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GLOBAL POVERTY: A PAUPERIZING MYTH

by

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INTRODUCING MAJID ~~RAHNEMA~~

More than anyone else, MR's official CV reflects only one facet of his personality, perhaps the least representative of the human being he really is. It is, however, only fair, for our readers, to extract a number of data from his long CV, to describe at least some of his public fields of interest and past "achievements".

After having finished the first part of his law studies at the St Joseph University in Beirut, MR started his public life as a journalist. He later joined the diplomatic service of his country, Iran: a 34 year of service which took him, in an earlier phase to Moscow, Paris and Beirut. He finished this facet of his life as Ambassador to Switzerland, after having served 3 years as Consul general in San Francisco and Representative to the General Assembly of the U.N. for some 14 sessions, from 57 to 72.

As a delegate, he served the General Assembly's United Nations mainly on the Fourth (Decolonization) Committee, where he played a most active personal role in the Third World countries' struggle against colonialism. He was one of the three "young turks" of the Afro-Asian group who were responsible for the first draft of the famous 15.14 Resolution which proclaimed, in 1960, the right for independence for all colonial peoples. In recognition of his pioneering activities in this field, he was elected by the General Assembly as UN Commissioner for Rwanda-Urundi, to supervise the elections and the referendum leading Rwanda to her independence.

Although M.R. could never reconcile himself with politics, his personal friendship with the Prime Minister brought him into it, when he was asked to create the first Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Iran. He accepted the job, on the basis of the many promises he was given by the Government to back his proposals for radical changes in educational policies. In the three and a half years he was at his job, many changes and "reforms" were indeed introduced in the country's higher education and research. Their overall budget was tripled and hundreds of young scholars returned home to take important academic

jobs within the newly created universities. Yet, he was far from being happy with the overall political atmosphere and the growingly schizophrenic nature of his job. Totally disenchanted, he decided, one day, to quit the cabinet, and politics, as a whole, seemingly forever. Soon after, he left for France on the invitation of the Unesco's Director General to participate in a 7 member Commission, presided by the former French Prime Minister Edgar Faure, called to prepare a major report on world education. The Report, entitled Learning to be, appeared in 72. Unanimously approved by Unesco's general conference, and translated into some 30 languages, it is still a valuable source of reference and a refreshing source of inspiration in the field of educational innovations and policies.

M.R. has often said that his "suicide" as a government official caused him to be reborn as a new man, the man he had always wanted to be, that is a simple human being, free to follow his own truth, and act accordingly. In this second period of his life, MR applied himself to a whole new world of activities. He published, in a revised form, a series of courses he had given at the Teheran Institute of Social Sciences on Afro-Asian Problems. This was an occasion for him to use some of the free spaces still left in the country, with a view to denouncing the paternalistic and un-democratic trends of "modernizing" régimes in countries like his. In 1972, he initiated a participatory grassroot project of self-development in the Luristan area, covering some 100 villages, a project which, in another way, challenged the country. As he was combining this kind of activity with such international assignments as Member of the Executive Board of Unesco and of the Council of the United Nations University, he developed the conviction that, under present world conditions, only questioning and responsible attitudes of "positive subversion" can represent right action. It is in this same spirit that many of his friends witnessed him directing the U.N. development programs in Mali, when he was appointed as the UN Resident Representative in that country. Following that assignment, he initiated another new programme at UN Headquarters aimed at the promotion of grassroot development all over the world.

Since he has retired from the United Nations service, in 1985, MR's activities have mainly shifted to teaching and lecturing. In the last few years, he has been both a Regent's Lecturer and Visiting Professor at Berkeley, where he continues to give courses and seminars on "The Tragedy of Development". He is a familiar face to many other campuses such as Stanford, Claremont colleges, Penn State University, Bennington and the University of British Columbia, where he has been giving lectures on the problems of our world, mainly from the perspective of the downtrodden and the so-called voiceless. His lectures are all an invitation to look at the world and to listen to it, in a fresh, questioning and creative fashion. For him, no one is in a position to provide another with an answer or a solution to any problem. Yet, we should all try, as a moral obliga-

tion to ourselves, to perceive the realities around us as they are, and not as we want them to be. Understanding and, eventually, changing the world is possible if only we learn to relate to each other, free from our fears and illusions, and with a mind unadulterated by our respective certainties, prejudices and established beliefs and conclusions. It is in this spirit that, we are sure, he would like us to read this text.

The editors

GLOBAL POVERTY: A PAUPERIZING MYTH

Majid Rahnema

The word "poverty" is, no doubt, a key word of our times, extensively used and abused by everyone. Huge amounts of money are spent in the name of the poor. Thousands of books and expert advices continue to offer solutions to their problems. Strangely enough, however, no one, including the proposed "beneficiaries" of these activities, seems to have a clear, and a commonly shared, view of poverty. For one reason, almost all the definitions given to the word are woven around the concept of "lack" or "deficiency"¹. Yet, on that basis, perhaps not a single human being could be found who would not feel "lacking" in some thing. What makes the difference between the poor and the "non-poor" would only be, then, the nature and the perception of the "lack". For the hungry, it would, most likely, be food; health for the sick and a berth for the homeless. For the economic man, it is money, or a rich bank account. For a woman wanting to become a mother, it might be a child; for the artist, the "masterpiece" that has not yet been produced. As for the compassionate seeker or the saint, it might be the encounter with Truth or divine love.

Poverty is, thus, an inescapable human predicament. There are, however, forms of poverty which, more than others, bring about unnecessary and/or unbearable sufferings. These, particularly, call upon us for action, as they touch upon the very essence of our common humanity, that is, our being as an integral part of our being-in-relationship.

¹ For the Oxford Dictionary, *poor* means "deficient in the proper or desired quality". The French Robert Dictionary defines the word as one "qui manque du nécessaire ou n'a que le strict nécessaire" [who lacks the necessary or has only the strict necessary]. For the Encyclopedia Americana, "lack of money" and "lack of power" are the two signs of poverty. For the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, "fundamentally, poverty is a negative term denoting absence or lack of material wealth".

Actions taken **for** and **by** the "poor", with a view to alleviating their sufferings, have thus a history as long as that of "poverty" itself. They have been motivated and justified by such sentiments as solidarity, responsibility, assistance, charity, love and compassion, or by the need to preserve public order or to create a more equitable society. Most recently, "global action" against poverty has been advocated and launched by modern governments and international institutions of assistance, as an expression of world solidarity toward the poor.

To what extent, if any, these various actions and interventions have actually alleviated the sufferings caused by various forms of unwanted or unjust poverty? A first look at the state of the art seems to indicate that, despite the confluence of good intentions and the many "campaigns", "wars" and "crusades" against poverty, the human sufferings related to the concept, are spreading. The claims of economic development to wipe out the causes of these sufferings have been far from being kept. In the meantime, only new, modernized forms of poverty have been added to the old list. Are the reasons for this inadequacy due to minor, managerial or temporary reasons, or do they raise more fundamental questions touching upon the very structures of the societies concerned? In any case, could alternative approaches, or solutions, be offered to the question?

The present essay does not seek to offer any new solution to the overwhelming questions raised by the idea of poverty, particularly because it does not believe there may be one. Instead, it aims, mainly, at clarifying some of the realities and myths which have gone into the construct. It seeks to partake, together with the readers, in a serious exploration of the facts conducive to a greater understanding of the issue.

As such, we shall try, in a first Chapter, to enquire into the many representations and definitions of the word, namely, trying to show what poverty is not. In the second Chapter, the reader is invited to participate in a digging on the archaeological site of poverty, with a view to discovering a number of perceptions whose rise and fall may give a further idea of the complexity of the question. The third and the fourth Chapters deal with the particular construct of global poverty: the way it was erected, the assumptions and the discourse on which it operates, as well as the practices and the consequences it has entailed. The fifth Chapter will present the "signals from the grassroots", with a view to giving an idea on the significant ways some of the victims are responding to their situation. In the last Chapter, a number of facts and working hypotheses shall be singled out for a future exploration of the question.

I

THE ELUSIVE DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY

As already referred to, there may be as many "poor" and as many perceptions of poverty as there are human beings. For some, poverty is even a blessing, a state of satiety through which what is perceived as a lack by some is sublimated into a fulfillment by others. As a rule, everyone belonging to a given socio-cultural space-time (or spime, to use an expression coined by Albert Einstein) recognizes one's poor and senses what poverty represents in that particular "spime". Yet, no one can possibly define poverty in terms totally recognizable by another, for poverty is basically a social and human construct, or concept trying to define a particular predicament. As such, it is the "invention of a civilization". On the other hand, it is too multiform, too broad, too relative, too ambiguous a concept to allow for any universally acceptable definition.

Many words for poverty

World languages compete with each other for the number of words referring to the stations and conditions associated with the different perceptions of poverty. In Persian, for instance, there are more than thirty words for naming those who, for one reason or another, are perceived as poor. In most African languages, at least three to five words have been identified for poverty². The Torah uses eight for the purpose³. In the Middle Ages, the words covering the range of conditions under the concept are well over forty⁴. To this impressive variety of words found at the "national" or dictionary levels, many more should be added in the corresponding dialects, slangs or colloquial expressions used at the vernacular level. A whole universe of insights into the shady depths of poverty is to be ex-

² See John Illife, *The African Poor, A History*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987.

³ See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, under "Poverty".

⁴ See Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, Yale Univ. Press, 1978:3. This study is a classic for the history of poverty in Europe. Besides the word **pauper**, Mollat has listed as follows the words referred to unpeccuniosity and destitution in general: (**egens**, **egenus**, **indigens**, **inops**, **insufficiens**, **mendicus**, **miser**); shortage of food (**esuriens**, **famelicus**) or clothing (**nudus**, **pannosus**); physical defects such as blindness (**caecus**), lameness (**claudus**), arthritic deformity (**contractus**), infirmity in general (**infirmus**), leprosy (**leprosus**), injury (**vulneratus**), feebleness due to poor health or old age (**aegrotans**, **debilis**, **senex**, **valetudinarius**); mental deficiency (**idiotus**, **imbecillis**, **simplex**); temporary weakness affecting women during pregnancy and childbirth (**mulier ante et post partum**); situations of adversity such as those involving the loss of one's parents (**orphanus**), husband (**vidua**), or liberty (**captivus**), and, finally, banishment and exile (**bannus**, **exiliatus**).

plored in the many thousands of related proverbs and sayings⁵. In most cases, it is extremely difficult for the outsider to grasp the full meanings and nuances of all those words and expressions, let alone to translate them into other languages.

For long, and in many cultures of the world, poor was not always the opposite of rich. Other considerations such as falling from one's estate, being deprived of one's instruments of labor, the loss of one's status or the marks of one's profession (for a cleric, loss of his books; for a noble, loss of his horse or arms), lack of protection, exclusion from one's community, abandonment, infirmity, or public humiliation defined the poor⁶. The **Tswana** folks of South Africa recognized their poor by their reactions to the appearance of locusts. Whereas the rich were appalled lest the locusts ate the grass needed by their cattle, the poor who had no cattle rejoiced because they could themselves eat the locusts⁷.

The rich "poor" of Medieval Europe. In Europe, for ages, the **pauper** was opposed to the **potens** (the powerful), rather than the rich. In the ninth century, the former was considered a free man whose freedom was imperiled only by the **potentes**. In the texts of peace movements of the eleventh century, the **pauper** had become the **inermis** who had to respect the force of the soldiers, the **miles**. The word poor could then be applied to the owner of a little **alleu** (a tax-free property), an ambulant merchant, and even to all non-fighters, including unescorted wives of the knights⁸. On the whole, the poor were quite

⁵ Here are some examples of proverbs and sayings from Africa:

From the **Igbos**, "The rich man puts down his basket in the market, the poor man fears"; "The poor man gets a friend; the rich man takes him away"; "Those who have money are friends of each other".

For the **Tswana**, "Where is no wealth, there is no poverty".

An **Ethiopian** proverb says, "When he sees a poor man, his eye closes".

A proverb recorded in the mid twentieth century in Burundi suggests: "The poverty of the solitary is exceeded by that of a woman with a child on her back". Finally, another **Tswana** or **Sechuana** proverb says: "An orphan can learn the law at his place of service". The above proverb are quoted in **The African Poor**, 1987, *Ibid.*, pages 91, 78, 28, 85, 63 & 76.

⁶ "In Medieval French, it was said of a man that he "fell" into servitude or misery, or that he could not "maintain his estate", much less "rise again". From this it is clear that poverty was a form of degradation; a man could fall only so far before he crossed a dividing line, a threshold at which he passed from difficulty into hardship and distress". Mollat, *Ibid.*: 5.

⁷ A letter from Hughes to Ellis, 13 March 1836, **Council for World Mission, Incoming Letters**, South Africa 15/1E/34, quoted by John Illife, *Ibid.*: 78.

⁸ Michel Mollat, **Etudes sur l'Histoire de la pauvreté**, Publication de la Sorbonne, Serie Etudes, Tome 8, Vol. 2, Paris 1974:15.

respectable persons who had only lost or stood in the danger of losing their "berth".

In that same period in Europe, a whole new category of poor appeared on the social stage: the voluntary poor who chose to share the life of the destitute and the berthless. For these, living poorly was a sign of elevation rather than degradation⁹. Respect and admiration for the voluntary poor had always existed in Eastern traditions¹⁰.

It was only after the expansion of the market economy, when the processes of urbanization lead to massive pauperization and to the monetization of society that the poor were defined as lacking what the rich could have in terms of money and possessions.

The relativity of the concept. As already mentioned, a common denominator to most perceptions of poverty remains the notion of "lack" or "deficiency"¹¹. This notion reflects only the basic relativity of the concept. Besides, when poor is defined as lacking a number of things "necessary" to life, the question could be asked: what is necessary and to whom? And who is qualified to define all that¹²? In smaller communities, where people are less stranger to

⁹ St Francis of Assisi considered that charity did not consist in "leaning over" the poor, but in "elevating oneself" to their level.

¹⁰ For the Iranian mystic A. Nasafi, the only shortcoming of poverty is apparent, while its virtues are all hidden. In the case of wealth, it is exactly the opposite. Hence, he exhorts upon the dervish: "Poverty is a great blessing: wealth a great pain. But the ignorant ignores this, escaping poverty and sticking to wealth. Our prophet ... chose poverty, for he knew it and its effects, as he knew wealth and its effects". Translated from A. Nasafi, *Le Livre de l'homme parfait*, Fayard, 1984:268.

¹¹ The French Robert Dictionary defines the word as follows: "**Qui manque du nécessaire ou n'a que le strict nécessaire**". [Lacking the necessary or having only the strict necessary]. For OED, poor means "wanting means to procure the comforts, or the necessities of life"; also "lacking, ill-supplied; having a want or deficiency of some specified (or implied) possession of quality". For the Academic American Encyclopedia, poverty is "a lack of foods and services necessary to maintain an adequate standard of living". In the same vein, the Encyclopedia Americana elaborates on "the lack of money" and "the lack of power" as the two symptoms of poverty. For the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, "fundamentally, poverty is a negative term denoting absence or lack of material wealth".

¹² To illustrate this question, what is necessary to someone living in a subsistence society is indeed not the same as another trapped in a market economy. What is necessary to a peasant in a rural area is quite different from that of a city dweller. And while a Ladakh family in the Himalayas can still live lavishly on an average "income" of much less than 1.000 U.S. \$ a year, an American family of the same size living in the U.S. could hardly meet their needs with the yearly income of 10.000 \$ which represents the officially recognized "poverty line". The nature, the forms and the degrees of deprivation depend so much on so many social, cultural and personal factors and choices that what appears ne-

one another and comparisons easier to make, such questions are already difficult to answer. In a world of "mass media", the old familiar horizons and the communally defined bases of comparison are all destroyed. Everyone may think of one as a poor, when it is the TV set in the old mud hut which defines the necessities of life, often in terms of the wildest and fanciest consumers appearing on the screen.

The ambiguity of the concept. In the same manner, the ambiguity of the concept takes new proportions as the old familiar horizons fade away. There was nothing ambiguous about the **pauper** who lived on what he earned for some humble trade in his little village, notes Mollat¹³. "His face was familiar, and despite his misfortune he remained, in his suffering, a member of the social group." Ambiguity starts when one crosses the vernacular boundaries. Are these strangers, rebels, vagabonds, disease carriers, really poor or genuinely ill? Are they saints or sinners? These questions not only deepen our ignorance of who the poor really are, but challenge us with serious cognitive problems as to what actually brews in their minds.

Four dimensions of poverty

Regardless of the many ways poverty is perceived, its construct depends inevitably on the following factors: a number of "materialities" or facts; the subject's own perception of one's condition; the others' gaze on that condition; and, finally, the various "spimes" affecting and defining the last three sets of elements.

The materialities. The facts or materialities on which various constructs of poverty are based are the "things" the lack of which is perceived as poverty. These lacks, deficiencies, or deprivations are either of a non-material and existential, or of a material nature.

To the first category belong such general or existential factors as one's inability to meet one's ends, lack of fortune or of self-confidence, not being respected or loved by others, or being neglected or abandoned, etc. As to the list of material factors, it could include discrimination, inequality, political or other forms of oppression and domination, absence of entitlements¹⁴, unavailability of

cessary to one may seem quite unnecessary to another. On this matter, see the moving book of Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of the Stranger*, Viking, 1985.

¹³ Michel Mollat, 1987, *Ibid.*: 8.

¹⁴ The notion of "entitlement relations" was coined by Amartya Sen, first in 1967, later elaborated in *Poverty and Famines*, 1981. For Sen, "an entitlement relation applied to ownership connects one set of ownership to another through certain rules of legitimacy... Each link in [the] chain of entitlement relations 'legitimizes' one set of ownership by reference to another, or to some basic entitlement in the form of enjoying the fruits of one's own labor".

a minimum of "necessaries"¹⁵, economic or biological survival, as defined by one's particular culture; also, all other forms of deprivation, destitution, hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, health deficiency, exclusion from educational and learning possibilities, etc.

Although the materialities referred to are relative to various societies and cultural spaces, it could however be argued that "there is an irreducible core of **absolute** deprivation in our idea of poverty, which translates reports of starvation, malnutrition and visible hardship into a diagnosis of poverty without having to ascertain first the relative picture."¹⁶

The subject's own perception of one's condition. The materialities referred to are indeed essential to the understanding of poverty in its different perceptions. Yet, none of them should be confused or identified with the concept itself. It is only when one or a combination of these materialities is perceived by a subject as an expression of poverty, that they acquire that particular meaning attached to the word. And that perception is quite a personal and socio-cultural matter. It is, in fact, part and parcel of the subject's wider perception of the world and one's place in it.

It has been noted that the non-voluntary poor tend generally to attribute what they lack to conditions independent of their will and beyond their control: either defined by metaphysical causes such as "God's will", one's **dharma** or **qismat**, or the unjust constitution of society. Their perception of the deprivations of which they suffer is also often aggravated by the feeling that they lack the necessary ability to overcome their condition.

The lack of particular material means and possibilities is not however always perceived in negative terms by all. The case of the mendicants in medieval Europe, already referred to, is not an exception. For the Iranian **sufis**, the

Entitlement relations accepted in a private ownership market economy include the following: **trade-based, production-based, own-labor and inheritance and transfer entitlements**. "in a market economy, notes Sen, a person can exchange what he owns for another collection of commodities... The set of all the alternative bundles of commodities that he can acquire in exchange for what he owns may be called "the exchange entitlement" of what he owns. The "exchange entitlement mapping" (or E-mapping for brevity) is the relation that specifies the set of exchange entitlements for each ownership bundle... A person will be exposed to starvation if for the ownership that he actually has, the exchange entitlement set does not contain any feasible bundle including enough food".

See Amartya Sen, **Poverty and Famines**, Oxford University Press, 1984: 1-3.

¹⁵ For Adam Smith, the necessities were, interestingly enough, "not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but what ever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, event the lowest order, to be without". See **An Inquiry Into The Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations**, 1776: 351.

¹⁶ Amartya Sen, *Ibid.*: 1717.

Indian **sanyasin**, and some contemporary schools of thought, such as the Gandhians, to be free from alienating material possessions is a blessing, indeed, and an opportunity for reaching higher degrees of riches. The Prophet of Islam has been widely quoted to say: **Al faqro faxri** [Poverty is my pride and glory].

It remains true, however, that the destitute and the materially deprived generally perceive their predicament in negative terms¹⁷. Even when they attribute their condition to metaphysical or ontological reasons, they spare no effort in trying to put an end to their deprivations, if necessary through violence. Often, they tend to establish relations of dependency with more "powerful" persons, groups, faiths or ideologies, a relationship which gives them an inner feeling of security and, sometimes, of false strength.

The others' gaze on the poor. The poor's perception of their predicament is inevitably affected by the others' gaze on them. The two perceptions are, however, seldom identical.

Poverty is sometimes perceived as a virtue by others when it represents a free choice of the subject. Otherwise, the poor are generally looked upon with feelings going from embarrassment to contempt and violence. On another plane, while **pauperism**¹⁸ was perceived as abnormal and calling for remedial action, **poverty**, in vernacular and pre-industrialized societies, was considered, by contrast, as a rather natural human predicament, if not an irremediable and unavoidable fact of life.

Different gazes on the poor have led to basically two types of reaction. A first represents a variety of forms of direct or indirect intervention, based on social, cultural or ethical reasons, such as charity, assistance, education, confinement, repression, etc. A second is grounded on philosophies of non-interven-

17 "Savanna Muslims viewed poverty with much ambivalence. Their traditions stressed the values of wealth and generosity. At their best, traditions evoked the largess of the rich and the hospitality of common people which many European travellers admired. At their worst, the same traditions bred contempt for poverty, both in others, expressed sometimes in mockery of the handicapped, and in oneself, for the shame of poverty could lead men (but apparently not women) to suicide. Like Ethiopians, savanna Muslims lived too close to poverty to idealize it. **"Beg from a beggar and you will see the blackest miserliness"** said a Hausa proverb. **"Poverty you hate it and are hated for it"**, added the Fulani. Yet Fulani combined display of wealth with admiration in the cultivation of a personal austerity which personally explained why the Islam of their state in Futa Jalon was so joyless". See John Illife, *Ibid.*: 4618.

18 Pauperism describes "a category of people unable to maintain themselves at all, or to maintain themselves at the level conventionally regarded as minimal, without outside assistance... Pauperism arose historically beyond the border of the functioning primary social group (e.g. the kinship group within which the economically independent can expect assistance or maintenance without social institutional provisions. It therefore reflects the fluctuating fortunes of such primary groups". Poverty, as a social phenomenon, implies only economic and social inequality, "that is, a relation of inferiority, dependence, or exploitation. In other words, it implies the existence of a social stratum definable by, among other things, lack of wealth". See E.J. Hobsbawm, *Ibid.*: 399 and 398.

tion, either justified by the belief that nothing should be done for the poor, for they somehow "deserve" their condition, or on the assumption that nothing can be done, for all forms of intervention ultimately produce negative or no change at all in their life.

Spimes affecting various perceptions of poverty. While the three above dimensions are mutually interactive in shaping the construct of poverty, they are all, in turn, affected by the space-times to which they belong. This explains the fact that, in different communities and at different times, the same materialities are perceived, categorized and hierarchized differently, both by those referred to as poor and by the society at large.

The findings of Ibn Khaldun (the "father of history", whose XIVth century writings on "another development" -or 'Umran-¹⁹, sound, to this date, more modern than most of the materials presently published by development experts), are highly illuminating on this point. The great historian, comparing the eating habits of the populations of H'ijaz and South Yemen or the veiled Shanhaja of the South Maghreb to those of Moroccan city dwellers, comments that hunger is a blessing for the life of the former, both in physical and mental terms. On the whole, he notes, "for a person who can support fasting or diminish the quantity of food he consumes, hunger is more salutary to the body. It procures well being to the latter and renders the mind clearer and healthier."²⁰

¹⁹ The word 'Umran which, for the Arabic speaking populations meant what development once represented for the advocates of the "alternative development" movements, comes from the root AMR, i.e., to fill (a place, a container in general), but mainly to fill a life (Hence 'Umur which means the part of an already accomplished life).

²⁰ As a rule, notes Ibn Khaldun, "the people who live in the desert and are short of grains and condiments, live better than those who lead an easier life in the plateaus: the color of their skins is of greater purity, their bodies healthier, their human shapes better proportioned and more beautiful, their behaviour without excess, and their faculties more receptive and more perspicacious in knowledge. This is a statement confirmed throughout generations..." By contrast, "the abundance of food and the diversity of unhealthy mixtures" has very negative effects on populations belonging to regions with an abundant agricultural production. This, he comments, often produces "stupidity, distraction and disequilibrium..." Elsewhere, he notes: "The victims of famines die less as a result of actual hunger than of the previous satiety to which they were accustomed".

Thus, for the observant historian, even such a materiality as hunger cannot be first, reduced to a general and universal formula composed only of a number of calories and protein and other purely quantifiable factors, in order, later, to be interpreted as a sign of poverty. The same factors viewed from one perspective can mean something quite different as they are placed in a holistic and socio-cultural context. For Ibn Khaldun, such is, in actuality the case of free animals living in their own natural environment, when they are compared to similar ones transformed by domestication. "The gazelle and the goat belong to the same family, the giraffe is the sister of the camel", ... yet "there is a great difference between them, as to the glamour of the skin, the beauty of the fur and the forms, the harmony of members and the vivacity of the senses". ... "Hunger embellishes the body of wild animals, and their shapes".

To look at the question from another perspective, Helena Nordberg mentions how the notion of poverty hardly existed in Ladakh, when she visited that country for the first time, in 1975. "Today, she says, it has become part of the language." When visiting an outlying village some eight years ago, Helena asked a young Ladakhi where were the poorest houses. "We have no poor houses in our village," was the proud reply. Recently Helena saw the same Ladakhi talking to an American tourist and overheard him say "if only you could do something for us. We are so poor!"²¹

Translated by M.R. from the **Muqaddima** in Mohamed-Aziz Lahbabi, **Ibn Khadûn**, Seghers, Paris, 1968, pp. 149-155.

- ²¹ Peter Bunyard, "Can Self-sufficient communities survive the onslaught of Development?", **The Ecologist**, Vol.14, 1984:3.

II

ON THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF POVERTY

The site on which contemporary pauperologists have erected their construct offers the searching archaeologist with a host of interesting ruins some of which could provide priceless clues to the understanding of the poor's universe. Curiously, they seem to indicate that, in many areas, there is a lot in common between some of the bygone perceptions of poverty and those held by many of the so-called peripheric populations of present times. The following reflections are inspired by random diggings on this unusually rich site.

The poor and the pauper. Functioning small human formations, be they traditional communities or so-called kinship or "primary social groups", belonged to complex networks of human relations and solidarities²². Regardless of the extent to which a society was inattentive to its weakest members, or even despotic, exploitative or discriminatory, the poor were always considered members of the group. In normal times, all communities made adequate provision for their members who were unable to maintain themselves. Medieval society, for instance, provided a berth for everyone if recognized as a member: its structural

22 The way different modes of life were organized with a view to meeting the needs of their "poorest" members is not always rightly understood by outsiders, particularly when these tend to analyze them through the distorting glasses of modern categories. In this context, the opinions expressed on the **jajmani system**, are significant. In this mode of socio-economic organization which was widespread in India, before the introduction of the market economy, the economic relations instituted between the people were not only based on persons, but also oriented toward the satisfaction of the collective needs of those entering into these relations. If the modern concepts of democracy and representativity were to be applied to this system, it could be qualified as hierarchical and even based on certain forms of "exploitation" and coercion. Yet, for D.H. Wiser who has studied it extensively, it still "ensures a kind of egalitarian harmony" and constitutes a "security for the poor". As to René Dumont, he believes that although the system favours an unequal distribution of the means of production, it institutes nonetheless "between those who dispose of these means and those who do not, an interdependency which altogether favors the latter: to a certain extent, the rich depend on the poor thanks to the 'ritual' aspect [...]. The system incorporates at the same time inequality... and a certain amount of security for the downtrodden".

René Dumont concludes that the "orientation toward the whole which, in the eyes of the various actors, represents their respective place in the socio-economic hierarchy, runs contrary to the economic phenomenon, *stricto sensu*. The latter "presupposes an individual subject, while in the former on the contrary, it is the whole, that is the village community's, embedded in a necessary order, which is aimed".

See R. Dumont, **Homo Hierarchicus**, Gallimard, Paris, 1966, p.141; also, D.H. Wiser, **The Hindu Jajmani System: A socio-economic system interrelating members of a Hindu village community in services**, Lucknow, 1936.

design excluded unemployment and destitution²³. On the other hand, the poor were not necessarily assimilated with despicable creatures, because of their indigence or their inability to work. They were perceived as quite respectable persons who had only lost, or stood in danger of losing their berth. Finally, even in societies of a stratified nature, the upper and lower strata had direct experience of each other. As a rule, local communities assumed the responsibility of poor relief within their boundaries, making it unnecessary for them to depend on formal, anonymous or alien sources of public assistance. Only in the case of general catastrophes (famines, flood, war, etc.) was the voluntary aid to the helpless supplemented by formal or institutional help. The greatest fear of the poor was not so much to lose all their money resources, but to be totally abandoned.

The breakdown of the old, self-reliant and self-sufficient societies does not only represent the end of a world, but also of a worldview where the poor becomes the abandoned, the berthless, the unprotected stranger, and the person without a community; in one word, the **pauper**, henceforth increasingly dependent, for his or her survival, on outside institutional assistance. Neither the new poor, nor for that matter, the new society to which they belong, will ever be able to recreate, as they were, the old broken bonds which tied them together.

From Charity to assistance

Throughout their history, the poor have been the object of two types of solicitude: that of the compassionate, seeking to share their condition and to understand and empathize with their predicament; and that of the calculating, seeking to define them in terms of society's or the intervenors' "interests", with a view to protecting the latter from the poor²⁴.

Although the word **charity** has now lost all its original meaning (**caritas** or love), it did once represent that first type of interaction with the poor. For charity was prompted by the "elevating" perception of the poor as the image of

²³ See Joseph Schumpeter, **History of Economic Analysis**, Allen and Unwin, London, 1954: 270.

²⁴ M. Rein opposes this "externality" view of poverty to the "subsistence" and "inequality" views, as it is concerned with "the social consequences of poverty for the rest of society rather than in terms of the needs of the poor". According to this view, "people must not be allowed to become so poor that they offend or are hurtful to society. It is not so much the misery and the plight of the poor but the discomfort and cost to the community which is crucial to this view of poverty. We have a problem of poverty to the extent that low income creates problems for those who are not poor". See M. Rein, "Problems in the Definition and Measurement of poverty", in Peter Townsend (Ed.), **The Concept of Poverty**, Heineman, London, 1970: 46.

Looking at the way the poor are acted upon in "democratic" capitalist societies, it appears that public official interest in their predicament is mainly motivated by the role they may be able to play, during election campaigns, in bringing the 51% of the votes needed by the candidates. Once elected, these pay back their debts to their electors by reducing to the extent possible "the discomfort and cost" the poor cause to the nation at large.

Christ. It meant to be one with the poor; and an act of life sharing, of beauty and of equilibrium, symbolized by St Francis of Assisi kissing the leper and sharing his clothes with him. Charity was then an act of self-purification and of self-enrichment, and had no other purpose outside the act itself. It signified only one's compassionate desire to "elevate oneself" towards the sufferer, rather than the self-centered gesture of "bending over" him in a condescending way. For that reason, the manner in which alms were dispensed was, in most cultures, more important than the content of almsgiving²⁵.

Assistance, on the other hand, particularly in its public and institutionalized forms, belongs to a totally different world. Here, no sacred relationship of any sort exists between the giver and the receiver. The exercise being rather utilitarian and objective oriented, the notion of assistance implies a process of "designation", an arbitrary reconstruction of the assisted, often without consideration to the latter's reality. A "viewpoint" is chosen according to the intervenor's particular cultural conditioning and motivations. It is based on considerations aimed not only at defining and restructuring the identity of the persons to "assist", but also at providing a moral and legitimizing foundation to the intervenor's action: Is the assisted a fake or really what s/he claims to be? A social case, a tramp, a handicapped, or a hero? Is s/he a person through whom one could obtain credits in heavens, public recognition, tax exemption, electoral or other advantages? Similarly, hierarchies are established, followed by a series of corresponding discourses, attitudes and practices.

The Assisted as an object and an instrument

The notion of assistance comes as a rescue to all the ambiguities and living complexities of the assisted. It implies the existence of two poles no longer tied by personal generosity or the feelings of compassion or solidarity, but representing a certain idea of group fusion and social responsibilities: the rights of the poor, the obligations of the group, and the need for the preservation of the philanthropists' image, or/and the interests of society.

Even when assistance is not prompted by the fear of the poor as a danger to society, or by the donor's individual salvation, the finality is the same: the greater moral or material comfort of the intervenor, rather than an existential necessity for the latter to understand the poor's predicament and to respond to their suffering.

25 In the Judaic as well as in the Islamic tradition, charity was essentially an act of God. Its equivalent *zedakah* [in Hebrew], or *sadaqa* [in Arabic ou Persian], literally means righteousness or justice. *Zedekah* is elevated to the rank of a biblical commandment "as important as all the other commandments put together". It is the criterion of the righteous [the *zaddik*], the seed of Abraham. Everybody is obliged to give *zedakah*; even one who himself is dependant on charity shall give to those less fortunate than himself (Git. 7a). Moreover, "the prime consideration is that nothing be done that might shame the recipient. When R. Yannai saw somebody giving a *zuz* to a poor man in public, he said: 'It were better not to have given rather than have given him and shame him'" [Hag. 5a].

See "Charity" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: pp. 338-353.

rings. The assisted is, in the last analysis, an object, an instrument and a means to a different end. For Georg Simmel, "assistance to the poor holds, in legal teleology, the same position as the protection of animals."²⁶

The transformation of the poor into the assisted, thus, represents a status degradation through which "the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local schemes of social types."²⁷ To receive assistance, notes Lewis Coser, "means to be stigmatized and to be removed from the ordinary run of men."²⁸ The assisted finds himself, as it were, penetrated by external or institutionalized agents in the sphere of his private world, a new mode of management of his private life being imposed on him by the same agents."²⁹

In the same vein, the relationship between the donor and the recipient is characterized by a total absence of reciprocity. In this relationship, dependence becomes unilateral and asymmetrical. As such, modernized poverty, defined by assistance, constitutes a radical break from other vernacular relationships based on gift, charity, or even protection.

Processes of systemic pauperization

Contemporary economized societies have built-in mechanisms of pauperization.

In pre-industrialized societies, destitution and unwanted forms of poverty were due, mainly to a configuration of material deficiencies (such as lack of food, shelter, clothing, etc.) coupled with a number of particular socio-economic and cultural factors preventing further the poor to respond to those deficiencies. Yet, as already referred to, most communities made adequate provision for the persons unable to maintain themselves, as these were recognized as members of the community.

On the other hand, a community's overall "needs" were defined according to its capacity to meet those needs. As such, there was an organic link between the needs and the activities required to meeting them. The relationship between

26 "The ⁱpoor, in *Social Problems*, Vol. 13, 1965:123.

"No one", continues Georg Simmel, "is punished in Germany for torturing an animal, except if he does it publicly in a manner that results in scandal. It is not therefore, consideration for the mistreated animal but rather for the witnesses that determines punishment".

27 H. Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies", in *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI, 1965: 420.

28 Lewis A. Coser, "The Sociology of Poverty", in *Social Problems*, Vol.13, 1965: 144.

29 Ruwen Ogien, *Théories ordinaires de la pauvreté*, PUF, Paris, 1983: 144.

the two was maintained and refined in the context of "subsistence ethics". The ethics, based on implicit notions of equity, reciprocity and solidarity, presided over many a technical and social arrangement necessary to meeting the claims both of the household and the community at large.

The economization of societies led to a gradual de-linking of the needs and the collective, local capacity to meeting them. The economic mega-machine, located elsewhere, took it upon itself not only to produce the "resources" it considered necessary to meeting everybody's needs, but also to defining the latter, most of which became economic. Further, it assumed that there could be no limit to needs, if only the inability of the economic machine to produce the necessary resources. As a result, the assumption of perpetually "needy" individuals, or persons with unlimited needs, entailed also a perpetual scarcity of resources, the economic machine being particularly geared to meeting the needs of its greediest consumers.

On another plane, the accelerated production of resources corresponding to the growing needs of the economically rich, that is, the growing minority of the better-off consumers, encouraged the cult of luxury and the systematic creation of envy, on a mass basis. To take an example, everywhere, public and private promoters of progress and of economic development joined hands in brainwashing everyone that TV was henceforth a sign of economic, social and cultural status, thus transforming that gadget into a "basic need". The result is that the non-possession of a TV set is not only already a sign of poverty, in most places, but the production of envy for the most inaccessible consumer goods and aberrant economic luxury has now become an integral component of families "rich" enough to paying for the set.

To sum up, in the new economized societies, built-in socio-economic, cultural and even political components have appeared which produce scarcity and envy, at all levels, while the majority of people have been disabled in meeting even the most elementary human needs. The economization of society has, on the one hand, destroyed the foundations of subsistence ethics in vernacular communities, thus disrupting and highly reducing people's capacity to meet their needs. On the other hand, it has established a monopoly over the production of resources, a major consequence of which is to deprive the populations concerned from such resources.

As such, modernized poverty is an inevitable side-effect of the industrial/capitalist system of production. It is the very product of the economic objectives assigned to society, all of which are related to profit, to cost-benefit calculations, to considerations of efficiency and greater productivity rather than to the well being of the poor.

The following are some of the features proper to modern pauperizing societies:

- a) The new forms of degradation and destitution appear and flourish amidst economic affluence and the plenty of commodities and consumer goods.
- b) While the surrounding "prosperity" often submits the new poor to unprecedented forms of humiliation and deprivation, the victims continue to be

systematically lured by organized illusions of material enrichment. The particular social mobility of some "developed" societies does increase these illusions, to the extent that it gives greater chances to small numbers of the aggressive and "lucky" poor to join the club of the rich.

c) Processes of pauperization are perpetuated by the new mechanisms of assistance to the poor. As these are devised with a view to mitigating extreme forms of social differentiation, the social structure continues to be based on this differentiation.

d) In the specific socio-political setting of the "developing societies", processes of localized "economic development" give often rise to a new class of relatively better-off poor. These tend to subject the other more hardly hit groups of the impoverished to new forms of exploitation, thus aggravating the situation of the critically deprived. Hence, the creation of new **kulaks** of development within these societies³⁰.

The Modernization of poverty

Modernized poverty has little to do with the old, vernacular forms of poverty.

The Cynic Antisthenes had already said to his audience, in the twelfth century: "If you live in accordance with Nature, you will never be poor."

A couple of centuries later, Rousseau added: "*S'il n'y avait point de luxe, il n'y aurait point de pauvres.*"

Modern economized societies tend to define their poor in accordance with their capacity to absorb the commodities and services they produce, and in the context of a system equally producing scarcity. The modernized poor are, thus, no longer persons eventually lacking the minimum "necessaries" evoked by Adam Smith, but entire groups of people perpetually caught in the rat race between their imputed "needs" and their increasing lack of "resources". On the one hand, they find themselves severed from nature, that is the environment which gave them once life and energy to meet their needs. On the other hand, they are artificially related to a mythical life of "luxury" which only pollutes their imagination and sensitivities.

As such, the modern poor are now total strangers within their land. Their predicament is that of modernized **paupers** whose vernacular and familiar networks of human solidarity have been replaced by the legal **rights** given them in the new scarcity-based societies, all of which are mainly regulated by the invisible and haunting laws of economy.

³⁰ See Marshall Wolfe, *Elusive Development*, UNRISD/ECLA, 1981: pp. 237 & 221: "The weaker are most directly and visibly exploited by neighbours whose own poverty makes them seek the meagre surplus that can be squeezed out of them: police and other petty functionaries, vendors, liquor dealers, moneylenders, petty criminals, local political intermediaries, etc."

The fate of the new poor is, thus, the nightmare of the vernacular poor: a sentiment of abandonment and severance from those with whom they could relate as human beings, and the prospect of a lifelong humiliation and disablement, as doomed losers.

The "resource" generating machine of economy, whose *raison d'être* is to produce increasingly scarce "resources", exposes them, on the one hand, to greater and more diversified sets of induced and addictive needs, while, on the other hand, it reduces their power to satisfy them. In absolute and "cash income" terms, many of them may look "richer" than their vernacular counterparts, in particular, in terms of the things and commodities they may possess, or the cash possibilities allowing them to buy more consumer goods. But, in actuality, the 10,000 dollar-a-year salaried family of a Baltimore ghetto lives still, in many ways, a "poorer" life than its Ladakhi equivalent with only 500\$ yearly income. Even in economically defined areas such as those related to food, health, education and shelter, nothing proves that the Baltimore family is better off than the Ladakhi one.

Two categories of modernized poor. In modern societies, there is, indeed, a most ostensible group of poor who live on public assistance or "welfare". These are persons officially classified as living below the poverty line, many of them receiving different kinds of stipends in cash, or in the form of food coupons, tax exemptions or other social security benefits. As persons or social "freaks" living on the fruits of other people's work, that is on the assistance provided from their taxes, the human and social identity of these persons and their families is often reduced to that of an Identity Card, a humiliating proof that they continue to have their place on the alphabetically arranged list of the assisted. The ID they use in order to get their food coupons, or to benefit from other similar "privileges" attributed them, confirms indeed their special status in modern societies. Yet, the latter is really to indicate the negative attributes of its holder, that is, by what the status-holder has *not*, rather than the apparent advantages recognized by the Card.

Phenomenologically, these officially recognized poor constitute a separate category of people. They "come to be viewed and classified not in terms of criteria ordinarily used in social categorization, that is, not by virtue of what they do, but by virtue of what is done to them."³¹

Besides the category of persons officially recognized as poor, there is indeed another, perhaps much wider group of people who are "economically" better off, yet whose ambiguous predicament is altogether sometimes more frustrating. This second category of persons are, in actuality, more typical of the modernized poor produced by economized societies. For they generally have enough money to survive. Yet, their entire life is a degrading and often lost battle for earning more, in order to meet the rising cost of the many addictive needs produced by present consumer societies. While such spending is necessary for them to acquire a social "identity" in one's "neighborhood", their possibilities of winning the rat race between their real purchasing power and their imputed needs

³¹ Lewis Coser, *Ibid.*, p.142.

become more limited. As these groups of people increase in number, modernized poverty trickles up the social ladder to a greater extent, while the trickling down of economic wealth tends to slow down and eventually stop at higher levels of income³².

Rights replacing human relationships. Both categories of poor have, indeed, for the first time, a number of **rights** which pre-industrialized societies were never ready to grant them. These rights generally recognize their equality with others. Amongst others, they are given the right to vote, that is, the theoretical possibility for them to change the very societal order responsible for their predicament. No legal obstacle prevents them to accede even to the highest public offices of the land. More, in many countries, they are granted special rights, such as free education, sometimes free health and free shelter. In some others, additional social security benefits, tax exemptions and forms of "positive discrimination" are foreseen in order to compensate their lack of economic means. The socio-cultural labyrinths in which the modernized poor generally find themselves are, nonetheless, such that the same rights tend often to reinforce, rather than alleviate their predicament. In many instances, the "advantages" given them create, in actuality, new holes in their already depleted money bags.

The holes are caused mainly by the very socio-economic régimes which claim to protect the modern poor. As already mentioned, the "resource" generating machine of economic development, coupled with the new imperialism of consumer societies, exposes them systematically to new sets of induced needs which they are never in a position to meet. The obsession for everyone to win that frustrating rat race prevents further the satisfaction of one's real human needs.

³² As this part of the essay was being typed, the following significant piece of news was published by the newspapers. Two American associations, The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities and the American Foundation for Families have produced a report based on a Gallup Institute's poll concerning the situation of the poor in the United States. According to this report, besides the 32 million persons who, according to the officially established criteria, live actually below the poverty line, there are some 13 million others whose resources do not allow them to meet their minimal needs. The report estimates that, on the average, a family of four persons, including two children, needs at least 15.017 U.S. \$ a year to this end, while the Government has set the poverty line, for the same kind of family, to only 12.092 Dollars. Thus the number of the poor in the U.S. presently extends to 18% of the population, rather than the officially reported figure of 13% [The second category of modernized poor, mentioned in the main text, should exceed this figure, by far].

"Official statistics are "forgetting" 13 million poor in the U.S." says the Montreal Daily, *Le Devoir*, July 19, 1990. On July 24, 1990, the same daily gave the following news under the title: «1% of the richest Americans will receive as much in revenue after donation than 40% of the poorest Americans». According to data from the 'Center on Budget and Policy Priorities' «40% of Americans at the bottom of the income ladder will get 14.2% from the gains after taxation in 1990, while 1% of the richest Americans will get 12.6%».

The changing perceptions of work. Amongst the many factors contributing to the processes of modernization of poverty, the following could indeed be singled out: the rise of the modern concept of the individual and of *homo equalis*; the economization of society coupled with the gradual disintegration of vernacular communities and the dislocation of subsistence economies; and the substitution, in the market economy, of the motive of subsistence by that of gain. On another plane, the changing perceptions of the notion of work, and its gradual substitution by the modern concepts of employment [and unemployment] are important to understand for the exploration of the subject.

What stands today for work, namely, wage labor, was -and still is- perceived quite differently in pre-industrialized societies. Traditionally, the rich, the powerful, and often the learned, distinguished themselves by having the others work for them. Work done under orders or involving income from trade, like work done with the hands, was servile, better left to the lowly or the slaves. Respected, "noble" members of society worked only for pleasure, for the advancement of knowledge, for religious or public purposes, or eventually for one's household and friends. Even those who glorified the social and human values attached to work, did so for the work done by others. Paid work done for an "employer" perceived itself as a sign of indigence and loss of berth³³. Significantly, the voluntary poor resented working for money.

The emergence of work, as an economic value and a commodity to be exchanged against another, represented indeed a break with the past perceptions of work. With the rise of market economy, "noble", unalienating and unalienated work became less "valuable" than "productive" or "useful" for the advancement of economy. At the same time, the wage laborer, realizing that economic development was henceforth dependent on the value of his/her work, perceived it as a major weapon for reversing the exploitative capitalistic order of dependency. Employment, thus, became the new panacea against poverty.

In actuality, neither the potential power of this new weapon, nor the fact that in some places the workers did appropriate the means of production, change the basic dynamics of the productive system, the latter continuing to generate new forms of poverty, even in countries which sought to "develop" themselves according to socialistic principles. In pre-economized societies, the berthless destitute could at least one day dream of working for their own, free from the alienation of wage labor. Now wage labor was to engulf all members of society, including the new rich, accompanied by its glorification as the predominant source

33 "Wage labor was a badge of misery all through the Middle Ages. It stood in clear opposition to at least three types of toil: the activities of the household by which most people subsisted, quite marginal to any economy; the trades of people who made shoes, bartered or cut stones; the various forms of beggary by which people lived on what others shared with them [...]. When one was engaged in wage labor, not occasionally as the member of a household but as a regular means of total support, he clearly signaled to the community that he, like a widow or an orphan, had no berth, no household, and so stood in need for public assistance".

Ivan Illich, *Shadow Work*, Marion Boyars, Boston, 1908: 102.

of value of economized societies. In order to survive and to develop greater economic resources, the majority of people had to work to "make money". Alienating wage labor became, thus, an integral component of modernized poverty.

III

THE CONSTRUCT OF GLOBAL POVERTY

Global poverty is indeed an entirely new and modern construct. The basic materials which have gone into the construct are essentially the economization of life and the compelling integration of vernacular societies into the world economy. Other specific phenomena helped the final design and conceptualization of the construct. Most prominent amongst them were the very concept of development emerging out of the ashes of colonialism; the increasing influence, in world affairs, of transnational corporations and financial, military and industrial complexes; the role assumed by the United States as the leader of the "developed" countries in search for world hegemony; the birth of a large number of new nation-states resolved to take their people into the main developmental highway; the ideological formation of their leaders; and the creation of the United Nations system and the World Bank group.

In one of its first reports in 1948, the World Bank closely correlates the "problem" of "global poverty" with countries' gross national product. It postulates that countries with an average *per capita* income of less than 100\$ are, by definition, poor and underdeveloped. It expresses the responsibility for the richer nations, the richest of them being the United States, to help the poorer countries raise their living standards.

Thus, for the first time in history, entire nations and countries come to be considered (and consider themselves) as poor, on the ground that their overall income is insignificant in comparison to those dominating world economy. Consequently, national income is introduced as a new global measure for expressing the various stages of "economic development", the latter being proposed as the final answer to poverty.

On another plane, the new construct no longer embraces the view that poverty is a multi-faceted human predicament. It considers it as a pathological phenomenon of a universal character, particularly acute in pre-economized societies. Following a consensus reached amongst the world "elites" on the diagnosis of the disease (under-development and lack of income,) as well as on its cure (economic and technological development), armies of experts, politicians, planners, bureaucrats, socio-economists and even anthropologists start acting as pauperologists, seeking to refine the discourse and the practices related to world poverty. The gist of the new approach is expressed in President Harry Truman's famous Point IV Declaration: "The economic life [of the poor] is primitive and stagnant... Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas." Greater production, development, assistance, and a wider and more vigorous application of science and technological knowledge are recognized as the answer and the "key to prosperity and peace."

The new construct has indeed a long history. The industrial era accelerated the breakdown of vernacular societies. It led to "the great transformation"³⁴ which dramatically reversed the traditional relationship between society and economy and, for the first time in history, **dis-embedded** the latter from its very socio-cultural roots, thus submitting society to its own rules and dynamics, rather than the opposite. "Man, under the name of labor, nature under the name of land, were made available for sale", notes Polanyi³⁵. The ensuing economization of society brought about, first, the hegemony of national economies over vernacular activities, then, that of the world economy over all others. These drastic changes affected largely the ways the materialities underlying the various perceptions of poverty came to be re-interpreted and re-constructed.

Firstly, the advent of a world economy, with all its realities and myths (the production of unlimited resources, technological miracles, consumer goods, induced needs, etc.) created a set of universal referents. To go back to a case, previously mentioned, this is how the Ladakhis came to perceive themselves as poor, once development and other national/military designs led to the economization of Ladakh. Similarly, not only individuals and communities, but entire nations and continents were led to believe that they were poor, and in need of assistance, only because their **per capita** income was below a universally established minimum.

Secondly, while the traditional answers to poverty were, in the past, often based on pluralistic, culturally established and holistic perceptions of each particular space, the new "programmes of action" represented a universalist, income-based, and totally a-cultural recipe for abstract patients. The recipe was composed of a mix of technicalities and "neutral" economic referents which only experts and planners could use and master with authority. The new technologized approach to poverty developed its own cognitive bases in such particular new fields of study and intervention as employment and productive policies, measurement of poverty, etc. It certainly overshadowed the exploration of such deeper and more sensitive issues as the processes of political and cultural domination, the pervasive role of institutions, and the very nature of the industrial production system.

Thirdly, the new fetish of a healthy global economy destined to save all the world's poor, not only helped the pauperizing economical and political systems to reinforce and legitimize their positions, but it also led their victims to perceive their own reality in the same terms. Thus, the new "proletarians" and impoverished wage earners, particularly in urban areas, focussed their actions and struggles on such limited objectives as employment, income raising and access to

³⁴ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1957. This book is a classic for the understanding of the social implications of the market economy as it grew into the industrial system in the 19th century.

³⁵ "Traditionally, land and labor are not separated; labor forms part of life, land part of nature, life and nature form an articulate whole. Land is thus tied up with the organization of kinship, neighborhood, craft and creed - with tribe and temple, village, gild and church". Polanyi, *Ibid*:178.

public services. And, to this end, they sought mainly to protect and to organize themselves through labor unions, sometimes totally disregarding the informal, **and** formal, community organizations which had traditionally helped the poor. Following the same patterns, even the non-wage earning workers in rural areas, came to think that earning cash money or receiving economic assistance and public services were the most logical ways of alleviating their deprivations.

Finally, as more people were manipulated into sharing the new economic myth that poverty could now be finally conquered through increased productivity and the economy's trickling down effects, the search for new modes of life and social organization based on simplicity, on voluntary or moral forms of poverty were discredited and devalued³⁶.

Most traditional societies had resisted the view that all poverty reflected personal inadequacy. This view that became characteristic of every capitalist society, especially in its Protestant versions³⁷, was advanced as a major component of the new "value system". Economic poverty was now to be perceived and acted upon, on a global level, as a shame and a scourge. The vast increase in wealth offered, or achieved, by modern societies fostering greed and profit making, played a significant role in the sharp devaluation of moral poverty³⁸. Thus, the race for enrichment became not only a desirable goal for economy but also a morally justified end.

³⁶ In this tradition, Michel Mollat quotes a great teacher of the first millennium, the sixth century North African abbot Julianus Pomerius who believed that "once an individual ensured his own survival and the survival of his family, he had the duty to give whatever he owned beyond his own needs to the *debiles* and *infimi*, that is, to the poor.

See Mollat, *Idid.*: 23.

³⁷ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Ibid.*: 400.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 401.

IV

THE CONSTRUCT IN ACTION

Assumptions

To translate the construct into action, a particular discourse and a set of "programmes" were initiated. Looking back at what actually occurred during the nearly 50 year old history of the exercise, the latter seemed to rest on the following assumptions:

The "poor" are assumed to be "under-developed" and -momentarily at least- deprived of their capacity to define their own interests. It is up to those in a better position of knowledge and power (governments, institutions, professionals, competent "authorities") to assist them on their behalf. People's "participation" is indeed welcomed and encouraged whenever that could help the populations concerned to manifest their support to the professionally designed programmes.

The discourse on global poverty recognizes the fact that the perceptions of poverty differs according to cultures. Yet it assumes that the perceptions in question all share a common belief: that economic growth and prosperity is a *sine qua no* condition for coming out of poverty. Thus, it posits economic development as a key to poverty eradication programmes, assuming further that the resolution of all "non-economic" or cultural problems of the poor could be tackled later.

The above assumptions serve to justify three basic tenets of interventionist practices. Firstly, that poverty is too global and sensitive a matter to be taken out of the hands of professionals and institutions trained and empowered to this purpose. Secondly, that the programmes in question have to be mapped, basically, in terms of economic resources and needs. Finally, that the agents mainly responsible for the design and the execution of such strategies are naturally the governments and the institutions officially in charge of both the identification of needs and the production of the required resources. Eradication of global poverty was thus considered as yet another reason for consolidating the present structures of governance, both at the international and national levels.

Operations

Assessment of needs. Poverty alleviation programmes claim to be based on a survey or assessment of "needs". Yet what planners, politicians and economists, in particular, tend to consider as their needs, has little, or often nothing to do, with what different categories of "poor" perceive as their needs .

In the global context, needs are first identified in an abstract manner, on a regional or national basis. To take an example, for UNDP, a golden rule is set, since the mid 70's, that 80% of the Organization's resources should automatically be allotted to the needs of LDC's (or Least Developed Countries), i.e.,

countries where the people's annual per capita income is lower than 300 US\$. (The rule is now extended to some other countries which, upon their explicit request, are recognized, literally, "as if LDC's" and, hence, given the same "privileges!".) The fact is disregarded by the bureaucracies concerned that, according to their own statistics and criteria, a much larger number of persons (i.e., of individual human beings) considered to be "poor" live elsewhere. The needs of these individuals are treated differently, only because they happen to be the citizens of countries where per capita GNP is higher, that is, countries where the rich can dispose of the major bulk of the existing national "resources".

As concerns the assessment of individual needs, these are evaluated on the basis of other sets of globally established "economic" criteria and systems of comparison. For Unesco, for instance, to have a percentage of "illiterate" above a certain figure, or a percentage of radios, books or newspapers below another, represents a set of needs calling for action. For WHO, the criteria of poverty are expressed in terms of the number of doctors, nurses, and health centers per person. For FAO, the needs are evaluated in terms of per capita calorie or protein intake, or, indeed, agricultural production on an average basis. No doubt, in all these cases, needs are always perceived as figures or combinations of elements often dis-embedded from the cultural type of livelihood generally defining those in vernacular spaces.

But even within the context of this abstract perception of needs, levelled off by often unreliable statistics and averages established on a national and technical basis, governments directly concerned are reluctant to give any particular priority to what, in very "economic" terms, their planners call the "basic needs" of the poor. A significant illustration of this fact could be found in the very heated debates which took place, in the mid 70's, on this same subject. The governments of the "developing countries" were then invited to consider a proposition, put forth by a group of "Third World" intellectuals, with a view to including the concept of "basic needs" in their planning priorities. The initiative was overwhelmingly rejected on the ground that it would be detrimental to the creation of a New International Economic Order, an objective which the Group of the 77 considered of vital importance for their protection against neo-colonial trends.

In actuality, what the governments of the "developing countries" were seeking was to get a greater piece of the international economic cake without, in any way, committing themselves to share it with their own poor. In the course of the debate, many of them argued that the problems of the poor could find a solution only in the framework of "national priorities". Investments of a "humanitarian" nature, which would focus on alleviating the sufferings of a particular social group, were considered to be ultimately detrimental to all, including the poor, for they would endanger the country's overall economic growth and postpone its "trickling down" effects. The argument was particularly appealing to economists for whom no serious process of capital accumulation can take place unless the poor are ready to place the economic needs of their country before their own pressing ones.

The promotion of institutions and professional skills at the country level. A major long-term component of all national and international programmes on poverty eradication has been what the UN jargon likes to call

"institution building", the latter being generally coupled with the reinforcement of "national capacities" and professional skills.

As in the case of the needs assessment practices, this policy also represents a significant consensus reached amongst "donors" and "recipients" of economic and technical assistance. The policy is supposed to provide the governments concerned with the instruments necessary for them to design their plans of action and to put an end to their structural dependency on foreign expertise. Strong ministries of planning and well-conceived para-statal organizations are thus presented as a necessity for assessing people's needs and responding to them, in accordance with the populations' own wishes and aspirations. For the "donors", the policy is served not only to provide them with professionally respected counterparts but, also, with institutions assumed to be in a better position to guarantee the protection of foreign economic and political investments.

Production of economic "resources" and "services". The production of economic "resources" and "services" is a major component of all poverty eradication programmes. The assumption is indeed that poverty is a direct result of a dearth of economic resources and of various social services inaccessible to the poor. It is also assumed that the only way to "catch up with progress" and to put an end to "underdevelopment" is to "see big", that is, to follow the model of the most developed.

It is this attitude which led the most "progressive" "developing countries", immediately after independence, to make a fetish of the concept of rapid industrialization. The latter came even to be perceived also as a prerequisite to the development of agriculture, or food production, considered as the number one answer to poverty. For the earlier planners of anti-poverty campaigns, there was no doubt that the peasants' own ways of managing their livelihood were the main reason to the backward stage of agriculture. They constituted an obvious evidence of the poor's underdeveloped mentality, and, as such, had to be changed, if necessary by force.

Sectoral reforms. The need for more diversified and expanded services has led many of those programmes to reserve a place of choice to "sectoral reforms", particularly in such areas as unemployment, population control, cooperatives, educational and health services, etc.

Redistributive policies. For more "progressive" or democratic states, redistributive policies are considered to be the most effective and dignified means of stopping the structural processes of pauperization generally triggered by the dynamics of economic development. In this context, Japan, India and China represent three countries where interesting results have been achieved through political and legislative measures.

Assistance programmes. With this type of programmes, one could wind up the list of activities which are generally pursued by planners and experts, within the context of present poverty eradication campaigns. These programmes are indeed meant to come closer to the actual and pressing preoccupations of the deprived and the destitute. Whatever their effective value, welfare states consider assistance to the poor as an obligation of society and an act of solidarity. More

"conservative" governments, together with economists, tend to question seriously the relevance of assistance to the long term interests of a modern state.

Results

The actual impacts of the above policies and programmes on the life of the deprived are often very different from the planners' expectations. We shall try to briefly explore them, in the same order of presentation.

a) The "needs" which development and poverty-eradication programmes seek to assess and identify through their experts and planning institutions are basically the needs of a certain "economy", of a certain idea of poverty, and of a category of consumers and tax payers whose "rights" and interests should be protected. They do not correspond to what need the real people, as these have been severed from their vernacular spaces. While such needs remain unmet, the very economic activities deployed in the name of the poor impute to them different needs of a more unsatiable nature. On another plane, the problematization of the poor's needs in "modern" economic terms further contributes to the disintegration of the vernacular spaces, exposing the poor to situations of total helplessness.

To sum up, the whole exercise of needs assessment is justified on the ground that it provides the planners with a "scientific" basis for their anti-poverty planning. In practice, it is often an irrelevant exercise. The very idea that it should start with an allocation of funds on the basis of the economic "development" of the country where the poor live, is enough to indicate the bureaucratic and highly irrelevant nature of the exercise. After separating the poor's "needs" from them as active and living human beings, it reduces the latter only to a poor ingredient of economic growth.

b) The absurdity of the situation is increased by the fact that the whole task is entrusted to predatory governments, such as the ones in "power" in the so-labelled "poorer" countries. While the "sovereignty" of these governments is often a matter of pure fiction -or formality-, the fact is that their "power" resides, on the one hand, in their capacity to "milk" their own people and, on the other hand, in the "assistance" they receive from their "richer" foreign patrons. For these governments, poverty like underdevelopment, is a catchword for legitimizing their claims for more centralized forms of control over their populations and, also, for more funds to implement their objectives. Foreign assistance particularly serves their own enrichment, the strengthening of their army, police, "security" and "intelligence" services. It serves them to make their populations pay for the services related to their own exploitation, to force their integration into national and world economies, and to impose on them the heavy burden of debts contracted for those very purposes.

On a different plane, the objectives of institutional building and of skill training create new barriers between the vernacular world of the poor and the new economized world of their protectors/predators. Much more than serving the poor, the new institutions and their professionals help the rich to better organize themselves against their victims.

c) On the central issue of the production of economic "resources" and services, it is still difficult for many to agree that poverty is **NOT** a question of "resources", in the sense given it by economists and planners. Yet, it is a fact that, in most "developing" countries, neither the production of "economic resources" and commodities, nor the extension of "social services" has ultimately served the destitute and the poor. More often than not, they have resulted in further diminishing their capacity to meet their real needs, as they had done it before in the context of their vernacular livelihood.

In fact, there is no evidence that "affluence" has, anywhere, improved the poor's condition. Notwithstanding the fact that the so-called affluent societies are presently the ones posing the greatest threats to the very life of the planet, the "reservoirs" of plenty they produce create, at the same time, new islands of poverty. The United States, the "richest" country in the world has, thus, to recognize that 30 millions of its citizens live below the "poverty line"³⁹. Similarly, in the "richest" city of Brazil, a country of the South whose development was once called "miraculous", five out of its 15 million inhabitants "live in extreme poverty, earning less than 65 Dollars a month"⁴⁰.

39 For Michael Harrington, already in 1963, the deprived in the U.S. numbered nearly 50,000,000.

Some startling facts on the phenomenon of poverty amidst affluence in the U.S. were recently reported in an article by Dolores King, a correspondent of **The Boston Globe**. "Twenty years after a White House Conference was to put an end to hunger in America itself for all time", as President Nixon phrased it, hunger is making a comeback in vengeance". Shoshana Packiarz, Executive Director of Project Bread, is reported to have commented: "That is an appalling thing that the richest nation on earth, the richest nation in history, is bringing up more and more children in poverty and hunger". Also, Dr. Jean Mayer, President of the Tufts University and organizer of the same White House Conference in December 69, is reported to have said: "In 1969, the average family spent 30 per cent of their income on housing. People under the poverty level spent about 50%... Now the average family spends a little more. But the people under the poverty line spend now 80 percent or more". See "Hunger's Bitter Return: Working poor, children seen as the newest victims", in **The Boston Globe**, December 1989.

On this subject see also:

Michael Harrington, **The Other America**, Penguin, Baltimore, 1963: 192-194, Michael Harrington, **The American Poverty**, Penguin Books, 1984, Physician Task force On Hunger In America, **Hunger In America, The Growing Epidemics**, Wesleyan University Press, 1985, & Robert E. Will & Harold G. Vatter (eds), **Poverty in Affluence**, Harcourt, Bruce and World, 1965.

40 See Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, "Sincerity is Subversive" in **Development**, [SID], No3, 1985: 3-5.

In this moving address, Cardinal Arns mentions that "there are twenty million abandoned and undernourished children in a country that not only has the means to feed all its own children but also hundred of millions in other countries". In the same address, the Cardinal notes that, in Bolivia, as a result of austerity measures adopted in order to obtain a

In many cases, particularly in the "poorer" countries of Africa, the pivotal accent on "resources" and "services" led, in actuality, to a succession of disasters, most of them are now recognized even by the governments concerned. It took these governments, more than three decades, to realize that their policies of forced industrialization and of massive agricultural modernization, justified by the need to produce these resources rapidly and on a large scale, had been irresponsible and counterproductive. While the human damages done to their own people had often been irreversible, destroying the very fabric of life and sustainable productivity in the villages and causing mass exodus to newly created shanty towns, the economic performance of the operation had also been, as a rule, entirely negative.

To take a few examples, Mali which was once called the grain warehouse of West Africa, became entirely dependant on others for its food. Together with the neighboring country Senegal, it followed the advice of the most serious economic "authorities", including the World Bank, to introduce massive plantations of peanuts in large areas where local peasants were formerly cultivating different varieties of grain in their small plot of land. Lured by the subsidies and other facilities they received at the earlier stages of the project, as well as by the prospects of increased cash money, the peasants became part of an important operation which was hailed by the planners as a great success story, so long as the price of the peanut was high on the Northern markets. When it crashed, not only the countries involved went to the brink of bankruptcy, and became subject to all the vulnerability of mono-culture types of agricultural production, but the small farmers had fallen almost irreversibly into destitution. Other parts of Sub-Sahara which had always been self-supporting, in terms of food, were opened to unprecedented and chronic famines⁴¹.

It is fashionable to oppose the success story of the Green Revolution in India to the situations described above. Yet, a more holistic view of the overall impact of that revolution on the life of the populations concerned would hardly corroborate the myth already created around the phenomenon. There is no doubt that this "revolution" has been a major single element in substantially increasing food production and, thus, preventing perhaps the chronic famines which were previously decimating the region. Yet, many important and informative studies have come out, sponsored, namely, by UNRISD, which give a more **nuanced** picture of the story⁴². The many questions raised by these studies tend to show, namely, that the very changes brought into the system of production have already particularly disadvantaged, if not destituted, large numbers of small farmers. For some observers, what was happening in India could suggest that she might dwarf what had already taken place in the world: that is, a food production which is the

loan from IMF, "The price of the daily bread to the poor for light and cooking went up three hundred percent... [and] public transportation in urban and rural areas skyrocketed from forty to one hundred percent".

41 Michael Watts, **Silent Violence: Food, Famine, Peasantry in Northern Nigeria**, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983.

42 Michael Watts *op. cit.*

highest the planet has ever seen, corresponding simultaneously to the largest number of hungry people ever witnessed in the history of the earth. On the whole, there is not yet convincing evidence that the prowess achieved on the productive level could be interpreted as one particularly serving the "poor". Neither, could the achievement prove that, in the present state of development of knowledge and know-how reached by various cultures, similar results could not be obtained without all their negative side-effects. Let us not forget that, almost in the same period, China did also put an end to its chronic famines, by choosing methods which drew more on the capacity generated at the grassroots level.

d) Sectoral reforms in the various fields of unemployment, population, education, health, etc., seem also to have had little or no positive effect in reducing the discriminatory trends proper to these sectors. Here again, even when these reforms have achieved their expected objectives, these have proved to be of little relevance to the specific needs of the deprived. "Good" schools have generally served to produce greater numbers of drop-outs belonging to poor families. Contrary to their vocation, health centers and hospitals, in particular, have seldom given hospitality to the poor. Employment policies have hardly succeeded in stopping the mass exodus of millions of people from their communities to the slum areas of big cities.

e) In this long list of "answers which are not", it could be argued that redistributive policies have, in some important cases, achieved partial success. Thus, the experiences of Japan, India and China might suggest, each in a different way, that political measures, aimed at fostering the principles of justice and equity, as integral dimensions of development policies, have reduced some of the impoverishing side effects of economy. The fact remains, however, that the dynamics and goals of a "resource" generating economy (principles of profit, of productivity, of capital accumulation, etc.) diverge, by definition, from socially defined objectives. As such, it is perhaps too early to conclude that such redistributive policies will be able to keep pace with the more powerful pauperizing trends of economy. Nothing seems anyhow to indicate that the policies in question might eventually succeed in preventing the substitution of traditional poverty by the forms of modernized poverty proper to all "developed" countries. Finally, there is no evidence to indicate that the "successful" economization of life, in these countries, can ultimately prevent the destructive side-effects of the process on people's livelihood, amongst others, the destruction of their natural environment.

f) Assistance policies, finally, have failed in many ways.

There is no doubt that, for political reasons, these policies have always represented a security valve against the mounting dissatisfaction of the populations most hardly hit by development processes. Yet, on the one hand, they are never sincerely wanted. On the other hand, when they are, they never work.

There is no need to repeat, here, a cliché dear to economists which actually makes sense: Assistance policies are not only, by definition, contrary to the dynamics of a good economy, but as they inevitably tend to slow down the processes of capital accumulation, they also delay the tricking down effects which,

for the economists, remain the only answer to their concept of "poverty". For governments of the "poorer" countries committed to economic development, it goes without saying that such policies hamper, to an even greater extent, the rate of their "growth". It was mainly for this reason, that they all emphatically rejected, in the seventies, the Basic Needs approach supported by ILO and the World Bank.

Another reason for which most of these governments, particularly those belonging to "developing countries" pay only lip service to assistance policies, is that their main priority remains the preservation and the continuous strengthening of their state apparatuses. The pressing needs of the destitute, or the fact that new categories of people were increasingly falling into destitution and modernized poverty, could hardly upset such priorities.

The Anatomy of a fraud

How to call the use of false representations to gain unjust advantage? For the Oxford Dictionary, the answer to the question is: **fraud**. The definition is supplemented by the following: "**Pious fraud**, deception intended to benefit those deceived."

Looking at the facts just mentioned, the only word that could characterize the false representations and the deceptions made in the name of poverty eradication would be nothing but "fraud", be it intended or not to benefit its "target populations". The question to explore is how the fraud was able to impress, for almost half a century, such large and innocent audiences, without being perceived as such.

The global village against vernacular villages. A first fact to consider is that the development discourse makes an abusive usage of a set of half-truths of a so-called scientific and universal nature. The objective is, on the one hand, to dis-value the vernacular, non-economic spaces and their populations' own possibilities of improving their lot; on the other hand, to make them believe that the only answer to their problems lies in the economization of their life.

Using the catching image of "one world" or the "global village", the development discourse invites its "target populations" to look at their predicament in a "modern", "realistic" and indeed comparative way. It asks them to consider that the world has changed, and the experience of those who have finally "done it" gains to be followed. If the poor would only understand what historically brought the people of the North to higher standards of living and greater political, economic and technological power, they, too, would no longer hesitate to take the main highway of development. The latter is presented as the only transcultural and universal modern road for all would-be travellers to reach any destination of their choice, under the fastest and surest conditions.

In actuality, what is proposed to them serves only the interests of the highway designers and its management system. For as one enters into it, one be-

comes a prisoner of its rules and logic. Not only one has to have, or to use, a car to drive on it; not only the road, the destination, and the exits are pre-defined, but the person engaged on the highway is no longer a free and incomparable human being. He is only the passenger of a car with a more or less powerful engine. The car's speed and performance defines his comparative position and "power" on the common road.

As to the construct of the "global village", it uses a vernacular concept only to destroy it. For it precisely aims at wiping out the thousands of villages whose great diversity has actually made the world's singularity and richness. The proposed "one world" seeks to substitute the thousands of real and living worlds with a single non-world, a totally a-cultural and a-moral economic corporation. only to serve the interests of its shareholders.

The development establishment seeks to coopt the vernacular concept of a live village with a view to promoting its own ends. In order to convince the "poor" that their livelihood is the main obstacle to their own dreams and aspirations, a number of "realities" are presented as objects of evidence: development projects which, here and there, are to demonstrate the undeniable superiority of modern technology; the "lottery" operations through which many a poor are given the chance of realizing their dreams in no time; the variety of consumer goods and services acting as quick and often addictive reliefs to people's sufferings; the emergence on the "power" stage of important "middle classes" of "poor" origin who have joined the club of the rich, etc. etc.

A whole set of other reasons led, initially, many a "target population" into taking the mirage of economic prosperity for a reality. Amongst them, one could mention some of the traumatizing effects of the gradual disintegration of the old vernacular spaces from within, a process highly accelerated by the very consequences of economization at the national level; also the systematic production of illusions and expectations for a better life by the development establishment; and, no doubt, the latter's particular ability to carefully keep out of the picture the other, shadiest sides of the story. People were, thus, manipulated into believing that they were left with only one option: to work harder, with at least the hope that their present sacrifices would give a better chance to their children. Later, did they come to realize the hidden realities behind the great development fraud.

The other sides of the story. Let us now explore further, with them, some of these realities.

Certainly, the economic approach to life may well lead to a massive or more efficient production of "goods" and commodities, that is, a development of things. Yet, both the resources and the needs it creates, inevitably lead to a situation of permanent scarcity where, not only the "poor" and the destitute, but even the rich have always less than they desire. Moreover, regardless of the level of wealth reached by a society, it is a fact that the poor are always the ones who suffer the most from the gap generated between their needs and the economically produced scarce resources, particularly as the same economy increasingly imputes to them new needs of its own, ever more difficult to meet. Thus, it is becoming clearer to many, that, however their needs may be defined, it is not only

an illusion, but a contradiction in term, to expect that economy could ever satisfy them.

Economy can indeed produce a lot of commodities and services to relieve a particular set of "needs". But as it dis-values and often destroys a whole range of human activities which, for the majority of people, continue to be vital for meeting their needs, the disabling effects of those relief operations are highly negative, on the long run. The overwhelming populations of the world still shape and satisfy their needs thanks to the network of human relationships they preserve within their vernacular spaces, and thanks to the many forms of solidarity, co-operation and reciprocity they develop within their communities. Their activities are generally concrete responses to concrete and immediate problems, enabling the populations involved to produce both the changes and the things they need. The economic design disvalues these activities and presses, or forces, people to abandon them. It seeks to reduce everyone into becoming the agent of an invisible "national" or world economy, geared only at producing things for whomever can pay for them. In other words, in the name of poverty alleviation, it only forces the poor to work for others.

In vernacular societies, abundance is perceived as a state of nature, inviting all living species to draw on it for meeting their specific needs. These are, in turn, perceived as limited indeed, insofar as they represent a mix of organic and socio-cultural "necessaries" for life. To share such plentiful resources such as air, water and land, arrangements are generally made, similar to the commons in pre-industrialized Europe, which make it possible for everyone to have access to them. The extent to which a community organizes itself for drawing on nature's abundant resources and sharing them with its members defines the relative prosperity of that community.

Whenever the populations concerned are, for some natural or socio-political reason (droughts, natural calamities, economic status, political or cultural oppression, etc.), prevented to draw freely on those resources, they suffer indeed from situations of rarity or scarcity. Yet, in all these cases, they continue to refine and to diversify their activities. Their success in dealing with such situations is however, more often than not, due to the non-economic, or extra-economic aspects of these activities.

As a whole, vernacular life seems to be regulated by the belief that there might be periods of break or interruption, both in nature's abundance or in people's capacity to draw on the latter for their own needs. Yet, there are lots of ways open to human beings to adapt themselves to such situations, either by reducing their needs, or by organizing themselves in a more effective way in order to reach out for that abundance.

The economic construct of reality is based on a different, if not opposite set of assumptions. It assumes that natural resources are scarce; that human needs, in particular those of the homo economicus are unlimited; and finally, that a sound economy can, and has to, make it possible for everyone to ultimately meet all one's needs.

This particular perception of reality tends indeed to reduce human beings and their societies to their economic dimension alone. It strips the vernacular space of all its powerfully live potentialities. It seeks to transform it into a trivial economic machine, controlled and operated by others. In the same construct, human beings are perceived as one of the many "resources" required by the economy for its own needs.

In the last couple of decades, many grassroots populations have learned to appreciate the advantages of certain economic and technological innovations. Under present conditions, the regeneration of people's vernacular spaces necessitates, sometimes, new and different types of tools and know-how. Yet the populations concerned are realizing, at the same time, that most imported technologies are ultimately dangerous, dependency-creating and inhibitive of their own creativity. Many of them are already a major cause of pauperization, particularly as concerns women⁴³.

Strategies of confusion. The global poverty discourse is responsible for another, highly misleading representation of reality. It deliberately confuses all the existing perceptions of poverty, replacing them with the only one which suits its proposes. In actuality, it is an abstract and particularly reductionist idea of how poverty **should** be perceived. It is far from being an expression of different forms of poverty, as they **are** perceived in different cultures and situations.

Wolfgang Sachs has made a useful distinction between three categories of poverty: frugality, destitution and scarcity. He rightly notes that "the stereotyped talk of 'poverty' has disfigured these different, indeed contrasting, forms of poverty beyond recognition."⁴⁴

His description of the culture of "frugality" could well represent most vernacular societies, where highly moral and convivial values dominate people's relationships and interactions. For him, destitution "becomes rampant as soon as frugality is deprived of its foundation." Finally, scarcity, or commodity-based poverty, derives from modernized poverty, where money and money making assume an ever increasing importance.

The development discourse confuses these different types of poverty with each other. It also confuses a sheer shopping list of material "deficiencies", problematized into economic and technological concepts, with a universalized "idea" of poverty. In so doing, it only helps the club of the rich to deal, in their own ways and interests, with the kind of "poor" who could become a threat to the economic order. It traps their victims into situations and conditions which make them increasingly dependant on forces outside their reach and control. It syste-

43 Govind Kelkar, "Tractors against women", in *Development*, No3, 1985.

44 See Wolfgang Sachs, "Poor Versus Different" in *Six Essays on the Archeology of Development in Interculture*, Issue 109, English edition Vol XXIII, No4, Fall 1990.

matically disables them in their capacity to deal with their problems, in their own vernacular way.

Towards liberating forms of poverty. The last, and perhaps the most inhibitive result of these strategies of confusing misrepresentations is that the victims are cornered into a situation where only two possibilities seem open to them: either to submit and to adapt themselves to their economic enslavement; or to "go back" to their old modes of life, knowing well that the forces unleashed against them are such that the latter option is no longer possible, nor desirable.

The insidious effects of the destruction of vernacular spaces are particularly dangerous at a time when many alternatives need to be explored. These can, on the other hand, be informed by the incredible advance of certain autonomous and convivial technologies, as well as by the often very imaginative solutions that some emerging grassroots movements are offering in terms of the regeneration of their life spaces. Observing these movements, it is already quite imaginable that new forms of liberating poverty could well emerge, at least at the grassroots level, on the ashes of present modernized forms of poverty.

SIGNALS FROM THE GRASS ROOTS

The way planners, development actomaniacs and politicians living off "global poverty" alleviation campaigns are presenting the case of the poor, gives the uninformed public a biased impression of how the world's impoverished are living their deprivations. Not only are these presented as incapable of doing anything intelligent by themselves, but also as people preventing the modern do-gooders to help them. Were such preposterous misrepresentations to be true, three quarters of the world's population would have already perished.

In the last couple of decades, promising signals are being received from the grass roots indicating their yet amazing vitality; in many areas, in fact, where the outsider would normally expect total resignation or submission. Not only in Asia where imaginative movements have been consistently witnessed since the Gandhian revolution⁴⁵, or in Latin America⁴⁶ where much has been equally

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- ⁴⁵ In the last couple of decades, literally thousands of grassroots movements have appeared in Asia, few of which have been thoroughly studied. The following suggested readings relate only to the ones more familiar to this writer.

Anisur Rahman (ed) **Grassroot Participation and Self-reliance, Experiences in South and S.E. Asia**, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1984. [This book includes studies on Pakistan, Malaysia, India, The Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh].

Bhaduri Amit & M.A. Rahman (eds), **Studies in Rural participation**, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1982.

G.V.S. de Silva & al., "Bhoomi Sena: A Struggle for People's Power", in **Development Dialogue**, No2, 1979: 3-70 [This collective study takes a close look at a movement of adivasis (tribals) in Maharashtra aimed at "liberation from oppression and the establishment of People's power].

Lim Teck Ghee & Tan Phaik Leng, **Grassroot Self-reliance Initiatives in Malaysia, A Case Study of Kampung Batu's Struggle for Land**, ILO. WEP 10/WP 25, Jan. 1982.

Henry Volken, Ajoy Kumar & Sara Kaithathara, **Learning From the Rural Poor**, Indian Social Institute, 1982 [The book gives an account on the situation of the rural poor].

- ⁴⁶ There is an abundant literature on the grassroots movements and networks in Latin America. Already in the 60's, some came to public attention which were initiated in Chile and Mexico. Between the 60's and the 70's, the Freirian methods of "conscientization" were used by a large number of them, in other parts of the continent. The non-violent doctrines of activist bishops like Helder Camara (in Brazil) and Oscar A.

happening, in Africa⁴⁷, too, interesting and original grassroots movements are now hopefully emerging.

These movements are indeed very different, both in their qualitative approach to the regeneration of people's space, and in their size. As a rule, they are localized and rather small in number. Yet, the rapid growth of some, like the **Chipko**⁴⁸, or the **Swadhyaya**⁴⁹, which already cover millions of people, in-

Romero (in El Salvador), as well as the ideological stands of the "theology of liberation" dominated the ones which followed. The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez [**A Theology of Liberation & The Power of the Poor in History**] and the Brazilian bishop Leonardo Boff [**Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Theology of Our Times**] have extensively studied this school of thought and praxis. The **Basic Ecclesial Communities**, created mainly in Brazil and Central America, were the direct products of the latter.

The mid-70's witnessed the birth of the **Participatory Action Research [PAR]** methodology, conceived by a group of activists from different regions of the world, in particular Latin America and Asia. Their intention was, amongst others, to create with the population concerned, the most favorable conditions for the creation and the dissemination of "grassroot knowledge". The methodology was soon adopted by, and spread over, many grassroots movements, not only in Latin America, but all over the world. In April 1986, many networks of grassroots movements signed a "solidarity agreement" for working together.

Lately a most innovative movement found its expression in the Mexican ANADEGES [Analysis, Decentralism & Gestion]. This movement considers itself as a "hammock" for peasants, marginals and "deprofessionalized intellectuals". Around 500.000 persons are said to be involved in this "hammock", whose discourse and practices take the opposite course to those of "development". The movement has been known to the outside world thanks to the inspiring and provocative writings and talks of Gustavo Esteva. See, in particular, "A New Call For Celebration", in **Development** [SID, Rome], No 3, 1986, and "Regenerating People's Space", in **Alternative**, Vol. XII, 1987: 125-152.

For a pleasant "travel log" account of some grassroot activities in Latin America, see also: Albert Hirschman, **Getting Ahead Collectively: Grassroots Experiences in Latin America**, Pergamon Press, N.Y., 1984.

⁴⁷ On the young emerging grassroots movements of Africa, some introductory material can be found in Majid Rahnema & Joe Short, **Report On A Preparatory Assistance Mission in Africa**, U.N.D.P., New York, 1987.

⁴⁸ This most inspiring movement has been well studied. In particular, see: Vandana Shiva & Bandhyopadhyay, "The Evolution, Structure and Impact of the Chipko Movement", **Mountain Research & development**, Vol.6 No 2, 1986: 113-142.

⁴⁹ Although **Swadhyaya** had its first tiny seeds planted in the early 50's by **Dada** (an affectionate nickname for the Reverend Pandhurang Athvale Shastri), the movement is less known outside the Swadhyayee Parivar [family]. It took the first "seeds" some 20 years to become "seedlings", and finally an impressive human forest of over 3 million people.

Swadhyaya means self-knowledge or self-discovery. The movement is entirely self-reliant and based on the Vedic Belief that there is a God within each person. Besides the

dicating that even their size is growing in importance. We shall try to outline the gist of their significance and message.

Indigenous Responses. For a couple of decades, the development discourse and practices succeeded in manipulating and bullying their "target populations". Anti-colonial and nationalistic slogans were particularly used to foster new illusions. The abusive methods in vogue, in the third quarter of this century, have lost much of their initial appeals. Many of the present grassroots movements represent people's rejection, if not their revolt, against them. The victims want now their "poverty" or "riches" to be defined by themselves, and to deal with that, free from unwanted pressures.

Growing resistance to governments and their modernizing policies seems to have fostered the trends towards a return to roots. It is true that such trends have often been already coopted by a new breed of manipulators linked with fundamentalist or religious/ethnic interests. Yet, as a whole, most grassroots movements are now aware of the dangers of sectarian ideologies. The lessons of the past, including the latest coming from Eastern Europe, prompt them, more than ever, to rely on their own creative wisdom and cultures in responding to their reality.

Surfing over the threats. Another expression of this growing distance toward established ideologies is the rejection, by many a grassroots movement, of the old-established notions of power, including the much sought objective of "seizing" power⁵⁰.

Here, too, not only these movements have learned much from their own experiences, but from all the other "revolutions". These have convinced them, further, that violence only leads to superficial changes, to a transformation of the former victims into new victimizers, and often, to more structural forms of violence. As their praxis leads them to better understand the dynamics of violence and power, they seem to continuously discover new and more artful ways of looking at the world and themselves. As the "common man" realizes that a certain form of "modernity" has, in fact, lost its touch with the present it claims to represent, he becomes truly modern, in the original sense of the word, that is,

impressive changes **Swadhyaya** has already brought in the daily life of its **parivar** members and in the human quality of their relationships with each other and with the outside world (including indeed nature), it has also generated great material wealth without any assistance from anywhere. The "family" has been using that "wealth" and its regenerated relationships to improve the condition of its poorer members in a most ingenious and graceful manner.

Two scholars of the Indian Center for the Study of Developing Societies, Ramashray Roy and Raman Srivastava are actually preparing a book on **Swadhyaya** for the United Nations University.

See also, Majid Rahnema, "**Swadhyaya**, The unknown, the peaceful, the silent, yet singing revolution of India", in **IFDA Dossier**, No 73, Apr. 1990.

⁵⁰ See Majid Rahnema, "Power and regenerative processes in micro-spaces" in **International Social Science Journal**, Unesco, Vol. 117: 361-375, Aug. 88.

one who is **of the present**. As such, he constantly refines his traditional, vernacular ways of facing the many waves threatening his life. To the thousands of tricks each culture has developed with a view to preserving itself from such passing waves, the new grassroots are adding the art of **surfing over and inside** the waves.

Vernacular universes. As in the case of power, grassroots movements seem to differ considerably with planners and politicians on their approach to the "macro" dimensions of change. What essentially matters for them is to bring about, within the horizons to which they are familiar, changes which are both possible and meaningful to their own life. It matters little to them whether what they do is "replicable" elsewhere, or is in conformity with ideal or abstract models of society, constructed elsewhere. As a rule, grassroots populations resent the man-made macro world to which they are asked to conform. The more they feel its artificiality and its danger to all their dreams and aspirations, the more they consider themselves as parts of macro worlds of their own. These are the vernacular or religious universes which give them hope and strength, and in which they like to find refuge. In these universes, a seed, a seedling and a forest are all different moments and forms of only one living reality. Hence, what matters to them is to see, like all peasants and farmers of the world, that the seed is properly planted in the land it likes, and that it receives the proper care, as it grows into forming its own macro. The particularly subtle Hindu concept of **dharma** well expresses the relationship between everyone's "micro" life to the "macro" cosmic order, a relationship which also defines one's responsibilities and duties toward both.

Here lies another fundamental difference separating the grassroots universe from that of modern technology. The latter starts with the blueprint of a "macro", a pre-defined idea of "**what should be done**" and how. The technocrat's design consists, then, in transforming everything to meet that blueprint. For the communities at the grassroots level, what matters is, by contrast, "**what is**"⁵¹, and life, as it designs its own course. The community's perception of **what is** remains indeed conditioned by its cultural heritage. Yet, what finally decides is often the living "nose" of the people directly concerned. In the other, technocratic approach, it is the dead data of an alien, often ideologically biased knowledge system.

The spiritual dimension. Most contemporary grassroots movements have a strong spiritual dimension. It is not only in India where such movements, starting from the Gandhian **Sarvodaya**, to **Manavodaya**⁵² and **Swad-**

51 A vivid illustration of this approach is given in an article on **Chodak**, a movement of "self-organization" of the poor and the marginalized in Dakar. In this excellent case study, the author indicates how the key to success, for this movement, became the people's concern "to see and to understand "what is", See Emmanuel Seyni Ndione, "Leçons d'une animation au Sénégal", **IFPA Dossier**, No 74 Nov./Dec. 1989.

52 **Manavodaya**, in Hindi, means "human awakening". This is another grass-roots movement whose "organizing philosophy and practice start with self-awakening and awareness, leading to family, community and social awakening... Recognizing a unity of

hyaya. have attached seminal importance to such factors as inner transformation, moral purity, self-discovery, self-knowledge, or the notion of the Divine in its many different interpretations. For other movements inspired by Islam, Christianity and/or Marxism [as the Theology of Liberation], the outer and the inner conditions of freedom have also been closely linked together. The sense of belonging to common spiritual ideals of a "purifying" nature, creates often new and contagious forms of enthusiasm and solidarity, as it highly increases the "operational" effectiveness of the group. A reason for people's indifference to the development ideology, and perhaps of its failure, could well be the latter's utter insensitivity to this crucial dimension.

purpose in all life and evolution, the end goal of development is seen by this movement as a society based on self-discipline and love". See the mimeographed Preliminary Report of the International Workshop **People's Initiatives to Overcome Poverty**, March 27 - April 5, 1989, organized by the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii.

IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

Taking off from the last signals received from the grassroots, a number of facts could be singled out or recapitulated which could well serve as a new basis for a further continuation of this exploration.

1. Convivial poverty is a blessing, never a scourge. Short of a better word to replace the more commonly used expression of "moral poverty", convivial poverty is used here to mean a mode of life based on the ethics of simplicity, frugality, conviviality and solidarity. This poverty has never been a "scourge", a shame, or an evil for the populations belonging to vernacular societies. Quite the contrary, it has always been, for them, a blessing and a continuous source of vitality. For it has allowed them, perhaps more than anything else, to strengthen their immune defense systems and to develop the cultures they needed to live up to the challenges of their human and natural environment. This kind of poverty means, indeed, constraint, self-discipline, a sense of constant provision of risks and of "risk aversion", elaborate defense systems against possible surprises and intemperances of all kinds (climatic, economic, human, etc.), as well as a deep sense of solidarity, of conviviality, of caring for the common interests of the household and the community at large, and sensitivity to other people's difficulties and hardships. It helps to fully understand and appreciate what has been called the "subsistence ethics"⁵³ of traditional villages, an ethics the loss of which could mean a catastrophe in the life of the billions to-day submitted to modern forms of destitution.

Economically, this poverty expresses a mode of managing one's deprivations in accordance with all the existing possibilities and limits imposed by the natural and human environment. Convivial poverty rests on the notion of "moral

⁵³ The term "subsistence ethics", used by James C. Scott is described as follows in the case of peasants living in pre-capitalist societies. "The peasant family's problem, put starkly, was to produce enough rice to feed the household, buy a few necessities such as salt and cloth, and meet the irreducible claims of outsiders".

Technical arrangements were made to that effect, such as "local tradition of seed varieties, planting techniques, and timing designed over centuries of trial and error to produce the most stable and reliable yield possible under the circumstances".

These were coupled with a host of social arrangements which served the same purpose. "Patterns of reciprocity, forced generosity, communal land, and work-sharing helped to even out the inevitable troughs in a family's resources which might otherwise have thrown them below subsistence".

The proven value of these techniques and social patterns, concludes Scott, "is perhaps what has given peasants a Brechtian tenacity in face of agronomists and social workers who come from the capital to improve them".

James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, Yale University Press, 1976, p.2.

economy"⁵⁴, general to all peasant societies, an economy based on the recognition that "needs" and "resources" cannot be delinked. A human being, worthy of that name is neither a perpetually "needy" person, nor an obsessed producer of goods and commodities for an abstract economy. S/he does not, and cannot morally, need more than what she or himself, together with the community of which s/he is a part, can produce in common.

2. Destituting poverty can easily be alleviated. Convivial poverty assumes that problems of survival, or what in modern jargon is called "absolute poverty" have, as a rule, been traditionally solved, everywhere. The famous Gandhian phrase remains valid that "the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs but not everyone's greed". Unbiased observers further agree that, with the present possibilities of human knowledge and know-how reached by the world cultures, the population growth cannot change the nature of the truth. The collective capacity of the world's cultures to meet such needs has impressively increased in the technical and organizational fields. It is therefore quite possible to imagine that, with an altogether different approach to the regeneration of their life space, workable answers could be found to destituting poverty by the populations concerned. The fact that the convivial poor are short of cash money, does not prevent them from having a wealth of imagination and creativity to improve their lot, without being always dependent on the rich. As Ladakhis, Rumanians and Tepitans⁵⁵, they could easily handle their "problems", would the rich get off their backs.

⁵⁴ The expression **Moral Economy** was first used by E.P. Thompson in his well-known study entitled "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" [*Past and Present* 50, February 1971]. As mentioned in note 51, James C. Scott elaborates the concept in his book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, and applies it to the study of peasant societies in Southeast Asia. The concept refers to the desire for subsistence security, a phenomenon which grows out of the needs of peasant economics, socially experienced as a pattern of moral attitudes, rights or expectations.

For Barrington Moore, the experience of sharing risks within the community "provides the soil out of which grow peasant mores and the moral standards by which they judge their own behaviours and that of others. The essence of these standards is a crude notion of equality, stressing the justice and necessity for a minimum of land for the performance of essential social tasks". The violation of these standards could be expected to provoke resentment and resistance - not only because needs were unmet, but because they were violated.

See Barrington Moore Jr. & Eric Wolfe, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966: 498-8.

⁵⁵ Wolfgang Sachs reports on a visit he paid, after the 1985 earthquake, to Tepito, a dilapidated district in the center of Mexico City. After having expressed his admiration for what the people had realized in a short time, he had wished them well with the following remark: "It's all very well, but when it comes down to it, these people are still terribly poor". Upon which, a *companero* present there had immediately and proudly corrected him: "**No somos pobred, somos Tepitanos** [We are not poor people, we are Tepitans].

3. Freedom from "economics" does not mean renouncing to an economy geared to the welfare of all. The search for alternative models of good life, including indeed those based on "moral poverty", should in no way be construed as an attempt to reduce the importance of sound economic activities. All societies do, and will continue to function on economics⁵⁶. In particular, at a time when the dislocation of the old social bonds has had most disturbing effects on people's traditional economy, an increased production of goods and services essential to the population's well being is indeed essential to the solution of many of their problems.

Even for a person like Mahatma Gandhi who strongly denounced the "immiserizing" nature of modernization, "economic reconstruction" was perceived as a crucial factor in alleviating material poverty. His *Swadeshi* economics was however far different from a self-regulating, socially "dis-embedded" economy serving the interests of the rich. To oppose what he called *economics*, Gandhi proposed an economy based on *sarvodaya* [the welfare of all], "where there is more truth than gold, and greater charity than love of the self". Noting the destruction of village life in India, as well as the growing "structural unemployment" everywhere, he suggested that the "production by the masses" become a substitute to "mass production"⁵⁷.

4. Economic development seeks to wipe out convivial poverty. It can do nothing but band-aid operations for the new destitute it produces. The problem with economic development is that, in its efforts to accelerate the economization of life, it uses the mantle of poverty with a view to destroying convivial poverty, rather than fighting the various forms of destitution generated by its own activities. As mentioned previously, it perniciously takes advantage of all the sufferings and deprivations caused by the processes of disintegration of the vernacular societies, and the ensuing lack of self-confidence they produce in many of their victims. In their great majority, the latter are the "drop-outs" of a city-based and foreign oriented economy, fallen into destitution, as a result of their severance from their familiar or traditional means of livelihood. Having lost their most cherished belongings, in every sense, they

See note No 42.

⁵⁶ As Karl Polanyi mentions, the etymology of the word economy is what the Greeks called *oekonomia*, which is the principle of householding, or production for one's own use. As such, economy is perhaps as old as the two other principles of reciprocity and redistribution in human societies. See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1957, Chapter 4.

⁵⁷ For further readings on Gandhian views on the role of economy in society, see:

Romesh Diwan & Marc Lutz (eds.), *Essays in Gandhian Economics*, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 1985, and

Amritananda Sas, *Foundations of Gandhian Economics*, Center for the Study of Developing Societies, Allied Publishers, Delhi, 1979.

are systematically lured to accept the new mantle of poverty aimed at modernizing their destitution. Designated as poor and classified as such, they become subject to all sorts of disabling interventions into their lives. In the increasingly violent jungle of modern shanty towns, their last assets of convivial poverty are traded off against the first addictive products and services of the new consumer society.

5. The destructive forces from within. The mirages of a better life, systematically kept up by the development discourse, further discourage its victims into understanding the deeper causes of their destitution. The contamination of the people's vernacular space by the economic virus, and the internalization of the values of the "successful élites" have produced a whole set of phenomena threatening its victims from without as well as from within: amongst others, the mass "artificial insemination" of entire populations⁵⁸, the systematic onslaughts against their immune defense systems⁵⁹, and their gradual addiction to imputed needs⁶⁰. Hand in hand, these phenomena seem to have produced a strange breed of "siamese" poor, organically linked with their "intimate enemies"⁶¹. These schizophrenic products of modernity, many of them belonging to the "lumpen-proletariat" of the mushrooming shanty towns and favellas of "developing" countries, live under abject and brutalizing conditions. Worse, they perceive their "lacks" and deficiencies in the same terms as their victimizers. In other words, while the promised "trickle down" effects of economy continue to be out of sight for the impoverished, the economic perception of poverty "trickles up" rapidly. Out of desperation, the new poor become the blind customers of all the lottery operations concocted by the economic establishment, operations which perpetually offer the desperate poor the hopes of instant "jackpots". The results are too well known. The victims are systematically transmogrified into the main agents of their destitution.

⁵⁸ By processes of socio-cultural insemination, this paper means all those which aim at irreversibly changing the "native" species into a "modern", "developed", and easily marketable one. These processes start with schooling and continue with other cultural, developmental and modernizing activities for replacing the "underdeveloped" populations with a "healthy" and competitive generation able to lead their nations into the twenty first century.

⁵⁹ See Majid Rahnema, "A New Variety of Socio-cultural AIDS and Its Pathogens", in *Alternatives*, Vol. XIII, January 1988.

⁶⁰ Mahatma Gandhi went so far in denouncing the consequences of this phenomenon that he identified it with nothing but theft. "We are not always aware of our real needs", he wrote. "And most of us improperly multiply our wants and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves... One who follows the observance of non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of his wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of breaches of the principle of non-stealing". From *Letters to Narandas Gandhi*, quoted in Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, Vol.3: p.471.

⁶¹ For this phenomenon, see particularly,

Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983.

6. The blades of grass are still impressively alive. Despite all the tragedies described above, most human societies continue to harbour within them a hard core of persons unaffected by the contamination of their life spaces, persons of great nobility, in the original meaning of the word: i.e., who belong to a tested, venerable stock, and to solid traditions of resilience, dignity, wisdom and intelligence. The Gandhian revolution, amongst others, did represent such traditions. The last decades have witnessed the emergence of new movements at the grassroots level. Those, amongst them, which perceive their roots in an open and critical fashion, are eager to let those very roots define change. On the whole, new and powerful blades of grass are emerging which represent most promising elements in the regeneration of the vernacular spaces. It is only by listening to them and to the populations with whom they still live in convivial poverty that new possibilities of solidary interaction can be developed, with a view to understanding the poor who need them.

7. Relying mainly on the "God from within". To the extent that modern forms of pauperization are generic to processes of economization, that economy is by definition a-moral, and that destitution and depravation have sometimes taken their most dehumanizing forms in the so-called affluent societies of our time, it is becoming clearer to sensitive grassroots movements that the solution to people's ordeals is, alone, in their hands.

No other God or Caesar can replace the "God within". Neither their own "national" governments and institutions, nor, for that matter, any international or global authority are an exception to the rule. If for no other reason, they are never on the real scenes, perceiving these only in terms of data, "reports" and "problems". Their answers and means of intervention thus correspond to their own stereotyped, ideologized and bureaucratic representations of reality. They are also often themselves a major part of the problem. As such, their interventions in the name of the poor are primarily inspired by their own interests, rather than those of the poor. More recently, convincing evidence has come out to show that even in the so-called welfare societies, including socialist or communist régimes, the State thinks of the poor, only after all its other "priorities" are met. If the victims would really count, revolutionary changes would have to be introduced in the very basic structures of present economic societies.

A typical language held by development is that the vernacular spaces being now irreversibly destroyed, the only choice left to people is to accept, like everybody else, the rules of the economic game. The victims are no longer impressed by this type of blackmailing. The illusion seems also over, for them, that through more "democratic" forms of participation to the game, they would ultimately become a majority able to change the rules.

8. Cherishing the present. While the grassroots populations continue to display a growing awareness of the significance and the importance of their own cultural roots for the regeneration of their vernacular space, there is no reason to believe that they intend to replace the illusion of development with the mirages of a bygone past. On the contrary, the new generations seem, more than ever, resolved to adopt a highly critical, yet soul-searching and constructive attitude towards the past, often avoiding the self-defensive, ideologized or narrow

nationalistic or ethnical/religious positions more commonly adopted by the preceding ones.

Not only the lessons drawn from the development practices, but also many of the very important socio-political changes that have recently occurred in the world, seem to have made them more sensitive to the importance of looking at their reality, as they are. Increasingly, more people realize the danger -and indeed the total absurdity- of trying to mortgage or simply steal away people's present in the name of ideologies claiming either to save their future or to bring them back to a glorious past. A most significant feature of many a present grassroots movement is their focussing on the present and on issues of real and immediate concern to people. Even when the regeneration of certain old roots appears to some as of utmost importance, it is on the assumption that solid roots are vital for giving life to that present.

Amongst these movements, the most creative are those who are genuinely trying to discover new forms of interaction based on processes of mutual learning and listening. This alone, they believe, helps compassionate actors to build primarily on the present, to be open to the surprises and the imponderables of the unknown, and to avoid that ideas and prejudices inherited from the past continuously dominate and distort one's clear perception of facts.

9. Burgeoning of new breeds of solidarities. Another interesting development, in this context, is that similar trends are witnessed all over the world. The initiatives of the convivial poor are indeed not limited to the "poorer" countries of the world. They are extending to many an industrialized country, namely in the United States, where modernized poverty is gradually "trickling up" to new strata of the populations. An informal network of relations, expressing new forms of solidarity, is thus dawning beyond the traditional geographic, socio-economic, political, cultural and even class boundaries. People with different experiences, belonging to different cultures and knowledge systems, are now gradually participating, at all levels, in an unprecedented, informal dialogue. New forms of interaction are taking place which allow these movements to learn from each other and to draw on the vast reservoir of wisdom, knowledge and know-how produced by different cultures.

10. Right action versus actomania. "Actomania" is one of the most typical psychological disorders -or diseases- of modern times. It manifests itself by the irresistible urge to translate one's inner confusion and doubts into any kind of visible and outward action. It aims, on the one hand, at giving one's "re-action" the seal of responsibility or professionalism; on the other hand, at drawing recognition or/and award. What matters to the obsessional "actor" is not whether the intended action will, or will not, meet its proposed objectives. Its function is only to release a particular form of psychotic energy the actomaniac needs for his performance, as he moves ahead finding a scenario, setting up the stage and attracting an impressionable audience. The disorder frequently strikes bureaucrats, planners and politicians in need of recognition. Actomaniacs are highly appreciated and encouraged by present development and "action-oriented" organizations, concerned with "attractive projects".

Poverty is an ideal subject for such actors. For, regardless of the quality of the scenario, the show is always sure to attract gung-ho and sentimental audiences, not forgetting funds! Yet, only the feeble-minded believe that actions produced by such shows could, in any way, help the poor. They generally lead to the opposite, that is, to further humiliating and crippling the latter.

To act, in a serious and responsible manner, requires very different qualities: namely, the ability to relate, to share, to listen or to learn, in the true sense of these words, and free from any conclusion and pre-defined "position". Such a freedom from the known inevitably prompts the outsider to interact with the poor only on the basis of the latter's own initiatives. A person endowed with such qualities acts, without **having or planning** to act, as a healthy seed just lives to become a tree or to produce fruits. For the compassionate mind, action flows, thus, from the very **act** of observing, of learning, and of attending. Hence, the action is always creative and truly "modern": i.e., it belongs neither to the past, nor to the projection of a dead past into the future. It always responds to the present, in all its living and perpetually living dimensions.

For those who really care for the poor, acting is thus a most delicate and responsible, almost a sacred happening, involving their entire being. It implies that the actor remains constantly watchful and attentive to every movement, in particular his own; that he cleans up the instruments through which he sees the facts, and learns to weigh all the consequences of his acts, in a responsible and holistic fashion.

Do-gooders deprived of such qualities often do more harm than good, for their actions are, at best, sentimental or ego-centric **re-actions** to people's sufferings. The harm is greater in the case of professionals who feel particularly sure of their knowledge in their recognized fields of competence. That "competence" precisely prevents them from seeing the living forest behind their tree of predilection.

11. Convivial poverty, both as an end and a means. For all these reasons, most genuine grassroots movement seem now to share a common belief: that the answer to imposed forms of material poverty has to be found, more than any other time, in the context of the people's own ethical and cultural approach to poverty. In other words, as long as the present race for material riches continues, on the ground that nothing but technological limitations should stop human beings from wanting and having more, not only the race itself will continue to breed the most dehumanizing forms of imposed poverty, but it will ultimately impoverish and destroy the very planet which gives us our common riches. By contrast, convivial poverty, that is, voluntary or moral poverty, implies the ideal of a livelihood based on the age-old moral principles of simplicity, frugality, enoughness and respect for every human being and all forms of life. It surely does not mean ascetism or monastic life. It only tries to give back to everyone that holistic and compassionate dimension of being, without which no human relationship is possible, in the true sense of the word. As such, convivial poverty could perhaps serve both as a means and an end to pauperizing economism.

12. The need for fundamental changes. In practical terms, this means that no substantial change could happen in the predicament of the poor (however they be defined), without a fundamental change of attitude, both at the level of their society and that of their inner perception of reality.

In the first case, a new "project of society" is required which would be defined, primarily, according to the ways that society perceives a good life within its existing capacity to give it a sustainable basis. There should be no doubt that if a given societal and economic system can no longer meet the real needs of people in that context, or worse, systematically produces new forms of poverty and deprivation, it is the system which has to change, or to be eradicated. Not the poor. To force the system on the poor and to ask them to adapt themselves to it, would only be imposing on them another, indeed a more pervasive and cancer-like deprivation.

As to the present "donors" or assistance organizations, the best "strategy" or "plan of action" which could be expected of them is to avoid having one. Instead, as Dada and the first tiny group of Swadhyayee did in the case of their own people, they could only start back learning from the poor as they are moving ahead, and eventually express their "availability" on demand. Much sensitivity and humility is required to give life and meaningful substance to these types of interactive processes. "Results" may take a very long time, perhaps a generation or more, to serve their ends. No Madison Avenue effect should be expected, with a view to attracting funds or public attention. Yet, such intelligent and patient forms of human interaction might, in some way, help the present victims of economic and assistentialist policies regenerate their life space, rather than continue dispensing them with disabling crutches.

In conclusion, times have actually come, perhaps everywhere, to look at poverty in a different manner: time to regenerate the age old traditions of voluntary poverty, as both a new form of individual liberation and a major instrument for seriously reducing all other forms of dehumanizing and brutalizing poverty. A tragic form of poverty, often perceived as an expression of modernity, is that of a world of economically obsessed individuals and "nations" fighting with each other for spreading more greed, more violence, more exploitation and more destruction of the inner and outer life forces of humankind. That poverty, of both perception and lifestyle, is now challenged by the ideals of a different form of poverty, a mode of living based on simplicity and respect for life. Increasingly, more compassionate and informed human beings are realizing that the earth can provide enough to satisfy all the needs of persons liberated from greed. The Economic Age, like all its predecessors, is not an achieved and eternal state. The deep crises it is traversing in all its fields of activities and, above all, the threats it is now posing to the very existence of our planet, are perhaps already preparing the coming of a new age. The flourishing of other, higher forms of convivial poverty may then appear as the last hope of creating different societies based on the joys of more being, rather than on the obsession of more having.

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