

	<p>Colette Pétonnet  1973, <i>Those People</i>.  <i>The Subculture of a Housing Project</i>  (Ces gens-là), translated by Rita Smidt,  Westport (Connecticut), Greenwood  Press (Contribution in Sociology n°10),  293 p.</p>
---	---

#### Foreword to the Translation by William Foote Whyte

The author of *Those People* presents us with a significant contribution to the literature bearing upon the culture of poverty. The anthropological literature in this area of studies of the urban poor in industrialized nations has been written largely by United States anthropologists, although Oscar Lewis conducted major work along this line in Mexico and Puerto Rico. This study from France enables us to broaden our comparative perspective on a field that is currently the focus of much scholarly controversy.

Colette Pétonnet received her B.A. in psychology at the University of Paris in 1953. During this period of study, she worked for three years in a home for delinquent children. Next, she worked in Morocco for several years, first in government educational programs in the slums of Casablanca and then later for the Ministry of Youth, when she worked on problems of juvenile delinquency. This foreign experience led her into studies in social anthropology. *Those People* grew

out of her doctoral dissertation in that field. Since 1968 she has been with the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research).

With this background of psychology and social anthropology and experience in working on the problems of youth, Mlle. Pétonnet was able to immerse herself in the lives of the people of the public-housing project. She speaks with the authority of a participant observer, presenting us with a remarkably comprehensive picture of economic resources, family life, boys' gangs, the use of space and time, and values and beliefs of the project residents.

We find the housing project isolated from the mainstream of French life. The residents must go outside for education, shopping, entertainment, and political participation. Project residents appear to be looked down upon by those of higher social status and greater economic resources. Yet this isolation does not seem to have produced internal cohesion among project residents. The groupings that have arisen appear to be based upon propinquity in residence for the adults and upon peer group membership for the young people. The residents feel subordinated by the outside world, but appear to take no organized steps to better their position.

We are presented with a picture of people who are struggling to hold their own and are not going anywhere. They work for small gains rather than major changes. School is regarded as a place to learn to read and write, and many people see no need for education beyond that point. They do not recognize the connection, at least for themselves, of education with the ability to cope with more complex problems and therefore to gain higher paying and higher prestige positions. The reading skill they acquire in school is little practiced in the home. If you already have learned to read, why should you bother reading at home?

Television is such a prominent part of life for nearly everybody in the project that we wonder how people lived in these situations before TV. Television seems to provide a vicarious escape from the constraints of the immediate and limited surroundings.

What light does the study throw upon the question of the "culture of poverty"? Indeed, is it useful to think in terms of such a culture of poverty? This study illustrates some of the possibilities and also some of the limitations of research guided by this concept.

While the housing project is composed of people of several distinct ethnic groups, Pétonnet finds similarities as well as differences in culture. In other words, there seem to be some general conditions of living in the housing project that reduce the differences due to ethnic group membership. But at this point, we are faced with a question that this study does not answer. Do the common elements noted by the author arise because the subjects of study are poor people, or do they arise because of the peculiar circumstances of poor people living in a large public-housing project?

We would assume that some of the common elements arise out of the life situation the residents share--low education, low income, low-skilled jobs--and the features that generally accompany these conditions. On the other hand, we would expect that some of these common elements would derive from the peculiar situation of the large housing project. Until we have comparable studies of residents in working-class neighborhoods in a large city in France, we will not be able to sort out the special characteristics that arise out of the housing project and those that are common to lower-class people.

The problem of interpreting the residents' relations with the outside world also points to the need for comparative studies. The housing project appears to be isolated from the city of which it is nominally a part. The residents appear dependent and alienated from the larger society. They seem to feel that they have no control over the political decisions that affect their fate. Since France is known for the centralization of its governmental structures, would we expect that poor people everywhere in France feel that they have little impact upon the decision-making process at the community level? Or is this sense of powerlessness and alienation particularly associated with life in the public-housing project? Questions such as these can only be answered after research into the

lives of people at the same socio-economic level but living in neighborhoods of large cities rather than in the governmentally contrived environment of the housing project.

This suggests a general orientation to the question of the culture of poverty. If that term is to be used as a guide to research, we must recognize that it is useless to try to prove that there is or there is not a culture of poverty. When we find some common elements forming a characteristic pattern of behavior, attitude, and belief, we nevertheless still need to find the elements of the environment that have produced these responses.

It is characteristic of a good study that it raises more questions than it answers. Colette Pétonnet has given us a penetrating view into the lives of a segment of the French working class. The view presented here will take on still more meaning as the author and her colleagues undertake further studies of working-class life in other environments in France.

WILLIAM FOOTE WHYTE