

HOW THE SYSTEM RATIONALIZES POVERTY

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Tuesday, 23 December 2008

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"No society can surely be flourishing and happy of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable."

Adam Smith: The Wealth of Nations, I, 1776

"Poverty is the open-mouthed, relentless hell which yawns beneath civilized society. And it is hell enough."

Henry George: Progress and Poverty, IX

The rich man's wealth is his strong city: The destruction of the poor is their poverty.

Proverbs 10:15 (NKJV)

Let's get this said right away: Poverty is bad. Poverty is destroying, not creating. Degrading, not uplifting. Ugly, not beautiful. Exclusive, not inclusive. Punishing, not rewarding. Death-dealing, not life-giving. Brutalizing, not ennobling. Man's way, not God's way.

A social problem as drastic as that of poverty cannot be allowed to exist unexplained. Should people begin to suspect that poverty might be caused by deliberately contrived measures of oppression rather than individual or familial dysfunction, they might begin to demand action on a societal level. This cannot be allowed to happen if the present socio-economic order that transfers wealth from the poor to the rich is to remain in place. Therefore the system needs to explain poverty in a way that is believable because it arises—not necessarily from truth—but from experiences and prejudices of the general public. The process works something like this:

"First, identify a social problem. Second, study those affected by the problem, and discover in what ways they are different from the rest of us as a consequence of deprivation and injustice. Third, define the differences as the cause of

the social problem itself."*

Let's apply this process to poverty since it among all social problems is perhaps the most prevalent and widespread. Social problems or issues can best be defined as matters that directly or indirectly affect many or all members of society in a threatening manner and are beyond the control of any single individual. Examples are poverty, crime, disease, pollution, family breakdown, and social disorder. Poverty fits the definition because it both threatens society and cannot be ameliorated by any single person or policy. So we identify poverty as a major social issue needing our attention.

The second step in the process is to discover what characteristics the poor possess that are not generally found in the larger society. We thus develop a common perception that the poor are really different from us in many ways. We believe, rightly or wrongly, that they are uneducated, lazy, poorly housed, either unemployed or marginally employed, living in less-desirable parts of the community at large, facing a higher degree of family breakdown, having a higher level of criminality, having numerous addictions, and being somewhat apathetic to their condition.

One problem is that these popular perceptions are deeply rooted in anecdotal experience. Everyone knows someone who is both poor and afflicted by one or more of these behaviors or conditions. That lends truth to our perceptions, even though they may be true for only a few people and grossly in error for the larger group.

The third step is to attribute poverty to those perceived differences. The system wants us to believe that individual failures and pathologies cause poverty and that people are therefore poor because they deserve to be. This view is perhaps best expressed in the oft-heard statement: "If they would get jobs, they wouldn't be poor." What seldom enters the discussion is that these attributes and behaviors might be results of poverty, not its causes. So the system identifies these symptoms of poverty as causes, popularizes them in the media and politics, and unfortunately even through religion, then uses them as explanations for the pervasive tenaciousness of poverty and the difficulty of making any serious inroads against it.

At this New Year we face one of the more difficult times in our history. Reports indicate that another 10 million Americans will this year join the approximately 50 million people already living in poverty or near poverty. President-elect Obama is pledged to act on this problem, but his efforts will be resisted, not just by people having something to lose if poverty should be alleviated, but also by those good Americans burdened by misconceptions concerning the causes and effects of poverty. Don't be among them..

*From *Blaming the Victim*, by William Ryan; quoted by William Herzog in *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*.