

The Culture of Poverty

Oscar Lewis

I want to take this opportunity to clear up some possible misunderstanding concerning the idea of a "culture of poverty." I would distinguish sharply between impoverishment and the culture of poverty. Not all people who are poor necessarily live in or develop a culture of poverty. For example, middle class people who become impoverished do not automatically become members of the culture of poverty, even though they may have to live in the slums for a while. Similarly, the Jews who lived in poverty in eastern Europe did not develop a culture of poverty because their tradition of literacy and their religion gave them a sense of identification with Jews all over the world. It gave them a sense of belonging to a community which was united by a common heritage and common religious beliefs.

In the introduction to *The Children of Sanchez*, I listed approximately fifty traits which constitute what I call the culture of poverty. Although poverty is only one of the many traits which, in my judgment, go together, I have used it to name the total system because I consider it terribly important. However, the other traits, and especially the psychological and ideological ones, are also important and I should like to elaborate on this a bit.

The Helpless and The Homeless

The people in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging. They are like aliens in their own

country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness. This is true of the slum dwellers of Mexico City, who do not constitute a distinct ethnic or racial group and do not suffer from racial discrimination. In the United States the culture of poverty of the Negroes has the additional disadvantage of racial discrimination.

People with a culture of poverty have very little sense of history. They are a marginal people who know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own way of life. Usually, they have neither the knowledge, the vision nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of others like themselves elsewhere in the world. In other words, they are not class conscious, although they are very sensitive indeed to status distinctions. When the poor become class conscious or members of trade union organizations, or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world they are, in my view, no longer part of the culture of poverty although they may still be desperately poor.

Is It All Bad?

The idea of a culture of poverty that cuts across different societies enables us to see that many of the problems we think of as distinctively our own or distinctively Negro problems (or that of any other spe-

cial racial or ethnic group), also exist in countries where there are no ethnic groups involved. It also suggests that the elimination of physical poverty as such may not be enough to eliminate the culture of poverty which is a whole way of life. One can speak readily about wiping out poverty; but to wipe out a culture or subculture is quite a different matter, for it raises the basic question of our respect for cultural differences.

Middle class people, and this certainly includes most social scientists, tend to concentrate on the negative aspects of the culture of poverty; they tend to have negative feelings about traits such as an emphasis on the present and a neglect of the future, or on concrete as against abstract orientations. I do not intend to idealize or romanticize the culture of poverty. As someone has said, "It is easier to praise poverty than to live it." However, we must not overlook some of the positive aspects that may flow from these traits. Living immersed in the present may develop a capacity for spontaneity for the enjoyment of the sensual, the indulgence of impulse, which is too often blunted in our middle class, future-oriented man. Perhaps it is this reality of the moment that middle class existentialist writers are so desperately trying to recapture, but which the culture of poverty experiences as a natural, everyday phenomenon. The frequent use of violence certainly provides a ready outlet for hostility, so that people in the culture of poverty suffer less from repression than does the middle class.

In this connection, I should also like to take exception to the trend in some studies to identify the lower class almost exclusively with vice, crime and juvenile delinquency, as if most poor people were thieves, beggars, ruffians, murderers or prostitutes. Certainly, in my own experience in Mexico. I found most of the poor decent, upright, courageous and lovable human beings. I believe it was the novelist Fielding who wrote, "The sufferings of the poor are indeed less observed than their misdeeds."

It is interesting that much the same ambivalence in the evaluation of the poor is reflected in proverbs and in literature. On the positive side, the following serve as typical:

"Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God."
(*Luke*, 6:20).

"The poor are the protégés of the Gods."
(Menander, *The Lady of Leucas*, c. 330 B.C.)

"It is life near the bone, where it is sweetest."
(H.D. Thoreaux, *Walden*, Ch. 18.)

"The poor man alone,
When he hears the poor moan
From a morsel a morsel will give."
(Thomas Holcraft, *Gaffer Gray*.)

Yes! in the poor man's garden grow
Far more than herbs and flowers,
Kind thoughts, contentment, peace of mind.
And joy for weary hours."
(Mary Howitt, *The Poor Man's Garden*.)

"Poverty! Thou source of human art,
Thou great inspirer of the poet's song!"
(Edward Moore, *Hymn to Poverty*.)

"Few, save the poor, feel for the poor."
(Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *The Poor*.)

"Happier he, the peasant, far,
From the pangs of passion free,
That breathes the keen yet wholesome air
of ragged penury."
(Thomas Gray, *Ode on The Pleasure
Arising from Vicissitude*.)

"O happy unown'd youths! Your limbs can bear
The scorching dog-star and the winter's air,
While the rich infant, nurs'd with care and pain,
Thirsts with each heat and coughs with every rain."
(John Gay, *Trivia*, Bk. II, l. 145.)

"My friends are poor but honest."
(*All's Well That Ends Well*, I, iii, 201.)

The following illustrate the negative elements in some of the stereotypes of poverty:

"All the days of the poor are evil."
(*Babylonian Talmud*, Kethubot, 110b.)

"He must have a great deal of godliness who can find any satisfaction in being poor."
(Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Pt. II, Ch. 44.)

"Poverty is no disgrace to a man, but it is unfoundedly inconvenient."
(Sydney Smith, *His Wit and Wisdom* (1900), p. 89)

"The resolutions of a poor man are weak."
(Doolittle, *Chinese Vocabulary II*, 494 (1872).)

"What can a poor man do but love and pray?"
(Hartley Coleridge, *Sonnets*—No. 30.)

"If you've really been poor, you remain poor at heart all your life."
(W. Somerset Maugham, Introduction to Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives Tale*, in *Ten Novels*.)

"The life of the poor is the curse of the heart."
(*Ecclesiasticus*, 38:19.)

"There is no virtue that poverty destroyeth not."
(John Florio. *First Fruits*, Fo. 32.)

"Poverty makes some humble, but more malignant."
(Bulwer-Lytton. *Eugene Aram*. Bk. I, Ch. 7.)

"The devil wipes his tail with the poor man's
pride." (John Ray. *English Proverbs*. 21.)

"The poor, inur'd to drudgery and distress,
Act without aim, think little, and feel less,
And nowhere, but in feign'd Arcadian scenes,
Taste happiness, or know what pleasure means."
(William Cowper. *Hope* I. 7.)

In short, some see the poor as virtuous, upright, serene, independent, honest, secure, kind, simple and happy, while others see them as evil, mean, violent, sordid and criminal.

Most people in the United States find it difficult to think of poverty as a stable, persistent, ever present phenomenon, because our expanding economy and the specially favorable circumstances of our history have led to an optimism which makes us think that poverty is transitory. As a matter of fact, the culture of poverty in the United States is indeed of *relatively* limited scope; but as Michael Harrington and others show, it is probably more widespread than has been generally recognized.

Poverty Here and Abroad

In considering what can be done about the culture of poverty, we must make a sharp distinction between those countries in which it involves a relatively small segment of the population, and those in which it constitutes a very large section. Obviously, the solutions will have to differ in these two areas. In the United States, the major solution proposed by planners and social workers for dealing with what are called "multiple problem families," the "undeserving poor," and the "hard core of poverty," is slowly to raise their level of living and eventually incorporate them into the middle class. And, wherever possible, there is some

reliance upon psychiatric treatment in an effort to imbue these "shiftless, lazy, unambitious people" with the higher middle class aspirations.

In the undeveloped countries, where great masses of people share in the culture of poverty, I doubt that social work solutions are feasible. Nor can psychiatrists begin to cope with the magnitude of the problem. They have all they can do to deal with the growing middle class.

In the United States, delinquency, vice and violence represent the major threats to the middle class from the culture of poverty. In our country there is no threat of revolution. In the less developed countries of the world, however, the people who live in the culture of poverty may one day become organized into political movements that seek fundamental revolutionary changes and that is one reason why their existence poses terribly urgent problems.

If my brief outline of the basic psychological aspects of the culture of poverty is essentially sound, then it may be more important to offer the poor of the world's countries a genuinely revolutionary ideology rather than the promise of material goods or a quick rise in the standards of living.

It is conceivable that some countries can eliminate the culture of poverty (at least in the early stages of their industrial revolution) without at first eliminating impoverishment, by changing the value systems and attitudes of the people so they no longer feel helpless and homeless—so they begin to feel that they are living in their own country, with their institutions, their government and their leadership.

Oscar Lewis is the author of a number of books, including, such best sellers as Five Families and The Children of Sanchez. He has taught at Brooklyn College and Washington University and is now a professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois. He has just completed a new book, Pedro Martinez: A Peasant's View of the Mexican Revolution, and is writing another on the culture of poverty in Puerto Rico.

[Deceased]