



Response to the Question:

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Mehl has attacked the school system as part of an organized bureaucracy which has contributed to the popularization of the "culture of poverty". The consequence of this popularization or general acceptance of the concept "culture of poverty" is a kind of unholy predestination which influences and reinforces the attitudes of all concerned. For, to be poor is to make the implications of poverty inevitable. Administrators, teachers, and the poor themselves apparently all have come to agree to this presupposition. The basic dilemma, according to Mehl, is the collaboration of liberals and traditionalists in their efforts to combat ignorance (and by implication crime, disease, sex, and violence associated with poverty).

This collaboration of liberals and traditionalists is not surprising. Both groups are critical of the system of which they are part. But surely their criticisms are superficial if only because liberals and traditionalists have a stake in moderate change of the system. Any radical change would jeopardize their own positions, and, therefore, they collaborate. In other words, I suspect, that confronted with the enormous implications of the "culture of poverty"

they subconsciously perceive that only radical, i.e. systemic, change can accomplish anything. Both groups reject that kind of change probably for the same reasons.

Systemic change means change of the system, means doing away with the "organizational dry rot" (NADER), with Parkinson's Law, with the self-perpetuating efforts of the institutions. To illustrate what this may mean a reference to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) may be permitted. Appropriations during the current fiscal year total about \$460 million "or an average income per reservation family of some \$5600 if paid out in cash. (The average family income is \$1500 per annum)." (NADER in *The New Republic*, March 15, 1968). What is true for the bureaucracy of the BIA certainly is also true for the operation of the other welfare agencies in the US. A sizable portion of the population (ca 32 million) constitute a subculture administered and perpetuated by organizations and institutions unwilling to work toward their own abolition.

There seem to be at least two ways through which the abolition of the present welfare system can be

accomplished. The first would lead to the integration of the poor into the affluent society. This is somewhat Mehl's solution. He wants to take off some of the pressure of schooling by rewarding poor students if they do reasonably well. (Do well, I assume, by accepted, i.e. middle class, standards.) Would this not constitute a gradual assimilation of the poor into the affluent society, so that they gradually accept the middle class values of learning?

The second way would imply a fundamental re-orientation of the whole society. While the first could be accomplished through a guaranteed annual income or a negative income tax, the second, obviously would call for much more drastic measures. The first would be a step in the right direction, but only one step, while the second would try to anticipate a social structure different from the present one. Money alone cannot do the job. A different social structure would also mean a different educational approach and philosophy. The communication of middle class values, rewarding students when they do well, or reasonably well, would no longer be the issue.

Now the school system along

with the other "educational" enterprises (like TV, radio) is primarily interested in propagating the American Way of Life. I am not sure what this way of life is. But if it means a dual system of justice, one for the poor and one for the affluent, if it means civil rights for those with political influence and humiliation and second rate citizenship for those without the money and political know-how to have influence, then the American Way of Life must go. If the National Rifle Association is powerful enough to prevent enlightened legislation in Congress while millions of migrant laborers on both coasts remain disenfranchised, then something is basically wrong.

I am suggesting that attacking the popularization of the concept "culture of poverty" is not enough. Any socio-political analysis of the culture of poverty may provide insight into the symptoms, and perhaps into the causes of poverty, but the very nature of the approach to the problems rules out proposing a vision of society and its educational institutions capable of overcoming the causes of poverty.

Any foreigner coming to the US and observing the educational system is struck by the extraordinary integrative power of primary and secondary school education. This integrative power has traditionally been considered a great advantage, because it facilitated the absorption of immigrant children into United States society. A different picture emerges in the moment we are confronted by groups unwilling or unable to use this integrative system. A distinction must be made between poverty and culture. A culture, even though it may constitute a handicap in terms of social mobility and integration, may be worth preserving. On the island of Oahu in Hawaii we have Samoan and

Hawaiian minorities concentrated in certain areas. These minorities apparently cannot be integrated into society because they reject the traditional school system and the values which it espouses.

A study of Polynesian culture reveals that those people live according to very different values. Theirs is a relaxed, happy, no-care way of life. Now, contrary to Mehl, I do not have the impression that "invasion of privacy" is the issue. What is privacy in Polynesian culture? In Samoa for example? They are scared or simply ignorant of how to react when contacted by teachers, doctors, welfare workers.—all representatives of institutions. Their knowledge of English may prevent them from filling out a form, or an application, and they are stunned when they are held accountable for their failure to comply with rules and regulations which most of us have accepted as a necessary drudgery. They seem to lack the concepts of failure and success, and thus the "necessary" drive to compete. So they do not conform, they become failures, and to be a failure is unpatriotic.

I have heard of a man who wants nothing more than to live with his family in a small house on the beach on the island of Kauai. All he wants to do is fish. But society will not permit him to "drop out" like that. To fish all day is not considered "productive" even though that way of life might make for a happy, close-knit family.

Apparently, U. S. society is incapable of or unwilling to accommodate culturally autonomous groups in its midst (Indians, Samoans, Hawaiians). We middle class people suffer from an identity crisis, yet we force people with a strong cultural identity to surrender this identity so they can be like us, without a real identity, but with lots of pretended identity. I am proposing that the

child of affluence and the child of poverty (and minority culture) both suffer equally from the inadequacy of the school system (cf. statistics on school drop outs from well-to-do families). The child of affluence through his parents is different from the other children only because his parents effectively keep up the appearance of normalcy. If Mehl is right in criticising the invasion of privacy of the poor, it is also true that the privacy of every child is invaded when he is forced to conform to standards which he eventually cannot or will not affirm (cf. the student revolution and its causes). Cultural and personal differences in thinking, values, styles of life must be encouraged not smothered by teachers, welfare workers, etc. We are trying to turn out "adjusted" children when we have no idea of what we adjust them to, and, more important, when we have our own secret doubts about what is normal, healthy, *HUMAN*.

We have to remember that the world is ONE, that to speak of other nations as far off and different, creates the illusion of distance which no longer exists. World politics is domestic politics, in other words. Our schools must reflect this fact in their curriculum and their approach. To apply this to the problem of a culture of poverty means that making the poor affluent, middle class, patriotic Americans may lead to another kind of impoverisation unless we are prepared to make every child proud of his heritage whatever it is, of their different values, styles of life, in short, unless we are prepared to accept them as *different and equal*.

The purpose of all education is to emancipate. In this context education means emancipation of every child within his own culture and in the context of all other cultures.

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