 1963, describes the life and values of a group of about 20 men, ranging in age from the 20's through the 40's, who congregate at a carry-out shop in Northwest Washington. Liebow draws a subtle and poignant picture of this particular segment of society, located between the outcasts at the very bottom, and the respectable lower-class with steady jobs above them. He describes the instabilities of their lives—their jobs, family ties and friendships, their desperate desires to achieve American middle-class standards in these things, and their failures to do so. His discussion of the family lives of these men—of their inability to maintain stable marriages, their inability to show affection for their own children while they pour affection lavishly on the children, fathered by other men, of the women with whom

they live—all this is a brilliant complement to the work done by Lee Rainwater on the matrifocal family.

Liebow's stress on the tragic gap between the norms that these men idealize and the reality of their daily lives illuminates his persuasively argued thesis that what he is describing is not a genuine sub-culture, but rather the ways in which men adjust to their inability to live up to the standard and values they set for themselves. Thus, in writing of the spending habits of these street-corner men, he points out that they are not caused by a preoccupation with the present and indifference to the future (in contrast to the middle class's future-time orientation), but rather that

they also reflect a future-time orientation—and one that is realistic in view of the hopeless future, loaded with troubles, these men face. Again, he maintains that the mating patterns are not based on a cultural tradition of serial monogamy. Rather they grow out of the inability to make marriage work, despite the hope that a successful marriage is possible. Sons are like their fathers in their behavior toward their wives and children, not because of any cultural tradition, but because fathers and sons both face the same impossible circumstances trying to maintain a family. Liebow concludes that since the situation he outlines is not rooted in cultural tradition but is a direct response to particular circumstances, the problem can be solved relatively easily by attacking the problem of poverty, thus opening the way for the men he describes to work for their goals.

Marx's book is a different kind of sociology, based as it is on the sophisticated use of polling techniques. Employing data gathered by the National Opinion Research Center in October, 1964, he plumbs the attitudes of a small, but representative, cross-section of black Americans. Some will aver that the book, based on now obsolete data, is no longer relevant, and that therefore its conclusions, indicating less anti-Semitism and more integrationist sentiment among Negroes than many had been expecting, is too optimistic. All this misses the true significance of the book. It is a careful description of the mood and attitudes of the black community at a given point in time, and a subtle analysis that is in stark contrast to the oversimplified, dramatic discussions of the journalists and the propagandistic statements of the militants, both of which have done so much to distort our picture of what is going on. Marx's sophistication and subtlety are best illustrated by what

is undoubtedly the most important chapter in the book, entitled "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy?" He shows that the Christian faith has actually performed both functions.

Neither Liebow nor Marx tells us all there is to know about their subjects. What is needed are scholars who will repeat their works, broaden them, and keep them current. For instance, Liebow's work should be expanded to include other cities and other segments of the ghetto population.

Liebow and Marx have both greatly enriched our knowledge of the black community. They have made an impressive beginning in hitherto basically unexplored avenues of research. Hopefully, others will follow them.

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