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Persistent Rural Poverty - Summary

In the chapter “Persistent Rural Poverty”, Gene F. Summers analyses the different motives for the persistence of rural poverty in the United States. Before approaching the three main reasons for this issue, the text entails a section dedicated to the roots of poverty in the U.S., as well as a brief definition of poverty, and an explanation of who the rural poor are nowadays.

The first argument for the persistence of rural poverty - deficiencies of the poor - lays on the idea that those who are poor have not made a big enough effort to change their situation or are not naturally capable, for genetic reasons, of doing so. This theory is divided in three sub-theories entitled “culture of poverty”, “human capital theory” and “genetic inferiority”, all of them implying that the poor are genetically inferior and lack the necessary skills to obtain jobs that pay wages above the poverty line. This theory is also used by racists against racial and ethnic minorities to justify the economic disparities, although there is no evidence to support such claims.

The second point – restricted opportunities – defends that impoverishment does not depend on the poor themselves and that they have no control over their economic situation. This is justified by the idea that there are social, political and economic factors that can affect the opportunities given to people. This concept is, too, split in different theories: the first one, labor demand deficiencies, defends that one can only work if there is a demand for the type of work he or she can provide; the second one, discrimination in education, explains that the denial of equal access to adequate education is a major cause of poverty; the third one, discrimination in labor markets, affirms that there are disparities in earnings between rural and urban workers with the same level of education, as well as between minority and white workers and women and men; the fourth one, worker exploitation, points out how the impoverished workers prefer to be exploited by the capitalists (those who own the means of production), than to starve. Moreover, this theory supports that personal deficiencies can only be mentioned after everyone is given equal opportunities.

The third concept advocates that, despite the moral motivations, the government intervention and its policies have failed to create work incentives, encouraging “welfare dependency”. It is also stated that these policies act as a brake on economic growth, instead of creating more opportunities.

To conclude, Summers affirms that these three points are not interchangeable but complementary among one another, for there are too many factors that could affect one’s economic situation, meaning it is impossible to give a definite solution for poverty.