

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 5, 2017,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Lee Rainwater  
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## LEE RAINWATER

BORN: January 7, 1928

DIED: July 4, 2015

Lee Rainwater, Professor of Sociology, *Emeritus*, in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, passed away on July 4, 2015, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was 87 years old.

Over his academic career, Rainwater published twenty books and well over a hundred articles. Throughout, Rainwater's scholarship was concerned with the nature and consequences of poverty and economic inequality. His early work, best exemplified by his influential book *Behind Ghetto Walls*, was based on interviews and participant observation. *Behind Ghetto Walls* documented the horrid conditions in Saint Louis's notorious public housing project, Pruitt-Igoe. Much of the book described the life of the housing project's residents—their attempts to deal unemployment, poverty more generally, strained family relations, and promiscuous sexual relations. Although Rainwater, like many other scholars of his time, believed that there was a culture of poverty, he argued that the culture was an adaptation to the high levels of income inequality in U.S. society, not an autonomous entity of its own as many others were claiming. A year after the publication of Rainwater's book, Pruitt-Igoe was torn down.

Rainwater's research took a dramatic turn with the Moynihan report controversy, arguably the most heated controversy over the relationship between race and poverty of the second half of the twentieth century. Harvard's Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor, had first shown that the rates of children being born out of wedlock in what was then called the Negro community were rapidly rising. Furthermore, the rates of out of wedlock births were no longer associated with the unemployment rate as they had been in the past. The assumption many made was that Moynihan, in the classic phrase of the time, was "blaming the victim."

With William L. Yancey, Rainwater documented, analyzed, and provided commentary from a host of others, including Moynihan himself, on the controversy in their book, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. Subsequently, Rainwater's own research would become far more quantitative and removed from the day-to-day lives of the poor.

Throughout his academic writings, Rainwater argued that poverty should be measured in relative, not absolute, terms. Poverty was not just a matter of one's ability to meet basic needs, but also one's status relative to others. His most ambitious attempt to show that ordinary people also understood poverty in relative terms came in his 1974 book, *What Money Buys*. The analyses in the book were based on a survey of 600 Bostonians, who were asked a range of questions about what constituted poverty. Rainwater was able to make a convincing case that people thought that poverty was not just a matter of an inability to meet basic needs, but also a function of one's diminished social standing and resulting exclusion from society's core institutions.

The most lasting impact of Rainwater's work will likely be his co-founding in 1983 of the Luxembourg Income Study, now known as "LIS: Cross-National Data Center in Luxembourg." Rainwater developed LIS over time to provide researchers with comparable microdata, mainly focused on household income, across countries. A decade after LIS was founded, it became enormously influential, following the 1995 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development publication titled *Income Distribution in OECD Countries: Evidence from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS)*, a study that Rainwater co-authored with Anthony Atkinson and Timothy Smeeding. At first, LIS covered only high-income countries, with data available at approximately five-year intervals. Today, it covers over fifty high- and middle-income countries, with data available at three-year intervals. For a host of researchers, LIS has become the primary database for comparative research on household and individual economic well-being. More than 6,000 researchers have used the LIS data and LIS currently lists over 600 research papers based on the data.

In the later decades of his career, most of Rainwater's research was based on analyses using the LIS database. His book *Poor Kids in a Rich Country*, co-authored with Timothy Smeeding, used the LIS data to compare the economic status of children in the United States to those in other rich countries. They found that children in the U.S. were far worse off and substantially more likely to be living in poverty—considering both relative and absolute income levels—than their counterparts in other countries. Importantly, they showed that this was not primarily due to cross-national differences in demographics, such as the share of children in single-parent households or their ethnic or racial composition. Rather, it was a function of country-level public policies. In essence, the high levels of child poverty in the United States were the result of decisions made by American policymakers.

Rainwater's other important LIS-based book, *Wealth and Welfare States*, co-authored with Timothy Smeeding and Irwin Garfinkel, provides a comparison of welfare states across a set of rich countries. Using convincing evidence, they showed that the United States was a laggard in its provision of both social insurance and social assistance but had once been a leader in public education, although it was no longer. They took on the argument that large

welfare states undermine economic productivity and growth, arguing that just the opposite is true.

Rainwater was born January 7, 1928, in Oxford, Mississippi. As a college student, he bypassed the B.A. degree and earned an M.A. degree in sociology in 1951 and Ph.D. in human development in 1954 from the University of Chicago. He started his career in Chicago at Social Research, Inc., where he worked for 13 years. In 1963 he moved to Washington University in Saint Louis where he was a professor of sociology and anthropology. In 1969 he then moved to Harvard. After 24 years at Harvard, he retired in 1993.

Lee was well loved by all, but particularly by his family and by his colleagues and students. He was a gentle and quiet man of modest demeanor despite his considerable intellect and scholarly accomplishments.

Respectfully submitted,

Orlando Patterson  
Mary C. Waters  
Christopher Winship, Chair