

"THE CULTURE OF MARGINALITY"
AND
THE NATIVE PEOPLE
OF THE
MACKENZIE RIVER DELTA

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There has been two major stereotypes of poverty and its role in the affairs of man. One stream of thought through the ages has seen poverty as an ennobling experience. "Poverty" says Lucan (The Civil War, ca.60 A.D., line 165) "is the mother of manhood" and "the step-mother of genius" (Josh Billings Affurisms, 1865). Pastoral romanticists, admirers of Rousseau's "noble savage", and the laissez-faire moralists of the early 19th century have hailed the dignity of the poor. Evan Bliss Carman, one of our great Canadian poets, was moved to write:

Thank God for poverty that makes and keeps us free,
And lets us go our unobtrusive way,
Upright, serene, humane,
Contented with the fortunes of the day.

On the other hand there are those who have seen poverty as a source and manifestation of human evil and despair. "Wealth" says Plato (Republic book IV-E, 422) "is the parent of luxury and indolence, and poverty of meanness and viciousness, and both of discontent". According to Shaw (Major Barbara 1907 Preface) it is "the greatest of evils and the worst of crimes." "Poverty", said Benjamin Franklin, "often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue; it is hard for an empty bag to stand upright." Both schools of thought agree on one thing: poverty is more than economic deprivation, it is a way of life.

In the social sciences there are at least two major approaches to the amelioration of poverty. Among those who are concerned with underdeveloped or poverty-stricken nations are those who hold that this condition may be reversed by the injection of a critical amount of cash and goods into the market of an underdeveloped country (e.g. Rostow

). The decrease of poverty, and "take-off" into an industrially developed state will occur after a sort of "critical mass" of economic

means is present. On the other hand are those who point to cultural and psycho-social characteristics in many of these nations which act as impediments to full economic development or the perpetuation of poverty or poverty groups within them (e.g. Hagen). Within anthropology, there has been a number of attempts to describe and analyze the human dimensions of deprivation and the typical responses to it (e.g. Barfield 1958; Lewis 1961; 1964 (a); 1964 (b); 1963; Fanon 1965).

One of the most successful yet controversial attempts to do this is found in Lewis' elaboration of the concept of the "culture of poverty." Critical reviews of Lewis' work have centred around two issues: (a) the validity of his particular research techniques, and (b) the analytical status of the culture of poverty concept. The latter has received the least attention, and we intend here to engage in a more extended critique of the concept. We propose to raise some questions about its analytical validity, to suggest some revisions and amendments to it, and finally to apply it to the Mackenzie Delta in Canada's Western Arctic.

In broad terms the concept culture denotes 'a design for living which is passed down from generation to generation'. In applying this concept to poverty, Lewis wants

"to draw attention to the fact that poverty in modern nations is not only a state of economic deprivation, of disorganization, or of the absence of something; it is also something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines. The culture of poverty has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members." (Lewis 1964: 149-50).

This way of life "is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic

society," and "adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society" in which it is found (Lewis 1966: XLIV-XLV). Economic deprivation is not sufficient to produce a culture of poverty amongst a group of people, but "lack of effective participation and integration of the poor in the major institutions of the larger society is one of the crucial characteristics of the culture of poverty" (Lewis *ibid.*: XLV). Consequently, the culture of poverty is found only among economically deprived, marginal, detribalized, or socially dislocated subgroups within colonial, quasi-colonial, or strongly stratified social systems. In such situations the culture of poverty groups have minimal sense of identity with the wider society of which they are part and may be actively discriminated against or socially segregated. The culture of poverty is usually marked by a "great deal of pathos, suffering and emptiness" for it is a "thin culture" which "does not provide much support or long-range satisfaction" for the individuals within it, who tend to suffer from feelings of apathy, alienation, and isolation. Lewis claims that the culture of poverty concept "provides a high level of generalization" for the understanding of poverty in a wide range of cultural, social, and national contexts, for it displays a marked similarity wherever it is found, and can be described in terms of some seventy traits or characteristics. If we can accept this brief summary of Lewis' point of view as reasonably accurate, we now turn to some crucial analytical issues.

As Belshaw (1967: 435) says, we may accept the concept to the extent that Lewis is saying that

where there is substantial poverty which has persisted over a considerable period of time, the people who live in these conditions develop defences, institutions, norms, which have a functional validity under their conditions of living, and which are resistant to pressures to change.

Lewis demonstrates this with 'sympathy, objectivity, and realism'. The idea has 'great merit of simplicity and conviction'. And Lewis seems to have been the first to lay this out systematically and elaborate upon it analytically.

His name for this adaptive way of life, "the culture of poverty", while it conveys the meaning with some impact, is perhaps less apt and somewhat misleading. As Lewis says, economic deprivation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of a culture of poverty. He goes on to say that "the lack of effective participation and integration of the poor in the major institutions of the larger society is one of the crucial characteristics of the culture of poverty." This condition I choose to call marginality. In anthropology it is now always useful to separate "the economy" or "economic behaviour" from other kinds of social interaction. I shall use the word "economic" to describe that aspect of an inter-personal or inter-group interaction which deals with the distribution of valued goods and services. The same interaction may be simultaneously "political" (i.e. deals with the distribution of power), "religious", "kinship-oriented", etc. To speak of "economic" aspects is to abstract analytically only one aspect of the highly complex nature of the interaction. It is trivial at the present state of knowledge to point out that the economic, religious, political and other aspects of interaction are functionally, analytically inter-related. Economic aspects of behaviour do not exist in a vacuum. Consequently, to speak of economic deprivation is to speak of but one face of a complex interaction in which deprivation, or limited access to social resources in general, is present. For this reason, I choose to see economic deprivation as but one kind of social marginality, and I suggest that it cannot be understood apart from marginality in other areas of social life. It is for this reason, too, that I would prefer to

call the "culture of poverty" the "culture of marginality". This designation has perhaps less immediate appeal, but serves to focus upon the whole state of objective conditions to which the "culture of poverty" is a functional response rather than on one limited sphere of these conditions. But more crucial analytical issues are at stake than simply a name.

Lewis (1964) has outlined some seventy traits or characteristics which he holds to be largely present in any culture of poverty wherever it is found. Among these are listed gregariousness, high incidence of alcoholism, frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels, wife-beating, early initiation into sex, high incidence of free unions or consensual marriages, high incidence of child-abandonment, lack of a tendency to delay gratification, and a present-time orientation of activities. A moment's reflection will show that, at least at one level of abstraction, these "traits" are simply specific examples of his two more general characteristics of "present-time orientation" or the "lack of a tendency to delay gratification." As such, their status as separate traits tends to dissolve. They can more readily be understood as structural products of the characteristic lack of organization beyond the family and the lack of broadly-based mechanisms of regulation and social control so typical of at least the three specific "cultures of poverty" upon which he bases his generalizations. Only a large number of carefully prosecuted cross-cultural studies would show whether in fact his designated traits are generally characteristic of cultures of poverty. In addition, I would like to raise the issue that the establishment of the generality of such traits is not essential to the culture of poverty concept (although Lewis would probably disagree). Much more fundamental is Lewis' insight that a culture of poverty is a way of life adapted to the circumstances in which it is found.

Since he says, but does not fully demonstrate, that it 'can come into being in a variety of historical contexts' we must be prepared to entertain the possibility that it will display different traits under different conditions, and that any traits that various cultures of poverty will display in common will be at a relatively high level of generality. Whether these general traits are yet identified is an open question. It is also true, as we shall presently show, that a large number of the traits listed by Lewis as diagnostic of the culture of poverty are characteristic of at least two Arctic aboriginal cultural systems which for other reasons cannot be considered cultures of poverty. It is not sufficient in defining a system as a culture of poverty simply to show that a given set of traits is present, nor even that these traits are interrelated in a complex way of life. It is necessary to show analytically that, in fact, the traits are manifestations of or adaptive responses to economic deprivation and social marginality in each specific case and that the traits derive from no other source.

The Mackenzie River Delta contains one of the larger concentrations, at least in Arctic terms, of Canada's Northern population. Aboriginally, this massive delta, some 4500 square miles in area, was only minimally exploited by the Louchoux Indian groups who lived in the mountains to the South and West or by the aboriginal Mackenzie Eskimos who inhabited the adjacent Arctic coast. Both the Indians and Eskimos were hunting and fishing peoples to whom the delta resources were of less significance than those of the mountain and coastal regions nearby. Although the aboriginal Mackenzie Eskimo population was estimated at some 3000 persons by Franklin in 1826, of which one of the largest groups centred on the coast of the Mackenzie Delta, a mere handful were left by the early part of the twentieth century.

The present population of the delta are virtually all descendants of

diverse peoples attracted to the delta during the development of the fur-trade (ca. 1850-1945) by its rich fur resources. Most of the Indians derive from bands originally resident on the Peel River some 125 miles above the point where it presently enters the delta. Most of the Eskimos derive from a dozen or more North Alaskan groups from as far away as the Kotzebue Sound region, just east of Bering Strait. Both Indians and Eskimos underwent traumatic social and cultural upheavals with the advent of European and American trappers, whalers, traders, and missionaries, as well as miscegenation on a grand scale.

The modern delta population is multi-racial and multi-ethnic. In recent years an increasingly large number of Southern Canadians have taken up residence in the area. Through the processes of traumatic social displacement and change, aboriginal cultural distinctions between the Native people have become largely submerged. The clearest, most palpable cleavage in the delta today is between two cultures, two ways of life: that of Outsiders, and that of Native people. These two local designations denote two exclusive social statuses, the relationship between which holds the key to much of delta social life.

The Native people, although still aware of their ethnic backgrounds and differentiated in part by linguistic features, food preferences and so on participate essentially in a common culture which is a product of the fur-trade in particular and exposure in general. This emergent cultural pattern, although sub-culturally differentiated to a certain extent, derives from a number of factors of which the most important seem to be the following:

- (1) Common residence in and exploitation of an area hitherto relatively ignored by the aboriginal societies.
- (2) Re-orientation to the common subsistence regime of the fur-trade under the stimulus and control of Outsiders.

- (3) Common exposure to the cash economy, missionization, education, and the administrative control of Outsiders.

By no means do I want to suggest that there are no differences between modern delta Indians and Eskimo. I suggest that what differences there are should best be seen as stylistic or sub-cultural variants of a common emergent culture which has been generated largely as a response to the effectively dominant Outsider culture which has acted, sometimes consciously, in a way to minimize cultural differentiation between Native people and to orient them to a common socio-economic position.

To the casual observer cultural differences between the Native people appear much greater than they really are, partly because the popular definition of culture focuses upon relatively superficial traits such as use of aboriginal languages (which is now largely confined to older people), ability to perform aboriginal dances or recall aboriginal myths, etc. Child-rearing practices, marital arrangements, ideas of leadership, subsistence and economic activities and other more fundamentally "cultural" phenomena are remarkably similar between the various groups of Native people, and perhaps represent less of a legacy from the aboriginal past than an adjustment and a response to the historical impact of the Outsider social system.

During the late fur-trade (ca. 1920-1945) an ever increasing number of people left the land-based subsistence and economic regime of trapping, fishing and hunting and assumed residence in the four major delta settlements. Today, only about 5% of the population follow a land-based, traditional fur-trade way of life. Those who follow a settlement regime may be divided into three major categories representing different styles of life:

1. Permanently employed persons and their dependents - a local "elite" - ca. 10% of the population.
2. Persons who follow a seasonal cycle of casual unskilled labour and dependence upon social assistance with only minimal dependence on more traditional land activities - 40% - of the population.

3. Persons who follow a modified dependence on trapping, fishing, and hunting combined with occasional casual labour and social assistance - 40% - of the population.

In terms of acculturative adjustment, the permanently employed category follow a way of life closely modelled on that of the Outsiders. On the other hand, most of the settlement residents follow a way of life, which although strongly "Native - identified", is a relatively new social development. It is this way of life which is the emergent Native culture. It is a "regionalized working-class subculture" (Slobodin 1964:53), a sort of back-woods proletariat.

Most of the Outsiders present in the area are involved in administrative activities. They are highly transient, for most stay in the area only for the duration of an appointment (2-3 yrs.). Their way of life is essentially similar to that of Southern Canadians save for the modifications required by relative isolation in an Arctic environment. Like other White Settler societies, the delta Outsiders are almost "hyper-organized". Not only do most of their activities revolve around the complex administrative structure, they have proliferated a large number of social service clubs, recreational and other voluntary organizations, and political interest groups. In this milieu abundant political and social process is generated, serving typically Southern Canadian interests through typically Southern Canadian organizational patterns, but much of it affecting the position of Native people.

In comparison, the Native sector is almost "under-organized" with virtually no organizational structures above the level of the family, few and usually weak leaders, and typified by little involvement in political and social service activities. Consequently, the Native people are unable to compete effectively either within the Outsider social structure or in opposition to it. They share few of the interests of the Outsider

organizations, sometimes do not understand them, and on occasion feel them to be incompatible with Native interests, values, and "ways of doing things."

This social system conforms to a pluralistic model in which two cultural segments co-exist, with the predominance of regulation and control maintained by one segment over the other. The relationship between the two segments in various contexts is essentially "the administrators versus the administered", the relatively powerful versus the relatively powerless (in terms of ability to "work the system"), and that of "teacher - student" (since most Outsiders think of themselves as socializers, educators, or agents of change vis-a-vis the Native people). Virtually all Outsiders have strong views about the "Native mind", the so-called "Native problem", and "what should be done about them", and engage actively in competition for the attention of Native people as well as the means of power to gain their various goals of social change. In this situation, the Native people can only be described as marginal.

The cultural content of this marginal, Native back-woods proletariat has been generated as a functional adaptation to marginality (or social deprivation). It happens to display many of the characteristic traits of the culture of poverty listed by Lewis - high incidence of alcoholism, high rate of consensual marriages, little tendency to accumulation of fixed or fluid capital, high incidence of violence in settling quarrels, few effective leaders, minimal formal organization beyond the family, minimal ability in developing social or economic entrepreneurs, etc. etc. There is definitely a present-time orientation and little tendency to plan for the future - in virtually all spheres of social life. This is a functional adaptation to a rapidly changing and unstable social environment over which the people feel themselves to have minimal control, and to a minimally

organized internal structure in which it is difficult to predict or depend upon the supportive activities of others or elicit long-range commitment from them. Many of these traits, especially those concerning organization and leadership, were also true of the aboriginal cultures. Yet the aboriginal cultures were not cultures of poverty, at least in the sense intended by Lewis. At this point I wish to maintain that, to the extent that certain traits in the present delta culture of poverty represent continuities from the aboriginal past, they are traits of a culture of poverty only in the present circumstances. Old traits continue with new "meanings" or functional significance. This illustrates my point that it is not sufficient simply to show that given traits are present in a culture to define it as a culture of poverty - it is also necessary to show that these traits when present are products of functional adaptation to poverty and social marginality or responses to it.

Let us turn for a moment to a consideration of the economic situation of Delta Native people, among whom it is not difficult to show that economic deprivation is present. Preliminary analysis of our data on income from gainful employment shows that only about 10% of the labour force in Aklavik was permanently employed, and that their average annual per capita income (from payrolls and marginal trapping) was about \$1200. The remaining 90% of the population falls well below the level of absolute poverty if we can take that to be \$600 per capita per year). For example, 82% of the labour force combines seasonal casual jobs with trapping. Their average annual per capita income was only \$417, while land-oriented people had an income of only \$359 per person per year. These figures are rather difficult to compare with those for other Canadian groups, for delta people depend to some extent on wild foods for which it is difficult to compute a

monetary value. Actual income is also augmented by social assistance payments, pensions, and family allowances.

Not only is the average per capita income low for 90% of the Native people, it is derived largely from seasonally unstable sources. Fluctuations in the availability of casual jobs, the typically marked fluctuations of the fur market, and the unpredictable seasonal and cyclical fluctuations of wild resources create a milieu in which it is extremely difficult for the Native person to depend upon a reasonable minimum income month by month or year by year. This effectively prevents most of them from making use of credit systems in which fixed periodic payments are mandatory (such as mortgages or financed purchases of capital equipment), although most are perennially in debt to traders in the "grub-stake" system. In addition, it will be noted that all the sources of cash open to Native people lie in the Outsider sector of the social system. Except for gambling and occasional *ad hoc* purchases between Native people there is virtually no other means of cash exchange between Native people. Although a few Native people have attempted to develop entrepreneurial activities, they have largely failed. These enterprises are now in the hands of Outsiders. Not only do the major sources of cash lie in the Outsider sector, the only places where money can be spent lie there also. These conditions conform to a kind of economic pluralism in which the Native people are in a state of economic dependence upon the Outsiders who hold the chief control and regulation of the sources of cash income and the means of its expenditure. Low, unstable incomes among most Native people make saving or long-term economic planning virtually impossible. It is to this set of objective conditions that the apparently erratic economic behaviour of the Native people is a response and an adaptation. Poverty in the Mackenzie Delta is considered as simply low and unstable income is only one sign or symptom among many of general social marginality, and this is what shapes the life of the poor.

One may now ask "What is to be done to relieve poverty and all its effects?" As we have suggested, poverty under certain conditions is more than simply economic deprivation. It will take more than money or increased incomes to change the profile of poverty in the Mackenzie River Delta. What is required is nothing less than complete structural revision of the characteristic ways in which Natives and Outsiders typically interact. Constitutional and legal changes are required to ensure that formal equality of opportunity is maintained. Changes in the mode of operations of the administrative system are also required in order to minimize any possibility of differential treatment among the various social segments. But constitutional and administrative changes are not sufficient. The law and its agencies represent the broad frame of reference within which daily life is transacted in the delta; it cannot be expected to penetrate the areas of life where "discrimination" and "prejudice" have their most pervasive effects. Since marginal people operate with a deficit of information about the society in which they live and the alternatives of action which may in fact be open to them, strategies are required to ensure that this deficit of information is overcome. Likewise, Outsiders in the delta operate with unrealistic ideas about who the Native people are, the nature of their way of life, and their potential role in Canadian society. They too must become informed about the implications of their actions for the Native people.

Now the social scientist may make recommendations for constitutional and administrative change, but of much greater importance is his potential role in overcoming the "information gap" between Natives and Outsiders. As a relatively detached observer and reporter, he must seek out ways to make his findings available to the people of the delta. In a crude sense, much

of the "pathology" in delta society is a product of decisions made daily in people's lives based on minimal or inferior information. Presumably, decisions made on "better" information are "better" decisions. The anthropologist has a crucial role to play in making this "better" information available. The Mackenzie Delta Research Project is now exploring alternative ways in which to play this educational role.

TABLE I

Average Annual per Capita Income From
Gainful Employment (Payrolls, Fur-Trapping, Hunting),
Social Assistance, and Pensions and Allowances for
Aklavik Native People, by Employment Category, 1965-66.

(A) Average Annual per Capita Income in Dollars.

Employment Category	Source					Total Annual Income per capita
	(a) Payrolls	(b) Trapping	(c) Hunting, Fishing (1)	(d) Social Assistance (2)	(e) Pensions, Allowances	
Permanent employees	\$940.00	\$92.00	\$118.00	nil	\$44.00	\$1194.00
Casual	194.00	88.00	44.00	\$50.00	41.00	417.00
Bush People	34.00	155.00	62.00	65.00	43.00	359.00

(B) Average Annual per Capita Income from Each Source as Percent of Actual Income.

Employment Category	Source				
	(a) Payrolls	(b) Trapping	(c) Hunting, Fishing	(d) Social Assistance	(e) Pensions, Allowances
Permanent Employees	78.72%	7.70%	9.83%	nil	3.68%
Casual	46.52	21.10	10.55	11.99%	9.83
Bush People People	9.47	43.17	17.27	18.10	11.97

1. Cash equivalents for wild foods are estimated at prevailing price rates for closely equivalent substances available on the local market; hence caribou, moose and mountain sheep are assigned the approximate value of commercial reindeer meat (i.e. ca \$0.50 per lb.), and fish are estimated at \$0.10 per lb., the price set by Native people in small-scale inter-personal exchanges.
2. "Social Assistance" includes direct issues to food, oil, clothing, etc. and payments on behalf of recipient (e.g. rent, power bills, medical expenses, etc.).