



Is There a Culture of Poverty?

Bernard Mehl

I would like to comment on the rise to popularity of Oscar Lewis' concept, the culture of poverty. It is not that popularization itself makes an idea suspect, but that the popularization of an idea via media served by and maintained by an organized bureaucracy such as the school system merits considerable critical examination.

We all remember how certain schools of psychology rose and fell in educational favor in terms of whether or not the particular psychological school, be it Behaviorism or Gestalt, served to uphold patterns of educational power. It didn't matter whether the theoretical stance was right or wrong. Experimentation, which could have given credence to one or another camp, was too often laid aside and in its place grew a kind of pseudo-research which sought to prove the benevolence of a particular socio-political system of education. *What is to be discussed here is not the rightness or wrongness of concept, but rather what the concept has led to in ways of looking at various problems which beset*

schools. Let us realize that bureaucratic bodies are no better or worse than the conventional wisdom which surrounds them. School officials are always hard pressed to resolve difficulties within their domain. They can become a convenient scapegoat for those of us who sit at the sidelines. We cannot cast stones if we ourselves let an idea stop us from undergoing basic philosophical change if the evidence requires it.

The culture of poverty idea in popular terms says that poor people are a separate group. They are separate in every way—in language, thought, dress, mannerisms, and action. They constitute a special distinct cultural group and can be studied and analyzed by certain types of social scientists. Also, they cannot be known in the terms of the value pattern of any other culture. Given the current faith in cultural relativism, what evolves is a modern equivalent of Social Darwinism. Or to compare it with an older religious determinism, the new belief in the culture of poverty out Calvin's Calvinism. In Calvinism, at least the

saints preselected by God could be found throughout the social class system and by sheer determination of will and effort they could be seen and known and gain rewards in this world and the next. The new concept holds to the same test but without God and with less chance of proving grace. And there is no exit.

It is determined that culturally poor youngsters do poorly because they do not have sufficient background. It is the benevolent society which must set up an Operation Headstart Program to provide middle-class experiences to lower-class children. What happens then is that the rate of success of children in the program is questionable. Two reasons for this are given, depending on whether the person is liberal or conservative. The liberal holds that there was not enough time, money, material, effort, attention given the program, or that inadequate teachers were hired. In the liberal mind what is needed is a massive effort to reach these culturally deprived youngsters at an earlier age, preferably just after

coming out of their mother's womb. The conservative's response to the poor showing of Operation Headstart is to berate the program for trying to legislate against low brain power. Bills to legalize mandatory birth control for welfare mothers are considered logically in order.

As can be seen, the liberal and conservative are for "the system" except that the methods used to keep "the system" going are somewhat different except at the point of programmatic involvement. The liberal would want to deculturate the poor and save them from their background before it becomes too late and the evils grow, i.e., crime, disease, sexual perversion, and violence. The conservative, too, wants to eliminate the children of poverty by making sure they don't get born into the world. In the conservative mind children born into poverty will grow up to act according to the values of the culture of poverty. That is, they will have little or no respect for property or for law and order. The world will be better off without them.

Liberals and conservatives agree that there do exist separate cultural groups that are even more separate than the old European ethnic groups which divided the nation in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But my question is this: Isn't all this a way of establishing divisions in terms of self-fulfilled prophecies, even to the point of falsifying the wide internal division within each of the aforementioned cultural groups?

What I am finding within education is that opposing factions who managed to remain alive within the system and still feel free to openly criticize the system are beginning to close ranks, by holding that the outside problems due to the culture of poverty (crime, disease, sex, and violence) call for a united front. As

I see it, both progressive and traditional educators are out to eliminate ignorance and in the name of this new crusade all of science and social science will be employed. The right of privacy and individual conscience are to be allowed only to the culture of affluence.

The last attempt to use education to stamp out ignorance was called the Inquisition and in its name those who did not know goodness were forced to acknowledge it. If they didn't accede then they were deemed unhuman. The ultimate disposition for those who insist on maintaining the values of a fundamental alien culture which goes contrary to mass man, be he Catholic or democratic, we have seen in the works of Eichmann and his crew. The belief in the culture of poverty in its present popular form may allow those who hold the weapons and ideas of power to usher in a new type of genocide which can be called culturicide. My reason for this is that the concept makes its own reality, finds its own supporting evidence, determines its own solutions, and invents its own techniques to bring about its own solution. Let me give two examples which have come to my attention here in Hawaii to illustrate what I mean.

In one rural Oahu area, considerable time and effort has been spent locating and analyzing the cultural style of people now popularly believed to reflect the culture of poverty. It has been pointed out by researchers that the local poor do not accept middle-class attitudes, especially in terms of the value given to learning, and therefore, the researchers reason, the poor turn school off because they are ignorant (this is not the word used) of the real reason behind the school's efforts in behalf of their children. Armed with this amazing piece of in-

formation, which says that parents of poor children don't dig the school, the school authorities are able to break attendance rules and give teachers a half-day off to visit the homes of students. And here is the issue: Invasion of privacy is deemed worthy. The new "priest" wears a white button-down shirt with a black tie. Incidentally, the complaint heard most often about this "program" is the old PTA complaint: Only the concerned parent of the already successful child (who by that very fact is no longer seen as a child of poverty) volunteers to serve tea or poi to a bewildered and uncomfortable teacher. Teachers who feel that request to visit the homes of their students insults their ethical sensibilities are subjected to pep talks about this new way to solve classroom problems. Armed with this guilt, the teacher begins to see the error of his way and is expected to vote that the next step be taken: — Every child of poverty must open his out-of-school life to teacher, social worker, J.P.O. officer, and scoutmaster in the same way the middle-class child allows his life to be invaded by all sort of organized agencies from dentist to little league coach. Except for one basic exception.

The privacy of child of affluence does not have to be invaded because figuratively, he can assemble enough legitimate pressure to force a stalemate without suffering anything more than a reprimand, a cold shoulder, or a sneer from those who oppose him. He can count on elements within his own camp to protect him. He does not have to resort to acts which bring forth police action against him. He can act in opposition without being labeled turncoat or heretic. On the other hand, the refusal to cooperate by those placed into the culture of poverty is seen by all outside groups as a call for more intensive methods

to bring about compliance complete with punitive reprisals. Infractions of rules are seen to be infractions of law, and, if this state of affairs is criticized, then rule becomes law. Therefore, it would not be surprising to find that truancy laws will be enlarged to indict the parents of the poor for *not* agreeing to teacher-parent consultation.

The second example concerns the school's involvement in prescribing sedatives for what is deemed an overactive child who usually belongs to the culture of poverty. Again, in the name of learning or classroom management, all is possible, even an act which teachers deplore if taken without learning in mind. Glue sniffing, which poor children use to sedate themselves from their own environment, is anathema to school people and all efforts are made to eradicate this anti-social practice. Drugs used to negate the school's influence are deemed ugly and sick, anti-drug movies are shown, and former addicts who are now fine citizens are brought in to lecture against the vile practice.

It is the teacher who starts this process by assuming a diagnostic ability far beyond her or anyone else's capacity. Studies abound that demonstrate that teachers continually misread the relation between energy level and learning. Yet, the teacher makes the first request by going to a counselor who doesn't quite know if he's for the child or the school. He, along with the teacher, sends a note home to a parent (note she's a culture of poverty parent who is frightened easily by official looking papers) which informs her that she has to have her child examined by her family doctor. Very rarely in such instances does a doctor exist who is

a friend of the family and not an agent of the school. The doctor called in is given the school's recommendation. On the basis of this and his own judgment can or cannot prescribe a sedative. Yet, what is a medical measure of hyperactivity other than an EEG whose interpretation is a job for a well-trained expert who may or may not, when all the facts are in, prescribe sedatives?

A kind of diagnosis and treatment, extremely difficult to be undertaken, even by specialists, is becoming a commonplace among "certain kinds" of elementary school children because it shows promise of keeping "them" quiet. Some teachers swear by this new method and proudly point out the gains made by students who are being treated by sedatives. (Other teachers might even be amazed at the amount of learning coming out of a drugged student and would like to use sedation on all students who have trouble in school.)

The panacea has arrived, but only the children of the culture of poverty will be in line for its "benefits," all without evidence. If a doctor could be found who would prescribe sugar without the teacher being aware of what was being swallowed, the results would indeed be strange.

The issue is not sedation, but compulsion. The parent and the doctor of an affluent child (hyper- or hypo-active) can reject the school's advice and the school can do virtually nothing, but the poor person has no advocate except those who are blessed with moral indignation. These are becoming fewer and fewer.

Such belief in moral relativity, brought out and strengthened by stressing cultural differences, leaves

only two alternatives: "dropping out" or annihilating the outsider. Remember, there are immediate and gradual annihilation procedures, but both are undesirable for those who stress moral equitability. Moral equitability is a term used to find a basis for morality which does not result in dogmatic absolutism. For if the opposite of relativism is the kind of absolutism which kills Greeks and Turks in Cyprus, then the only answer is to "drop out" of society. But the trap does not have to close. We can begin to believe both in permanence and difference. We have to build equitable systems in a world which unfortunately favors inequality in status, power, and intelligence.

One proposal could be to face students in the poorer sections of the city and reward them literally if they do *reasonably* well in school, for that is what we do with children in the affluent section. The reward can be the same as that given to affluent children who do fairly well in school. This may mean subsidizing the poor child economically, waiving educational requirements, and finally making sure he gets a job commensurate with his advanced educational standing by utilizing a variant of the preferential treatment we afford our own children. The condition that now prevails in school is that there are those who fail and fail while others fail and succeed. If this is the case, then we have to get rid of all devices which try to deal with school failure (almost everyone fails school i.e., very few really learn) and start learning and using strategies which insure a greater degree of passing through for all. We also need to upgrade our moral sensitivities to real and not imagined injustices imposed on the poor and make known to authorities and colleagues the hidden hurt of the poor who can be described but not defined under the rubric *culture of poverty*.