

The Caribbean Zola

Orlando Patterson may be the last of Harvard sociology's big thinkers.

IN THE SPRING of 2012, Brown University hosted an extraordinary academic conference. "Being Nobody?" honored the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *Slavery and Social Death* by Orlando Patterson, Harvard's Cowles professor of sociology. Giving a birthday party for a scholarly book is a rarity in itself. Even more unusual, the symposium's 11 presenters were not sociologists. They were classicists and historians who gave papers on slavery in ancient Rome, the neo-Assyrian empire, the Ottoman Middle East, the early Han empire, West Africa in the nineteenth century, medieval Europe, and eighteenth-century Brazil, among other topics. "I'm not aware of another academic conference held by historians to celebrate the influence of a seminal work by a social scientist writing for a different discipline," says

by CRAIG LAMBERT

Illustrations by GARY KELLEY

John Bodel, professor of classics and history at Brown, one of the organizers.

But Patterson is no ordinary academician. "Orlando is one of a kind—the sheer scope and ambition of his work set him apart from

99 percent of social scientists," says Loïc Wacquant, JF '94, professor of sociology at Berkeley. "In an era when social scientists specialize in ever-smaller objects, he is a Renaissance scholar who takes the time to tackle huge questions across multiple continents and multiple centuries. There was another scholar like this in the early twentieth century, named Max Weber. Orlando is in that category."

PATTERSON is a historical-comparative sociologist who has written extensively on race relations and, especially, slavery and freedom. *Slavery and Social Death* is "a landmark study that has had

very broad and deep impact,” says Goelet professor of medieval history Michael McCormick, who participated in the “Being Nobody?” conference (see “The New Histories,” page 52). Patterson’s *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, a kind of obverse to *Slavery and Social Death*, won the 1991 National Book Award for nonfiction. Like his mentors, Harvard sociologists David Riesman and Seymour Martin Lipset, “Orlando tries to speak to a broader audience,” says Diker-Tishman professor of sociology Christopher Winship. “In many ways, he ranks among Harvard sociology’s last big thinkers—David Riesman, Daniel Bell, Talcott Parsons.”

Impoverished, urban black youths have “deep commitment to some of the most fundamental values of the mainstream—its individualism, materialism, admiration for the military....They are more American than Americans.”

The study of culture—of values, established ideas, traditions, language, customs, learned behaviors, symbolic materials, including the arts, and other nonbiological inheritances—has been central to Patterson’s work. Sociologists often contrast culture with structure: the “hard” variables that include prevailing institutions, distribution of wealth, education, housing, jobs, and other “physical-world” factors. For decades, researchers have debated whether culture informs structure, or vice versa.

Many scholars oversimplify culture by equating it simply with values, Patterson says. This can lead to paradoxes like citing the same cultural complex as the cause of opposite results. “Confucianism was used in the past to explain backwardness in China, before it became successful. The Confucian ethic was supposedly inconsistent with capitalism,” he explains. “Then China becomes economically successful, and suddenly it is the Confucian ethic that explains its success. The same cultural values can move in either direction. So you need a dynamic approach that shows how culture *interacts* with structure.

“Culture is a very tricky concept,” he continues. “It’s like Typhoid Mary—you’ve got to be very careful with it! Most conservatives tend to use the concept in a simplistic way. Liberals are wary of it—there is guilt by association.” That association has roots in the 1966 book *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, which gave an in-depth portrait of a former prostitute living with her sixth husband. Liberal critics attacked Lewis’s “culture of poverty” concept as one that “blamed the victims” for holding values that perpetuated their state: he suggested in *La Vida* and other work that the poor could pass down poverty-related beliefs for generations, and that such values might persist even after people had achieved better circumstances.

“No one talked about culture for a long time,” Patterson says. “Now it is back, but still wishy-washy as a causal explanation. It’s fine now to use culture like [anthropologist] Clifford Geertz does, as an interpretive, symbolic vehicle [in a classic essay on Balinese cockfighting, Geertz interpreted the cocks as symbols of important men in the village], but not as having a causal role

in social structures.”

The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth, edited and to a large degree written by Patterson (with Harvard graduate student Ethan Fosse as co-editor), to be published by Harvard University Press in January, breaks with that convention. “Orlando is first and foremost an iconoclast,” says Winship, and the new book, about impoverished young blacks in American cities, does challenge some received wisdom. It shows not only how much culture matters to these young people, but also their disproportionately large impact on mainstream culture. In October 2003, for exam-

ple, a turning point in the history of American popular culture occurred when “all of the top 10 positions on *Billboard*’s pop chart were filled by black artists, nine of them in the inner-city-created rap genre,” Patterson writes in the new book. “It is hardly to be wondered that the typical Euro-American imagines the African-American population to be somewhere between 23 and 30 percent of the U.S. population, over twice its actual size.”

The Cultural Matrix (with chapters by Winship and by Robert Sampson, Ford professor of the social sciences) may also enlighten some readers by demonstrating black youths’ “deep commitment to some of the most fundamental values of the mainstream—its individualism, materialism, admiration for the military, and insistence on taking near complete responsibility for their own failures and successes,” Patterson writes. The young African Americans are surprisingly self-critical, he notes. For example, he writes that “92 percent of black youth aged 18 to 24 say ‘young black men not taking their education seriously enough,’ is a ‘big problem,’ while 88 percent declare likewise on ‘not being responsible fathers.’” Patterson adds, in an interview, “They are more American than Americans.”

Responsible fatherhood is a particularly sticky issue, one that Patterson has often addressed in his studies of African-American history and culture. Slavery in the American South, he says, left no legacy more damaging than the destruction of the black family—the relations between husband and wife, parent and child. Marriage among slaves was illegal, and slaveholders brutally broke slave families apart by selling off children or parents to other masters. “It is true that many slaves were involved in social units that looked like nuclear families, but these were largely reproductive associations based on fragile male-female relationships,” Patterson says. “In many cases the ‘husbands’ lived on other plantations and needed permission to visit their ‘wives,’ and parents had no custodial claims on their children, who at any time could be sold away from them. To call these units ‘families,’ as revisionist historians have done, is a historical and sociological travesty.”

In his 1965 *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (the “Moynihan Report”), Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had taught government at Harvard and was then assistant secretary of labor under President Lyndon Johnson, argued that the relative absence of nuclear families among black Americans, and the relatively large numbers of families headed by single mothers—both traceable to slavery and Jim Crow segregation—were a root cause of African-American poverty. Black leaders attacked the report, accusing it of stereotyping black Americans (particularly men), perpetuating

cultural bias, and setting back the civil-rights movement. “Moynihan became the *bête noire* of sociology. He took a terrible beating from academics,” Patterson says. “It was so unfair. He was an architect of the War on Poverty—the most radical national agenda for black people in American history. The critics all admit that slavery was horrible, but balk at the idea that the destructive impact has consequences today. Yet you cannot neglect slavery’s effects on the black family as a critical component of African-American life.”

Patterson and Moynihan befriended each other as Harvard colleagues, and when the University awarded Moynihan, by then retired from the U.S. Senate, an honorary degree in 2002, Patterson served as his escort at Commencement. Five years later, the American Academy of Political and Social Science and Harvard’s sociology department and Du Bois Institute (now part of the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research) co-sponsored a conference of sociologists and economists, “The Moynihan Report Revisited.” “The conclusion they had come around to,” Patterson says, “was that he was right.”

SLAVERY is a crucial part of Patterson’s cultural heritage. He grew up in Jamaica, a country that endured almost two centuries of ruthless slavery under British rule. He wanted to understand how “the horrendous colonial past of slavery, and then a pretty oppressive

post-emancipation era of 124 years, shape the present in terms of poverty and underdevelopment. In the Caribbean, that is a very radical position: it’s part of the neo-Marxian analysis of the plantation system. One of the great ironies of my life is that when I raise the same questions in the American context, because of the complexities of race here, people see it as *conservative*: ‘You’re blaming the victim! We don’t want to hear about the past—we want to hear about how present-day economic inequalities explain the plight of African Americans.’ But where I come from—both the British New Left and the Caribbean neo-Marxists—history is critical.”

History rolls through every page of Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death*. “Slavery has existed all over the world,” he says, even if many Americans imagine it was unique to the antebellum South. “I asked if there were any common attributes to slavery that differentiate it from other forms of oppression, like serfdom,” he says. “What I came up with is that the fundamental feature of being a slave is that slaves are *socially dead*—both metaphorically and literally. They have no recognized legal existence in the society. They do not belong to the community, because they belong only to the master, and exist only through the master. I use the concept of *natal alienation*: they have no rights at birth. This doesn’t mean slaves don’t have communities of their own—they did have a slave life, a slave village. But in the eyes of non-slaves they do not be-



long, they are non-citizens. So after the United States abolished slavery, one of the first things they had to do was to amend the Constitution to make slaves citizens!

“The idea of social death became very powerful, very useful, especially in explaining what happens after slavery is formally ended,” he continues. “For example, Southern Americans, and Americans generally, found it so hard to accept black Americans after slavery was abolished. The *culture* of slavery still persisted, which is the idea that ‘you do not belong.’ They were nobodies; people were horrified at the idea that they could vote, like citizens. It even lingers to this day. What is the thing people who don’t like Obama say? They try to make out that he doesn’t have a birth certificate—that he doesn’t *belong*. Even a black president does not belong!”

AN UNEXPECTED OUTGROWTH of Patterson’s study of the socio-historical significance of slavery was his shift to the study of freedom. “I had gone in search of a man-killing wolf called slavery; to my dismay I kept finding the tracks of a lamb called freedom,” he writes in the preface to *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. “A lamb that stared back at me, on our first furtive encounters in the foothills of the Western past, with strange, uninnocent eyes. Was I to believe that slavery was a lamb in wolf’s clothing? Not with my past. And so I changed my quarry.” Patterson’s iconoclasm also informs this work. “The idea of freedom is seen as ‘inherent’—so there is nothing to explain,” he says. “[The idea is that] ‘Every-

body wants to be free because it is part of the human condition.’ That’s nonsense. Freedom as a value, as a cherished part of one’s culture, as something to strive for and die for, is *unusual* in human history. You can’t just take it for granted. So the question turns into, how did freedom become important? My explanation is that freedom emerged as the antithesis to the social death of slavery.”

Under slavery, he explains, there were three groups of people: masters, slaves, and non-slaves. “All three come to discover this thing we call *freedom* through their relationships. For the master, freedom is being able to do what you please with another person: freedom as power. For the slave—well, what does a slave yearn for? To be emancipated, to get rid of the social death that is slavery. Masters *encourage* this notion of freedom, too, as the hope of manumission is one of the most powerful ways to get a slave to work. The third group, the non-slaves or freemen, look at the slaves and say, ‘We are not them. We are born free.’ Suddenly, being born free becomes important, in a way it never could be for slaves. Freemen have a different status in society, one that does not depend on their socioeconomic class.

“If you go deep into Indo-European languages, the linguistic evidence is fascinating,” he continues. “The most ancient root of *freedom* is a word that means *beloved* or *belonging*. The people who first celebrated freedom were non-slaves who recognized the virtue of being born free, and belonging to a community of free people—the beloved. These three forms of freedom lie at the roots of democracy, and the first place it emerged was from the slave culture of ancient Greece.”

BORN IN JAMAICA in 1940, Patterson is the son of Charles and Almina Patterson, a police detective and a seamstress. His parents separated for several years, but eventually reunited. Patterson spent much of his boyhood in the small rural town of May Pen, which, like Jamaica generally, had an almost entirely black population. One day when he was about eight or nine, a one-room library opened under a pavilion in the town park, and the boy was astonished to learn that you could borrow books there. “Borrow books?” he recalled asking the librarian, in a 2013 interview in *small axe*, a Caribbean journal of criticism. “So I found myself going to this place with the smell of brand-new books, and I could take any book I wanted. It was amazing! I used to go there, and read and read and read....That was a *transformative* experience. I just read. Instead of shooting birds or swimming in the Rio Minho river, I’d go to the library.”

He rose to the top of his classes. Patterson’s mother was a strong-willed, intelligent woman who emphasized education; she made her son her “project.” He won a scholarship to the University College of the West Indies in Kingston, then an overseas college of London University, hoping to study history, but was involuntarily funneled into the new economics program. In 1965, he earned his Ph.D. in sociology at the London School of Economics (LSE), and married Nerys Thomas, Ph.D. ’81, a Welsh scholar of Celtic literature. (The couple divorced many years ago and Thomas has since died. They had two daughters, Rhiannon and Barbara.) Patterson cut quite a figure on the London literary scene, publishing three novels, the first when he was 23, as well as essays in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *New Statesman*, and *New Left Review*, serving on its



editorial board. The LSE appointed him to its faculty.

The early 1960s gave the young sociologist a golden opportunity to witness cultural change close-up. When he arrived in Britain in 1962, "It was still a gray, staid, uptight country," he recalls. "It was pre-Beatles. You didn't think of popular culture or fashion when you thought of Britain—they were just imperialists who played cricket. Then, overnight, there was a cultural revolution, and not just music—also theater, and fashion, with Mary Quant. Suddenly it exploded, right in front of our eyes. It showed how important culture is, and how it can change radically, and very quickly. When I hear sociologists talking about culture being slow, thick, and hard to change, I want to say, 'What are you talking about? You should have lived in Britain in the Sixties!'"

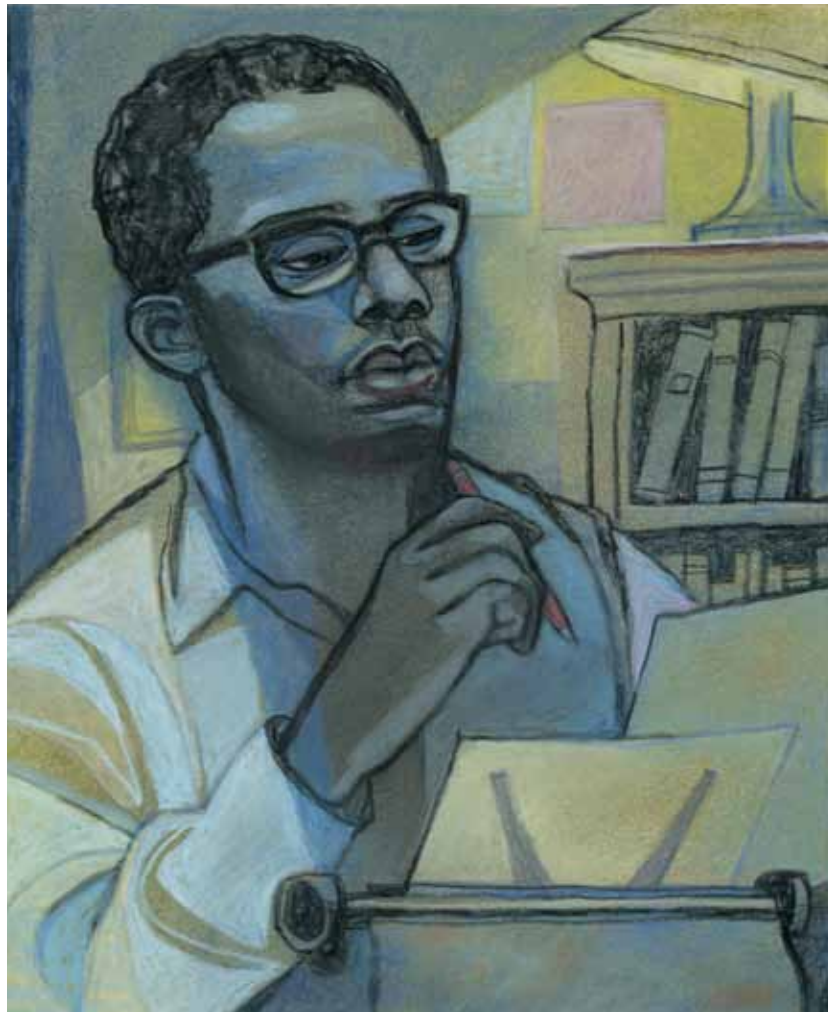
Patterson's first academic book, *The Sociology of Slavery* (1967), gave an historical account and analysis of Jamaican slavery across three centuries and was very well received. But his career in fiction started just as strongly. Two novels set in Jamaica, *The Children of Sisyphus* and *An Absence of Ruins*, appeared in England between 1964 and 1967. (Both have been recently reissued.) A third, *Die the Long Day*, set in Jamaican slave society, was published in 1972.

As its title implies, *Sisyphus* took inspiration, in part, from Camus: set amid the extreme poverty of the "Dungle," an urban shantytown in Kingston, it stands as a fair argument for the hopelessness of the human condition. The novel contains one of the first portrayals of the Rastafari, the religious cult made world-famous by reggae superstar Bob Marley, and about which, Patterson says, there has been "a lot of romanticizing. I thought Rastafarianism was their attempt at making symbolic sense of their condition. They thought [Ethiopian emperor Haile] Selassie was God. In reality, Selassie was an authoritarian who was eventually deposed." Throughout *Sisyphus*, Patterson's dialogue flawlessly renders the Jamaican patois, as in this street encounter with a middle-class woman, related by a Dungle laundress:

"Me see you a'ready," she say, "is wha' yu doin' in dis part o' Kingston?, so me ask her if is any o' her business an' same time she say, "Ah 'member wha' ah see you now, you come from de Dungle, you is a Dungle pickney, ah can smell it 'pon you, wha' yu ah do in good people place?"

The *Daily Telegraph* headline on *Sisyphus* called Patterson the "Caribbean Zola." With talent in both sociology and fiction, he had to make a choice. The turning point came when he went to tea at the home of George Lamming, an award-winning Barbadian novelist who had published several books and lectured widely. Lamming owned no car. Patterson had to change trains three times to get to Lamming's home in "the wilds" of North London. He found the address, and it was a neat cottage, "a pleasant house," he thought. But Lamming, it turned out, resided in a bed-sitter (a one-room studio) above the cottage. On leaving, Patterson thought, "Well, this is not the life for me." He had his parents to look after, and didn't feel he could gamble on the literary life. There was a secure career available in the academy.

PATTERSON WAS IN ENGLAND during the watershed moment in 1962 when Jamaica achieved full independence by leaving the Federation of the West Indies. A few years later, despite his suc-



cessful life in London, he felt a pull to return home. In 1967 he resigned from the LSE to take up an appointment at the University of the West Indies, and built a house in Jamaica. Then, while guest-teaching at Roosevelt University in Chicago in the summer of 1969, he got an unexpected phone call from Harvard's Talcott Parsons, a high-level theorist and one of the most prominent sociologists alive. Parsons offered Patterson a visiting professorship in African-American studies and sociology. He accepted, and soon gravitated toward the latter.

As a Jamaican who grew up as part of a racial majority, Patterson had not been socialized to feel like part of a minority group. Without a personal history of racial discrimination by a majority group, he hadn't experienced the slights and affronts that assail Americans of color daily. "I never felt awkward here," he says of the United States. "Not having been raised in a predominantly white society, you don't see racism, even when it is all around you." Furthermore, in Jamaica, the focus was on Oxford, Cambridge, and the LSE, not the Ivy League. "So being the second black professor at Harvard [after Martin Kilson, now Thomson professor of government emeritus] was no big deal to me, though it seemed to be for others," he recalls. "I came from the British system where there was no affirmative action, no pressure to appoint blacks, so I took it all in stride." He has remained at Harvard ever since, and now lives near the Square with his second wife, Anita (Goldman) Patterson '83, Ph.D. '92, a Boston University professor of English

whom he married in 1995, and their 10-year-old daughter, Kaia.

But his Jamaican ties remain strong. Patterson met Michael Manley when the trade-union leader visited the University of the West Indies when Patterson was a prominent, politically active senior—one of the “young Turks” who were the first generation of Caribbean students to study social science. The two men hit it off.

When Manley won the Jamaican prime ministry in 1972, he appointed Patterson as his special adviser, and the scholar began living two lives. For four to five months annually until 1980, during summers and at Christmas, he changed his clothes to tropical fabrics and departed the academic calm of Widener for the political turbulence of Kingston, where he wrote reports, did a major study on the living conditions of the poor of Kingston, and fed Manley ideas for helping his new leftist government implement a democratic socialist revolution.

It was hardly easy. Manley (who served as prime minister until 1980, and again from 1989 to 1992) “drove Jimmy Carter crazy,” Patterson says, and at one point “the CIA came after us.” (After Manley was photographed embracing Fidel Castro on a 1975 visit to Havana, “there were strong suspicions that the CIA was trying to destabilize the Manley government,” Patterson explains.) The left wing of Manley’s party, which had little actual power but did include bona fide communist D.K. Duncan, who held a minor ministry in the government, was “scaring the hell out of the middle class,” which fled the island; at one point Jamaica

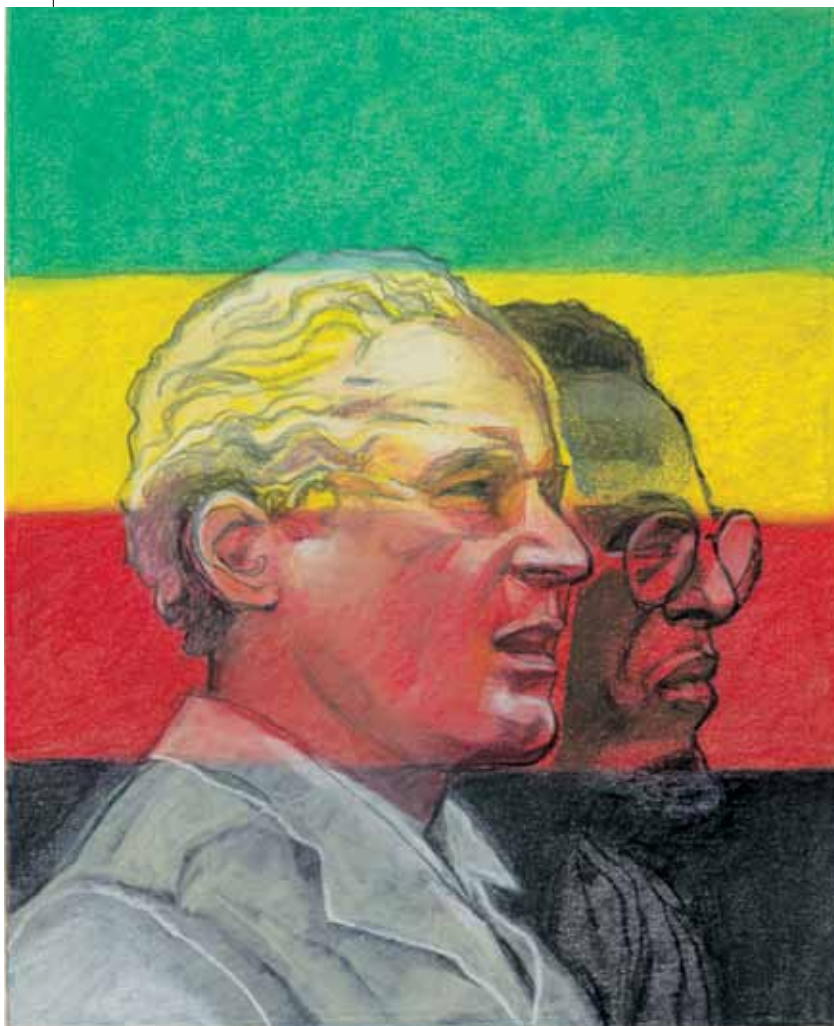
was down to two dentists and not many more doctors. In such a transition, “you need managers more than ever,” Patterson says. “You can’t implement things with hotheads who couldn’t run a chicken coop.”

Instead of demolishing tenements to build high-rise public housing “for the 5 percent, while kicking the other 95 percent out to another slum,” Patterson advocated “urban upgrading,” bringing in services like water, electricity, daycare, health centers. “It will still look like a slum, but it is a more livable slum,” he says. “The minister of housing *hated* my plan.” Patterson did put into place a program that sold 12 essential items to the poor at highly subsidized prices. “It was one of the worthiest things I’ve ever done,” he says. “It meant that thousands went to bed each night, not starving.” Eventually, though, he decided, “I am willing to be a public intellectual, but not a politician or revolutionary. Scholarship is what I wanted to do.”

Alongside his scholarship, Patterson has also taught sociology, emphasizing culture, and has earned a national presence as a public intellectual in the United States. As a teacher, “I try to get my students to be open to different approaches, and not to latch onto the latest bandwagon,” he says. “David Riesman and Marty Lipset always encouraged me to stay a little on the ‘outside.’” Consequently, Patterson is very critical of “people who try to set ‘agendas’ as a way of making a name for themselves. They love to call their agenda a ‘new paradigm,’ and promote it as an agenda for the discipline. That usually leads to dogma, and I am hostile to dogma.”

He has skewered dogmas in numerous op-ed essays in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, and has appeared on the PBS *News Hour* and *Hardball* with Chris Matthews on MSNBC. “I always just write what I think,” he says of his op-eds. “I don’t consider the political or social repercussions.” Though his credentials as a political progressive are unimpeachable, his freethinking essays often upend the settled pieties of academic culture.

In the aftermath of the dramatic 1991 Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in the U.S. Senate, for example, Patterson’s *New York Times* op-ed “Race, Gender, and Liberal Fallacies” insisted that readers face “certain stark sociological realities,” however disconcerting. One such reality related to the allegation of sexual harassment Anita Hill made about Thomas’s behavior when she was his subordinate at work. Though Patterson found Thomas’s legal credentials inadequate for the Supreme Court, and identified himself as a feminist, he went on to assert: “Now to most American feminists, and to politicians manipulating the nation’s lingering Puritan ideals, an obscenity is always an obscenity, an absolute offense against God and the moral order; to everyone else, including all professional social linguists and qualitative sociologists, an obscene expression, whether in Chaucerian Britain or the American South, has to be understood in context.” For Hill to raise Thomas’s bawdy remarks 10 years later was “unfair and disingenuous,” he wrote, the latter because she “has lifted a verbal style that carries only minor sanction in one subcultural context and thrown it in the overheated cultural arena of mainstream, neo-Puritan America, where it incurs professional extinction.” This essay cost Patterson friendships. Yet, some years later, Anita Hill



invited him to contribute to a book she was editing, and he happily did so. His philosophy is that “what we do as public sociologists must inform our discipline, too.”

THAT DISCIPLINE ITSELF can be revolutionary, as sociological analysis of the past can clarify the roots of present conditions. For example, Patterson’s first book, on Jamaican slavery, remains the benchmark work on the subject. “Jamaica was the largest and most productive of the British colonies.

There was lots of money made from the sugar and coffee plantations,” he explains. “It was like an oil field, or a gold mine—in fact, sugar used to be called ‘brown gold.’ But the British in Jamaica made a harsh decision. Though some slave children did survive, there were high rates of infant mortality. So plantation owners focused on buying their Jamaican slaves from Africa as young adults, then literally worked them to death in eight years or so. Then they’d just buy another slave as a replacement. The demand for slaves in Jamaica far outran the supply from local births; astonishingly, the small island of Jamaica imported more slaves than the United States. Yet by the 1820s—even though the slave trade was abolished in Great Britain and the United States in 1807—the United States had far *more* slaves than Jamaica, because American masters encouraged reproduction and their slaves could be more cheaply provisioned.

“The money made in Jamaica did not stay there but went back to the owners in Britain,” he continues. “Those great English mansions were built on the backs of Jamaican slaves. The owners were not present on the plantations exercising any proprietary self-interest in their slaves. Instead, they left running the estate to overseers and slave drivers—people with no interest in preserving the slave stock. So they worked them as hard as possible. There were many slave revolts. Jamaica had the harshest system of slavery in world history.”

This sets the stage, he says, for understanding modern Jamaica, an economically underdeveloped and politically disorganized country relative to many of its Caribbean neighbors. Though many social scientists seem obsessed with change, “it is also important to explain continuity and persistence, which is one of the themes that has stayed with me,” Patterson notes. “The problem of persistence has finally emerged as an important one for economic historians. It takes the form of the role of institutions and institutional persistence.”

A lively debate now roils economic history regarding which is more important in determining prosperity: good *policies* or good *institutions*. MIT economist Daron Acemoglu (who has collaborated with Florence professor of government James Robinson; see “Why Nations Fail,” July-August 2012, page 9) argues that institutions—such as respect for private property and strong schools—are decisive. The “policy” advocates admit that although institutions are important, enlightened social and economic policies will give rise to good institutions. Both camps recognize, of course, that both policies and institutions are crucial; they disagree only over priority.

In *Turnaround* (2013), Jamaican economist Peter Blair Henry, dean of New York University’s Stern School of Business, argued the “policies” position by comparing Barbados and Jamaica: two

black Caribbean societies that took their institutions from their British colonial rulers and became independent in the early 1960s. “Fast forward half a century, and Barbados has been very successful, while Jamaica is having problems,” Patterson says. “So, Henry says, it couldn’t be the institutions, which are similar—it must be the policies in Barbados that made the difference.”

Patterson is joining the debate with a long paper on the subject. “If you look at history, you find something else,” he says. “It is not

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just institutions, but playing the institutional game the *right* way. A lot of African countries had great institutions set up: Zimbabwe is theoretically a democracy, but does Robert Mugabe actually get elected democratically? And factories are fine, but they are useless if you don’t have the know-how to *run* a factory.

“In Barbados, the colonial elite was ruthlessly efficient and brutal, but at all levels of society, they used black citizens—who thereby acquired the institutional knowledge,” he continues. “There were black policemen, black artisans, black bureaucrats—they got hired even at the expense of poor whites. Right after slavery ended, Barbados abolished the militia, which had been composed of poor whites. They instead created a police force and gave those jobs to blacks, as the elite had decided that the local poor whites were a degenerate, incompetent group. When independence came in 1966, they were already way ahead of the game: they knew what they were doing. They knew how to run a democracy and a court system. They did a much better job educating black citizens. In 1946 Barbadian blacks already had a literacy rate of more than 90 percent; at independence it was close to 100 percent, and today UNESCO ranks the island as one of the five most literate countries in the world.

“The history in Jamaica was very different,” he continues. “Yes, Jamaica did have black civil servants and a colored middle class, but that was far more the case in Barbados. Schools were much more efficient in Barbados. Jamaica had an Afro-Jamaican culture where the peasants were involved: that’s where reggae came from, and it’s a big reason for the cultural vitality of Jamaica. There was not the same degree of acculturation to British ways. Today, Jamaica has a democracy, too, but a very shaky one: hundreds of people die at elections—there’s endemic violence, class conflict, and corruption, and it will have to solve those problems before it can move forward. No one dies during elections in Barbados; Freedom House considers it one of the most democratic countries.”

This is the power of cultural and historical analysis, as practiced by Harvard’s answer to Max Weber, or its Caribbean Zola. Yes, structure, policies, and institutions matter. And another thing that matters a great deal is culture, the legacy that history leaves. ▢

Craig A. Lambert ’69, Ph.D. ’78, is deputy editor of this magazine.