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THE DISADVANTAGED

We believe that the word 'disadvantaged' should be relegated to the scrapheap of the euphemisms it was intended to replace ('culturally deprived,' 'slow learners' and so on). These terms too were coined with good intentions but were found to reflect racial and social-class chauvinism. Today a new concept of disadvantage is being advanced to include everyone who is denied what he needs for fulfilment of his human potential. Weinstein & Fantini.

The purpose of this article is to alert people to an increasing problem: disadvantaged people. It is hoped to discuss the Disadvantaged in a perspective which will help us (the Disadvantaged) to perceive the dimensions of our problem, and to begin to seek radical solutions to our predicament. In order to present the problem with clarity, the author will address himself to the following questions, in turn: Who are the Disadvantaged? What are the possible causes of disadvantage? Can we hope for solutions to the problem of disadvantage?

Who are the disadvantaged?

A few studies have been made which provide some insights into the personal characteristics of the Disadvantaged. There is, however, a scarcity of statistically based evidence to support the more analytical studies. This is hardly surprising since the people who concoct statistical data tend to be among the ranks of the Disadvantaged.

The Disadvantaged, when they are conscious of experiencing themselves, tend to experience themselves as 'empty,' lacking in spontaneity and lifeless. However, the Disadvantaged are rarely conscious of their beings, but are acutely aware of roles they adopt, and expectations others hold for their role performance.

The Disadvantaged experience difficulties in expressing their emotions and feelings, and some appear to have lost their capacity to feel. The Disadvantaged have had a history of denying and negating their own experience of themselves, in repressing their feelings and in assuming mechanical and routinized masks.

The Disadvantaged tend to be ambitious in terms of seeking promotion, earning higher salaries, and seeking 'high-status' jobs.

The Disadvantaged tend to have peculiar speech patterns. To an outsider it would appear that the Disadvantaged may be genetically inferior in that the mouth, in speech, assumes an abnormal anatomical position. However a closer examination will reveal support for the cultural- environmental factor rather than the heredity factor, since babies of the

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Disadvantaged are not born with this anatomical abnormality. Futhermore it has been observed that adults not born of Disadvantaged parents are capable of adopting this abnormality, especially when seeking an appointment for a 'high-status' job.

The Disadvantaged person is unable to express his feelings and emotions in a variety of situations. He rather tends to conform to what he perceives is expected of him in each situation in which he finds himself. One might say that he is an adept role-player. He appears to be one person at a cocktail-party, another person in his office, another person when driving his car, another person when taking a piss etc. It could be said that the disadvantaged person is a pseudo-person, in that he perhaps says one thing and does something which contradicts his words. Marcuse and Fromm suggest that this pseudo-person might be such because he tends to operate on the basis of 'false' needs, that is, needs which are unrelated to a person's organic growth but rather to greed.

The causes of disadvantage

The author will discuss the following possible causes of disadvantage: intelligence, genetic inferiority, linguistic deprivation and socio-cultural-environmental deprivation.

Low intelligence

If intelligence is defined in terms of a person's ability to develop his own potential, to experience himself as an authentic being, to develop his powers of self-determination, to behave spontaneously, to love, to express his feelings and emotions in a self-fulfilling manner, to empathize with the feelings of another, to accept others for what they are, to behave in non-self-negating ways, to behave in ways which do not negate the experience of others, to choose his own values, etc., then disadvantaged people are those who have a low degree of intelligence.

Genetic inferiority

The author has administered fifteen test items to several groups of white and black teachers in the U.S.A., on which the lowest number of correct answers by any black person was thirteen. The test was constructed by Black Americans.

There is some evidence to suggest that there are genetic differences among persons of different ethnic origins, but to attribute a value to these differences in terms of intelligence or other capacities, is an unsupported and uncalled-for move. In addition, how could we explain, using the arguments of genetic differences, the varying degrees of disadvantage existing among persons of similar ethnic origins?

Linguistic deprivation

Disadvantaged people tend to have difficulty in expressing themselves. They tend to be very wordy and often confuse themselves or tend to lose sight of their original meaning, with their unselective use of words, when attempting an act of communication.

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It could be said that their 'elaborate' use of words prevents them from communicating or being understood by the majority of the people. In this sense their language can be said to be 'restrictive'. To the outsider, the disadvantaged person appears to be able to communicate with other disadvantaged persons, but the meaning of the communication, or the relationship of the communication to action is extremely difficult to perceive.

It is possible, however, to argue that the disadvantaged person's pre-occupation with words reflects unintelligent behaviour. From an observer's viewpoint, which is clearly not the ideal viewpoint for gaining an understanding of others, one can describe the disadvantaged person's language as defensive behaviour. That is, an elaborate use of words serves the purpose of self-concealment. Although we have all probably experienced situations in which we perceive that the most intelligent act is to conceal our intentions, our feelings or our thoughts, the consequences of internalizing self-concealment into our beings can be viewed as self-destructive. One cannot avoid concluding that self-destructive acts are by definition unintelligent acts.

Socio-cultural deprivation

Self-concealment is learned. Unfortunately the institutions administered by disadvantaged people, especially the family, the schools, the church and bureaucratic organizations and government, facilitate and value self-concealment, and appear to develop hierarchies on the basis of self-concealment.

We can attribute this 'distortion' to the disadvantaged person's socio-cultural basis of reality in which his values are embedded. Since his values can be described as unintelligent, and since we can assume that he learns these values in a socio-cultural context, we can deduce that he exists in a deprived socio-cultural environment. It is worthwhile to discuss very briefly just two aspects of his environment in order to demonstrate how difficult it is for a young person to exist in such an environment and to avoid spiritual suicide.

Family background

From birth the infant learns that he is rewarded for obedience to his parent's concept of reality. It has already been mentioned that the disadvantaged person's concept of reality may be based in a false consciousness. Consequently the infant is valued for becoming false, for becoming pseudo-human, for alienating himself from his own powers for self-determination. Self-determined acts are invariably punished in some way.

The most powerful technique his parents use against him is the application of pseudo-love and the withdrawal of authentic love. Laing writes: *Children do not give up their innate imagination, curiosity, dreaminess easily. You have to love them to get them to do that. Love is the path through permissiveness to discipline; and through discipline, only too often, to betrayal of self.*

Laing and Esterson have presented detailed case studies of families which very clearly demonstrate the soul-destroying techniques families use on their children, and especially on those who are different from what the family would like them to be.

Disadvantaged people wish to manipulate their children into a prescribed image. Parents fill the child's environment with materials which will hopefully place him on the path toward 'respectability' and material success. There are plenty of books, plenty of educational toys, plenty of ways of interrupting the child's own spontaneous play, plenty of ways of interfering with the child's play.

Children are channelled into clean, non-offensive activities, preferably activities which will prepare them for school, for their sex-roles, but primarily for the status achieving motives of their parents. Their playmates, if they are that fortunate, tend to have similar parents. They tend to meet their playmates in play groups rather than the home, because the latter must be kept clean and tidy and is rarely furnished in a manner which reflects the needs of the children. Disadvantaged parents don't encourage their children to play in the street or on the recreation ground. The street tends to be dangerous (many disadvantaged families own two cars), and the recreation ground or park is out of the question because their children may come into contact with undesirable characters, that is children who are relatively non-disadvantaged.

How can the child avoid feeling anxious about himself, as he learns more and more that his self-fulfilling actions are not rewarded by the persons he loves? He has to settle for the second best, that is being rewarded by his parents for actions which please them. The reward he is told is love. He is 'loved' in order to alienate himself, to destroy himself. Surely this must be as absurd as the notion of killing in order to restore peace.

The school

The Disadvantaged child is well prepared for school. The school is an extension of his family because it is run by disadvantaged people for disadvantaged parents in order to make their children disadvantaged.

The school is reasonably efficient, especially if it utilizes 'progressive' teaching methods, at manipulating the child into alien activities. The child learns to enjoy the rewards he receives for being manipulated. The disadvantaged teachers and headmasters adopt words to describe their actions: freedom, choice, independence, and self-direction. The children learn these words. Many of the disadvantaged children have experienced the distorted meaning of these words in the home. For them the illusion of self-determination is established early in their lives.

Most disadvantaged people have succeeded in school. This may be a crucial factor formulating the condition of Disadvantage. In order to succeed in school one must conform to values and comply with the values inherent in the schooling process. The basic processes of schooling are concerned with the control and manipulation of the behaviour of the inmates towards ends decided by those, the Disadvantaged, whose prime motivation is to ensure that as many people as possible become disadvantaged. Once children have developed an alien self or a false consciousness, the disadvantaged elders feel safe to allow the young more freedom and choice, because choices will be made from a base of false consciousness.

Can we hope for solutions to the problem of disadvantage?

There is substantial basis for the hope that the Disadvantaged may be able to recognize their own condition of self-alienation, and that the Disadvantaged themselves will be able to act upon this recognition and begin to liberate themselves.

Charles Reich has described, in detail, the growing self-awareness and search for authentic actions among many young people in the U.S.A. We will need to take a look at these people in ten to twenty years to see to what extent they have been able to avoid the temptations of reverting to an existence supported by a false sense of security, and to what extent their own liberation has been a 'real' project.

It has been mentioned that Black Americans have been relatively successful in avoiding the 'universal trap'. It is unfortunate, however, that the price Black Americans have paid to hang on to their authenticity, is economic disadvantage. Ultimately an intact soul is to be preferrred to an intact house.

In Western society we have various 'liberation movements', which themselves are testimony of an increasing concern for human dignity and freedom. Throughout the world, we have numerous more basic struggles, where groups are fighting to live and fighting for their right to control their own destiny.

Before disadvantaged people can engage in action for their own freedom, they must become aware of their unfreedom. Paradoxically the leaders of the Disadvantaged are facilitating this awareness. The most exalted among the Disadvantaged have become extremely skilful in their use of techniques of self-concealment. One can hardly prevent oneself from being overawed by the techniques adopted by disadvantaged leaders to conceal themselves. But it is through observing techniques of self-concealment in their most exaggerated form, that persons somewhat less disadvantaged can see the self-destructive consequences of internalizing such techniques. In this paradox lies the hope for the salvation of the Disadvantaged. The capacity to perceive the absurdity of self-concealment might prove to be the basis of the power which disadvantaged persons may exercise to begin to restore themselves to sanity and a more authentic existence.

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