

## Berichte und Kommentare

### Acculturation, Entropy, and the Culture of Poverty

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If something could happen. What? What? What could happen? For what? About what? (Selby 1957: 126)

Annie Mae watches up at the ceiling, and she is as sick with sleep as if she had lain the night beneath a just-supportable weight: and watching up into the dark, beside her husband, the ceiling becomes visible, and watching into her eyes, the weight of the day (Agee and Evans 1941: 82).

These two literary quotations suggest that the notion of psycho-cultural vacuum has been with us for some time; but it was Lewis (1959: 16) who gave it a semblance of academic rigor by incorporating it into the concept of a culture of poverty, viz., a class cultural value system marked by subsistence living, ignorance, an amorphous concern for the future, and a conviction that education is not so important as know-how; the mental set thus acquired was found to be persistent enough to be carried over into *nouveau riche* status. Seen in this light, and as popularized by Lewis' followers during the American "war on poverty" of the 1960s and early 1970s, poverty became conceptualized as a way of life characterized by stupefied acceptance of cultural deprivation.

However, it has become increasingly clear that the richness of a culture or subculture devoid of much appeal to the investigator is the hardest to discover. The "culture of poverty" has thus joined the ranks of Bernstein's (1970)

"restricted code" and the more general issues raised by the IQ controversy – all concepts suffering from both a less than intimate acquaintance with the group under analysis and an evaluation of its little-known deep patterns by questionable Western middle-class standards. One should bear in mind that without a knowledge of the proper cultural etiquette the outsider is likely to find a community "taciturn, vaguely hostile, and giving all the appearances of dullness and stupidity" (von Sturmer 1981: 25) – especially if this community is in an inferior position in terms of power relationship.

Valentine (1971: 208–209) has argued that traits normally associated with the culture of poverty, such as flexible standards of legitimacy and lack of gratification deferral, are phenomena of efficient adaptation to adverse conditions imposed from the outside. This is not to say that the symptoms described for the culture of poverty cannot have a pernicious effect on individual development and behavior. For instance Griffin, passing as a Negro in New Orleans in the heyday of racial discrimination, gives this vivid description of the consequences of the urban poverty that had engulfed him:

Existence becomes a grinding effort, guided by belly-hunger and the almost desperate need to divert awareness from the squalors to the pleasures, to lose oneself in sex or drink or dope or gut-religion or gluttony or the incoherence of falsity (1960: 48).

There even seems to be a biological basis to the observed self-perpetuation of defective conditions for individual development: at least two of the brain's neurotransmitters, serotonin and acetylcholine, are heavily dependant on dietary