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# PROBLEMS IN BREAKING THE POVERTY CYCLE

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There are no simple ways to break the poverty cycle. There are few experts to provide the answers. To try to understand the problem and to share with each other our experiences in coping with the complexity of modern poverty is our immediate task.

Poverty has been given a new status of importance in our society, because we have suddenly become very conscious of it. We have become aware of the economics of poverty, its relationship to a growing economy and high employment, and the socio-cultural implications of little education, poor skills, and social disorganization among the poor. We have become conscious of the political implications of poverty legislation and the influence of administrative know-how on effective programming. We have begun to discuss the moral issues and the rights of people which are involved in the relationship of the people who have to those who have not. The problem is complicated and many faceted. The present comments are, therefore, confined to one aspect, the socio-cultural factors involved in the "new poverty," the kind of poverty the "war on poverty" is designed to conquer.

Three issues must be considered. First, do we understand the "new" poor and their poverty? Second, do we really want to eliminate poverty? Third, if we do accept the challenge, are we willing to mobilize the resources of our communities to eliminate poverty?

Poverty has been with us for a long time. We have, however, given it a social position of special significance within the last few years. With renewed enthusiasm a growing number of "authorities" speak not of ameliorating poverty, not of lessening it, but of truly eliminating it. In 1964, the Conference on Economic Progress actually predicted that with proper action, the people living under the poverty level of less than \$3,000 could be reduced to about 1 percent of the population by 1975. This is a notable goal, one considered more idealistic than realistic by most people.

In the past, the causes of poverty have been explained in somewhat simplistic terms. As a consequence, simple solutions have been consistently offered. All that is needed is more jobs, or more education, or more casework or therapy, or even more punishment for the poor.

Poverty today, however, is not the poverty of yesterday. It has

significant and distinctive characteristics which make simple solutions obsolete.

1. There is poverty amidst plenty. The contrast has made us especially conscious of the problem. Even with an increasing gross national product, with increasing employment rates, with relatively stable and favorable economic conditions, the solutions to poverty do not seem clear.

2. There are many jobs available with no takers. Unemployment is relatively high although many work openings are unfilled. Automation has demanded skills which the unemployed do not have and may actually not be capable of attaining.

3. There is more formal education today than ever before, yet our youths are leaving our schools upon completion or prior to completion of high school without adequate preparation for employment.

4. Our opportunities for social mobility seem to have increased, but not equally for all.

It is difficult to define poverty, but when one speaks of the poverty cycle, one delimits the problem. The poverty cycle implies poverty that generates poverty—a generational inheritance. The pattern is relatively clear. The very poor are generally unemployed and socially isolated from the major interactions of the community in which they live. Their children, denied adequate social experience at home and in the community, come to school less prepared than other children, they learn more slowly, and fall farther behind each year. Having learned little in school, they have difficulty finding or holding jobs. They drift, fail, and become dependent on society. Unable to develop adequate images of themselves in a society which insists on self-support, the poor become alienated from the life of the community, sharing only in its peripheral associations and values. They have little education, minimal skills, inadequate social relationships, and deficient self-images which encourage rejection of self and dependency or possibly aggression on society. Their children repeat the process.

Traditionally the poverty cycle has been broken by introducing agents external to the individual—increasing the number of jobs, increasing educational opportunities, increasing welfare assistance. The “motivated,” interested, and “worthy” individual was thereby to pull himself up “by his bootstraps” and become part of the “mainstream.”

In the past, this has worked with some exception. The immigrant, in spite of his lack of education, could with an unskilled labor job that demanded no formal education begin to provide some stability

for himself and his family. In spite of some discrimination which prevented more rapid participation in the benefits of the economy, the immigrant slowly moved into the mainstream of the American dream. Cultural resources supported him in the difficult transition from rural to urban cultures. He had a heritage of property consciousness, a heritage of self-improvement, and a heritage of family stability. Yet in spite of this heritage, many of the immigrants could not cope with the challenges of urban life, and they became labelled the "poor," the most socially disorganized of the urban dwellers. Time, increasing productivity, and extension of opportunity, however, enabled most of them to escape the label.

The "new poor," like the old poor, are poor because they lack adequate income to maintain the essential needs of daily life. They also have most of the handicaps of their predecessor poor. But traditional patterns of mobility do not seem as effective in disrupting the poverty cycle in the urban complex today. At least, they do not seem to be able to do it quickly enough in a society which demands rapid change. Racially segregated housing, so much a part of our urban slum life, has created a complex of social conditions which have thwarted mobility. The schools in concentrated areas of slum life usually provide the most inferior educational efforts. Family and social disorganization are intimately associated with areas of poverty. Those who desire to better themselves frequently find it impossible to move into better neighborhoods and better schools. Compelled to live in segregated patterns of urban life and subjected to the growing challenges of deterioration and blight, they easily fall prey to apathy and social alienation. Some have lost all desire to better themselves, succumbing to an ever-present awareness of failure and frustration. Combined with the social stigma of inferiority placed upon him, the Negro, in particular, faces a maze of hopelessness that induces a lack of personal confidence and self-respect which demands outlets for expression.

Welfare payments have provided some relief and have, at times, prevented total frustration and starvation. Welfare payment levels, however, are maintenance oriented. They are not designed to cope with those factors which cause the poverty. In fact, there is much concern today that the present welfare assistance programs create more dependency than they resolve.

The social implications of the "new poverty" are clearly illustrated in the seven marks of poverty noted by the Conference on Economic Progress in 1964.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Leon H. Keyserling, *Progress or Poverty*, Conference on Economic Progress, Washington, D. C., 1964.

1. Sixteen million children among the families of the poor bear the scars of their poverty when they enter school. The limited vocabulary, limited pride, limited motivation, bring limited and slow learning progress.

2. One-half of the men taking the selective service preinduction tests in 1963 had failed due to physical or intellectual deficiencies or both. These are largely the young men who are entering the labor market ill prepared for even the simplest of technical jobs. Yet, they have had, in many instances, at least some high school education.

3. The poverty impact is clearly related and recognizable in the increasing delinquency and crime rates.

4. The poverty group is filled with persons who are unable to help themselves, children in broken homes, young female heads of families who cannot work or who earn little if they do, and the many aged.

5. Poverty and slum life are largely synonymous whether in the city or on the farm. Inadequate housing, poor physical and mental health, high crime rates, and consumer exploitation are counterparts of poverty in our slums.

6. Concentration of poverty among Negroes intensifies racial tensions in the yearning of a people who want to be free.

7. Unemployment persists for the untrained in spite of the fact that jobs are available beyond the supply of laborers.

This "new poverty" must, then, be understood within the context of a culture of poverty which encourages an isolation of the poor, prevents their full participation in the community social system, and thwarts social mobility by making it difficult to live within the values of the middle class. Each of these concepts—culture, social systems, social mobility, and values—must be understood if the new poverty is to be understood and conquered.

Culture is not easy to understand. It is an abstraction like hate, anger, or peace. One can see acts of love, but not love; acts of hate, but not hate. Culture is known only through its expression. Culture is also learned. It is not inborn through some biological process. We may have the potential for loving and hating, but what we love and hate is learned. Many behavior patterns considered inborn, "natural," are learned in their entirety or are at least strongly modified by the social conditions under which people live. The enjoyment of what one eats, the way one dresses, the way one walks, the way one talks are often considered "natural," and those who differ somehow "unnatural," therefore inferior. Negroes, for example, are

frequently considered inferior because many speak with a slow drawl and slur some words, making it difficult to understand them. Physical anthropologists tell us that Negroes and whites reared under the same cultural conditions cannot be distinguished by tone of voice.

This does not imply that heredity or physiology is unimportant. What it does mean is that even the most basic physiological functions develop within the socio-cultural conditions and the behavior patterns under which people live. Culture influences the physical, mental, emotional, and social development of man.

A social system is a series of interrelated and integrated positions and roles. Only recently have efforts been made to examine communities as social systems. Political, economic, educational, religious, and family systems are interrelated and integrated with each other and with other elements into a community social system. Changes in any of these elements encourage changes in all of the others. Changes in the poverty pattern of the community will bring about a change in all of these systems. There are many elements of the community which do not want the changes that would result from elimination of poverty.

Conflicting values among social systems also deter the effort to eliminate poverty. The school system, the recreational system, and the family system of a community may be in open conflict. The schools may not reflect the community. The administrators and teachers may not live in the neighborhood of the schools. They may not understand the area, the people, or the children. Head Start Programs were received with considerable indifference by the school systems of many communities. On the other hand, those in charge of the poverty program did not want the schools to dominate the program for fear such domination would result in the traditional classroom approach of a teacher talking to students. The recent Elementary and Secondary Education Act has encouraged educators to re-examine their patterns of teaching the culturally deprived. Obviously the social conditions of poverty had created a different type of student who was unreached or unreachable through the standard formal classroom programs. Modifications of the social systems of the community seemed as important to the elimination of poverty as the modification of individuals.

What is this culture of poverty which so influences people and the systems to which they belong? One of the basic conditions of the life of the poor is the availability of very limited alternatives. The poor do not have many choices in life. They are compelled to live in specific areas of the city, with minimum freedom of residen-

tial mobility. They have limited choice of jobs and of careers; they have limited choices of marriage partners. Life is not a series of alternatives but a sequence of either this or nothing, a sequence of pre-selected conditions upon which life depends for survival.

As a result there develops in poverty groups, especially in the concentrated urban areas, a characteristic helplessness. The poor become socially impotent, with no bargaining power. Where can a poor person be heard? Too often, in the past the only voice that listened was the political ward boss handing out small favors but no basic reforms. Voluntary social agencies in urban centers have not been oriented to the poor but to the middle-class needs of middle-class people. Public welfare has not been service oriented. It has concentrated its efforts on deciding upon eligibility, handing out assistance checks, and finding the cheaters. There has been a basic neglect of the vast proportion of people who desperately need service as well as money, and who need understanding and opportunity rather than degradation.

The social structure has attempted to forget these people, to wish them out of existence, because poverty is a blemish, a desecration of what America must be. The isolation of the "hidden poor" encourages a deprivation which is magnified in our country by the material ideals of the commercials and ads which depict an American dream the poor can seldom attain. The resulting insecurity precludes planning for the future, and increases a basic inability to cope with traumatic experiences, serious loss of health, injury, loss of work, death, divorce, and desertion. To the poor life becomes unpatterned, unpredictable—a congeries of events in which they have no part and over which they have no control.

Their alienation and their sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, unrelatedness frequently lead to unconcern or to frustration, hatred, rebellion. Yet all evidence indicates that the goals and values of the poor in America are basically the goals and values of the rest of America. The poor want better education, better jobs, more stable families.

Their inability to make the dream a reality almost inevitably leads to a fatalism, a resignation to "our lot in life." They develop an orientation to "now" not to "later" with an authoritarianism that "the only thing that counts is strength, the ability to express strength, to be the stronger" and with an emphasis on the concrete rather than on the intellectual, or the aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Lola M. Irelan and Arthur Besner, "Low Income Outlook on Life," in Lola M. Irelan, ed., *Low Income Life Styles*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, D.C., 1964.

Somehow the opportunity to move toward the American dream must be made an American reality for the "poor." The traditional means of encouraging social mobility through changes in individuals are inadequate. We need changes in social systems as well as in personalities. New methods of educating, of training and motivating adults as well as children, must be developed through special efforts on the part of schools, social agencies, industries, and legislators. For the young there are needs for additional preschool preparation, Headstart Programs, special tutoring, job overviews, work experience, special services for dropout students, and finding employment for youth just leaving school. For adults, there are needs for literacy programs, opportunity for high school completion, job training, homemaker education, and consumer education. New training procedures must be developed to help prepare these men and women for modern employment. New jobs might well be created for many of the poor. They can be used to survey the poor. To reach the poor, to aid communication, to maintain rapport may be exciting new roles for the poor. It would seem that the poor can best communicate with the poor. In terms of health education and improved health care, much needs to be learned. Urban renewal must become community renewal and not house renewal. Services as well as buildings need renewal.

One of the first principles of effective casework is to begin where the clients are. This has usually applied to their level of emotional or intellectual functioning. It has seldom meant to begin where they are culturally or socially. We have never really thought of going where the clients are culturally. While maximum feasible involvement of the poor is the Office of Economic Opportunity program's aim, it is difficult to get the poor effectively involved. They often are experientially and educationally ill equipped to become members of the boards of directors in decision-making roles. Yet, it also seems essential that the poor serve on local action boards and poverty councils, and that they have a voice in the development of neighborhood action centers. The poor must be brought into effective communication with the rest of society, and they must become responsible, to some degree, for their own destiny. This approach creates many risks because it questions the right of anyone to prosper from the poverty of another, and it emphasizes self-expression by people with minimal preparation. There is also the danger of riots, which are to some degree the symbols of that risk. Riots are not eliminated with force, but with change.

The comprehensive programs herein discussed demand the involvement of the federal government. Excessive centralization is un-



desirable. But, when the needs of the people are unfulfilled because local agencies or state agencies do not or cannot resolve the problems, then someone must make the effort. The difficulty local agencies have had in raising the 10 percent local contribution for the poverty programs has clearly evidenced the inability or unwillingness of local interests to truly mobilize against poverty. "Creative federalism," in which the federal government promotes state and local agency cooperation in particular programs, may be the necessary solution. Large bureaucratic structures are truly a danger, but local communities do not seem to have the resources or the desire to develop sufficiently comprehensive programs to cope effectively with the problem. It took the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to challenge our school system to work more with the culturally deprived. The Economic Opportunity Act has startled people in our social agencies and welfare programs. The Law Enforcement Assistance Act has encouraged renovation in the law enforcement structure. The Civil Rights Act has tried to widen the opportunities for mobility. The Delinquency Control and Prevention Act has stressed community organization as a means of social control. The Older Americans Act has been an effort to awaken us to the problems of the aged.

In summary, the basic issues of breaking the poverty cycle are oriented around: (1) our need to understand the "new poor"; (2) our need to want to eliminate poverty; and (3) our willingness to extend ourselves to mobilize existing resources and to create new ones to fight poverty. Working with children to help the next generation is an essential part of breaking the poverty cycle, but a strong plea must be made for an emphasis on adult learning and training. Although it has often been said that the future is in the hands of our youth, it must be remembered that the youth are in the hands of the people of the community. And the people of the community must change if our youth are to be able to handle the future. It is interesting that the future which is now, was in the hands of you and of me, who were the youth of yesterday.