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LIFE STYLE OF THE URBAN POOR AND PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATIONS

Richard P. Poethig

So long as the city contains a sizeable lower class, nothing basic can be done about its most serious problems. Good jobs may be offered to all, but some will remain chronically unemployed. Slums may be demolished, but if the housing that replaces them is occupied by the lower class, it will shortly be turned into the new slums. Welfare payments may be doubled or tripled and a negative income tax instituted, but some persons will continue to live in squalor and misery.... The streets may be filled with armies of policemen, but violent crime and civil disorder will decrease very little. If however, the lower class were to disappear... the most serious and intractable problems of the city will disappear with it. (itals. mine)

— Edward Banfield
*The Unheavenly City**

There is no such thing as an apathetic group, culture or class.

— Saul Alinsky

The two quotes represent two views of the urban poor. Edward Banfield, an urbanologist, suggests that the social problems of the city stem from the poor who live in a state of improvidence and irresponsibility. Eliminate the poor, says Banfield, and the city will go on to greater things.

Saul Alinsky, an organizer of urban poor communities, believes differently. Alinsky asserts that there is no group of people who are hopeless. Any people no matter how poor, can be organized to become determiners of their own future.

Literature Provided A View of the Urban Poor

In the past, views of the urban poor have been expressed by those who study urban communities. Government programs related to the urban poor have drawn heavily on the pictures of the urban poor reflected in the writings and studies of novelists, journalists, and sociologists. The urban poor were first characterized by the novelists and muckrakers of the 19th century. Charles Dicken's portrayal of the London slums in his novel and Jacob Riis' journalistic work on life in the New York tenements, *How the Other Half Lives,* presented the images of poverty upon which latter-day sociologists reflected.

Close on the heels of the novelists and the muckrakers were the American Clergymen whose religious sensibilities were aroused by the conditions of the urban slums. The Social Gospel Movement, led by Walter Rauschenbush, played a major role in calling for social reform in the industrial system of America, which had relegated countless thousands to lives of quiet desperation. The literature which came out of this period continued to have influence long after its initial impact. Its reformist message colored the writings of the later urban sociologists who used empirical data to picture life among the urban poor.

Literature during the New Deal period in the U.S. was essentially reformist in nature. The urban poor were treated as an entity apart from the main body of society. Franklin Roosevelt's "one-third of a nation — the ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed" were to be legislated into the main body of the nation. "Dead End," a popular motion picture of the period, reflected many of the sociologists' notions of the social disorganization and the familial disintegration which were to be found in

*Little, Brown & Co., Boston, Mass., 1970.

the life of the urban slums. It was filmed on a street dead-ending on the East River. The title was symbolic of the future of those who lived in the slums. It told the story of neglected children — the school drop-outs of that day — beginning their life of crime. A "wanted" criminal, who returns to the haunts of his youth, is the hero of the street gang. The moral of the story was, of course, that crime does not pay, since the public enemy is finally gunned down by New York police. But the image of poverty presented by the picture remains vivid in my mind's eye thirty-five years later — repressive, retrogressive, disintegrative.

A Personal View

Having grown up in New York City during the 1930's, within walking distance of the scene of "Dead End," I can now reflect on the inadequacies of the image presented. The neighborhood in which I lived was not repressive, retrogressive, or disintegrative. The families from which my friends came were not at the point of falling apart. The neighborhood, in fact, had a distinct character.

Although reputedly the German section of the city, it was ethnically mixed. The street corner society to which I belonged included friends whose forbears were Czechs, Slovaks, Austrians, Hungarians, Russians, Italians, Irish, and Armenians. The city block provided the normal social unit around which social activities took place. Relatives were within walking distance or could be reached by a quick trip on the subway. Grandmother's birthday brought together numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins. Friends from the neighborhood would drop by for pinochle or poker games or just to *kaffee-klatsch*. The shops and the stores fronting on the avenues provided points of social exchange. They also provided after-school and Saturday jobs. The sidestreets were the playgrounds. A wide range of ball games were ingeniously contrived to fit into the limited space available. For the adults on warm summer evenings, the front stoops of the sidestreet tenements provided the context for conviviality, the exchange of neighborhood information, and for keeping a watchful eye on the activities of the neighborhood youth.

This personal note does not mean that all neighborhoods were alike or that the elements of family breakdown, juvenile delinquency, crime were not to be found in poor neighborhoods. It is to assert that a pattern of social relationships did exist which provided organization and a continuing rhythm of life to the neighborhood.

Social Organization Among the City's Poor

William Whyte was among the first to discover the social organization which existed in urban poor communities.[1] "Street Corner Society," his 1943 study of the north End of Boston, uncovered the highly organized behavior and social controls which existed in an Italian urban slum neighborhood. Whyte's work began a stream of urban poor neighborhood studies which have continued to this day. Besides affirming the social organization which exists in urban poor neighborhoods, these studies have shown the variety of social environments in which the urban poor live. Clinard in his authoritative work on

[1]Some better known studies were William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, a 1943 study of North End Boston; Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, 1957; Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961, with specific reference to Greenwich Village and lower Manhattan; Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, a 1962 study of West End Boston; Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner*, a 1967 study of a Negro section of Washington, D.C. From Latin America: William Mangin and John Turner, *The Barriada Movement*, a 1968 study of squatters of Lima, Peru; Liza Peattie, *The View from the Barrio*, a 1968 study of a barrio of Guayana, Venezuela. From Asia: Ronald Dore, *City Life in Japan*, 1958; Barrington Kaye, *Upper Nanking Street*, a study of a shop house section of Singapore; Mary Hollnsteiner, *Inner Tondo as a Way of Life*, 1967.

Slum and Community Development (1966), summarizes the findings of the past decade on urban poor neighborboods:

> *Although some slums lack unity, disunity cannot be assumed to be a general phenomenon of the slum. Rather, each slum neighborhood must be examined in the light of its own sub-culture. In each case, the particular sub-culture will be the dominant influence on the life pattern of the respective slum inhabitants, shaping their lives through the pressure of environmental and family backgrounds, cultural traditions, and major life concerns.*[2]

The neighborhood distinctness to which Clinard refers is undergirded by aspects of social organization from which the urban sub-culture draws its life — the sense of belonging and attachment to a neighborhood, strong family and ethnic ties, formal groups, informal social activities, mutual assistance.

Culture of Poverty

The work of Oscar Lewis provided a different dimension and a compelling term for the life he found among the urban poor. Drawing upon the studies of the *vecinidades* of Mexico City and La Esmeralda, the squatter barrio in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Lewis asserted that within these urban poor communities there existed a way of life which could be characterized as a "culture of poverty." In this concept, Lewis emphasized the cyclical nature of poverty, as it is passed on from one generation to another. For Lewis, the "culture of poverty" is both a state of disorganization and economic deprivation, and a rationale of socio-psychological mechanisms through which the poor face life. In his studies of the Sanchez family of Mexico City and the Rios family in San Juan and New York, the social and psychological characteristics of poor families are reinforced in the behavior of the young early in life. Lewis has enumerated the characteristics of the "culture of poverty":

1. The lack of effective participation of the poor in the major institutions of the larger society.
2. Within the local community, there are poor housing conditions, crowding, gregariousness, and a minimum of organization beyond the level of the nuclear and extended family.
3. On the family level, there is an absence of childhood as a specially prolonged and protected state in the life cycle, early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriages, a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of wives and children, a trend toward mother-centered families, predisposition to authoritarianism, lack of privacy, a great emphasis on family solidarity, an ideal rarely achieved.
4. On the individual level, a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependence, of inferiority.[3]

Some years ago. E. P. Patanne, in a *Manila Times Sunday Magazine* article[4] applied Oscar Lewis' concept of the "culture of poverty" to the Philippine scene. Patanne sought to show the similarity of the poor of Oscar Lewis' studies to the poor of the Manila squatter areas. He listed the economic aspects of the culture of poverty which he found in Lewis:

1. the constant struggle for survival
2. unemployment
3. low wages
4. a miscellany of unskilled occupations
5. child labor

[2]Marshall B. Clinard, *Slums and Community Development* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 17.

[3]Oscar Lewis, *La Vida* (Vintage Books: New York, 1968), p. xiv.

[4]"The Culture of Poverty," *The Sunday Times Magazine*, November 11, 1962.

6. absence of savings
7. a chronic shortage of cash
8. the absence of food reserves in the home
9. the pattern of frequent buying of small quantities of food many times a day as the need arises
10. the pawning of personal goods
11. borrowing from local money lenders at usurious rates of interest
12. spontaneous informal credit devices organized by neighbors
13. the use of second hand clothing and furniture.

Patanne translated these into common Tagalog sayings:

1. nakaraos din
2. kung minsan may trabaho, kung minsan wala
3. ang kinikita ko, kulang pa sa pagkain
4. maski anong trabaho
5. mabuting anak, nagtitinda ng sigarilyo
6. walang-wala
7. palaging 'broke' tayo, alam mo naman
8. wala bang makain dito sa bahay na ito?
9. o ito, bumili ka ng tuyo, utangin mo na!
10. prenda
11. the great "pa-utang" system which can be found in all market places and neighborhoods — "hulugan"
12. paluwagan
13. Tama na iyan, saka na lang bumili ng bago 'pag may pera. In everything else, *pasuerte-suerte* lang.

Patanne carried his analysis further by suggesting a close relationship between the attitudes of the poor and the traditional patterns of behavior in the Philippines. "To a certain extent," Patanne suggested, "the culture of poverty may be defined, in our case certainly, in terms of the norms which straddle the entire society — from the rich to poor." Seven years later in her column in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil made the same point. Reasserting the kinship between the rich and the poor in the Philippines, she wrote:

> *For the ways of the rich in our country are uncannily like the ways of the poor. They have the same style, or if you prefer, the same profligacy of spirit. The poor man is poor because he blew his last carabao or quit his last job for a fiesta. Only the very rich should be able to afford such dissipation, and they do and it only makes them richer. But the poor do it, too, and my only point is that they do it just as beautifully and with the same generosity.*[5]

Both E. P. Patanne and Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil were on the track of the essential relationship which poverty has to culture. For many years, poverty has been looked upon as disorganized behavior in urban society. The earliest efforts of journalists, clergymen, sociologists were aimed at reforming the poor and bringing them into organized society. Most of the reflections upon poverty as a sub-normal condition in modern society have been drawn from studies carried out in the Western world. The American experience with its strong social conscience and its mission to achieve a unified society exerted a strong influence on the modern views of the urban poor. Those who studied, spoke, and wrote about the urban poor, viewed society from within the context of their middle class values. They saw the wide range of ethnic and racial groups in the United States as foreign bodies which needed to be reformed and incorporated into the main body of America. Since the immigrant groups in the U.S. in the 19th century began at the bottom of the economic ladder, poverty was associated with foreigners, and was seen as an abnormal state in a basically rich society.

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[5]"Rich and Poor," *The Sunday Times Magazine*, July 27, 1969.

Studies of the urban poor in other countries have had a similar bias. The urban poor have been viewed as a people outside the mainstream of society. The initial concern has been to bring them into the main body. Even Oscar Lewis' work, for all its insights into the cultural characteristics of poverty, has studied poor families at arm's length from the society as a whole. Poverty, to Lewis, still carried the caricature of separateness.

Culture — A Stronger Force Than Poverty

Recent studies of squatter communities, particularly in Latin America, have pointed to the integrative elements of poverty in relation to culture. A poor man cannot be separated from his natural environment and from the culture into which he was born. The daily behavior of a person and the social relationships he develops are rooted in the cultural patterns of his society. This web of inter-personal relationships cuts across all groups of people in his culture. It provides a holistic relationship between rich and poor and the reactions each have to the issues of life. In the introduction to *Peasants in Cities,* William Mangin makes the point that the poor in any country have more in common with the rest of their country in terms of family and kinship patterns, aspirations, values, cultural world views, body movements and language habits, than they do with the poor of other countries. Thus, Mangin suggests:

> *The poor of Mexico and Puerto Rico (San Juan and New York varieties) described by Lewis have more in common culturally with the general population of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans than they do with the poor of France and Pakistan. Poor Negroes in the United States are more like middle class black and white Americans, even granting the black power rhetoric, than they are like the poor of Ghana, Egypt, or Mexico.*[6]

What does this say to us as we try to relate to the issue of poverty in the Philippines? First, it tells us that we must take seriously the role which cultural patterns provide for change. We have often looked at culture as restrictive in regard to social change. In an age of rapid social change, we have lumped together all the attitudes and attributes inherited from the past.

But no society is completely static. There is a continuous interplay of regional and international forces, as well as internal pressures, which keep a society on the move. What is important is how a society uses the cultural patterns open to it in accommodating to and in bringing change. Close-knit associational patterns among the Peruvian Indian migrants into the city provided them the organizational ability to carry out planned squatter invations of vacant government land. Faced with well-planned and determined squatter occupations, the Peruvian government ultimately legitimized the holdings of the squatter organizations.

Social Organization in Philippine Cities

The same patterns exist within the Philippine setting. Strong associational ties to one's region is the basis for much community life in the city — particularly among the poor. Regional ties are used to gain political patronage, for mutual aid, or to find a job in the city. Among the urban poor, people from the same region settle near one another for social contact and for protection. The community, derived from regional associations, helps the new urban dweller survive in the city as well as provides him a base from which to gain urban experience. On the basis of the community, individual families are able to rise and achieve social mobility within the city. Social mobility as a factor for change is open to a limited

[6]William Mangin (ed.), *Peasants in Cities,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1907), p. xvii.

number of families. If the families who are upwardly mobile deprive the community of their leadership, the community is the loser.

A second aspect of the issue is the change brought to a culture by technology. Technology has sped the growth of the cities. It has increased the movement of people off the land into the urban centers. Besides producing consumer goods, technology has provided the means of communication and transportation by which the city lives and moves. Technology has prompted the organizational system which ties a city together. A city functions through the network of its various organizations — be they economic, social or political.

To live in the city, a person takes part in its organizations. Guy Swanson, an American sociologist, points out that the casualties of city life are those people who are not tied to it organizationally. He cites studies made in Detroit, San Francisco, and Springfield, Massachussets which show that the most forlorn are the aged, the divorced, the widowed, the unemployed, and the unskilled. The studies indicated that advancing age, limited educational attainment, and low economic status relate directly to the degree of alienation a person feels toward society. When these factors are in combination with social isolation — a lack of relationship to formal organization or few informal contacts — the alienation intensifies.[7]

Organization becomes an essential factor in the participation of the poor in urban society. I have already suggested that participation in their social, ethnic, or regional associations begins to provide the poor a sense of belonging in the city. The urban poor soon learn that to have leverage in the city, the name of the game is politics. Living tenuously as they do on government land, the urban poor learn to exert pressure on the political system. They convert their social, ethnic, and regional associations into political alliances to win favors for votes. The urban political system provides the urban poor with the means to hold off eviction and to gain time while some of their number improve their position.

Philippine Political Organization

In his study of urban politics, Dr. Aprodicio Laquian has pointed to the development of local political machines as one basis for integrating the poor into urban life. The local political machines, built upon the vote of the urban poor, force the national parties to recognize the needs of the poor communities — thus allowing for wider political participation of the poor. Laquian concludes. "Hopefully, as economic and social conditions in the slums improve, there will be a shift in the role of machine from selfishly particularistic pressure to more general welfare-oriented lobbies."[8]

The development of political *savoir faire* among the urban poor has thus provided a lever for wider community change. But even here experience has taught that often political machines have not delivered the goods they promised. The people become over-dependent upon the *liders* who dominate the organization. Many times the *liders* pick a losing candidate or they fall out with the administration. In any case, the *liders* short-circuit any real participation on the part of the people in community change.

Participation of the Poor in Decision-Making

This raises the need for another alternative. Recognizing the importance which organization plays in bringing change, the people's participation in organization needs to be broadened so that they become shapers of their so-

[7]Cited by Guy Swanson in *The Vocation of a Church in America,* address given in Detroit, Michigan to a joint Session of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the U.S.A., June 1961.

[8]*The 'Rurban' Slum As 'Zone of Transition,'* paper given on February 3, 1969 at Institute of Advanced Projects, East-West Center, Hawaii, p. 16.

ciety instead of its victims. The need to involve more people in discussions which concern their livelihood, their environment, their future is the process which community organizers seek to strengthen. William Mangin cites the importance that direct involvement and participation of the poor in changing their immediate situation has upon them as citizens.

> *The Latin American urban squatters who take initiative, defy the police, risk and often lose their property and occasionally the lives of relatives and friends, and who create their own communities and build their own houses in the face of societal opposition, often seem to gain a confidence and strength from the activity that enables them to become a functioning part of the same society that opposed them.*[9]

It is this ability to build organizations, to make decisions, to act upon those decisions which is the very process of democratic involvement. It is a confrontation of the power of wealth and influence by the power of the people organized for justice. This is part of the process of democracy which keeps it vital and the only alternative to political systems controlled by the few. Even Oscar Lewis recognizes the effect of organization upon the culture of poverty.

> *When the poor become class-conscious and active members of trade union organizations, or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world, they are no longer part of the culture of poverty, although they may be still desperately poor. Any movement, be it religious, pacifist, or revolutionary, which organizes and gives hope to the poor and effectively promotes solidarity and a sense of identification with larger groups, destroys the psychological and social core of the culture of poverty.*[10]

The criticism of the poor voiced by Edward Banfield in the opening quotation suggests little hope for change. The poor will always need things done for them. But when the poor organize on their own behalf, it is the beginning of the end of a welfare psychology. Participation in organization breaks the continual cycle of poverty-consciousness by focusing upon what they can do for themselves through their numbers. It is the beginning of a people who have recognized their right to participate in their society — economically, socially, and politically.

The goal of a democracy is to assure the participation of all segments of a society in the making of a nation. Exclusion of any group from representation in the affairs of the larger society weakens that society and leaves it open to discontent. It is the task of those who believe in democratic processes to assure that the channels for expression are kept open and the machinery for the redress of injustice is kept functioning.

[9]William Mangin, *op. cit.*, p. xxxiii.

[10]Oscar Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. xlviii.

A nation's treasure... scholars.

Don't waste good iron for nails... good men for soldiers.

Bitter words are good medicine... sweet words carry infection.

From the Chinese