ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF LIFE:
A new approach to development studies

by

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A new approach to development studies is rapidly taking shape: the study of alternative ways of life or as it is usually referred to - alternative "styles" of life. There are two reasons why the word "ways" has been preferred over the word "styles", however: "styles" gives too much of a connotation of fads and fashions, and also seems to imply more possibility of choice for individuals than there actually is. In general the ways of life are built into the social structure, making choices in ways of life very much an upper class privilege, closely associated with the idea of freedom, the nature of which is precisely to have a choice. And what can be more important that to choose your own way of life?

As a perspective on development this approach has two major advantages: it is both human in the sense that it refers concretely to the individual human condition, not to such social characteristics as averages, disparities, structures; and it is holistic in the sense that it takes in the total human life-span, not merely establishing a snapshot of a cross-section of the society at any given point in time. The approach will try to come to grips with how human lives are lived, from womb to tomb, and one of the major points would be to try to clarify what is meant by a sentence like "he lived a very rich life", and in general to understand better how our ways of life can be enriched, "we" meaning all of us, rich and poor, in rich and poor countries. Thus, the approach touches rather fundamental human issues, but of course in a social setting, domestically and globally, in solidarity with present and future generations. This perspective is underdeveloped in social sciences, we know very little about how people "budget" their lives or how the lives are budgeted for them by society - in economic, social, psychological terms. And even in literature this style of writing seems to be less

prominent than it was before. Earlier generations saw magnificent presentations of entire lives, and not only one generation (as in Thomas Mann's Buddenbrooks) through the temperament of literary geniuses; contemporary authors seem to prefer snapshot presentations (synchronic rather than diachronic analysis this is called in the social sciences). A very important exception would be Oscar Lewis' presentation of Mexican Families (although the time perspective is insufficient), and above all Gabriel Marquez' Cien Años de Soledad - an epic presentation of generations, letting the reader experience a century in the lives lived by members of a family, in the politics of a country, in the relations of imperial dominance.

But there is more in this theme than the emphasis on the entire life-span of individuals: there is also the idea of "alternative ways". There are obviously alternative ways of living one's life, and this opens for an empirical study of how ways of life differ in different positions in the social structure, domestically and globally, and perhaps also over time, historically. To study this empirically is to invite a critical evaluation, and one tool of critical evaluation is the cost-benefit analysis to be discussed below. From this evaluation there is but a short step to the third facet of contemporary development studies: a constructive phase where alternatives are envisaged, other ways of living one's life, with particular emphasis on how poor ways of life can be enriched. As a problem this not only opens for a discussion of differences between poor and rich countries and poor and rich people, but also between poor and rich segments of any given individual life-span - an example of a poor segment being the way of life lived by the retired people in rich countries. Thus, ways of life can be studied empirically, critically, constructively - and from all three combined scenarios, even concrete strategies of how to improve ways of life may emerge.

Now, then, would one go about evaluating a way of life? what kind of cost-benefit analysis could be imagined? If we accept that the only meaningful yardstick is what a way of life do to human beings themselves, directly or indirectly, then one

approach would be in terms of human needs. They can be conveniently divided into material and non-material needs, with the former characterized by a notion of scarcity - what I receive of food, house, shelter, medical care, schooling, transportation and communication (to mention some goods and services) today may be at the expense of others today, or tomorrow. For non-material "consumption", for instance of love, or of togetherness, or a sense of meaning with life there is less competition - what I consume today may even increase the possibilities for others today and tomorrow, because it is not something I take away from others, but may even be something I create in others by creating it in myself, and vice versa.

This, then, leads to a simple approach for the evaluation of a way of life: in terms of its positive and negative implications for the satisfaction of material and non-material needs, for the person himself/herself, and for others. There are at least three ways in which the way of life of any given person may affect the ways of life of other people: by taking resources away from them today, by taking resources away from future generations, tomorrow, and by affecting the general power relationship. In other words, a way of life cannot be valuated only in terms of what it does to the person who lives his/her life that way, the impact on others because we live in a world of material scarcity, at present and possibly even more so in the future cannot be neglected.

And this plays directly into one of the main subjects to be studied under the heading Alternative Ways of Life: the ways of life of people in rich countries. More particularly, there seem to be two major sub-divisions: the study of material over-consumption in rich countries, and the study of non-material under-consumption. In these formulations the conclusions are already, perhaps somewhat prematurely, embedded: the idea that there is an over-emphasis on material consumption at the expense of non-material needs, leading to a very skewed profile in the quality of life of people in rich countries - for if the term "quality of life" is to have any meaning at all, it should refer to the total life-span of anyone individual, not to some kind of

average of everybody in a society at a given point in time.

Let us look at some examples of these two themes.

A team of 46 experts under the Federal Health Ministry in the Federal Republic of Germany some time ago published a 480 pp. study Nutrition Report-1976, concluding among other things that half of all West-Germans are at least 10 % overweight. For more details consider the following (from International Herald Tribune, 26 October 1976):

> ' The penchant for corpulence costs West Germany's quasi-compulsory national health insurance program, already burdened by spiraling medical, hospital and pharmaceutical fees, almost $ 7 billion annually in the treatment of cardiovascular, kidney, pancreatic and other ailments directly related to over-eating and fatty foods.
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> The incidence of diabetes has increased 15-fold since the beginning of this century.
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> Gout, a disease virtually extinct in those lean, hungry postwar years, has been increasing at such an "alarming rate" that 5 per cent of all adult males are now threatened by it.
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> Indeed, there is even the possibility that the current Fresswelle - the eating craze - may ultimately contribute as much to the final elimination of the West Germans as the much-discussed Pillenknick - the baby will pinch - which has made West Germany's birthrate the lowest in the world.'

The conclusion is very simple: overconsumption is dangerous. It is bad for the person who is overconsuming; to this should then be added that the resources over-consumed - and this is today a commonplace argument - might have been channelled in the directions of material under-consumers. The most dramatic case would be the use of soil in countries with material under-consumption - in order to produce for over-consumption by, for instance, West Germans - at the same time as the soil is surrounded by landless, hungry and increasingly angry masses.

If this reasoning is correct, the lean years during the Second World War should be better for health - and this is a point made again and again in several investigations. A Norwegian physician, Professor Jens Vedichen, has recently published an

article (in Norwegian, Tidsskrift for den Norske Lægeforening, Nr.16, 1976) "Cholesterol and arteriosclerosis again; Are we on the wrong track?" where he refers to the many observations made after the last World War to the effect that"wartime restrictions caused a marked decrease in the mortality from cardiovascular diseases in Norway. Simultaneously, a marked decrease in the number of thrombo-embolic complications following surgery was observed". He also comments on the trend in mortality from cardiovascular diseases after the last war, a trend that "shows a steady increase in spite of propaganda against saturated fats, and in spite of the increase in consumption of soybean oil." Norwegians have a strong strain of puritanism so such propaganda does not fall on barren soil; yet it does not seem to be as effective as "wartime restrictions". Possibly this may be because it is not only a question of nutrition but of something deeper, possibly even in the link between social structure and psychological structure in a situation that brought people much more together than has been the case in recent years.

On the other hand, it will be highly unjust to the rich industrialized and also Western countries only to emphasize the costs of material overconsumption; particularly if corresponding points are made about excessive clothing, shelter, medical care, schooling and transportation (the last three being the specialities of Ivan Illich in three well known and very important books in the field of critical - not so much constructive - studies of ways of life). To any cost-benefit analysis benefits should also be added:the high level of welfare in terms of these six or seven material needs associated with ways of life in those countries. And that being said the costs will also have to be calculated: what is the price of over-consumption, how many BNUs (basic needs units) have been taken from those in need and given to those not in need through present patterns of resource distribution, and how are the ecological equations relating to over-consumption? As a matter of fact,this is not only a question of over-consumption: it will also be argued that if there is enough for everybody in the world today if it is well distributed, but only in an amount that would look like "wartime restrictions", so be it - and anything above that level is over-consumption.

In other words, the concept of "over-consumption" can be defined relative to the impact on the consumer, but also relative to the impact on everybody else, today and in the future. These three ways of drawing the social maximum may or may not coincide - most likely they will not coincide.

Let us then turn for a moment to non-material consumption: to the satisfaction of needs for love, esteem, togetherness, challenge and creativity, meaning of life. It is very difficult to arrive at any measure of the costs of our present ways of life in the rich countries, but it does not seem unreasonable to say that the various types of mental break-downs could be used as one indicator of non-satisfaction of the basic non-material needs. Like money it has the virtue of being relatively one-dimensional (at least for those of us who are not specialists in the field!), constituting some kind of negative market on which the "baddies" of society are measured, and the figures are frightening. In a country like Norway alone it has recently been estimated that one-third of the population will need psychiatric help at least once during his or her span of life; that 10% to 20% suffer from neuroses, 5-7% from psychoses, and for the industrialized countries in general schizophrenia rates of about one per cent seem to be the rule. Many Norwegians in a recent study reported that they felt that they were at the brink of a crisis, possibly leading to a mental break-down - and a study of adolescents in Oslo and a rural community recently lead to the characterisation of "bad mental health" for 19,6% in Oslo, as against 7% in that rural community. Not much difference was found, incidentally, between well-to-do and less well-to-do groups in Oslo, perhaps indicating that it is the social structure rather than the access to goods and services (by means of money) that plays a significant role here. As a consequence of all this it is not surprising that as much as 56% of patients in Norwegian hospitals are in mental hospitals.

What would be the main characteristics of that social structure? It is centralized, highly division of labor oriented both in the sense of specialization and exploitation - the top having more enriching tasks both materially and non-materially. The structure has unlimited size, can spread itself all over the

world as in a transnational corporation. The net is spun very wide, but also very thin: people are hanging on to it through very coarse ties of interaction ("single-stranded" the anthropologist would say). I call it the alpha-structure, because it is so dominant in "modern" society. As is well known it is capable of producing an astounding variety of goods and services because it can draw on resources everywhere (natural resources, labor, capital), transport them towards the center, process them and distribute them through its far-reaching channels, for use and/or exchange. The modern state, like modern capitalism (private or state varieties), is based on this structure, at the center of which bureaucrats, capitalists and their helpers, the researchers and other professionals, flourish.

In a recent report from the World-watch institute, The Two Faces of Malnutrition, it is pointed out how "the affluent diet, characterized by the high consumption of fats and decreasing consumption of fibers such as raw vegetables and whole, unmilled grain foods can overnourish the body, causing obesity, and can have the same effects as undernutrition, reduced life expectancy, increased susceptibility to disease and reduced productivity" (from International Herald Tribune, 15 December 1976). But the the report goes on urging governmental intervention to encourage dietary changes, praising certain efforts or initiatives by the Swedish and Norwegian governments in this direction. This is, then, contrasted with the "egg board" created by the EC Congress to advertise eggs, thereby "boosting the consumption of a substance high in cholesterol, which is thought to cause arteriosclerosis. The European Economic Community's commission's tax on margarine, in the same vein, will increase the consumption of butter, of which Western Europe has its famous surplus - another way, possibly of hardening the arteries. (Pedichen argues that this may not be correct).

But the ambiguous nature of governmental intervention is not the only issue here. The problem is also whether any such intervention would not merely strengthen further the alpha-structure, and thereby a way of life, which may have abolished undernutrition for those living in its center but at the price of proceeding at great speed from under-consumption to over-consumption (or from undernutrition to overnutrition to highlight that special case).

And could it not also be that this structure itself, highly efficient but also very cold and even anti-human, carries a great deal of the responsibility for the "non-material under-consumption". Compare it to the beta-structure that any society has, the high number of small units of family members, or friends, of colleagues, of neighbors constituting some kind of protective cocoon around the individual, at least potentially providing the softer things in life - love, esteem, togetherness, meaning of and with life. They are not so efficient and they have to be limited in size, for a basic idea is that everybody somehow cares for everybody else - for good or for bad, but it is at least not cold. It is profoundly human. It is also associated with a way of life. In all modern societies consist of a mixture of alpha- and beta-structures human ways of life combine the two, with more beta in childhood and old age and more alpha in middle age. The argument against rich, Western societies, then, would be that alpha is becoming ever stronger, that beta has been reduced to highly vulnerable nuclear families, themselves splitting up along their vertical and horizontal axes through children leaving home early in age, siblings being irrelevant to each other and the parents separating, divorcing. People living in a society with a very strong alpha-structure and a weakened, even destroyed beta structure will be under a tremendous pressure, much like exposure to cosmic rays when the protective ozone layers is broken. Is it strange if many of them/us collapse?

But the structure is not the only determinant of the way of life, with the possible working hypothesis that the beta structure is better at providing the means of satisfaction for non-material needs, the alpha structure better at the production for material needs satisfaction. Having said this, however, one should immediately add that the alpha structure seems not to be equipped with any stop signal. It just goes on expanding and producing. But why is that so? At this point culture should enter as an explanatory factor: the Western culture as an ever-more culture, insatiability rather than constraint being a basic theme. Such a culture would not provide material for the definition of stop signals, and consequently be compatible with structures that are incapable of recognizing any optimal phase between under- and overconsumption. Or, to put it more precisely: the recognition comes too late, and then the alpha structure is put to work to remedy the situation, with new industries for recycling and

cleaning-up technologies to take care of depletion and pollution; centralized health services and governmental controls for the problem of material overconsumption; and big centralized mental health systems for the problems of non-material underconsumption - the increasing incidence of mental break-down. Alpha produces its own problems and reproduces itself by trying to produce solutions to those problems, all the time trying to avoid one simple insight: that it may itself be part of the problem, even an important part. The problem of rich ways of life, then, may perhaps be translated as a problem of obtaining a better balance between the alpha and beta parts of our existence, modifying alpha and strengthening beta.

This also opens for another perspective which is almost forced upon us the moment we choose to relate our development theory and practice to the entire life-span of human beings, not only to a cross-section of society at any given time. If alpha and beta are two ways of life, not merely two parts of a composite social structure, then the mix may not only be an eclectic mix, dividing all social functions between the structures that operate at a distance and those that operate on the basis of closeness, but an oscillation between the two. Maybe they both speak to our condition as human beings; maybe the freedom to choose between life in a metropolis or in a people's commune, to take two examples, should not be a choice made by the society at large, nor by an individual once and for all (e.g. in choosing occupation), but choice to be made again and again throughout one's life-span. In other words: the good society would be the society that not only has a diversity in life styles, but also permits an effective choice (not only for the rich!) among them, even at any point in time. Basically, the life-style approach is a question of how much people get out of their lives without reducing the quality of life of others.

In conclusion: how would this approach apply to poor countries? The examples used are from rich countries. Would the diagnosis for poor countries be the opposite one, material under-consumption and non-material overconsumption? Certainly not. The differences are not that sharp. There are material under-consumers in rich countries and material overconsumers in poor countries, as is very well known. The problem can be formulated

the same way, only the proportions differ. More particularly, in the modernized enclaves in the LDCs the *alpha* structure administered by the same local groups of people is very strong and the *beta* structures correspondingly weak. In parts of the country the opposite combination may hold true, and in some of these parts a level of material sufficiency may be guaranteed. But the general rule is material underconsumption, and there may be large segments of the country where the *beta* structure has been destroyed and no *alpha* structure established, leading to ways of life with little steering, little structure of any kind. The local culture defining the group's rules for how lives are to be lived may also be eroded. All of this belongs to the picture and should be captured in our conceptual net designed to analyse ways of life in any part of the world. The research schizophrenia of having one set of tools for LDCs and another for I's should be avoided.

But above all: before this new direction of research is developed too far, dialogues with people all over the world to know their views should loom large on the research horizon. For what should possibly belong more to people than the ways of living one's own life?