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THE CULTURE OF POVERTY
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THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

"THE CULTURE OF POVERTY" and Basic Personality

Oscar Lewis describes in this way his idea of the Culture of Poverty:

"For those who think that the poor have no culture, the idea of a culture of poverty may seem contradictory. It would appear to give poverty a certain dignity and status. This is not my intention. In the anthropological sense, the word culture refers, essentially to a way of life handed down from generation to generation. By applying this idea of culture to the understanding of poverty, I wish to draw attention to the fact that poverty in modern countries is not only a state of economic privation, of disorganization or the absence of something. It is likewise something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a reasoned posture, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly survive. In short, it is a notably stable and persistent system of life which has been handed down from generation to generation in certain families. The culture of poverty has its own nuances and proper consequences of a social and psychological order for its members. It is a dynamic factor which limits participation in the broader scope of national culture and becomes a sub-culture in itself."

In summary, "the culture of poverty? is:

1. A way of life, a stable and persistent system of behaviour
2. by means of which the poor adapts to his situation
3. which is handed down from generation to generation

4. a typical phenomenon of modern countries which arises surrounded by similar characteristics in all countries because it does not flow from different national cultures but from the objective situation in which the poor must operate.

So described, the culture of poverty is seen in direct relation to the idea of "basic personality" as developed by Kardiner based on the works of Ainsworth (2). For Kardiner, the ego is defined as "the sum total of all the processes of adaptation", "the organ of continuity and of the organization of experience". Although sensible to the impulse of the interior world, its principal function is not to channel these impulses but rather to adapt to the external world: the objective world perceived and the social world lived. The Freudian idea of the unconscious as center of gravity of the psychological mechanisms is substituted by the idea of the physical and social world known by means of perception. Adaptation to reality replaces the sublimation of the libido as fundamental determining agent of the structure of the personality, or more exactly, of the "matrix" within which the personality will be structured later. This "matrix" is the basic personality.

The aspects of the social and physical world which mold the Basic Personality are those which the individual finds in the first place and which therefore confront the individual with the fundamental and inevitable problems of adaptation ("Primary Institutions").

In the social world: the institutions which organize the structure, govern its work and maintain a certain "order" of society in relation to which are defined the rights and the duties of the individual. (3)

In the physical world: a geographic medium is necessary to know and rule in order to survive; a certain kind of work, flowing from the demands of the environment, a system of production with technical and commercial characteris-

tics which conform to the world of economics as a result of the division of labor; an abundance or shortage of foodstuffs, alternating prosperity and poverty as the result of the greater or lesser amount of wealth produced.

Both worlds--the social and the physical--are in reality only one world in the perception of the individual; the social structure is to a great extent the result of the economic structure, and viceversa, the production and distribution of goods depends as much on the social structure as on the natural resources and on technology. "The economic factor is found at the crossroads of the natural and the cultural" (M. Dufrenne)

It is obvious that what is most important for the child is most important for the adult. The whole personality of the normal adult is not reduced to the experience of infancy. But there is growing evidence that the mechanisms of adaptation to the world developed in infancy exercise a permanent influence on the most complexly-structured behaviour patterns of the adult (4).

This description--necessarily simplified--of the idea of basic personality, will help us understand the psycho-sociological mechanism which originates the "culture of poverty."

The different characteristics which Oscar Lewis ascribes to it all lead to a socio-economic world which is exactly what the poor in any country of the modern world have in common.

The typical conditioning factors of poverty appear early in the context of contemporary economy.

"The economic characteristics of the culture of poverty include a constant fight for life, periods of unemployment and sub-employment, low salaries, a diversity of non-descript jobs, child labor, no savings, chronic absence of cash, lack of food reserves in the home, the system of buying small quantities of food, often on a day to day basis as they are needed, the pawning of perso-

nal articles, borrowing from local money-lenders at high rates of interest, spontaneous and informal lending services organized by some neighbors and the use of second-hand clothing and furniture." (5)

The environment--deprived areas downtown and on the outskirts of big cities--is translated in terms of uncomfortable and confining urban housing, poorly equipped in community and social services.

Based on this "physical world", one can understand the attitude of the poor in relation to the social world, which originates and supports it: The critical attitude toward some of the values and institutions of the ruling classes, hatred of the police, distrust of the government and those who occupy government posts as well as a cynicism which extends even to the Church, give the culture of poverty a contrary quality and a potential which can be used in political movements directed against the existing social order". (7) Along the same lines one can trace their mistrust of agencies and institutions which pretend to solve their problems and also of professional men such as doctors and priests to whom they go very seldom and only under the most extreme of circumstances. "Foreigners in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs, those who live within the culture of poverty have a strong sense of marginality, of destitution, of dependence, of not belonging to anything.(8)

This vision of the physical and social world explains psychologically the characteristics with which Lewis describes the behaviour of members of "the culture of poverty", "A gregarious sense, high incidence of alcoholism, frequent recourse to violence to solve difficulties, frequent use of physical violence in the formation of children, beating his wife, early initiation to sexual life, common law marriages or not legalized, relatively high percentage of abandoned mothers and children, a tendency toward mother-centered families,

and greater knowledge of maternal relatives, preponderance of the nuclear family, a strong predisposition toward authoritarian rule and a great insistence on ideal family solidarity which is rarely reached. Other characteristics include an orientation toward the present with relatively poor capacity to postpone his wishes and plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism based on the realities of the difficulties of life, a belief in masculine superiority which finds its peak expression in "machismo", that is, the cult of masculinity, a corresponding martyr complex among the women, and finally, a great tolerance toward psychological pathology of all kinds."

On the other hand, their worldview is limited to their own environment: "Those who live within a culture of poverty have a poor sense of history. They are people who are not part of the mainstream; who know only their problems, their local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own particular way of life. In general they do not have the knowledge, nor the vision, nor the ideology needed to compare their problems to those of their counterparts in other parts of the world. In other words, they have no class awareness although they are very sensitive to distinctions in social position." (9)

It is not difficult to see how a severe and constant frustration induced by the physical and social world, generates as a defense mechanism a retreat from the world (alcoholism, fatalism, passivity, feminine masochism, inability to bring oneself to be aware of the future) and an uncontrolled aggressiveness (violence toward children, women, chance adversaries) and a compulsive need for immediate gratification without considering past commitments or future consequences.

This aggregate of characteristics is the expression of that "matrix" which is the basic personality of the poor who live in the "culture of poverty".

2. URBANIZATION AND THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

Historically, the rise of the "culture of poverty" in the Latin American

countries is linked to the process of urbanization of the underdeveloped countries.

The process of urbanization is not peculiar to such countries. What is exclusively theirs is the meaning this phenomenon conveys. In already industrialized countries, urbanization is the result of a redistribution of the work force, increasingly unnecessary in rural areas where production is highly mechanized. In underdeveloped countries the mechanics of the process is to some degree independent from economic and technological factors and conversely is strongly linked to psychological factors. Rural migration--the principal agent of Latin American urban growth--is explainable in terms of an "anticipated socialization" of the rural and semi-rural masses, whose frame of reference is the urban middle class: its values, its way of life, its consumption habits its motivations and its aspirations. Multiple investigations carried out in the large cities of the region reveal the existence of this "anticipated socialization", its influence on the decision to migrate and the persistence to live in the city despite the obvious disadvantages which this represents for many migrants.

This "anticipated socialization" is brought about by different channels opened by the growing influence of the city over the country; new systems of trade and the opening of new work markets which expose the rural man to contact with the urban man; the new techniques of mass communication with their eminently urban content; the opening of new means of communication which shorten distances and the cost of geographic mobility toward the city in areas which were practically isolated until recent times; compulsory military service for the men and the demand for domestic service for the women which transplant youths of both sexes from a traditional world to an internationalized one, microscopic communications by means of family ties which contaminate the younger and more active segment of each family group with the hopes and

the successes of the first migrants.

It should be pointed out that the frame of reference is not the objective situation of the urban middle class, but the "image" that this middle class projects and the possibility of identifying with it that the migrant conjures up on the basis of the information that these channels afford him. It could be said that the anticipated socialization of the migrant happens in relation to a mythology of the way of life of the middle class and the possibility that the city offers to attain it. Such mythology generates a kind of blind faith in personal and family success which can persist despite repeated objective failures. All that these failures are able to produce in the personal attitude of the migrant is to transfer his own expectations and aspirations to his children, trying, for example, to make it possible for them to attain a university education and professional training. The "culture of poverty" was born in this context; there would not be a "culture of poverty" in the same economic conditions if these were not seen in relation to the "image" of a prosperous urban world and the possibility of being included within its perimeter--without these conditions there would be poverty, but this poverty would not generate the psychological mechanisms described by Lewis. They are the result of the frustration of the aspiration to become integrated to that world the migrant thought accessible by means of transferring to another place. When the structure of the city itself with its invisible social barriers hinders this access, there starts developing the "basic personality" which expresses itself in "the culture of poverty".

If this analysis is exact, "the culture of poverty" is the result of the virtual lack of upward social mobility that the two-class social structure of the Latin American cities determines for the migrants from the traditional areas.

3. POVERTY and IMPOVERISHMENT

Different American authors--for example Matza,--have pointed out the distinction between poverty and impoverishment. Poverty is a situation of current economic limitation; impoverishment is poverty becoming constantly and inevitably worse. A poor situation is in itself ambiguous. Within a social structure of sufficient social capillarity it (poverty) is the starting point of personal or family ascent (transitory situation); within a rigidly stratified structure it (poverty) is the beginning of a constant individual and family fall (structural situation). The latter case is one of impoverishment and is the situation corresponding to "the culture of poverty".

Metropolitan urban areas are the geographic areas where the signs of economic growth and social modernization are more rapidly evident. In relation to this growth, a static situation which does not become worse in absolute terms, but does not get better in proportion to the total betterment of the urban areas, is in concrete terms, a progressive deterioration.

In this context what has been referred to as "demonstration effect" and from the psychologico-social point of view "the revolution of growing expectations" makes sense.

The phenomenon is typically "psycho-functional." The migrant is shown how the urban man can live--or what apparently is the life of the man of the middle class who embodies urban life because it is the frame of reference--with resources he does not own and which allow him to satisfy newly perceived needs but in new ways he knows nothing about. In this "showing" the desires and the aspirations of the migrant acquire new dimensions and suffer the impact of new urgent demands. Because he has been shown that it could be this way, he takes this to mean that it should be this way that he should make of this end a personal life-project.

The growth of resources among the privileged urban groups and its consequent use in ever more elaborate spending, becomes for the migrant, stalemated in a static situation, the psychological impression of a progressive deterioration. In the measure that the range of his "needs" grows and consequently also his aspirations, besides the "demonstration effect", the downward sensation becomes equally greater. The stress on the difference between the living standards and open social possibilities becomes a growing frustration.

This is why integral economic development in any of our Latin American countries, if the two-class system which distorts the distribution of wealth produced remains, is not a symbol of real betterment of the lives of the groups which live in the "culture of poverty". In our social reality, there is an inverse relation: economic growth, because it is badly distributed, is equivalent, in terms of social psychology, to a growing deterioration of the poor marginal groups.

4. THE CULTURE OF POVERTY AND RELIEF (social aid)

This makes the majority of the relief and social betterment programs developed up to now in Latin America questionable.

The fundamental aim of such programs is to better, in absolute terms, the situation in which the members of "the culture of poverty" live. To better public health, housing, education (or more exactly, to cut down on illiteracy), technical-industrial training and other programs destined to popular recreation. In the area of these objectives, it is easy to show how there has been evident progress in Latin America in the last ten years.

However, the crucial point is not in knowing if there has been progress in relation to the situation existing before, but rather to know if this progress can be measured in proportion to the correlative progress reached by the

higher economico-social layers of the urban population. In other words: if this progress has been something more than a mere alleviation of an infrahuman situation, making it more human, or if it has consisted in a social restructuring which determines the possibility of upward social movement, which is appreciably higher.

Despite the indubitable progress accomplished in absolute terms, the situation of the marginal groups in Latin American metropolitan areas has visibly deteriorated. Currently, the distance between the extremes of our structural dichotomy is greater than it was 10 years ago.

5. CONCLUSION

The "culture of poverty" is the aggregate of defense mechanisms which characterize the adaptation of growing marginal groups of our Latin American societies to the urban structure of the large cities. The "big city" hypnotizes them, attracting them with the shiny image of the modern and industrial society, and at the same time it keeps them from obtaining an equitable participation of it, blocking practically all possibilities of upward social mobility with the subtle barriers of a rigid stratification. The "culture of poverty" is the result of the "basic personality" determined by the socio-economic urban system as a source of constant frustration of the aspirations and expectations which the "demonstration effect" generates."

When "the culture of poverty" is interpreted thus, its growth among large groups in our big cities is the undeniable index of a structural injustice of our societies. It is not individual attitudes nor occasional abuses of a group which cause "the culture of poverty". It is the total system of social and economic relations--primary institutions--that generate this injustice. Although no one would attempt to take advantage of others, the same social structure of our societies by itself would generate a constant and growing injustice.

If we agree that the culture of poverty is the visible symbol of this structural injustice, the question that faces us is not what we can do to alleviate the situation within the existing structures, but what we must do to transform the structure producing the injustice. As all existing structures aim to perpetuate themselves, it is inevitable that their change will necessarily imply a percentage of social action. "The culture of poverty" in Latin America leads us, therefore, to an aggregate of specific ethical problems:

In what measure are individual rights, which are normal in a society which is supposed to be structurally just, also rights when their exercise is an obstacle to the necessary change of a social structure which produces injustice?

What fundamental ethical principles must guide the attainment of political power and its exercise when its primary function is to establish a new structure and not simply to maintain a structure which is assumed to be just?

It is necessary to place oneself within vision of these problems in order to understand the sense of the revolutionary trends in Latin America. I the citizen of a prosperous and stable society, apparently "open", the revolutionary rumbles in Latin America appear as anti-social extremist movements, since from the point of view of his society he sees as evident the possibility of eliminating injustice by means of simple adjustments of the existing structure. To a great many of the Latin American "intelligentsia", this possibility is utopian since from the point of view of their society, only a structural change can eliminate the injustice.

What Lewis has described as "a culture of poverty" in his different books is the living witness of what the Latin American sensitive to social problems lives every day.

To passively accept this daily drama as a part of the scenery and the folklore of our societies means to him to become an accomplice of injustice. Not to accept it and consequently to look for a structural change, means to him to aspire toward revolution.

The only problem left to be discussed is under what symbol and with what end in mind this revolution must be carried out.

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