THE IMPACT OF POVERTY AND UNDERNOURISHMENT ON MAN AND SOCIETY IN RURAL JAMAICA

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In their endeavour to explain human behaviour social psychologists have a tendency to look for causes in the past of the individuals under consideration. Albert A. Campbell, for example, states in the conclusion of his study on Saint Thomas negroes, that he made an effort to analyse the most important aspects of the childhood experience typically present in St. Thomas in order to derive the best representation possible of the origins of the adult behaviour of the individual St. Thomian.1) Madeline Kerr, who studied the personality of the Jamaican peasant is also dealing with the effect of childhood experiences on the personality of the grown up when she pays considerable attention to what she calls (1) dichotomy of concepts over parental roles and (2) lack of patterned learning in childhood.2)

The above described approach is a genetic one: how have certain particular needs and certain goals come into being in a given situation? This "historical" approach may result in the discovery of interesting relationships and is no doubt required for a comprehensive explanation of the behaviour of certain categories of individuals, but it is also true that many striking phenomena in human behaviour can be explained satisfactorily by relating them to the immediate psychological fields of the individuals concerned. This approach is concerned with the question: how do the needs and goals of a given individual at a given time in a given situation determine his behaviour?3) It is for this reason that the writer suggests that social psychologists should test the following hypothesis: the behaviour of small farmers in Jamaica can at least partly be explained as a consequence of undernourishment and poverty.

The purpose of the present paper is solely to offer this hypothesis and to give some facts and a framework of reasoning which might be useful in the process of testing the above hypothesis.

Although no exact figures are available it is very likely that a high percentage of Jamaican small cultivators are undernourished. They con-

2) Kerr, Madeline, Personality and Conflict in Jamaica. 1952.
sume only small quantities of such foodstuffs as milk, meat, chicken and fish, although they desire these. Among this category of farmers there is a relatively high incidence of various diseases such as venereal diseases, hookworm, avitaminosis and anaemia, whereas many children are suffering from what is locally called kwashiorkor, a hunger disease.

A still higher percentage of the rural population suffers from poverty, that is, they have not sufficient income in cash or kind to maintain a level of living and decency accepted in the community as a minimum. Not all poor people are undernourished, but the undernourished section of the population is, as a matter of fact, included in the poverty stricken segment of the population.

The effect of undernourishment and poverty is that for large groups of the population, certain foodstuffs and/or small amounts of money are overriding goals. The road to these goals is at least partly blocked by various obstacles, so that frustration often results. These blockages arise from (1) the material resources (shortage of good land), (2) the character of the traditional system of small farming and (3) the social environment.

As regards the material resources of the small holders (farmers with less than 10 acres available for exploitation) it can be said that most of them have not enough land to keep undernourishment and poverty out of their homes. A survey revealed that 40% of the small holders' households in four areas in Jamaica have an annual income (cash and kind) of less than £50. 4)

The traditional character of small farming is also a barrier in the way of progress. Many farmers still have a tenant mentality towards farming. Tenants without security of tenancy (and also small landowners with a tenant mentality) are disinclined to invest money in their farms and are very keen on getting a quick return of the money and labour put into the farms. The small farmers do not like to spend much money at one time. Even those who have sufficient ready cash usually prefer to hire one or two men intermittently to do a job piecemeal, rather than to invest enough capital to have it done at once. The economic goal of backward, impoverished tenant farmers who have no security of holding is to get a quick crop without much effort and investment and without bestowing much care on the land. This tenant mentality is a barrier, both to the proper management of the farms, and to the realisation of the major goals of these farmers, sufficient food and money.

The social environment is another source of frustration. Society sets up a social class system which is so important to the members of the

4) Smith, M. G., A Report on Labour Supply in Rural Jamaica. 1956. 90.9% of the survey population consisted of households with less than 10 acres available for cultivation. 97.1 percent had less than 20 acres.
society that they are strongly motivated to preserve or improve their position in the class structure. The small farmer is so afraid of falling down in a lower class that he carefully protects what he has and does not dare to take the risk of losing his little money all at once. This is another reason why he proceeds to spend money on his farm in a piecemeal way, which generally retards his progress. Another aspect in the social organization which the farmer may find frustrating is the marketing system. The small farmer feels himself powerless in the hands of the big produce dealers and the government, both of whom he mistrusts. Although the prices of the export crops are nowadays fixed by his own organizations, he nevertheless feels that he has no control over the prices of these products. For locally marketed crops he is in the hands of higglers, who sell his products in many different markets, where the prices fluctuate with supply and demand. Being, until recently, exploited by a few big produce dealers, who have enriched themselves at the expense of the farmers, the small farmer still fears that he may only recover the cost of his production, that is, mainly his own labour, and even less and that the remainder is absorbed by some big shots and by government.

Having discussed these various obstacles to the major goals of the small farmer, we will now see how he tries to overcome these barriers.

The normal reaction of people who are blocked in the achievement of a certain goal is to mobilize all their energies. Difficult conditions in life create in people, as a survival mechanism, a toughness and stubbornness very difficult to circumvent. In the Netherlands during the starvation period (1944-5), the undernourished citizens of Amsterdam and other big cities made tremendous efforts to satisfy their immediate wants, among others by walking very long distances to obtain food. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the country parts of Jamaica. When going to market or to a buying station, the farmers and their wives sometimes cover surprisingly long distances on foot in the hope of getting some small profit. This "profit" is often really spurious, only representing a "wage" for porterage of the goods. On their farms, Jamaican farmers prove themselves tough and stubborn workers, not minding the hot sun and not counting all the hours they spend to get a small profit.

To avoid hunger many a Jamaican farmer must reap the crops before they are mature. These prematurely gathered fruits are for home consumption, or they are sold, in which case the farmer makes less money than, with a little patience, he could have made by waiting.5) Some

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5) The reader should bear in mind, that we are dealing with the more impoverished section of the farming population. There are, of course, farmers with a different economic mentality. Farmers who store potatoes are not exceptional. They do this to get a better price later on, but only farmers in relatively favourable financial circumstances can afford to do this.
farmers reap part of their yams\(^6\)), ripe or not, before the 25th of December to get some money to spend in "the Christmas". They reap their bananas before these are fit and get, as a result, less money on buying day. Some small farmers cannot wait to deliver their coffee to the Jamaica Agricultural Society. They gather some of the berries and take them to a shop where they are sold or exchanged for groceries, whereupon the shopkeeper in turn supplies these berries to the J.A.S. at a profit.\(^7\) The mind is so much occupied by present needs that future needs are highly underestimated. When hunger is checked, relaxation follows and neither the past nor the future seems of much importance. So many of the Jamaican country people have had these psychological experiences that they are reflected in Jamaican proverbs e.g. "When man belly full, jaw mus' 'top" (relaxation) and "When man belly full, him bruk pot" (he forgets about the future). It is, by the way, not surprising that, in a country with a problem of malnutrition which is generations old, many proverbs deal with either "empty belly" or "full belly".

If concentration on his farm work, strenuous efforts and a keenness to get quick results ("quick bread mentality") does not solve the problem, the farmer may look for other paths to reach his goals (food and money). At that stage, feeling himself powerless, he will complain of being weak and tired. He will beg for help and say that he cannot do hard work: "You nebber see empty bag 'tan' up". Not being able to help himself, he is looking for somebody to help him and nowadays increasingly turns to government for that help. "What we need, Sir, is a little help" is an exclamation which is often heard by the sociologist who is doing an investigation. Another way out is slyness. In folk tales, Anancy, the spider, is a symbol of the powerless black man who gets the better of the powerful noisy tiger by guile. Anancy's behaviour emphasizes the "every man for himself" concept.\(^8\)

So far, we have been dealing with the efforts of individuals to overcome the barriers which prevent them from reaching their major goals in life. When these efforts are not sufficient, the frustration persists and eventually consequences of a less adjusted nature occur. Aggression, withdrawal and sublimation are such maladjusted consequences. Aggressive acts, which seem to allay, at least temporarily, the frustrated state, may take the form of verbal or physical violence by magical practices such as obeah. Frustration may also lead to withdrawal from the frustrating experience. Many farmers pack their belongings and leave the countryside,

\(^6\) A yam (Dioscorea Alata) is an edible root crop used as a vegetable.

\(^7\) Sometimes other factors besides the desire to get quick returns may also be involved in the selling of crops before maturity and before produce buying day, e.g. an unexpectedly high demand and price, ignorance of what is a mature banana, obligations to shopkeepers and so on.

\(^8\) Kerr op. cit. p. 173.
or would like their children to withdraw from small farming. Those who
are not able to leave the scene of frustration physically, escape psycho-
logically to another environment; the Ras Tafari cult, pocomania and
revivalism may be regarded as escapisms. The Ras Tafari cultists believe,
that they cannot succeed under existing conditions in Jamaica and that
it is advisable to repatriate to Ethiopia, which country they consider to be
the homeland of the black Jamaicans.9) Pocomania and revivalist cults
are small religious bodies with a mixed European and African belief
system, characterized by a search for mystical experience and presence of
a charismatic leader; they are short-lived and often local. At pocomania
and revivalist meetings drums, monotonous singing and dancing work
some of the attendants into a state of frenzy, in which they get possessed
by a spirit. According to Simpson10) this vigorous, at times almost violent
activity, provides relief from frustration which goes with economic and
political inferiority. Just as excessive drinking served as an escapism for
19th century frustrated European labourers, revivalism releases nowadays
Jamaicans from their tensions.

To be distinguished from withdrawal is sublimation. This is the
unconscious process by which the tension associated with the repressed
needs is deflected to new objects, new goals, new activities of a type
apparently unconnected with the original drives. The belief system of the
small Churches of God, which exist alongside revivalist groups in
Jamaica’s countryside, might — at least partly — be explained out of
sublimation of earthly needs. These Churches of God (sects) differ slightly
from revivalist and pocomania groups (which are cults). With the latter,
the cults, mystical experience is an essential element, whereas the former,
which are sects, emphasize individual regeneration, individual perfection
and ascetism. The appeal of ascetism and becoming “revived” for the
underpriviliged is clearly stated by Goldschmidt11), when he wrote: It
denies the existence of this world with its woes; it denies the values in
terms of which they are the underpriviliged and sets up in their stead a
putative society in the Kingdom of God, where, because of their special
endowments, they are the élite. It is the society of the saved. Millenarian-
ism is of the essence, for it is thus that the putative society is created;
ascetism is the denial of the world in which they have been denied.

Having discussed some psychological effects of undernourishment
and poverty, we now propose to deal with some of the sociological
consequences.

Poverty generally has a harassing effect on some human relations,
as it fosters attitudes of egoism and also promotes disproportionate envy and hostility towards people who prosper. In short, it emphasizes negative attitudes and minimizes positive ones.

In cases of calamity there is often a certain isolationism, a tendency to keep to oneself. The demands of the biological self are sometimes so pressing that the individual is forced to concentrate all his efforts on self-preservation. The "self" generally includes close relatives, the immediate family, whereas the extended family falls into second place. Outsiders (non-family) are considered to be competitors and are the objects of feelings of hostility so that there is only a weak affiliation to group life other than the family. In poverty stricken agrarian areas of Jamaica it can be observed that the farmers find it difficult to regard co-operative undertakings as theirs.

With regard to feelings of envy it is observed that the hostility towards those who succeed in "building themselves up" can become so strong that the less lucky ones will try to "keep down" the persons they envy by means of black magic (obeah). This creates an emotional atmosphere, because fear of being obeahed is then added.

Severe emotional strains, often engendered by frustration, may have a disintegrating effect on human relations, as in the case of obeah, envy and anxiety. However, highly emotional people are easily swayed from one extreme to another, so that different circumstances sometimes have an integrating effect on the very people so set apart. The country people in Jamaica are indeed very generous in time of trouble. In situations which appeal to their protective instincts, such as accident, sickness, the birth of a child and death, the Jamaican peasant is very helpful. When a poor person dies everybody in the district tries to help: by supplying board for a coffin, by digging the grave, by supplying food and rum for the death ceremonies and so on. Many people, too, are willing to help a child who is in need. This is, however, only temporary co-operation with familial goals. Co-operation in an organized form does not or only very seldom evolve among the farmers themselves. It is true, that there are many revivalist and pocomania groups and Churches of God in the country parts, but they are, for the most part, shortlived. The very fact that there are so many of these groups with practically the same ritual and theology demonstrates the strength of the disintegrating forces.

As long as the state of poverty exists, utilitarian social systems (associations) will not, as a rule, function satisfactorily. For this reason, most of the energy devoted to organizing the farmers into voluntary groups for extension purposes is lost energy. When some form of organization is imperative, a compulsory or semi-compulsory form has to be adopted, as is actually done in the cases of the commodity organizations such as the All Islands Banana Growers Association, the Citrus Growers Association etc.

The whole social and psychological situation in the poverty stricken
The countryside of Jamaica bears a marked resemblance to that prevailing in the Netherlands during the Hungerwinter of 1944-5. In the struggle for food the citizen of Holland withdrew into the stronghold of his family. The severe fight for self preservation forced the people to look after their own interests exclusively. As far as food was concerned, other people, who were not members of the family were regarded as competitors and were accordingly mistrusted. There were extreme feelings of jealousy towards people who were doing better, who were still eating thick slices of bread and who were carrying larger bags of rye and potatoes along the routes where the thousands of hungertrekkers passed by. Being in the borderland between life and death people are very irritable and aggressive, they are highly motivated by egoistic impulses.

The effect of hunger on social life was also studied with an Indian tribe in Bolivia. The Siriono, who live more or less continuously under starvation, are characterized by aggressiveness, individualism and a poorly developed tendency to co-operate with their fellow men.