Sirianni, Carmen. 2009. *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
Sirianni, Carmen, and Diana Schor. 2009. "City Government as Enabler of Youth Civic Engagement." In *Policies for Youth Civic Engagement,* ed. James Youniss and Peter Levine. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
Taylor, Nikki M. 2005. *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802–1868*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Mark R. Warren
doi:10.1017/S153759271200117X

> "Wynton Marsalis stated that he does not listen to rap or hip-hop because it is ignorant." (p. 44)

In her new book, Cathy Cohen refuses the demonization but also the victimization of black youth. Her project aims to reclaim black youth as political and moral agents in their own lives and within American democracy. In order to do so, Cohen explains what young black people think about sexual, cultural, and political issues, as well as their understandings of the situations they face and the choices they make in their lives. The result is a richly nuanced account that offers a powerful direction out of the structure/culture trap that has stymied efforts to understand black youth and address their conditions.

It might be surprising that a study of the political views of young black people spends so much time on moral (sexual) and cultural (hip-hop) issues. However, moral concerns lie at the heart of *Democracy Remixed* in part because the "immorality" of black youth is widely condemned by the larger society—and by significant portions of the black community as well. From the dominant perspective, black youth listen to rap and hip-hop apparently because they are "ignorant" and cannot appreciate "better" musical forms. Moreover, this ignorant, violent, and oversexualized music is symbolic of the moral degradation of black youth.

Let me clarify that Cohen is no blind supporter of hip-hop culture. She critiques the commercialization of much of rap music, its stereotypical portrayals of black men and women, its violence, and its misogyny. Yet she also shows that rap music, as distorted by commercialization as it is, nevertheless remains highly relevant to the lives of young black people. Rap music contains strains that critique the systemic racial discrimination experienced by many young blacks and that address the real-life situation facing black youth, especially those who are poor—nearly 40% of all black youth.

We social scientists are so used to reading statistics that it may be hard to grasp the human reality of that percentage. Nearly 50 years after the historic gains of the Civil Rights movement that opened up opportunities to many black people, and in a polity that elected an African American as president, half of all black children grow up in or near poverty. Poverty, poor education, and mass incarceration have combined in such a way that low-income black youth face a human and social justice crisis of dire proportions. Michelle Alexander's recent book, *The New Jim Crow,* reports that 70% of black men in the North

Mark R. Warren is Associate Professor of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the McCormick Graduate School at the University of Massachusetts-Boston.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271200117X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago are ex-offenders, mostly for drug offenses, and will suffer legally sanctioned discrimination for the rest of their lives for their criminal records.[1]

Hip-hop culture is one arena in which black youth struggle to make sense of this situation and of their lives. And this meaning making is at the heart of Cohen's concern and at the center of her contributions to a different understanding of black youth morality and politics. Cohen draws from surveys designed to measure what black youth think and do, and she also incorporates material from in-depth interviews and focus groups. In other words, rather than relying upon what others tell us about black youth, an approach that can demonize or victimize, she reports what many black youth themselves think as they struggle to be authentic agents in their own lives.

Structural Constraint and Personal Responsibility

These findings are complex and revealing, and certainly rebut popular stereotypes of black youth as ignorant and immoral. Cohen reports that black youth grasp very well the structural oppression they face—growing up in poor and often violent neighborhoods, attending underfunded and often dysfunctional schools, and being harassed at the hands of local police. Yet they also see that many blacks have "made it." Even in the context of tremendous structural barriers, young black people don't give up. They hold themselves and other black youth accountable for their personal choices. I interpret this claim of personal responsibility as the fundamentally human drive for respect and liberation. Liberation cannot be given; it must be achieved through personal and collective action. Black youth perhaps know that if they do not take responsibility for their actions, they cannot achieve their full humanity—no matter what the larger society thinks of them or how it treats them, positively or negatively.

One of Cohen's most revealing findings concerns the disconnection between beliefs and actions. Black youth want to be responsible for their moral choices, yet they face situations that strongly constrain them. Cohen reports that the large majority of black youth—80%—think that too many young blacks have the wrong morals about sex and work. Yet 70% report that they themselves have had sexual intercourse; indeed, 42% of people in the 15–17 age group report sexual intercourse, while 43% of the whole youth cohort report having been or gotten someone pregnant. The author helps us understand why this might occur, when barriers to participation in mainstream American life are so large.

Cohen also suggests a more supportive public policy response. If 50% of children born to women under the age of 30 (80% for black children) are being born out of wedlock, then we would do better to develop programs that support the "true norm" of single parents and their children than continue to condemn the situation as deviant—an approach, she asserts, that can lead to "acceptance and empowerment" (p. 98).

The constraints facing black youth are not just structural, however; they are also profoundly cultural. One of the difficulties black youth face in realizing their personal agency is the larger moralizing and stereotyping of them by the larger society. Another one of Cohen's fascinating findings is that older black people often share the moral condemnation of black youth. Drawing from theories of moral panic, she offers us some understanding of why that might be, that is, as a way to protect their status in a racially stigmatizing society.

Whatever the reasons, however, what this means is that black youth remain structurally constrained and morally condemned by both the larger society and its institutions and by many black adults who could help provide guidance. Cohen calls for the creation of honest discourse about the conditions facing black youth that can help them make reasonable and healthy moral decisions. Indeed, she powerfully reveals just how much black youth are struggling to find themselves and navigate responsibly throughout their lives. She reports, for example, that although black youth have sexual intercourse at higher rates than whites, they are also more likely to use protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Resolving the Structural/Cultural Trap

Cohen's project is essential because she seeks to recover the political agency of black youth. They are not defenseless victims but authentic actors in community and political life. She reports that fully a quarter of black youth in one survey report participating in "buycotts," that is, making consumer decisions on the basis of political values. Indeed, many young black people consider listening to rap music in and of itself to be a political act. To be fair, Cohen points out that relatively few black youth participate in political protests and other forms of activism—perhaps around 8% do so. However, a much larger proportion, around 40%, participates in a broader category of civic engagement that includes volunteer activity but also possibly more politically oriented forms of community engagement.

At the end of the book, Cohen argues that civic and political engagement on the part of black youth is necessary so that they can demand the resources they need to advance their situation. In other words, mobilization addresses structural discrimination. I would like to suggest, going further, that collective action can also provide the honest spaces where black youth can address their moral concerns and take responsibility for their lives. In other words, it is through participation in groups that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271200117X Published online by Cambridge University Press

undertake collective action that black youth can resolve the structure/culture trap.

Youth Organizing: Personal and Collective Agency

One form of political community engagement, called youth organizing, has grown rapidly across the country, particularly among youth of color in urban communities. In youth organizing groups, young blacks discuss the conditions they face in their lives, identify problems, and develop action campaigns around solutions they design—usually supported by, and in alliance with, adults in the community.[2] For example, youth organizing groups have campaigned to open community centers, expand mass transit service and summer job opportunities, fight gang violence and police abuse, limit tobacco and alcohol advertising in urban neighborhoods, establish restorative justice discipline policies to combat the "school-to-prison" pipeline, and open new high schools oriented to community leadership and social justice, among many other issues.[3] In this way, black youth work for structural change.

These groups, however, also provide "free spaces" in which young people can discuss the wide range of issues they face in their lives and develop a sense of political *and* personal efficacy.[4] In other words, these are precisely the kinds of moral spaces for honest discourse that Cohen argues we so desperately need. Youth organizing groups typically include mentoring of individual young people as part of the collective process. Hip-hop culture and debates about the morals and politics of hip-hop culture feature prominently as young people work to build a positive community. Mentoring and community building help young people navigate a direction through personal and educational processes.

The victories that young people achieve—the opening of a community center, the changes in school disciplinary procedures—make a real difference in their lives, even if they appear small in relation to larger structural challenges. Moreover, when young people achieve victories through organizing campaigns, they gain tremendous confidence in themselves and develop respect for each other and their community. They become responsible actors in their own lives and in the community. They gain hope.

Youth organizing is moral politics because, like all politics, it concerns both interests and values—how black youth can improve the material reality of their situation, but also how can they demand respect. In these groups, young people can begin to construct a sense of how they want to live their lives.[5] Cohen convincingly shows that black youth want to live a moral life—achieving in school, getting a good job, avoiding early sexual activity—but they face structural contexts in which other behavior makes a certain sense. Through organizing, black youth have the opportunity to integrate thought and action. More broadly, they can break out of the structural/cultural bind and offer social scientists and the broader public a way to resolve it. They can develop actions that meet their moral values.

In dominant discourse, the structure/agency duality results in a polarized stalemate: Either we work to address structural racism or black youth are expected to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, à la Barack Obama. Agency in youth organizing is different because individual choice and behavior are connected to collective discourse and action. Youth organizing seeks to transform individual lives through efforts to change communities and structures.

Youth organizations remain fairly small and localized efforts at this point—although their ability to work with young people as they connect to one another in local communities and schools is a necessary part of their contribution. Yet I believe Cohen's book reveals the possibilities for a broader potential. She shows us that black youth are not passive victims of discrimination. Nor do most want to accept anti- or asocial behavior. Indeed, young black people are searching for ways to take responsibility for their lives in the context of limited choices and persistent stereotyping.

Black youth cannot be expected to solve their problems on their own. Cohen demonstrates that black youth, far from being a problem for American democracy, form a critical part of the solution to the problems we face. If adults—social scientists and the broader public including older black people as well—would approach them as intelligent and caring moral agents, we could begin to work together for greater racial equality and a more inclusive democracy.

Notes

1 Alexander 2010, 191.
2 For a description of this emerging field, see Warren, Mira, and Nikundiwe 2008 and also Warren and Mapp 2011.
3 See Checkoway et al. 2003 as one source.
4 For a more detailed discussion of this process, see Ginwright 2009; on free spaces more generally, see Evans and Boyte 1992.
5 The pursuit of moral meaning in political action is treated more broadly by Taylor 1989.

References

Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.

Checkoway, Barry, et al. 2003. "Young People as Competent Citizens." *Community Development Journal* 38(4): 298–309.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271200117X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Evans, Sara M., and Harry C. Boyte. 1992. *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ginwright, Sean. 2009. *Black Youth Rising: Activism and Radical Healing in Urban America*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press.

Warren, Mark R., and Karen L. Mapp. 2011 *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Warren, Mark R., Meredith Mira, and Thomas Nikundiwe. 2008. "Youth Organizing: From Youth Development to School Reform." *New Directions in Youth Development* 117(Spring): 27–42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271200117X Published online by Cambridge University Press