

# Men without women: An African-American crisis

by [Matthew Johnson](#) in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

*Blood Rituals: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*, by Orlando Patterson

The title of Orlando Patterson's book refers most immediately to the racially motivated lynchings in the old South, which he discusses in the second of the three interlocking essays that make up the text. But it also may speak sharply to the quasi-ritualistic categories in which current ideological debates on race and cultural are embedded. Both old-line liberals and conservatives will object strongly to many of Patterson's claims, and few who are seriously interested in the problems he confronts will be entirely comfortable with what he says. Everyone, however, should find his book challenging and helpful.

The book is the second installment of a trilogy on the legacy of race and slavery. The first, *The Ordeal of Integration*, marked points of progress in race relations. *Blood Rituals* examines the social distortions that took form during slavery, were perpetuated through institutionalized racism and continue to plague both the country and the African-American community. Though the book is organized around the plight of the African-American male, it transcends African-American issues. In the final essay, "American Dionysus," Patterson points out that the current image of African-American men, when decoded and examined, illuminates the entire landscape of modern American popular culture. To understand this image, Patterson argues, is to uncover some of the most enduring sources of our resistance to social progress.

Patterson's arguments are both brilliantly insightful and, at times, speculative. In his first and most controversial essay he diagnoses the African-American situation and shows that the African-American family is in trouble. According to Patterson,

African American men and women of all classes have a terribly troubled relationship. Slavery and the system of racial oppression engendered it, and poverty, economic insecurity, and lingering racism sustain it. But blaming these injustices alone will get them nowhere. Not only because it is Afro-Americans themselves, especially men, who now inflict these wounds upon themselves—through the ways they betray those who love them and bear their progeny, through the ways they bring up or abandon their children, through the ways they relate, or fail to relate, to each other, through the values and attitudes they cherish and the ones they choose to spurn, through their comforting ethnic myths about their neighborhoods, through their self-indulgences, denials and deceptions—but because only they as individual men and women can find the antidote to heal themselves.

Patterson dispels the myth of the coherence and the effectiveness of the extended family in the African-American community. “[African Americans] do not enjoy the main benefits that usually come with dense networks—the security and support of kinsmen,” he insists. “For, contrary to conventional wisdom and ideology, their networks have the smallest proportion of kinsmen of all native-born Americans.”

Although this myth may make people feel good, Patterson contends, an overestimation of the extended family’s health and coherence masks the community’s fragmentation and the epidemic loneliness and isolation it spawns. It grossly overstates the cultural resources available to the community as it confronts a host of continuing difficulties. While Patterson’s realism places him in tension with historian Herbert G. Gutman and others, seeing a difficult problem realistically is an important step in solving it.

For Patterson, another dangerous myth, the myth of the “hood,” amounts to “the belief that viable informal friendship patterns and communities exist, compensating for the breakdown or absence of more formal institutions.” African Americans, he writes, “should stop undermining their own best interests by misguidedly favoring policies that preserve their ghetto neighborhoods, especially in light of the fact that the ‘hood’ itself is not what it has been made out to be.” Elsewhere he states simply, “There are no ‘hoods’ out there, which is precisely why murderous gangs, like opportunistic cancers, rush in to fill the vacuum.”

In his third essay Patterson extends this badly needed de-idealization to such cultural forms as rap. He places rap squarely at the center of a hip-hop culture that reinforces patterns of ignorance and misogyny, and links it to larger cultural forces that debase the popular images of African-American men. He agrees with Martha Bayles's statement that rap has reduced African-American music to a "minstrel version" of violence-obsessed white rock bands. But, he writes, "an even greater tragedy has befallen Afro-American music: it is the fact that while the mass of Afro-American music lovers have embraced the misogynistic, self-loathing noise of 'gangsta' rap—now sponsored mainly by Euro-American companies—they have largely abandoned the authentic music of the blues and jazz."

At the heart of the difficulties plaguing the community—the rise in abusive patterns of child rearing, the festering problems of chemical dependency and violent crime and the self-destructive patterns of African-American lower class youth (particularly male)—lie deeply disturbed gender relations: "For, without consistent and lasting relations between men and women, and without a durable, supportive framework within which children are brought up, a group of people is in deep trouble."

Patterson presents an impressive range of statistical data to support that conclusion. "Not only are Afro-Americans marrying at declining rates, but . . . their marriages are extremely fragile and dissolve at greater rates than those of other groups," he writes.

To make his point, Patterson traces the problematic nature of African-American manhood throughout American history, from the systematic emasculation of men during slavery through the legal and social destruction of the roles of husband and father. Behavioral patterns that arose during slavery continued to undermine gender relations and the family during the area of Jim Crow. But Patterson's ringing moral indictment of contemporary African-American men for the perpetuation of these problems is the most controversial aspect of his book. This indictment is worth quoting at length.

Indeed, if one must assign blame, the major part must surely be placed on the men who so wantonly impregnate these mothers, then abandon them and their children. It is hard to imagine a more execrable form of immorality and irresponsible behavior than that. The worst part of all is that the fathers' immorality and irresponsibility are reproduced in their own sons. The economic deprivation, loneliness, social isolation, stress,

and emotional and physical exhaustion of mothers that account for the mother-child syndrome I have . . . analyzed are all, in the first place, either largely caused or else critically exacerbated by the natural father's betrayal and abandonment. When these factors are added to a tradition of weak child-rearing skills inherited from a traumatized past the resulting disastrous offspring is well nigh inevitable.

Though Patterson points out that what he says here is true only of roughly 35 percent of the African-American population, he often seems to condemn most of the community, and his figures are not always consistent. At one point he argues, more sweepingly, that "sixty percent of Afro-American children are now being brought up without the emotional or material support of a father. This is so because the great majority of Afro-American mothers have been seduced, deceived, betrayed, and abandoned by the men to whom they gave their love and trust."

Insightful and stimulating as Patterson always is, his moral reflections, as distinct from his sociological analyses, leave me uneasy. Not all of his conclusions seem reliable, and his distribution of the weight of culpability can be challenged. He has correctly identified some serious moral issues for the African-American community, but he often oversimplifies a complex problem. In fact, the moral dilemma that Patterson perceives is far more multidimensional than his description of it would suggest. His indictment is largely based on a traditional Christian moral framework and a traditional understanding of the family that centuries of hypocrisy have undermined for many. Larger social processes directly impact the moral quality of individual choices.

That Patterson recognizes this in his second chapter, where he reflects on how the difficulties of the South during the "transitional period" led to the activities of lynch mobs, makes even more striking his disinclination to extend this objectivity to African-American men. He fails to take into account the ongoing "legitimation crisis" of the dominant American tradition within the African-American community—a crisis that has spawned a deep resentment and contempt which undermines constructive moral choice. The popularity of the Nation of Islam and of Islam in general, especially among the community's young men, is only one sign of this crisis.

Patterson's failure on this point is particularly disappointing since he is in a position to offer a rich moral argument that ventures into territory that remains unexplored by both the moralistic stance of the right and the language of victimization on the

left. By integrating his sociological analysis with his moral reflections, Patterson would deepen his discussion of both gender relations and the “criminal” dynamic that is an equally justifiable object of his moral scorn. As it is, he tends to reduce the reasons for ghetto violence and the disproportionate crime rate among African Americans to dysfunctional families. He goes so far as to argue that since “married or otherwise stably partnered men commit far fewer crimes than single ones . . . the far greater crime rate among Afro-American men must in great part be explained by their unmarried and largely unpartnered existence.” But it actually might be true that both the unpartnered state and the disproportionate crime rate are rooted in a common source—the crisis in legitimacy of once-accepted religious and moral traditions.

While many will regard Patterson’s unflinching position that personal responsibility has a part to play in the resolution of African-American difficulties a defection to the enemy, I find his candor encouraging. For both many African Americans and many white liberals, to speak openly of this personal responsibility is, in effect, to exonerate European Americans for their complicity in deeply embedded racist practices. But Patterson’s position highlights the need for African Americans to struggle against forces of disintegration personal as well as social, internal as well as external to the African-American community.

The enemy is not always on the other side of the line. Sometimes he walks in your territory and looks just like you. A consequence of the systematic brutalization of a people is that they sometimes turn on each other, making the oppressor’s task easier and the road to freedom harder. Far too little attention has been paid to this internal dimension of racist oppression.

The cultural climate that supports this inattention makes Patterson’s project courageous. Many African-American leaders and self-styled public intellectuals have been too soft on the pathogenic dynamics that have taken root as a result of racism. “Community is celebrated, especially by urban community leaders and activists,” Patterson writes, but “the truth is that Afro-Americans lead the nation in their unconnectedness to community support groups. The isolation of adult Afro-Americans from each other generates, in turn, numerous psychological, physical and social problems.”

There has also been a tendency to romanticize or idealize African-American culture and institutions—to read cultural responses simplistically as heroic reactions to

oppressive external forces. Ignored is the internal transfiguration of African-American life that often plays itself out within the community in powerfully destructive ways. This romanticizing often obscures the ugliness of complicity and shared culpability.

Patterson himself seems to fall into this romanticization when he fails to require the same personal responsibility of “victimized” African-American women as he does of African-American men. “True, it takes two to be unfaithful, and single Afro-American women who have affairs with married or cohabiting men, especially those with children, should do better,” he writes. But then he concludes that “the marriage market is so bleak for Afro-American women that their behavior in this regard is understandable, if not to be countenanced.”

He convincingly illustrates the distance between African-American women and men on key issues—such as attitudes toward sexuality and commitment to traditional moral codes—that directly impact the health and longevity of heterosexual relationships. Ignorant, self-destructive modes of thought and behavior are glorified in the burgeoning African-American popular culture. A strategy for meeting challenges such as these, however, cannot be based on a theoretically premature moralization of the issues. Patterson, quite justifiably, wants to assume a problem-centered approach—one that doesn’t lose sight of the real practical problems. But in keeping with his overall objective and his guiding metaphor of “diagnosis,” he must not omit from his moral analysis factors that are essential to a full understanding of the crisis. The absence of a full description of the problem and its implications will undermine any formulation of an effective strategy for dealing with it, and deflect the potential impact of his well-intentioned and badly needed project.

Evil works its most sinister designs and weaves its most intricate webs in the lives of the most vulnerable—those who are stressed to the point of moral exhaustion. As John Crossan points out, demonic possession flourished among the lower, oppressed peasant class to whose health and liberation Jesus devoted his life. That this point is missed by many African-American thinkers is nowhere more evident than in the treatment of the African-American church by black theologians and religious thinkers. It is aptly and embarrassingly illustrated by the failure of contemporary African-American church studies adequately to analyze the recent scandal in the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.

The reluctance of African Americans to “air dirty laundry” in public is grounded in a justifiably defensive posture. Anyone growing up in America should be aware of the

twisted nature of those bent on preserving the notion of white supremacy. They should be aware that it is in the presumed defective moral nature of “blacks” that the most sinister forms of reactionary racism remain embedded. African Americans know all too well how likely reactionaries are to twist the kinds of things Patterson points out to their own ends and use his “blackness” to enhance their credibility. But a diagnosis of the malady sickening the African-American community must courageously run that risk. There will always be “knaves that will twist your words to make a trap for fools.” Patterson demonstrates that he is prepared to take on that challenge.