

Working Paper

THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE
OF POVERTY

Michael Thompson

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ABSTRACT

Are the poor all alike or are they different? Both, obviously. The similarities are handled by *political economy* - a long-established and familiar approach; the differences are handled by *political culture* - a newly-emerging and unfamiliar approach. Political culture looks, not at how people are differentiated by constraints - by what they *can't* do - but at how people are differentiated by capabilities - by the different things they do with what they *can* do.

If poverty has to do with the absence of the chance to choose, then non-poverty has to do with the presence of the chance to choose. This leads to the consideration of the possibility of personal strategies for resource management and for need management. There are four logically possible management strategies and one coping strategy, and the cultural hypothesis is that an individual will be led to adopt one of these strategies and to reject the others by virtue of his social context and its associated cosmology.

Fieldwork in Britain and informal guided interviews in the United States support this hypothesis and reveal that less than half of those officially classified as 'poor' conform to the official image of poverty.

Political culture has implications that go beyond the arena of poverty policy. In suggesting that the economist's category 'land' is not a 'given' but is created and destroyed by social processes, it offers a way of identifying the cultural bias of an institution and a way of compensating for that bias. For instance, if we assume that IIASA's bias is towards caste-ism (that is, towards a personal strategy in which needs are given and only resources are manageable) then we should not be surprised to discover that those who argue from a more sectist social

context (a context in which the adopted strategy is to manage needs downwards) find credible a level of energy demand two-and-a-half times lower than IIASA's minimum.

THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF POVERTY

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INTRODUCTION

"The very rich are different from you and me," said Scott Fitzgerald. "Yes," replied Hemingway, "they've got more money." Economists, by and large, side with Hemingway; anthropologists with Scott Fitzgerald. Both, in taking sides, have missed the whole point of this literary exchange which is that these two positions are not to be seen as contradictory. Scott Fitzgerald is not denying that the very rich have more money than he and Hemingway; he is insisting that, over and above that distinction of *degree*, there is some other distinction of *kind*. He is saying that, at right angles to this clearly visible *economic* axis, there is a *cultural* axis which has been overlooked. What is more, whilst the economic axis is a continuum with individuals spread out all the way along it and sliding this way and that as their fortunes wax and wane, the cultural axis involves discontinuities - individuals, far from being spread out along it, are clumped around certain points and, far from sliding smoothly back and forth, they can only shift their positions (if at all) by either headlong careers or sudden discontinuous jumps from one clump to another.

Having criticised Hemingway for missing (albeit deliberately) the whole point of the argument, let me now redress the balance a little and take Scott Fitzgerald to task for not carrying his reasoning through to its logical conclusion. Having gone to all the trouble of setting up his two axes - one a continuum, the other a discontinuum - he then goes and spoils it all by assuming that they represent dependent variables - that as you move up one you move up the other. But why should only the very rich be different from you and me? Who, come to that, is to say that you and I are the same? And why shouldn't some of the very rich be different, not just from you and me, but from others among

the very rich as well? In other words, what Scott Fitzgerald has overlooked is that his two axes may represent two fully independent variables. Let me now try to rectify that omission.

The anthropologist does not disagree with the economist; he concedes that the very rich have got more money than the not-so-very rich and that, in consequence, they are able to do all sorts of things that others with less money are not able to do. What the anthropologist is saying is that, when the economist has said that, that is not all that can be said. We can go on and, slicing through social life along a very different orientation, look, not at how people are differentiated by constraints - by what they *can't* do - but at how they are differentiated by capabilities - by the different things they do with what they *can* do.

Now, of course, it is quite possible that Scott Fitzgerald, though he did not pause to consider whether his two variables might be independent of one another, was nevertheless right but the fact that the economic axis deals with problems and with continuities, whilst the cultural axis deals with capabilities and with discontinuities, suggests that this is unlikely. The mathematician will raise objections to such non-kosher dependencies and the statistician will throw up his arms in horror if asked to marry aggregations and disaggregations in this way. To these fundamental distinctions between the two axes we must add a contingent one: the economic axis is a well-trodden path that has been mapped and signposted by generations of travellers; the cultural axis is known only through the fragmentary reports of a few explorers and our attempt to traverse it will inevitably be a much more tentative and speculative business.

But at least we can make some preparations against the uncertainties that lie ahead. What might we expect to find out there? We should expect to find several, but not innumerable, distinctly different ways in which people who are all subject to the same constraints set about making the most of whatever possibilities these constraints leave open to them. Whilst it is only to be expected that these different ways of managing are likely to flourish in all their glorious variety in situations where the constraints are least severe, we should nevertheless be prepared to encounter them even when the constraints are at their most stringent. In other words, we should not be surprised to find just as many differences in kind among the very poor as among the very rich. And, if our expectations are confounded,if we don't find any of these differences, even among the very rich? Then, come home Ernest; all is forgiven!

A MODEL OF THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

Begin with the idea that individuals can be differentiated by the ways in which they are caught up in the process of social life, and further assume that these different ways of being caught up can be adequately described by just two axes - one (*group*) describing the way an individual is caught up in the

processes of group formation, the other (*grid*) the way he is caught up in the processes of personal network-building (both his own network and those of other people). These assumptions give us two dimensions of *social context* and the next step is the quite reasonable one of assuming that the extent to which an individual will, in the conduct of his social life, end up by manipulating others or by being himself manipulated by others varies according to his social context.

Given these assumptions, we can represent the relationship between these three variables - the two dimensions of social context and the level of *manipulation* that they result in - by a three-dimensional graph. One such graph, which happens to be the one that underlies all that follows, looks like this (Figure 1):

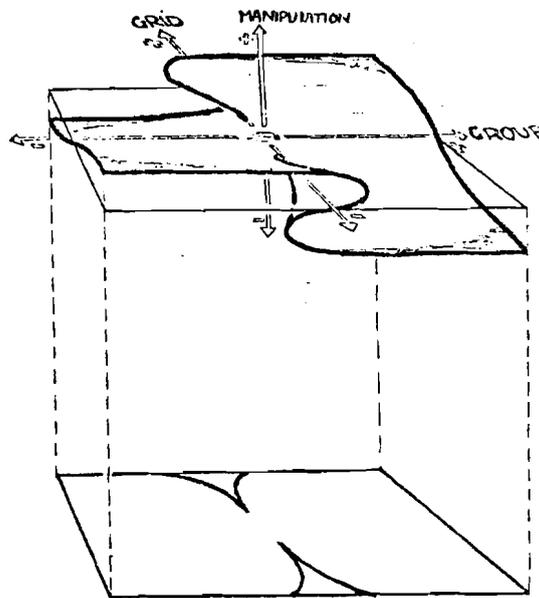


Figure 1. The Social Landscape.

I will not make any attempt here to justify this model¹ but will simply point out the way in which it satisfies the criteria implicit in Scott Fitzgerald's ideas about cultural difference.

If individuals are clumped around certain points, instead of being spread out all over the continuum, then this means that there must be some stabilizable equilibria (the clumps) separated by zones of instability (the regions where there are no clumps). In this model there are five such regions where clumps can form; they are the five flat bits - the two *hilltops* located above opposite ends of one diagonal of the social context square, the two *basins* above opposite ends of the other diagonal, and the *saddle point* that lies above the place where these two diagonals cross.

The flatness of the surface is a necessary condition for stability but it is not a sufficient condition. For an individual to come to rest at such a locality he will have to

be following an appropriate *strategy*; to stabilize yourself on a hilltop you will have to follow a strategy of always moving towards higher ground, to stabilize yourself in a basin you will have always to move towards the lower ground, and to stabilize yourself on the saddlepoint you will have to make sure that you always pull back from steepening slopes. Depending on which strategy you are following (and on where you happen to be to start off with) you will eventually find yourself clumped with socially similar individuals at one of these flat bits. If, for some reason, you change your strategy then off you will slide until you eventually fetch up at an equilibrium that *is* stabilized by your new strategy.

Conversely, if you are subjected to a sufficiently large perturbation, you will be dislodged from your equilibrium *despite* your strategy. In such an eventuality you will find yourself sliding around on the slippery slopes (the regions of disequilibrium) that lie between those flat bits. If we introduce the further refinement that individuals always try to reach a stable equilibrium and that they may be prepared to change their strategies in order to reach one, then we obtain a not-too-unrealistic picture of social life in which the various clumps are always present yet individuals are often on the move between them. To this can be added the further realistic refinement of variations in the steepness of the slopes between these clumps. Along two sides of the square the slopes contain overhangs (cusp catastrophes) and this means that transitions between the equilibria they separate will be sudden and discontinuous; the other two slopes do not overhang and transitions here will be continuous and, perhaps, quite gradual.

An interesting feature of the overhanging sections is that they each permit two very different equilibria (a hilltop and a basin) to be stabilized at the same social context. This means that, within the overhanging regions, a change in strategy will result in a sudden switch - a conversion - from one stable equilibrium to another without any intervening region of instability. Another interesting property of this graph is that the volumes that it encloses above and below the social context plane are equal; manipulating and being manipulated exactly cancel one another out - power and impotence are equal, but not opposite. Power is distributed along the watershed linking the two hilltops; impotence, at right angles to this, along the troughs that run up to the saddlepoint from each of the basins.

But it is time to get back to the question of poverty. The point of the picture is simply that it will illuminate the argument that follows by revealing some of the remarkable kinds of properties that a system capable of the sort of variations that Scott Fitzgerald is insisting are there will have to possess. At this stage, it is not to be taken as anything more than a light organising framework for approaching some hitherto unexplored terrain; a way of making three concepts graphically clear - stabilizable equilibria, appropriate strategies for stabilizing them, and unstable transitions (sometimes smooth, sometimes discontinuous) between them.

HOW TO DRAW THE PROFILES OF THE POOR

Why should it be that inflation, the effects of inflation upon minorities, the programmes designed to assist them, and the steps taken by their members to cope with all these, present a picture so muddled that an expensive research project entitled "Inflation and Deprivation: A Political Analysis" is needed to clarify it? We, or at any rate the economists amongst us, know what inflation *is*, so it can't be that. So the chances are that the mess has, as usual, to do with people; and my guess is that those whom the problem-solvers have assigned to the convenient pigeon-hole "deprived" (or "oppressed ethnic minorities and the permanently poor") are not, in fact, all birds of the same feather.

Oscar Wilde once said: "If only the poor had profiles there would be no difficulty in solving the problem of poverty". By this he did not mean simply that if only they were two dimensional, and so had no stomachs to fill, there would be no problem. Rather, the trouble was that "the poor" could only be perceived by the problem-solvers as an anonymous mass. If only they could discern the features of the poor - perceive them in all their individual diversity - the problem would be solved. The irritating thing about Wilde is not that he is so facetious and so witty - too clever by half - but that he is usually right as well. If he is right about the poor, then the task facing us is an anthropological one: drawing the profiles of the poor.

The task now is to devise a way of actually bringing this anthropological approach to bear on poverty in Britain. A convenient way of doing this is to look at the British definition of poverty. In fact there are (at least) three definitions - the implicit, the technical, and the practical - and the anthropological approach can be neatly slotted into the gaps between them.

1. The implicit definition of poverty: 'What really matters are the chances - or lack of them - people face; not the decisions they make, faced with these chances....In defining poverty, we should give priority to those who lack the opportunity to give themselves and their families an adequate income.'² So poverty is essentially *the relative absence of the chance to choose.*
2. The technical definition of poverty: Put like this, it is tempting to conclude that poverty is a consequence of inequality but the technical definition of poverty does not draw that conclusion; it simply states that poverty is *lack of command over resources relative to needs.*³
3. The practical definition of poverty: This involves two large assumptions: first, that *command over resources is measurable in terms of net income*, second, that *needs are expressible in terms of the current level of Supplementary Benefits.*³

If these two assumptions are valid then the two explicit definitions define roughly the same thing, and policy (based on the practical definition) will, give or take a few approximations, be directed squarely at the problem (identified in terms of the technical definition). But if the assumptions are not valid then policy may not have anything to do with problem; indeed, it may even be that policy is a *cause* of the problem.

The technical definition: lack of command over resources relative to needs: is a *personal* definition - it tells us when and why a particular individual is in poverty. The practical definition is an *impersonal* definition - command over resources is measured in terms of net income regardless of variations in individual resourcefulness, and the universal measure of needs in terms of the Supplementary Benefit level can take no account of the fact that some individuals are more needy than others. Within the technical definition, the poor have profiles. Within the practical definition, they have none. So how, in practice, can we draw their profiles?

Consider an individual (not necessarily a poor individual). He will have certain *wants*: a minimal daily intake of calories sufficient to sustain life, air, water, and an ambient temperature which, if his environment is harsh, may require a microclimate. In this latter eventuality, his wants will have to include such items as shelter, fuel, and clothing. And then, of course, there is security from attack and the problem of reproduction. As he makes the transfer from total isolation to involvement with others so his *wants* become submerged by his *needs*.⁴ All theories of needs have run up against this obstacle: how to distinguish a 'basic need' (a *want*) from a 'derived need' (a *need*).⁵ As we become social animals what we want is needs. Nevertheless there is, somewhere, a minimal, universal, biologically defined level of wants: those inputs to the individual that will sustain, not his social life, just his life.

You can increase or decrease your needs but you cannot do anything about your wants. If you practice infanticide and abandon the elderly you do not need to provide for your young family or look after your ageing grandmother. Indeed, as Swift⁶ pointed out in the context of Irish poverty, you can actually satisfy your wants by divesting yourself of your needs: you can eat your children. Swift knew what absolute poverty was and he knew how to distinguish a want from a need. The current British definition of poverty does not make this distinction: both needs and wants are lumped together as wants. If we wish to draw the profiles of the poor, we have to start with Swift: you can manage your needs and you can manage your resources but you cannot manage your wants. The Lord Buddha, before he found the middle path, managed his needs in such a way that their level fell far below his wants: he chose to limit his intake to just one hemp seed per day. Since his wants were considerably above this level, he could not have sustained his physical existence indefinitely but, since a wide range of choice was open to him, he was not poor even though he was starving! The famine-stricken Irish peasants were not prepared to eat their children - they needed them. The tragedy of this situation was that their command over resources did not even meet their wants, let alone their needs.

Now, of course, the British Department of Health and Social Security⁷ comes across few, if any, Buddhas in its day-to-day business nor, thank heaven, does it have to deal with potato famines. My purpose in starting with these extreme examples - Buddha's venture along the ascetic path and Swift's policy recommendations for eighteenth century Ireland - is to emphasise that people *manage* - that there can be enormous personal scope for resource management and for need management. If, in contemporary Britain, individuals do (or could) exercise some such scope, then the technical and the practical definitions of poverty define very different things. If this is the case, then an anthropological approach capable of drawing the profiles of the poor would be most useful.

How Could Anthropology Help?

There are two possible reasons for adopting the practical (no profile) definition of poverty - one justified by *equity*, the other by *efficiency*.

- a) The equity argument is that it is unfair to single out individuals. The policy must be applied impartially and what better way to make sure of this than to use a theoretical framework that is *incapable* of distinguishing between individuals?
- b) The efficiency argument is that it is impossible to take individual needs into account (needs and priorities are as gloriously varied as are individuals). You would have to have a separate policy for every single individual.

The anthropologist might reply, first, that if the needs of individuals vary it is not fair to treat them all the same and, second, that perhaps there exists some middle ground between the extremes of universalized and individualised needs. The needs of individuals may exhibit a diversity so vast as to be unhandleable, but the number of ways in which individuals can personally *manage* whatever their varied needs are in relation to their *management* of their varied levels of command over resources may be quite limited. There is, as they say, more than one way to skin a rabbit but, at the same time, there aren't *that* many different ways. The following logical possibilities exist:

1. You can manage neither your needs nor your resources.
2. You can manage your needs but not your resources.
3. You can manage your resources but not your needs.
4. You can manage your needs and your resources.

These four logical possibilities assume simply that, with respect to needs and to resources, you either can or cannot manage them. But, of course, these are not all-or-nothing states - you may be able to manage a little or a lot, a bit more or a bit less. The significance of these all-or-nothing states is that they map out the various extremes that it is possible for you to attain. Take, first of all, the implicit assumption that poverty is to do with the absence of the chance

to choose. There are two different ways in which you may get the chance to choose: you can choose in one way if you have scope to personally manage your needs, and you can choose in another way if you have scope to personally manage your command over resources. We can represent this by drawing two axes: 'individual scope to manage needs' and 'individual scope to manage resources'. The only calibrations that we put on these axes are CAN'T at the origin and CAN at the two extremities. The four logical possibilities are depicted like this (Figure 2):

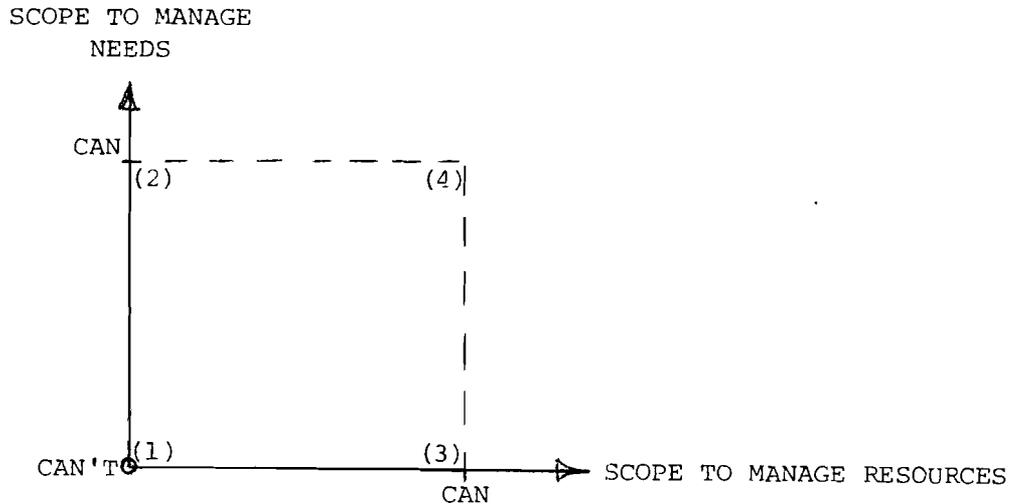


Figure 2. Two degrees of freedom

Possibility (1) has no degrees of freedom; if you are plotted there you can't manage your needs and you can't manage your resources. Possibilities (2) and (3) each have one degree of freedom and this is fully depicted on the graph. But possibility (4) has two degrees of freedom and to represent this adequately we will have to have a third axis.

If you can manage both needs and resources you can also manage the overlap between them. Depending upon how you mix simultaneously increases or decreases in needs and resources, so you can vary the size of the overlap. With possibilities (2) and (3) you cannot mix, and when you have chosen to increase or decrease your one variable you have also chosen the direction of change in the size of the overlap. At possibility (4) you have the choice of managing or not managing the direction of change in the size of the overlap according to the following simple matrix (Figure 3):

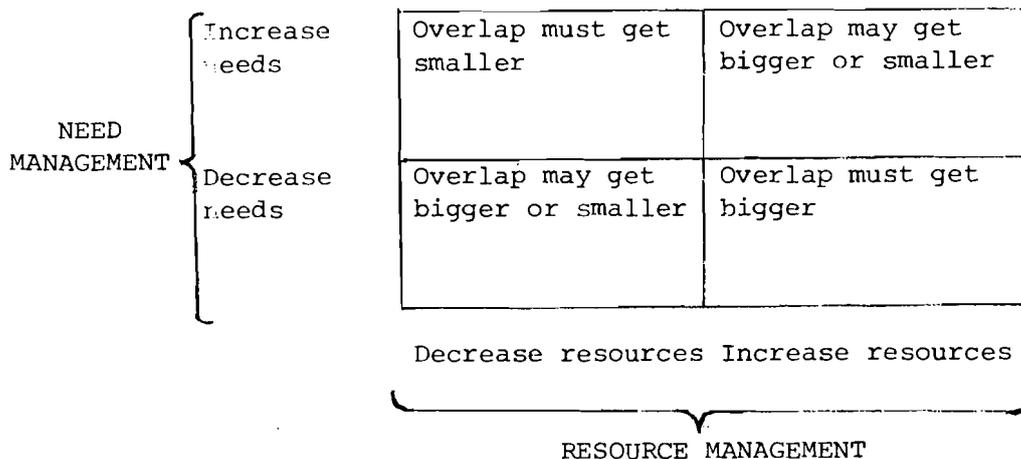


Figure 3. A Third Degree of Freedom

With two combinations of mix you have scope to manage the direction of change in the size of the overlap, and with the other two possible combinations you do not have this scope. So, by virtue of this third axis -scope to manage the overlap between needs and resources -possibility (4) provides not one but two attainable extremes (Figure 4):

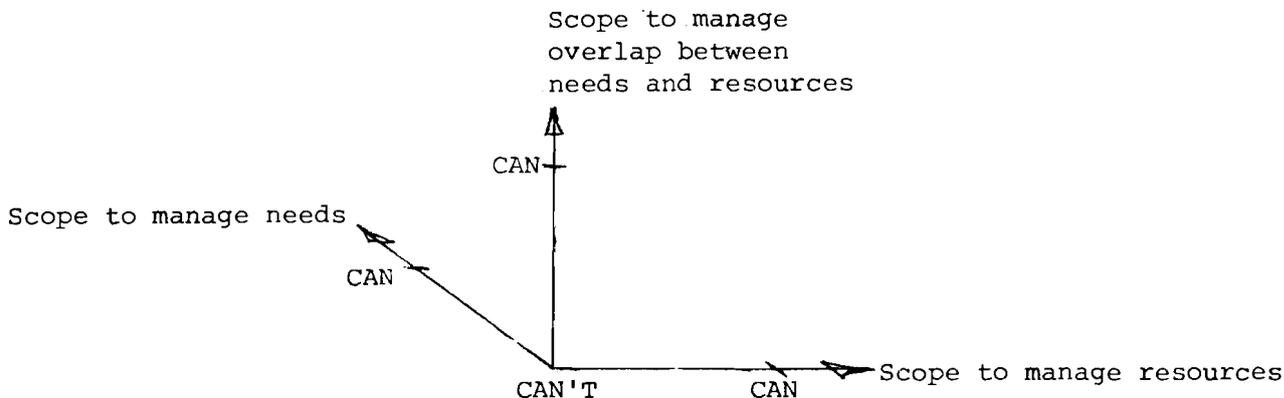


Figure 4. The Three Degrees of Freedom

As an individual moves from 'can't to 'can' in one, two or all three of these directions, so he gradually acquires more and more of one, two or all three of these freedoms. The result is a three dimensional space that defines the limit of where it is possible for him to go (Figure 5):

sorts of people are assumed to have different sorts of needs - a single parent's needs are differently assessed from those of an elderly widow - but these needs apply to social categories not to individuals. So the practical definition puts everyone at possibility (1). By the practical definition, the whole world is poor, implicitly.

These three definitions of poverty are all social: they stress the fact that man does not live by bread alone. Indeed, they stress it to such an extent that they overlook the fact that there has to be *some* bread. If you continually manage your needs downwards, there will eventually come a point where they fall below your wants. You will then be in a fourth kind of poverty: you will be starving. But, since you are choosing to bring your needs to this level, you are not implicitly poor. Similarly, if your command over resources declined to such an extent that you could no longer satisfy your wants, then the fact that you could still manage your needs (and consequently could still increase the overlap between your needs and your resources) would enable you to die a wealthy man, technically. We must take Swift seriously and recognise that implicit poverty, technical poverty, and practical poverty are all different kinds of *socio-poverty* and that they do not always coincide with *bio-poverty*: that extreme state where either needs, or resources, or both needs and resources, fall below the level of wants.

So this anthropological approach helps us to understand what a complex business poverty is, and how contradictory our conceptions of it can be. Rather than providing us with a definition of poverty, it maps out the complexities and the contradictions: it reveals the vertical separations and the horizontal displacements between the four definitions (bio-poverty and the three varieties of socio-poverty) that constitute the traditional British approach to poverty. (Figure 6)

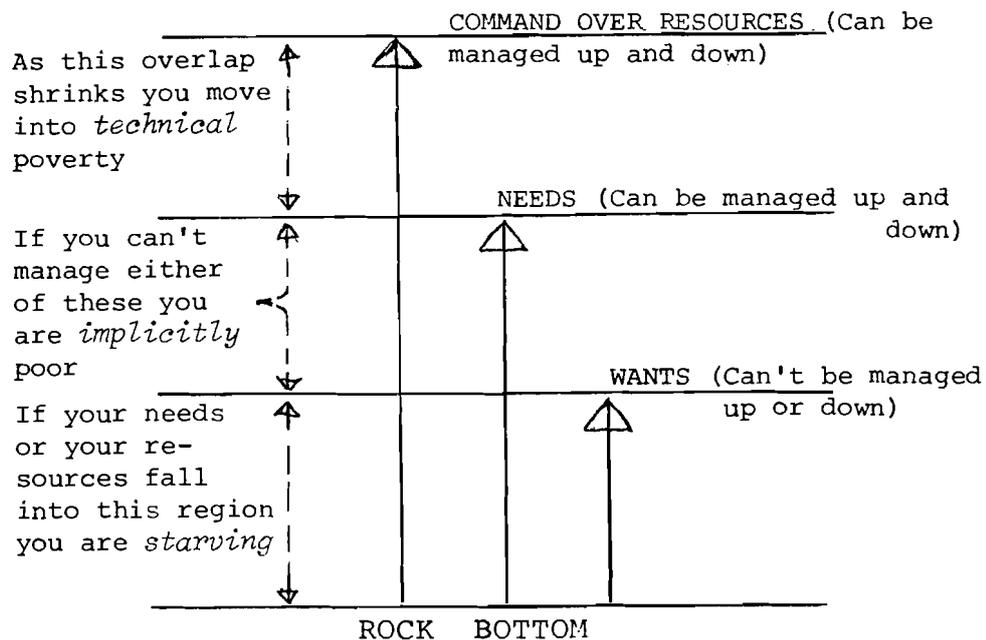


Figure 6. Complexity and Contradiction

- a) If your aim is to avoid *implicit poverty* you must acquire the chance to choose. That is, you must move yourself away from possibility (1) towards one of the other four extremes.
- b) If your aim is to avoid *technical poverty* you must manage your needs or your resources or both your needs and your resources so as to make the overlap between them as large as possible (or, at least, large enough).
- c) If your aim is to avoid *bio-poverty* you must make sure that, in achieving these first two aims, you do not reduce your needs too much. This means that, other things being equal, it is preferable to increase your resources rather than to decrease your needs.

If you are fortunate enough to have the chance to choose, then, depending on what scopes are available to you and depending upon which of these aims you deem to be paramount, you will strive to manage your resources and your needs in such a way as to maximize certain variables and to minimize others (these variables being resources, needs, and the overlap between resources and needs). The significance of the four extreme possibilities that exist when you have the chance to choose is that they reveal that there are four, and only four, different ways of setting about these maximisings and minimisings: that there are four, and only four, *management strategies*. And, of course, there is in addition just one way of not being able to manage: not so much a strategy as a way of living with a situation over which you can have no control.⁹

Stripped to the barest essentials, these five strategies may be described as follows:

- Possibility (1): Keep your fingers crossed and hope that Lady Luck will smile on you. Survive.
- Possibility (2): Decrease needs to increase overlap.
- Possibility (3): Increase resources to increase overlap.
- Possibility (4a): Increase resources and decrease needs to increase overlap.
- Possibility (4b): Increase resources and increase needs to decrease overlap.

(For strategies (4a) and (4b) to separate we have to assume that increasing resources requires a lot of effort. With (4a) you maximise your chance to choose and minimise your effort. With (4b) you accept a high level of effort in order to maximise the satisfaction of needs.)

Two tasks remain. First, to demonstrate that these five strategies coincide with the five possible 'clumps' that are already predicted in the hypothetical model. Second, to demonstrate that all five possibilities are, in fact, taken up in contemporary Britain and in the United States and that each of the five strategies is adopted according to the social context predictions of this hypothesis.

MANAGING AND NOT MANAGING NEEDS

Most people, I suspect, will have little difficulty with the idea that you can manage your needs, upwards and downwards. What may be more difficult for them to accept is that some people are not in a position to do this. But those individuals whose lives are hedged about with all sorts of socially-imposed prescriptions will find it very difficult to do anything to their needs - they are, in one way or another, just given to them.

For instance, the young subaltern in a smart regiment will find that his time, his dress, his social relations, his recreations, even his eating, his drinking and his sleeping (and his sleeping partners) are almost totally imposed by virtue of his fairly lowly position within a complex hierarchical organisation. He has to wear a well-cut suit on an informal evening in the mess and he has to wear expensive mess dress on a dinner night. All sorts of compulsory items, ranging from donations to regimental charities to subscriptions to the Polo Loan Fund, are added to his mess bill. If he has no private income, and so no scope to increase his resources, he may be tempted to try to decrease his needs. He will find it almost impossible to do so. The additional items on his mess bill are compulsory, the dinner nights are compulsory, even the excessive drinking of champagne and the marvellously idiotic and dangerous games that go with it are compulsory. If he has a private income, he may be tempted to increase his needs - hard drinking, hard gambling, and hard riding are the traditional avenues. But, if his drinks bill, his bridge book debts, and his stable charges rise above a quite low threshold, he will be up in front of the Colonel and told to bring his mess bill down to a more acceptable level.¹⁰

A complex hierarchical organisation *maintains* itself by imposing equally complex and hierarchically-patterned levels of needs upon the individuals who compose it. The result is that an individual will find that, though his level of needs may be set at quite a high level, he can neither manage it up nor down. At least the young subaltern's lack of scope makes sense to him. It confirms him in his particular rank, defines the gradations between his station and those above and below him in the framework, enables those in these stations to recognise him and treat him appropriately, and impresses upon him the fact that he enjoys the privilege of holding a responsible position within a fine disciplined body of men. But what of those who, having little command over resources and a low level of needs, find themselves prevented from lowering their needs still further?

Poverty Versus Conspicuous Non-Consumption

It is well known that it is those educated and resourceful individuals with their fifteen year old Morris Minors, their cottages in Wales, and their copies of *Which* magazine who make the best peasants these days - shopping around for supermarket bargains, tending their kohlrabi patches, knocking up nourishing stews from skirt of this and belly of that, stuffing their deep freezers with bartered allotment produce and keeping their spare

cash hidden from the tax man in a stripped pine chest under their Victorian brass beds. In other words, the poor pay more.¹¹

This whole area - managing or not managing a low level of needs downwards - is a political minefield and I must take care not to blow myself up. Let me just state the simple fact that, if the one who *can* manage his needs trades down and moves into a run-down house, he will probably get a letter telling him that it is now listed as a building of outstanding architectural or historical interest, and that, if the one who *can't* manage his needs moves into the house next door, he will in all likelihood get a letter informing him that it has been condemned and is no longer fit for human habitation.¹² At every turn the non-manager is hemmed in by prescriptions that make little sense to him and frustrate all his attempts to manage. These prescriptions are not imposed by nature (though those who do the imposing may insist that they are). They are socially-imposed - by the setting of the Supplementary Benefit level, and by the implementation of the various policies designed to prevent individuals falling below it.

The majority of wage and salary earners in Britain have their tax deducted at source - they receive a regular weekly or monthly income, there is no problem in determining the level of tax that is due, and any small imbalances can be sorted out by the computer at the end of the tax year. Other indirect taxes are collected automatically - Mr. Average pays for his petrol and his beer and the tax component in the price is sorted out somewhere down the line between the retailer and the supplier; the same sort of thing happens when he buys a new car or sells his old one; if he has any capital it is probably tied up in his house and if he sells that at a profit it is exempt from capital gains tax.

Only nearer the top of the pile, among the company directors, the self-employed, those with investment portfolios, more than one house, property abroad, and so on... do things get more complicated. It is only here that value-added tax, capital gains tax, capital transfer tax, dollar premiums, residential statuses, currency exchange controls, exotic rates of personal taxation, and so on... begin to bite.¹³ There is no doubt that this is a legislative jungle, but the person fortunate enough to enter it knows that he is entering it, wants to enter it, and what is more knows that there are plenty of guides (taxation advisers, investment consultants) who, for a tolerable fee, will be only too glad to smooth his path through it.

The astonishing thing about British poverty is that those at the very bottom of the pile find themselves in exactly the same predicament as those at the very top; except that, for them, there are no guides and they have to enter the jungle whether they want to or not.

There is now a bewildering variety of government programmes, operating on quite different principles, which are designed to relieve poverty.... None, save expert administrators and welfare rights advisers, can understand who should get what or why.¹⁴

So these individuals who are caught in 'the poverty trap' - prevented from managing their needs downwards by the intervention of the state's safety net, and prevented from managing their resources upwards by the too-rapid removal of means-tested benefits - are actually forced into poverty (in terms of both the technical definition and the implicit definition) by programmes 'designed to relieve poverty' (in terms of the practical definition).

Could this counterproductive state of affairs be remedied by doing away with the safety net altogether or, less drastically, by lowering it a little and removing the means-tested benefits rather less rapidly?

Well, there is no clear-cut answer; it depends on which kind of poverty you want to relieve. It depends on how many people, once the net is removed or lowered, swim and how many of them sink; and it depends on how far you can lower the level of Supplementary Benefits before it passes below the level of wants. The dilemma is that tender paternalistic attempts to relieve technical poverty and practical poverty may just drive people into implicit poverty, whilst tough radical measures may get rid of socio-poverty by driving people into bio-poverty instead. Perhaps we should stand back from the immediate problem for a moment and, instead of asking how we can decrease poverty (in its various definitions) ask ourselves instead how we can increase wealth. In other words, how can people acquire the scope to manage their command over resources and to manage the gap between their needs and their resources? How do they gain more degrees of freedom, and does an increase in one man's scope inevitably mean a corresponding reduction in another's? Can we help them to do this, and if so, how?

MANAGING AND NOT MANAGING RESOURCES

Development experts tell us that in countries like India wealth and land are virtually synonymous. They urge that we start by recognising that this is so and they recommend development programmes that, one way or another, will increase the productive efficiency of that land. On this view India's resources are finite and fixed; when it comes to land, as Mark Twain pointed out, they don't make it any more. But could it not be that India is poor *because* the Indians insist on seeing wealth and land as synonymous? At the periphery of Indian society all sorts of people (Parsees, Sikhs, Tibetans) have become immensely wealthy thanks to their ability not to see wealth solely in terms of land.¹⁵

Obviously, resources do have a physical base but the Indian example suggests that it is not the resources that are actually there, but the resources that are *perceived* to be there, that matter. We are given and denied resources, not by nature, but by our *idea of nature*.

The anthropological hypothesis is that ideas of nature are socially generated - that there are only a few different kinds of ideas of nature that are socially viable, and that an individual will find one of these kinds of ideas credible (and the others incredible) by virtue of his social context. This anthropological argument is complex but it can be illustrated very simply by looking at the self-evident, yet contradictory, metaphors and catch-phrases that different people find credible images for describing the resources that are available to them.

A hundred years ago, the courageous and enterprising seeker after wealth heeded the sound advice : 'Go West, young man.' Because of this open frontier, his gain did not result in anyone else's loss (at any rate, it was not perceived as doing so). Eventually that particular frontier was closed and there are now many experts who will tell us that all frontiers are closed. On the cosmic scale, there can be no such thing as an open frontier in 'Spaceship Earth' and, on a more domestic level, we can do nothing about the size of the 'national cake' - it is already baked - all we can do is argue about how to share it out.

Culinary metaphors, it seems, are much favoured by those whose idea of nature insists that there is no scope for increasing our resources. Ecological accountants tell us that there is no such thing as a free lunch and, of course, the 'national cake' metaphor is buttressed by the compelling nursery truth that you cannot have your cake and eat it. Yet, self-evident and indisputable though these truths may seem, there are individuals who hold to other equally self-evident truths that totally contradict them. Paul Ehrlich's ecological balance sheet is contradicted by Andrew Marvell's metaphysical lunch:

Ripe apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine.
The nectarine and curious peach
Into my arms themselves do reach.¹⁶

Those who share such a cornucopian¹⁷ idea of nature where, even in the desert manna falls from heaven, are declaring that it is impossible to draw up a balance sheet. For them, nature is inexhaustible.

Ideas of nature, and the self-evident truths that justify and enforce them, are profoundly moralistic. In Nancy Mitford's novel *Love in a Cold Climate* her three outrageous heroes, behaving with total hedonistic disregard for these natural laws, seem all set to receive their just desserts. To the dismay of their 'cake mentality' critics, they sail serenely on into a three-sided relationship that breaks all the social rules. Cedric, the effete aesthete whose exuberant style has opened up these triangular capabilities, triumphantly proclaims their success:

So here we all are, my darling, having our lovely cake
and eating it too, One's great aim in life.¹⁸

So if we look, not at nature, but at *ideas* of nature we must recognise that there are at least two contradictory versions that people can find credible and that embedded in each of them are two very different moralities.

ACCOUNTABLE NATURE

Metaphors of closure:

'national cake'
'spaceship earth'

Justifications:

'You can't have your cake
and eat it'
'There's no such thing as a
free lunch'

CORNUCOPIAN NATURE

Metaphors of openness:

'Plenty more fish in the sea'
'Go West, young man'

Justifications:

'You can have your cake and
eat it'
'Cast thy bread upon the waters'

'Consider the lilies of the
field....'

What are the consequences of all this for the personal management of resources?

With cornucopian nature there can be no obstacles to an individual managing his resources up or down. If he manages them up it does not follow that he is driving someone else's level down nor, if he manages them down, can he expect the approbation of his fellows in return for the benefits they enjoy as a consequence of his forbearance. With accountable nature the picture is very different. If an individual manages his resources up then, somewhere along the line, others are being deprived and, if he manages them down, others somewhere should feel the benefit. This is the notorious zero-sum mentality that some observers have diagnosed as the underlying cause of 'The British Disease.'¹⁹ But this zero-sum mentality can manifest itself in very different ways, depending upon the social context in which it arises.

In a strongly individualised context the inevitability of one man's gain being another man's loss becomes one of the regrettable facts of life: an individual who manages his resources upwards will justify his behaviour with the excuse: 'if I don't do it someone else will.' Here credibility is given to the image of nature 'red in tooth and claw'. It is 'the law of the jungle' in which the strong succeed and the weak go to the wall. This inevitable process continually sorts out the weak from the strong: the former cannot manage their resources, the latter can. But the weak may still find the cornucopian idea of nature credible. It is just that the strong have gained control of the horn of plenty and it only disgorges resources in their direction. The weak, as a result, are easily attracted to millenarian movements that promise to turn the world upside down and point the horn in their direction instead.

But if, instead of this Hobbesian war of all against all, individuals are given or denied access to resources according to whether they are included or excluded from social groups, this free-for-all is stopped before it can start. Strong sanctions can be applied to individuals who put self before whole. In the French Foreign Legion the man who steals from his comrades will be pinned to the barrack-room table by bayonets through the palms of his hands, an unpopular member of a mountaineering expedition may be accused of 'secret eating,' and a non-conforming union member may be sent to Coventry²⁰ by his workmates. And, behind these severe sanctions, there always lies the threat of a worse one - expulsion from the group. In Britain recently, journalists who did not obey a strike call were expelled from their union. Since union and employees operate a closed shop agreement, these journalists lost not just their union cards but their jobs as well.

In such contexts the individual's scope to manage his resources is almost nil.²¹ Resources are managed collectively: the small hunting band divides the day's catch (be it a buffalo or a rabbit) according to strictly observed rules, in the forced bivouac the Mars-bar is divided with surgical precision, and in the fundamentalist farming community no one works in the fields on Sunday. If access to resources is obtained by membership of just one simple egalitarian group then there is little scope for the collective management of resources: the village land or the national cake is given - all the group can do is see that it is divided fairly. But if there are several possibly overlapping groups, and if there are hierarchical divisions both within and between these groups, then a particular group can press for a larger *share* of the cake - after all its only loyalty is to its members - somebody else (the Government, the economy...God) can worry about how the cake can be cut to give each group its entitlement. It is in this way that individual members of complex groups can, by acting collectively, acquire the scope to collectively manage their resources. If such groups are fairly evenly matched and all press their claims with equal vigour such management of resources may well result in inflation.²²

By contrast, the members of simple (small tight-knit egalitarian) groups are likely to devote much of their energy to maintaining the boundary of the group - protecting the soft vulnerable 'us' from the nasty predatory 'them'. Looking under every sheep's clothing in case it conceals a wolf, and looking under every bed in case there is a red hidden there, are time-consuming activities. Similarly, the need for scrupulous fairness will lead them to place great emphasis on precedent and tradition. These preoccupations are likely to draw attention away from the possibility of collectively increasing their resources, for to do this would require time, energy and innovation. Indeed, since innovation and personal resource management are quite possibly among the nasty activities that make those outside the boundary of the group so predatory, there is a strong chance that belief in the fixed nature of resources, and rejection of innovation, will become essential qualifications for group membership.

In the case of one group within a complex hierarchical arrangement of groups, its scope to collectively manage its resources is quite independent of the total level of resources. The group's aim is not to increase its resources by increasing the size of the cake but to increase its *share* of the cake. In such conditions the size of the cake *may* increase but the chances are that it will stay the same or even shrink. What is significant is not what is happening to the size of the cake but that no one is very interested in what is happening to it. Ideas of nature, though still accountable, will be little developed among group members. Their attitude is likely to be that nature is someone else's department. For them, nature performs a subservient role, fitting itself to the demands of the social order. Their idea of nature and of society is that they are isomorphic and clearly separate systems.²³ Le Corbusier's 'ville radieuse', in which vast complex white buildings are raised on legs above the well-ordered parkland that flows around and under them, provides a concrete expression of this idea of nature and of man's place within it.

To predict just when and where environmental concern will appear is not easy. It tends to appear in strongly group contexts but in some strongly grouped contexts (trades unions, for instance) it is remarkably absent. This is a complex problem for the anthropologist to unravel but fortunately it need not concern us too much. All we need to note here is that, thanks to the contradictory ideas of nature - cornucopian and accountable - resources, though based in nature, become subject to social control. Depending upon what sort of control is being operated, individuals will find themselves able or unable to manage their command over resources.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND PERSONAL STRATEGY

All I need to do now is to put forward some credible and useable hypothesis showing the way the five personal management strategies relate to variations in social context.

Whether you can or cannot manage your needs depends, I have argued, on whether you are subject to socially-imposed prescriptions. So one dimension of social context can be envisaged as running from total prescription to total freedom from prescription. A second, and quite independent dimension, runs between one extreme where an individual derives all his support from group membership to the other extreme where he is excluded from all such groups. (Figure 7)

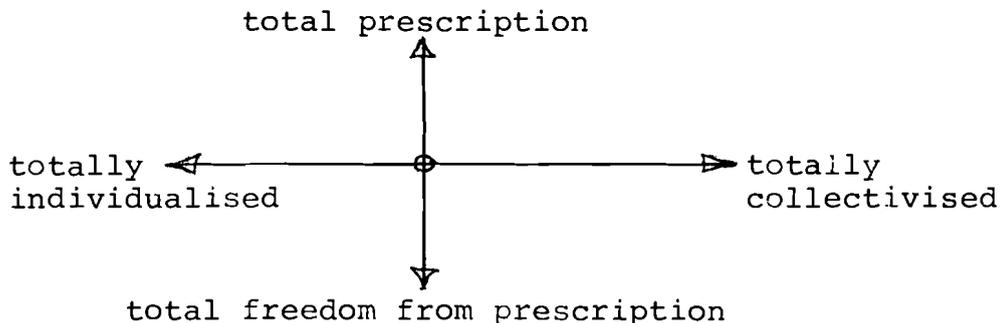


Figure 7. Social Context

The hypothesis is that the five alternative strategies generated by the ability or inability to personally manage your needs and your resources relate to your social context in the following manner. In doing this they arrange themselves in a pattern that exactly matches the five possible clumps in the initial hypothetical model.²⁴ (Figure 8)

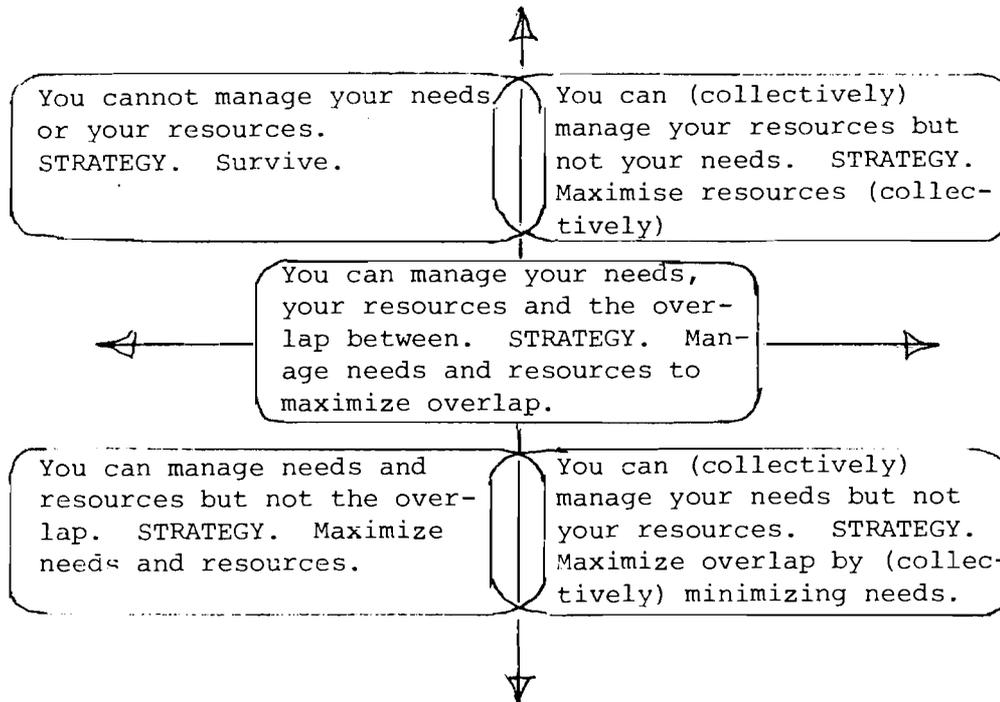


Figure 8. The Five Strategies and Social Context.

CONCLUSION

It was possible, within the constraints of this pilot project, to carry out some fieldwork (in Britain), aimed at investigating some of the social consequences of the model, and also a very small test (in the United States) of the hypotheses that this model generates.

The fieldwork was designed to explore some of the more prominent features of the social landscape revealed by the model. In particular,

- a) the saddlepoint was explored by looking at a self-sufficient 'organic' farm in Norfolk, at a self-employed graphic designer in London, and at a marginal sheep farm in the Lake District;
- b) the two individualized contexts, and the smooth transitions between them, were explored by looking at some individuals engaged in 'the hidden economy' - two part-time striptease artistes and a self-employed builder in London;
- c) the two collectivised contexts, the smooth transition between them, and the discontinuous transition between the simple group context (positive group, negative grid)

and the entrepreneurial context (negative group, negative grid) were explored by looking at some of the Bengali immigrants in their central London ghetto in Spitalfields.

The hypothesis was then put to the test in the United States. We (Ellen Tenenbaum and myself) designed an interview format comprising nine rather general questions and then Tenenbaum carried out informal guided interviews with fifteen individuals (men and women, black and white) in Washington D.C. and in rural West Virginia. All fifteen were 'officially poor.' These interviews were designed to reveal both the individual's social context and the personal management/coping strategy that he/she was using.

In all fifteen cases the social contexts and strategies (scored independently by Tenenbaum and myself) matched in the manner predicted by the hypothesis, and it turned out that less than half of our (admittedly small) sample were poor in the way the poor are officially assumed to be poor. (Figure 8)

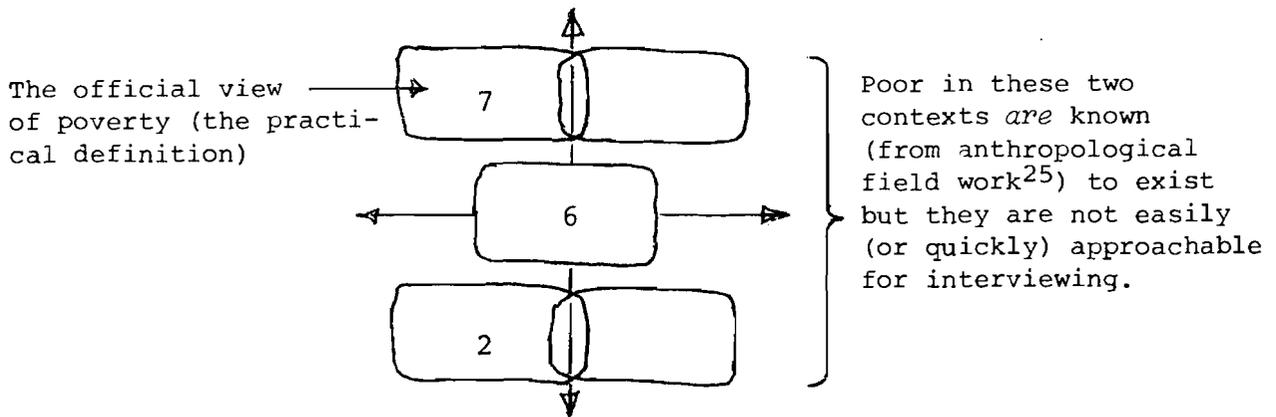


Figure 8. The Profiles of Fifteen of the American Poor.

NOTES

1. For its justification see: THOMPSON, Michael, "A Three Dimensional Model" in DOUGLAS, Mary and OSTRANDER, David (eds.). *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*. Routledge, Kegan Paul, London, and Basic Books, New York. (To be published January 1981).
2. PIACHAUD, David. "Inequality and social policy." *New Society* Vol. 47 No. 859 March 22 1979. p. 670.
3. PIACHAUD, David. "Who are the poor, and what is the best way to help them." *New Society* Vol. 47 No. 858 March 15 1979.
4. Wants and needs may seem to be the wrong way round here. I am following the philosopher's usage: 'our basic repertoire of wants is given. We are not free to create or annihilate wants.' MIDGLEY, Mary. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Harvester, 1979.
5. E.g., MALINOWSKI, MASLOW, INGLEHARDT
6. SWIFT, Jonathan. *A modest proposal for preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burthen to their Parents or the Country, and for making them Beneficial to the Publick*, 1729.
7. The government department responsible for the implementation of poverty policy.
8. Of course, these freedoms may not unfreeze in the exponential manner depicted here - this is just *one* of the ways they may unfreeze. But, regardless of the way they unfreeze, the topological properties of this space remain the same.

9. A distinction that we make in ordinary language between 'managing' (personal scope) and 'coping' (no personal scope).
10. This vignette is drawn from six years of participant observation by the author.
11. Ref. to book of that title.
12. See THOMPSON, Michael. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford University Press 1979.
13. Some of these - currency exchange controls and the associated dollar premium - have now been abolished by the Conservative government of Mrs. Thatcher.
14. PIACHAUD, op. cit. 15 March. p. 603.
15. See THOMPSON, Michael. The aesthetics of risk: culture or context? in SCHWING, R., and ALBERS, W. (eds.) *Societal Risk Assessment*, Plenum New York 1980.
16. From *The Garden*, written before 1653, first published in *Miscellaneous Poems*, 1681.
17. See COTGROVE, Stephen. Catastrophe or cornucopia. *New Society* Vol. 47 No. 859 March 22, 1979.
18. The penultimate sentence of the novel, the ultimate being: 'Yes, I know,' I said, 'The Boreleys think it's simply terrible.'
19. DAHRENDORF, Ralf.
20. A form of ostracism in which all verbal communication is withdrawn.
21. The only scope he has is that he can manage his resources sharply down by choosing to leave his group.
22. A sociologist (Goldthorpe) has defined inflation as 'the monetary expression of distributional conflict' without, alas, saying anything about the *kind* of distributional conflict that produces this particular *kind* of monetary expression. This anthropological hypothesis suggests that inflation is likely in social settings where fairly evenly-matched complex groups predominate.

An economist (Jay) has argued that the only way to get rid of inflation is to somehow arrange things so that the workers 'become infected with the entrepreneurial realities.' He, alas, does not go on to offer any suggestions as to how this massive aggregate shift of individuals towards individualised social contexts might be effected.

GOLDTHORPE, 'The current inflation: towards a sociological account' in HIRSCH and GOLDTHORPE (eds.) *The Political Economy of Inflation*. 1976.

- JAY, Peter. Employment, inflation and politics.' *Occasional Papers of the IEA*, 1976.
23. For an elaboration of this see DOUGLAS, Mary. Cosmology. *Occasional Papers of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1978.
24. The way the individualised and collectivised extremes relate to *group* - the way the individual is caught up in the process of group formation - is probably fairly obvious. The way in which prescription varies in relation to *grid* - the processes of personal network building - is probably less clear. For some discussion of this see: THOMPSON, Michael. 'A Three Dimensional Model' and 'The Problem of the Centre' both in DOUGLAS, Mary and OSTRANDER, David (eds.). *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*. Routledge, Kegan Paul, London and Basic Books, New York. (To be published January 1981).
25. See, for instance: STACK, Carol B. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. Harper and Row, New York, 1975, and SHEEHAN, Susan. *A Welfare Mother*. Mentor, New York, 1977.

(Some references are still incomplete).