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The Culture of Poverty as a Way of Life in Informal Settlements: A Reading of Oscar Lewis's "Sociology"

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Abstract

Our research paper aims to uncover the culture of poverty in the urban context, specifically within informal settlements, by examining the social, economic, and psychological conditions that shape the lives of their inhabitants. It primarily addresses the valuable contribution of the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis to the study of poverty, seeking to explore the sociology of poverty and understand how poverty is produced and reproduced within urban areas. The paper also considers the ways in which structural inequalities, limited access to resources, and social marginalization contribute to the persistence of poverty across generations. When we speak of the culture of poverty, we are speaking, first and foremost, of a culture that emerges, persists, and is transmitted from one generation to another, providing individuals with a particular and distinctive way of life characterized by a set of interconnected economic, social, and psychological features. These features are reflected in patterns of behavior, attitudes, values, and everyday practices that become deeply rooted within the community and are transmitted across generations. From this perspective, poverty is not understood merely as a lack of income or material resources, but also as a social condition that influences individuals' perceptions of themselves, their relationships with others, and their expectations for the future. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to shed light on the mechanisms through which poverty is maintained and reproduced, while also highlighting the importance of understanding the broader social structures and urban conditions that shape the experiences of individuals living in informal settlements.

Keywords: Sociology of Poverty; Urban Context; Informal Settlements; Way of Life; Practice.

Introduction

Contemporary cities are witnessing the spread and intensification of numerous urban and ecological problems that have become a source of concern for researchers and a subject of growing interest. Ample evidence points to their increasing prevalence, cumulative nature, and growing complexity, ultimately revealing the contours of an escalating urban crisis and the emergence of the concrete city a dystopian city that feeds on the displacement of its crises, contradictions, and constituent elements, which directly affect its social organization. It is therefore hardly surprising that this increasingly troubled situation has deteriorated further as a result of unplanned urban growth and the emergence of a crisis of informal settlements, amid the coexistence and interpenetration of rural and urban value systems. The city has also witnessed acute tensions between competing architectural forms, manifested in the ways urban development and spatial planning have been pursued. This has placed considerable pressure on the urban fabric and, in many cases, led to its destruction, not to mention the other social manifestations accompanying migrants' adaptation to their new environment. These processes have generated a subculture reflecting the particularities of life within such neighborhoods, as well as the marginalization and silencing of certain groups among their residents.

In this context, informal settlements appear to be more than merely residential areas lacking basic infrastructure and essential services. They also constitute social spaces within which distinctive patterns of relationships, values, and everyday practices emerge as a result of the interaction between poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion. This underscores the importance of approaching the phenomenon from a sociological perspective that moves beyond viewing poverty as merely a material deficiency, and instead examines it as a social and cultural reality that may reproduce itself over time and shape individuals' perceptions of themselves, others, and their future. Within this framework, the contributions of the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis acquire particular significance, given his interpretation of the culture of poverty as a way of life that develops under specific social and economic conditions, with some of its elements being transmitted across generations.

Accordingly, in light of this reality, the foregoing discussion leads us to the following questions:

- What does the culture of poverty mean?
- How does urban poverty emerge, and what are the initial conditions of its production? Is it a fixed or relative condition? Does responsibility for it lie with individuals or with the state? Are the conditions that produce it rooted in the city, or do they extend beyond it?

- What are the characteristics and distinctive features of this culture?

1. Research Concepts

1.2 Definition of Informal Settlements

The modern era is characterized by the rapid growth of cities, which has led to the significant neglect of many original neighborhoods within or outside urban areas, or to the emergence of entire neighborhoods inhabited by people who have migrated to cities while maintaining their previous living standards and failing to adapt to the urban lifestyle. Therefore, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the concept of "informal settlement" within the city.

- **Abdel Halim Ibrahim (1989) defines informal settlements as:**

A state of urban deterioration that may exist in any component of the urban fabric, such as spontaneous construction of infrastructure, changes in land use, or the loss of control over the relationships between densities, services, and facilities. Informality represents the loss of one or more of the urban elements constituting the city. (Al-Jawhari, Urban Sociology, p. 345)

- **According to Edmond Breton, informal settlements represent:**

A concept that expresses a new form of urban expansion characterized, on the one hand, by demographic growth, a specific built structure, particular forms of housing, and certain functions within what is known as an urban agglomeration; and, on the other hand, by a distinctive lifestyle. (Wati, 1981, p. 365)

- **Operational Definition:**

Informal settlements refer to neighborhoods consisting of unplanned housing units and structures that have been self-built according to illegal or non-regulatory standards on land belonging either to the state or to private individuals, as a consequence of the housing crisis. They generally contain unpaved roads and streets that are often narrow and overcrowded. Most of their inhabitants are recent migrants and marginalized groups. These neighborhoods frequently lack the basic services necessary for daily life. Since they belong to the informal sector, they are characterized by the prevalence of informal economic activities and occupations, some of which may operate outside legal frameworks.

2.2 Definition of the Culture of Poverty

A debate has sometimes emerged suggesting that poverty produces distinct behavioral patterns and gives rise to certain beliefs, including the belief in fate and destiny. Accordingly, poor people

may be perceived as accepting their poverty as an inevitable condition and believing that no power can help them overcome it or escape from it.

However, this assumption is insufficient to confirm that poverty remains permanently associated with poor people, or that it is reproduced across generations through conditions of deprivation. In such circumstances, children from poor or deprived families are raised within a cultural environment shaped by their parents, allowing poverty to be reproduced and experienced again by subsequent generations.

The term **“culture of poverty”** was first introduced by the American anthropologist **Oscar Lewis** in 1961 to describe people living in impoverished areas in Third World countries and developing societies. According to Lewis, families in these areas raise their children within conditions of poverty and deprivation. The criticism directed toward governments stems from their failure to support and develop these marginalized areas, as well as from societies’ inability to provide moral incentives that encourage individuals to pursue development and growth, escape the cycle of poverty, and receive self-help opportunities that enable them to achieve a better quality of life. (Maan Khalil Omar, pp. 178–179)

3. Causes of the Emergence of Informal Settlements

It is necessary to understand the true dimensions underlying the emergence of informal settlements, particularly their political, social, and economic foundations.

- Informal settlements initially emerged from groups of marginalized migrants who were searching for employment opportunities after their living conditions in their original rural areas had become increasingly difficult. (Ibrahim, 2008, p. 163)
- Another factor behind the emergence of informal settlements, in addition to the unplanned migration and movement of rural populations toward cities, is the continuous growth and demographic expansion of urban populations themselves. (Ibrahim, 2008, p. 164)

Regarding the socio-cultural dimensions of the emergence of informal settlements and similar urban phenomena, they have developed within two fundamental dimensions:

✓ **First:**

The emergence of informal settlements in their social and cultural dimensions reflects the situation of individuals and groups seeking life and aspiring to secure it in whatever form is available, based on the principle that the right to life is guaranteed to them.

✓ **Second:**

In their formal and administrative dimension, informal settlements historically and practically preceded official administrative recognition in terms of planning, implementation, and supervision.

(Ibrahim, 2008, p. 166)

Researchers also attribute the emergence and development of informal settlements to several factors, including aging and neglect of urban areas, reduced transportation costs, external factors, urban renewal processes, increased income levels, and other contributing elements.

4. Functions of Informal Settlements

Informal settlements provide numerous social and economic advantages for their inhabitants. Among these functions is the promotion of social cohesion and the preparation of residents to understand and adapt to urban ways of life.

They also provide a type of housing suitable for people with limited incomes and serve as permanent residential spaces for those who migrated there at the beginning of their lives.

In cities experiencing industrial growth and significant urban development, informal settlements perform several important functions, including:
(Boudra, p. 21)

- They enable migrants and their families to save part of their income and allocate it to other purposes.
- Informal settlements facilitate the efforts of individuals who began their lives there by enabling them to save some money to establish small businesses, which may later help them rent housing in better neighborhoods than their original places of residence.
- "Informal settlements represent spaces of adaptation for their inhabitants before their integration into urban life; therefore, these settlements are considered places of residence for migrants in most cities around the world."

(Boudra, p. 22)

5. Characteristics of Informal Settlements

Among the most prominent common characteristics of informal settlements are the following:

5.1 Housing Conditions in Informal Settlements

Informal settlements are characterized by high population density and an old, neglected urban character that has rarely undergone restoration or maintenance. Most of their deficiencies are

related to the nature of the housing itself, due to its poor quality, the absence of adequate lighting and ventilation, and severe shortages in health, educational, and other public services and facilities. (Boudra, p. 26)

5.2 Frequent Changes of Residence in Informal Settlements

Population mobility and residential changes vary from one area to another and depend on the social background of inhabitants. This mobility is influenced by numerous factors, including religious, family, cultural, social, and economic factors, which tend to promote stability and permanence in the place of residence rather than relocation, given that housing units are occupied by families rather than individuals. It should be noted that the majority of residents of these informal settlements are poor.

(Boudraa, p. 28)

5.3 Lack of Social Services and Public Facilities

Informal settlements are characterized by a persistent shortage of social services and essential facilities provided by social, administrative, educational, health, recreational, and even religious institutions, which are generally insufficient.

They also suffer from deficiencies in basic infrastructure, including streets, alleys, pathways, and sidewalks that lack maintenance, in addition to drinking water networks, sewage systems, electricity and gas networks, and other essential utilities. Such services are often neglected in informal settlements, even in developed countries.

(Boudraa, p. 29)

5.4 Deterioration of Public Health and Spread of Diseases

Informal settlements are generally characterized by very low health conditions, resulting from the absence of preventive healthcare. Consequently, these areas become fertile environments for the spread of diseases and increased mortality rates.

This situation is caused by the limited availability of effective means for waste and garbage disposal in these densely populated neighborhoods, exposing residents directly to the risk of transmitting germs and diseases. Such conditions are considered common in these settlements, which are characterized by high population density, widespread poverty, and unemployment. (Boudraa, p. 29)

6. Theoretical Approaches Explaining the Emergence of Informal Settlements

A long-standing debate has emerged in contemporary literature concerned with poverty regarding its description and analysis within socio-economic formations. Within this theoretical debate, several

theoretical approaches have appeared to explain the phenomenon of informal settlements, the most important of which include:

- The anthropological approach and the culture of poverty approach.
- The marginality approach.
- The radical approach.
- The informal urban sector approach.
- The theory of social deprivation.
- Other related approaches.

6.1 Oscar Lewis's Anthropological Approach to the Study of Informal Settlements

Culture, in its broad ethnographic sense, was defined by Edward Burnett Tylor as:

"That complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, traditions, and any other capabilities acquired by human beings as members of society."
(Bayoumi, p. 120)

From this perspective, the ideas of Oscar Lewis developed and became established through two major studies: the first concerning "The Children of Sánchez", and the second concerning "La Vida (Life)". (Ibrahim, 2008, p. 191)

These studies led him to a fundamental conclusion:

"Poverty creates its own culture, with common elements among poor people wherever they exist. One of the most important characteristics of this subculture of poverty is that it reproduces itself and possesses the ability to move and be transmitted across successive generations through its own distinctive lifestyle."

The first major study conducted by Oscar Lewis in this field involved the analysis of five cases belonging to five families in Mexico City. He followed their daily lives in detail, examining individual and collective activities, interactive relationships, levels of individualism, eating habits, clothing patterns, present and future values, self-perception, views of the future, attitudes toward others, child-rearing practices, traditional values, consumption values, work, religious beliefs, and moral values.

The methodological criterion adopted by Lewis was his selection of these families according to different levels of poverty, background, and social status, with each family representing a distinct social position.

However, despite the relatively broad acceptance of Oscar Lewis's ideas and the concept of the subculture of poverty as a framework capable of explaining itself, many anthropologists opposed this perspective and presented criticisms of Lewis's approach. They argued that it contributes, in their view, to degrading human beings and limiting their abilities and skills.

Some critics argued that poverty, its culture, and associated behaviors are not necessarily linked to low economic income levels. They maintained that poor people do not differ from other members of society in their aspirations, tendencies, and values, as they remain part of the broader cultural system of society.

(Bayoumi, p. 195)

Therefore, Oscar Lewis's concept of the urban subculture of poverty can be considered one of the appropriate approaches for studying *informal settlements*, as these settlements represent a specific cultural pattern that requires understanding its nature and interpreting it according to its historical development and its relationship with structural social, economic, and cultural problems.

This requires viewing the subculture of poverty as a way of life represented in the minds of its members, while taking into consideration the differences and diversity existing within the subculture itself.

(Ibrahim, 2008, p. 195)

4.6 Radical Approach and Informal Settlements:

This approach represents the works of a group of economists and sociologists who have been concerned with studying the reality of informal urban activities in the cities of developing countries. Among the most prominent scholars associated with this approach are **Garry, Green, Bromley, Bienfield, Portes, and Moser**. Their research aimed at addressing the problems of developing countries, including the issue of the **"informal urban sector."** (Qira, 2004, p.143)

4.6.1 The Informal Urban Sector and Its Relationship with Informal Settlements:

During this millennium, cities have witnessed a tremendous increase in urbanization rates due to their explosive demographic growth, as many urban areas have doubled in size. Consequently, the dominant characteristics of their growth have become clearly identifiable. Moreover, natural population growth rates have been intensified by rural–urban migration, indicating that the rate of urbanization far exceeds the rate of industrialization under the prevailing conditions of distorted capitalist economic development (Salatnia, 1999, p.81).

This situation has contributed to the expansion of poverty and unemployment in their various forms. Given the seriousness of such problems, they have become central concerns within development

theories, which are characterized by diversity and multiplicity. Therefore, it is appropriate to briefly examine, first, the theories that addressed employment and unemployment issues and paved the way for the emergence of the concept of the **"informal urban sector"** as an alternative to **"formal employment"** and as a simplified model for understanding social, economic, and demographic transformations in developing countries. Subsequently, we will diagnose the reality of this sector in contemporary cities as a **"productive, absorptive, and service-oriented sector."**

5.6 Social Deprivation and Informal Settlements:

According to **Marshall**, social deprivation is defined as the deprivation of something or a state of being stripped of something. The term has been used broadly to refer to a condition in which an individual lacks something, whether or not that thing was previously possessed by them. This implicitly means that the deprived person has a legitimate expectation of obtaining what they have been deprived of.

However, identifying precisely the things from which individuals may be deprived remains difficult. Nevertheless, certain basic needs have received considerable attention, such as the need for food, housing, and education. Marshall argues that the concept of deprivation, like the limited view of poverty, can be understood according to either absolute or relative criteria. It is divided into two types:

- **Absolute Deprivation:**

Refers to the absence of the means necessary to satisfy basic needs required for survival, such as food, clothing, and shelter.

- **Relative Deprivation:**

Refers to the type of deprivation experienced when individuals compare themselves with others and perceive themselves as lacking certain resources or opportunities available to them. (Al-Gohary, *Urban Sociology*, 2009, p.389)

Thus, it becomes evident that this theory tends to be associated with ideas related to the culture of poverty and with the analyses of classical and neo-liberal perspectives, which argue that poor individuals, in addition to lacking motivation to work due to their dependence on aid and assistance, also suffer from a lack of appropriate talents and skills, a condition referred to as **"capability poverty."**

On the other hand, Gurney and Kathleen Tierney have also focused on multiple deprivation, where different forms of deprivation encompass a wide range of social needs. This issue is also connected to the sustainable livelihoods approach, which focuses on the development of human assets, such as education, training, and skills; social assets, such as networks of social relationships within local

communities; as well as financial assets, including the ability to access loans that support small enterprises for individuals who lack sufficient guarantees because they are poor or live under informal conditions.

(Al-Gohary, Urban Sociology, 2009, p.346)

6.6 The Poverty Approach and Informal Settlements:

A careful examination of the extensive body of research on informal settlements inevitably leads to the conclusion that these areas represent a form of urban distortion and a relatively socially incoherent environment.

Consequently, urban social studies tend to associate informal areas with lower social classes living under deteriorating physical and social conditions. These conditions are particularly reflected in low living standards, population overcrowding, unemployment, malnutrition and inadequate nutrition, declining human behavior, widespread illiteracy, lack of sanitation services, electricity, transportation, and access to clean drinking water, as well as the accumulation of waste and the proliferation of insects. All of these factors generate negative effects on residents, who nevertheless often remain optimistic and continue to aspire toward the future.

In reality, when comparisons are made between different sectors of the urban poor, researchers find weaker forms of social participation among poor residents of urban slums than among poor migrant communities. Here, the evidence strongly challenges the idea of a "culture of poverty" among migrants while strongly supporting the notion of a culture of poverty associated with residents of informal settlements, particularly in relation to clothing, dietary habits, family life, reproductive practices, and perceptions of oneself and others.

Thus, these settlements can be considered a product of structural imbalances within the social system. They generally take two dominant forms: hopeless settlements and hopeful settlements. (Qira, 2004, p.19)

8. Conclusion:

It is necessary to understand that poverty has its own culture, and that this culture is nourished by historical and social residues. It becomes rooted and transmitted from one social space to another and from one generation to the next. In order to transform this culture and overcome its persistence, **Oscar Lewis** argues that four fundamental interventions are required:

1. The relationship between the individual and the state.
2. The relationship between the individual and space.
3. Working on the family structure.

4. Working on values.

These essential elements may contribute to producing another social logic based on spatial, social, and housing justice, thereby creating conditions for a more equitable and inclusive urban reality.

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