Other authors also run the risk of being accused of displaying an arrogance of privilege and interpretive sleight of hand. Richard Williams, in "Oliver C. Cox and the Historical Method," presents what some might view as an effort to universalize the Eurocentric standpoint, justify exclusionary practices within traditional American sociological theory communities, and apologize for the exclusion of Cox. "When linked with Marx, Cox is generally diminished to being an evolutionary determinist who is more motivated by a political agenda than a desire for historical clarity . . . he is able to . . . appropriate use of the historical method . . . [so that] the significance of his original ideas in *Caste, Class and Race* are easily obscured even from those who are supportive of his views" (pp. 104–105). In his treatment of Cox, Williams conflates the categories generalize and universal, and equally conflates the categories actors and groups. Williams' rhetorical shifts, and his apparent commitment to a belief in choice, results in his explaining that Cox is partially responsible for our perceiving him as a professional deviant. In the end, Williams affectionately assures us that Cox really is not all that deviant, thanks to Weber.

The anthology is a fascinating exposition of both the condition of subjugation and a history of racialized consciousness. That is why the generations should look at it.

American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto, by **Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. 332 pp. $31.50 cloth. ISBN: 0-674-00321-7.

DOUGLAS HARTMANN
University of Minnesota
hartmann@atlas.socsci.umn.edu

Early in the 1990s, when young sociologists like Sudhir Venkatesh and myself entered graduate school, some of the hottest, most contentious public and scholarly issues involved the so-called "urban underclass." Even as we learned to participate in the debates about whether this group was best understood in terms of race or class, many of us came to believe the entire discussion was muddled by conflicting assumptions about who this "urban underclass" was, what their daily lives were like, and how they understood the world in which they lived. Few of us, however, took on the task of gathering concrete, empirical data relating to these concerns with the vigor, inventiveness, and diligence of Venkatesh.

Venkatesh got his start working as a graduate assistant for William Julius Wilson. Under the auspices of Wilson's massive urban poverty project at the University of Chicago, Venkatesh's job was to solicit interviews from young African Americans on the city's southside using a standard survey questionnaire. This was not his focus for long. After his prospective interviewees told him he wouldn't "learn shit" asking these questions, Venkatesh took their advice and started "hanging out" with them instead (p. xiv). Venkatesh's immersion into this field was exceptionally deep and sustained. Out of it he has now produced a work of extraordinary texture, scope, and power. *American Project* is a book no scholar whose research is in any way implicated with the urban underclass will be able to ignore.

American Project is much more than a description of the lifeworlds and worldviews of inner-city African Americans. It is a full-scale analytic study of one of the largest, most well-known, and most controversial housing communities ever constructed in the United States, the Robert Taylor Homes. Based on extensive original research (including life-history interviews and archival documentation), an encyclopedic knowledge of previous literature, and a sophisticated theoretical framework, Venkatesh helps us to understand not only what life was like in this community but also the forces—external and internal—by which this community came into being, evolved, and ultimately was dismantled. This is ethnography in its grandest, most ambitious sense—not merely method or technique, but a sophisticated sociological vision of a community taken as a complex, dynamic, and meaningful whole.

Venkatesh's approach is particularly innovative in its orientation to history. His extensive and inspired use of life-history interviews reflects this and should receive serious consideration from methodologists. But *American Project* is historical in an even more fundamental sense. It takes us, literally chapter by chapter, through the history of a community once considered a model of urban subsidized

Do not duplicate. Copywritten material.

housing. One virtue of Venkatesh's ethno-historical approach is that it allows highly sophisticated sociological analysis to read as narrative, and *American Project* is a compelling if ultimately tragic tale. And it is precisely as narrative, in my view, that the book captures and conveys the tensions—between continuity and change, structure and agency, meaning and action—central to the development of any community.

There are moments where I think *American Project* is a little too seamless and synthetic. Rarely did I disagree with Venkatesh's interpretations and conclusions. Nevertheless, I often found myself wondering what they were based on, whether they were the result of new data, different ways of thinking about the data, or some combination—this, particularly, given Venkatesh's reliance on life-history interviews. The curiously impersonal, almost imperial voice of social scientific authority in which Venkatesh has chosen to write the bulk of his text only exacerbated these concerns. All of this may be a response to the demands of writing for a broad, public audience and a hedge against the questions conventional sociologists often raise about qualitative case studies. But the danger here is that both audiences may miss the rigorous, social scientific methods—the systematic and multifaceted data collection, the insistent contextualization, the clear and consistent theorizing—that endow an account like Venkatesh's with its particular utility and authority.

The deepest, most challenging questions I have about *American Project* involve Venkatesh's relationship with William Wilson. Wilson was Venkatesh's teacher, mentor, and dissertation advisor, and Venkatesh followed Wilson to Harvard where, on fellowship, he drafted this book. Venkatesh describes Wilson's work as "the definitive examination of the post-war African American experience" (p. 289), and in the book's forward Wilson says that "no scholar better captures the consequences of the second stage of federal housing policy" and predicts the book will "trigger a discussion" on ways to "serve these truly disadvantaged communities." My intention is not to expose or disparage the ties between these two fine scholars but rather to suggest that they may obscure crucial intellectual differences between student and mentor. Isn't *American Project* about more than the entitlements public housing residents lack and the consequences of public policy? Isn't *American Project* also about how folks in "disadvantaged communities" operate within and around and against these constraints—indeed how they can, should, and do play an active, constitutive role in creating the worlds in which they live?

What is at stake here is not just our understanding of the urban underclass and its problems. What is also (and perhaps more importantly) at stake is how our social scientific analyses shape the policies we envision and the politics we employ in trying to bring these policies into being. No one is more aware of this than Wilson. But whether he sees that *American Project* might offer alternatives to the moralistic, top-down paternalism that so defines his mindset on these matters is another question. We can only hope that Sudhir Venkatesh not only continues to write books that raise such possibilities but also becomes an active participant in answering such questions himself.

America's Banquet of Cultures: Harnessing Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration in the Twenty-First Century, by **Ronald Fernandez.** Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000. 280 pp. $65.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-275-95871-X.

RICHARD ALBA
State University of New York-Albany
r.alba@albany.edu

Ronald Fernandez's latest book is an attempt to reach beyond the narrow precincts of professional sociologists and address a larger audience concerning the long-term implications of contemporary immigration and increasing racial/ethnic diversity. The question that seems to guide him is one that he repeats at intervals throughout the book: "What shall we do with our America?" For readers who are familiar with the mushrooming literature on multiculturalism, the answer that he provides bears a strong resemblance to the position taken by the historian David Hollinger in his well-known book, *Post-Ethnic America.* Fernandez's answer would be described by Hollinger as "cosmopolitan multiculturalism," and this is the stance that no doubt would draw the greatest agreement from sociologists, on both intellectual and personal grounds.

Do not duplicate. Copywritten material.