

## Ideological Explanations of Poverty

A brief review of Herbert Gans, "The Positive Functions of Poverty",  
American Journal of Sociology 78, Number 2.

Gans has reflected at some length on the functions of poverty, taking up Merton's point that items which are functional for some sub-groups in society may be dysfunctional for others. The value of his paper is in pointing out instances in which poverty actually benefits, in some sense, particular interest groups. Society is so pre-occupied outwardly with the "costs" of poverty that it fails to identify the corresponding benefits, or rather, the groups or values who benefit. He describes 15 sets of functions, as follows:

- (i) poverty helps to ensure that dirty, dangerous, menial and undignified work gets done;
- (ii) the poor subsidise the affluent by saving them money (for example, domestic servants, medical guinea pigs, and the poor paying regressive taxes);
- (iii) poverty creates jobs in a number of professions (e.g., drug pedlars, prostitutes, pawnshops, army, police);
- (iv) the poor buy shoddy, stale and damaged goods (e.g., day-old bread, vegetables, second-hand clothes) which prolongs their economic usefulness and similarly use poorly trained and incompetent doctors, teachers and so on;
- (v) the poor help to uphold the legitimacy of dominant norms by providing examples of deviance (e.g., the lazy, spendthrift, dishonest, promiscuous);
- (vi) the poor help to provide emotional satisfaction, evoking compassion, pity and charity, so that the affluent may feel righteous;
- (vii) the poor offer affluent people vicarious participation in sexual, alcoholic and narcotic behaviour;

- (viii) poverty helps to guarantee the status of the non-poor;
- (ix) the poor assist in the upward mobility of the non-poor. (By being denied educational opportunities or being stereotyped as stupid or unteachable the poor enable others to obtain the better jobs);
- (x) the poor add to the social viability of non-economic groups (e.g., fund-raising, running settlements, other philanthropic activities);
- (xi) the poor perform cultural functions, like providing labour for Egyptian pyramids, Greek temples and medieval churches;
- (xii) the poor provide "low" culture which is often adopted by the more affluent (e.g., jazz, blues, spirituals, country music);
- (xiii) the poor serve as symbolic constituencies and opponents for several political groups (being seen either as the depressed or as "welfare chiselers");
- (xiv) the poor can absorb economic and political costs of change and growth in American society (e.g., reconstruction city centres, industrialisation);
- (xv) the poor play a relatively small part in the political process and indirectly allow the interests of others to become dominant and distort the system.

Gans denies that he is showing why poverty should persist, only that it "survives in part because it is useful to a number of groups in society . . . whether the dysfunctions outweigh the functions is a question that clearly deserves study". He points out that alternatives can be found easily enough for some functions. Thus, automation can begin to remove the need for dirty work, and professional efforts can be directed, like those of social workers, to the more affluent, and those of the police to traffic problems and organised crime. But he argues that the status, mobility and political functions are more difficult to substitute in a hierarchical society, and though inequality of status might be reduced, it could not be removed. "A functional analysis

must conclude that poverty persists not only because it satisfies a number of functions but also because many of the functional alternatives to poverty would be quite dysfunctional for the more affluent members of society".

### Shortcomings

This type of analysis, like all functional analysis, suffers from a number of important defects. Gans argues that unlike the David and Moore analysis of inequality, which claimed that social stratification was functional because it provided society with highly paid professionals, it is not conservative. By identifying the dysfunctions of poverty and discussing functional alternatives it takes on "a liberal and reform cast, because the alternatives often provide ameliorative policies that do not require any drastic change in the existing social order". But this is merely to give conservative functional analysis a flavour of political pragmatism by accommodating some of the less easily refutable criticisms and suggesting that incremental reforms but not social transformation is possible.

Gans lists 15 functions. He passes in a few lines over the dysfunctions of poverty. He does not define how the functional might be distinguished from the dysfunctional. He does not explain what we are to make of items which for any single group might be both functional and dysfunctional, though possibly to different degree. He does not discuss how the scope or degree of functions and dysfunctions might be measured. It is surely important whether poverty is functional or dysfunctional for 500 or 5 million persons and whether it is crucially or marginally functional or dysfunctional for these numbers. In everyday life certain benefits, and certain limitations, are experienced without question or even consciousness. They make barely any impression on the stuff of which life consists. Other benefits or limitations are fiercely defended or attacked. Whether they exist or not may make a profound difference to a whole style or standard of living. The sociologist's job is to find and apply criteria of discrimination to these different items.

By failing to define and measure both the scope and degree of poverty and its functions and dysfunctions Gans makes sharp assessment impossible. Explanation is muffled and therefore readers are by implication persuaded to make do with the existing social order. What is required is the kind of analysis showing that the extent of poverty is, say, 20 per cent in one society and 10 per cent in another and whether and how functional analysis can explain these differences, and, moreover, whether it can explain any differences in prevalence over time. To give a vague list of the obstacles to the removal of poverty makes a very small contribution to our understanding of the existence and conditions for removal of the phenomenon.

Again, a shopping list of functions may help introduce a young student to the general fact that there are groups in society with a vested interest in perpetuating poverty, but the interrelationships between groups and the sources and conditions of their power are not explored with the effect of implying constructive alternatives and hence how specious are the claims to inevitability on the part of apologists for the existing social system.

Worst of all, Gans pretends his analysis is neutral; claiming that it "suggest only that poverty exists because it is useful to many groups in society". But it appears (a) to give equal weight to functions which ought to be treated as having very different weight, and (b) to assert that certain items are functional or dysfunctional without attempting to measure extent or degree. The overall effect of such an approach is to convey that poverty cannot be removed but only diminished or modified. It is therefore as profoundly ideological as was the functional statement of Davis and Moore in 1945.

In his final paragraph Gans admits that though his analysis is more complete than early functionalism it needs to be made more complete by an examination of functional alternatives. A conclusion would then be reached which would not be very different from that of radical sociologists "that phenomena like poverty can be eliminated only when they either become

sufficiently dysfunctional for the affluent or when the poor can obtain enough power to change the system of social stratification". But in fact he does not examine functional alternatives and it seems a bit late to leave new matters which are fundamental to an explanation of poverty to the final sentence of a paper. Gans does not analyse the system of stratification, trace its origins and means of maintenance, or specify the conditions for changing it. Nor does he say how we would recognise what could be "sufficiently dysfunctional for the affluent". It would seem that functional analysis so far offers no more than preliminary descriptive classification of different groups who may, to an undefined extent, benefit from as well as suffer from poverty in society.

Peter Townsend

20th January 1973