

# **The Philosophy of Poverty and the Poverty of Philosophy**

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The government of the United States of America has persuaded many people, and not just the majority of its own citizens, to see its country's victory in the Cold War as a victory of the ideas of freedom and democracy, just as it presents the events of 9/11 as an attack upon those same values. But to what extent can these values be understood without reference to the material conditions of society? Freedom and democracy tend to have a different meaning depending on whether one lives in a rich or a poor country, just as they mean different things to the elite and to the underclass of a country. This opens up a different way of reading the situation and it emerges even from the Bush administration's own major policy document, if one reads it carefully enough. *The National Security Strategy* of the United States (henceforth NSS), published in September 2002, acknowledges that poverty and inequality are among the causes of terror:

In Africa, promise and opportunity sit side by side with disease, war and desperate poverty. This threatens both a core value of the United States –preserving human dignity– and our strategic priority –combating global terror. (NSS 10)

Africa, which George W. Bush, the Presidential candidate had dismissed as lacking strategic importance for the United States of America, is back on the map, and this is because “global terror” is truly global unlike global development, which privileges some places over others. That is to say, it is terror that makes globalization truly global, just as it is globalization that makes “terror” in any part of the world a concern for a superpower. But “globalization” is (like the words “democracy” and “freedom”) a word that means something very different depending on where one lives and one's circumstances there. For the poorer countries, “globalization” means lack of control over one's own destiny, just as “democracy” has a diminished meaning in a state dependent on foreign aid, with the result that it is not the people but donor nations and the International Monetary Fund that determine major policy issues.

It is the task of the philosopher to do what the Western media has singularly failed to do: to point out that the Bush administration has left the term “terrorism” undefined, as if terror had never been used in a just cause, and so as to create the illusion that we are simply dealing with a law and order issue. Once that task has been accomplished, it soon becomes clear that the major division within the world is not that between those who support it and its values, as the Bush administration has repeatedly maintained, but that between rich and poor. This is true even though poverty and inequality are not the central issues for terrorist organizations. However, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* deconstructs its own position when it concedes that:

A world where some live in comfort and plenty, where half of the human race lives on less than \$2 a day, is neither just nor stable. Including all of the world’s poor in an expanding circle of development –and opportunity– is a moral imperative and one of the top priorities of U.S. international policy. (NSS 21)

The United States government itself, by acknowledging that the present world order is neither just, nor sustainable, has put in question the legitimacy of all institutions invested in maintaining the *status quo*. Philosophically, the legitimacy of those institutions comes to rest on their promise to bring about a more equitable distribution of the world’s resources and their conviction that they alone possess the means, and the roadmap, to take us there. *The National Security Strategy* offers such a justification when it describes “an expanding circle of development”, that it claims will operate by “entrepreneurship”. Indeed, the United States government is so convinced that this is the only way that it has announced that it will restrict foreign aid to nations that “enable entrepreneurship” (NSS 22). That means that the hunger of millions upon millions of impoverished people is to be used openly as a weapon of foreign policy. One can already hear the rhetoric declaring that a foreign government is responsible for the hunger of its own people because it has failed to pursue “entrepreneurship”, with all that this means given the current distribution of world capital.

The legitimacy of the present world order thus depends on whether or not one believes that entrepreneurial global capitalism is a viable means to eliminate poverty. I cannot now address the economic questions raised by this issue, but it is worth noting that the economists tell us that the gap between rich and poor is widening. The best that its adherents can hope for is that the argument, so often derided when applied to communism, that this solution has not yet been properly tried, is suddenly found to be persuasive. There is also a question as to whether the problem to be addressed is not only absolute poverty, “desperate poverty”, but also differentials. Is there not a point at

which inequity in the distribution of wealth is so scandalous that it constitutes a form of poverty that must be eradicated irrespective of whether lives are immediately endangered?

I believe that we have far exceeded that point. The scandal of poverty used to be the existence of two distinct and separate worlds, that of the rich and the poor, as they existed within a single nation.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, one version of the scandal of poverty today is that the poor of all nations, if they have access to a television or to the products of Hollywood, are constantly slapped in the face by intimate coverage of the way that the wealthy consume resources. Their wealth can often be traced back to the exploitation of the people and resources of those left in poverty. Let me make four brief points intended to indicate the new context. Firstly, the way poverty and inequity manifest themselves in the world –their phenomenology– has been radically altered through the media: the intrusive coverage of the intimate details of what being rich or poor looks like. Secondly, the effects of wealth –influence and control– are more blatant, as is apparent when campaign contributions are seen to count more than votes because money has the power to sway numerous votes. Thirdly, the causes of poverty and disproportionate wealth are more clearly understood and less readily surrounded by superstition than ever before. Finally, and most importantly, global poverty –at least in the sense of “desperate poverty”– presents itself today as something that can be eliminated. A redistribution of wealth, whereby the citizens of the affluent countries give up what would amount to on average as only 1-2 percent of their average income, would eradicate severe poverty worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Previous generations labored under the belief that “the poor will always be with us”.

In Europe, the idea that poverty could be eradicated at least from a single location can be traced back to Juan Luis Vives, who in 1526, in *De subventionem pauperum*, a text addressed to the Town Council and Senate of Bruges, advocated “nothing else than the elimination of the poor”<sup>3</sup>. It was proposed as an exercise in social engineering for the benefit of the whole of society. In the Middle Ages, discussions of involuntary poverty –as opposed to the voluntary poverty of the religious orders– treated the poor as indispensable members of society in so far as the rich could best secure their salvation by giving to them. However, for Vives, the poor were beginning to be seen as a problem: a source of disease and a potential threat to the stability of society. Soon they would be regarded, in a way that they had not been previously, as responsible for their own poverty, as blameworthy. The poor were to be examined, to an extent that was new, [to see if] they were deserving or not. Nothing better reveals the transformation of the conception of poverty at this time than the comments of critics of the

new system of addressing poverty: the sixteenth century Dominican theologian, Domingo de Soto, was such a critic. He speculated that it would be more meritorious to give alms to the unjust than to the righteous.<sup>4</sup>

There has been much fine work in the philosophy of poverty recently showing how it might be addressed from within the established Western ethical discourses. However, this work needs to be combined with a genealogical study of the idea of poverty so that we can better understand what in the established philosophical framework derives precisely from the attempt of previous generations to resist the demands that the faces of poverty make on us. This conflictual heritage leaves our fundamental intuitions on the question of poverty confused and in need of investigation. I believe we experience this phenomenologically every time someone on the street asks us for money: we feel guilty whether we give to that person or not. As Nietzsche said, "Beggars should be abolished: for it is annoying if you give to them and annoying not to give to them"<sup>5</sup>. These attitudes play into social policy when similar questions are raised as to whether or not our responsibility to poor countries is dependent on their own policies. We have seen that the Bush administration, according to its own policy statement, believes that its responsibility is limited, when it disagrees with a country's policies.

To explain what I mean by a genealogical approach I will say a little about John Locke's role in the genealogy of contemporary attitudes toward poverty. Locke is not just any example. He is central to that genealogy, just as he continues to have a central place with Kant in contemporary ethical discussions about poverty. Nor should it be forgotten that he remains probably the single most important philosopher for understanding the conceptual framework still governing the United States, where the rights of property trump the rights of the poor to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In Western Europe in the Middle Ages, and one might find parallels elsewhere, it was sometimes acknowledged that the poor not only had a right to charity, but that where the charity was not freely given they also had a right to take what they needed in order to survive. There were debates about the mechanics of how this right might be exercised in individual cases: whether one should seek the permission of the bishop beforehand; what to do if he was not available or if the emergency was acute; and so on. The rights of the poor were acknowledged by some of the Church Fathers, reformulated by Thomas Aquinas, and reasserted by Hugo Grotius as a right surviving the social contract.<sup>6</sup> Pufendorf directly challenged this claim,<sup>7</sup> although Locke's more ambiguous position was historically more significant. For Locke, the poor are neither industrious, nor rational. They should be made to

work. However, he also believed that a parish that let a poor person die should be fined for failing in their duty.<sup>8</sup> He acknowledged that “Charity gives every man a title to so much of another’s plenty, as will keep him from extreme want, where he has no means to subsist otherwise”<sup>9</sup>.

The question of interpretation is whether this right survives the invention of money, when Locke overturns the limitation of the accumulation of property to as much as one can use. The removal of this restriction on accumulation, if it is not accompanied by the abolition of the title of charity, would mean that the poor would have more opportunity to exercise their title to another’s plenty, because the claim of those in desperate poverty is limited to the difference between what another can use and what keeps him (in Locke’s masculine world) from extreme want. On Locke’s account, this gap widens with the invention of money and thus of an unlimited right to accumulate foods irrespective of what one can use. That perhaps is the underlying reason why, against this right of those in desperate poverty, Locke denies that one has a property “in that which another can by right take from me, when he please, against my consent” (TT 360-360). This definition of property can be understood as an explicit denial of the right of the poor to charity, as if that right was renounced, along with much else, when our forebears allegedly agreed to the invention of money. On this interpretation, definitions of poverty would be understood as a correction of the previous order, a revisionist definition necessary so as to let the new order have the appropriate incentives in place. Whatever Locke himself meant, the right to charity disappeared in the worldview Locke helped to inaugurate. To the extent that the idea of a right to subsistence has now resurfaced as a human right, it is nevertheless now separated from the right of the poor to take what they need. As with other human rights, the worry is that it does nothing for the people who need to appeal to it. It is in this context that some Kantians argue that because there are no specific agents against whom the rights of the poor can be claimed, we must shift our focus from rights to obligations.<sup>10</sup> In making this claim, the Kantians seem to forget that acknowledgment of such a right, even if it remains unenforceable, nevertheless serves to delegitimize the established orders. It allows for a counter discourse of a kind which is severely lacking at present.

Of course, the poor, had they been rational (which, of course, they are not for Locke, because he seems to believe that if they had been they would also have been industrious) would not have given up their right to charity except in return for a guarantee of remaining at the subsistence level. More precisely, as Thomas Pogge has pointed out in *World Poverty and Human Rights*, under the veil of ignorance, it

would not have been rational for anyone to consent to the invention of money unless everyone was to have been better off than the average person was in the state of nature, that is to say, somewhere between subsistence and as much as one can make use of (WP 158). To put it another way, the present world order is unjust and unsupportable, even from a Lockean point of view. It is worth highlighting that some of Locke's other provisos would still not have been met, most notably that as much and as good be left for others, with respect to the appropriation of land. To be sure, the presupposition of Locke's argument, that there is always land for everyone, long ago lost what little legitimacy it had. Of course, in focusing on this condition Locke sought to legitimate the colonialization of North America in which he was heavily invested with Shaftesbury. But the fact that the earth is a circumscribed globe, and not an inexhaustible resource, was not theorized in Europe until Kant. Yet he failed to draw the decisive implications for property rights, because he was under the sway of an idea of cosmopolitanism that itself was not free of notions of development. Indeed, this conception of cosmopolitanism has since become one of the principle vehicles for spreading the idea of development, both for better and worse.<sup>11</sup>

The standard defense of the current world order rests on the notion of development. That is why it is so significant to find that the United States and the other rich and powerful nations have largely rejected the once popular notion of endogenous development. They have thereby reverted to the long criticized Western model of international development in which it is the task of the poor countries to follow the models that had been successful for the highly industrialized countries.<sup>12</sup> This idea of development serves to justify the so-called advanced societies. The United States' understanding of itself as the nation at the highest point of development means that it considers itself empowered to provide the criteria according to which all other nations can be judged. By the same token, the United States considers itself immune from criticism because it embodies the criteria. The so-called developed world considers itself authorized, in spite of its failings, to tell the rest of the world what its future is because it claims that it is that future.<sup>13</sup> To this extent the Western philosophical idea of development is an instrument not to bring about change but to reinforce the *status quo*, particularly as the likelihood of more than a handful of nations following Europe and the United States on the road to economic development is no more absurd than imagining that all the citizens of the United States could enjoy the American dream. Both myths try to universalize what by the nature of the case must be exceptional. Further, such 'development' as will happen is a goal that the poorer, the least powerful, nations can never find acceptable. Subsistence comes at the cost of accepting American leadership and American values. And yet Western philosophers for the most part do

not do enough to expose the problems with this conception of development, even importing it into their own understanding of their discipline. The problem of inequalities of wealth –and consequently inequities of power– have become so gross, so outrageous, and the means of reversing the process in any significant way so unlikely, that the world's fundamental institutions have lost their moral authority. If George W. Bush can say that the death of some 3000 people on one day provides a justification for changing our conception of what justifies war, so as to allow for preemptive strikes, should not the death of 30,000 children under 5 each day from preventable causes also provide an overwhelming reason for changing the distribution of the world's resources? Does not the fact that the deaths are preventable provide reason enough to challenge the conceptual framework that remains undisturbed by this daily event? For the most part, philosophical discussion of this issue is still tied to the framework established by the philosophies of Locke and Kant, the philosophies that help to justify the present world order, even when they question it.

Let me close by explaining my title, "The Philosophy of Poverty and the Poverty of Philosophy". My title in part refers to the failure of contemporary philosophers, when discussing Locke's defense of unequal shares in private property, to point out that even this champion of agrarian capitalism, of chattel slavery, and of colonialism did not succeed in legitimating the world order he helped to inaugurate. I am not arguing that reintroducing a right to charity would provide the answer to the problem of world poverty. However, I am suggesting that it is not enough when reading and teaching Locke to point out that he unjustifiably limited the rights of the poor so as to establish the rights of private property without limits, because he did not establish the safeguards that would legitimate unlimited property. One cannot read Locke today without raising the question of the legitimacy of the modern world order from the standpoint of its foundation in Locke, the question of whether it is not only unjustifiable, but also unjustifiable even on its own terms. The unjustifiability of the present world order even on his terms should be as much a part of the reading of Locke, as a critique of his racism. However, my title is also intended to highlight a further complicity of philosophy with the present unjust world order. In response to Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions or the Philosophy of Poverty*,<sup>14</sup> Marx observed in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that the increase in productivity and wealth that had taken place had not been shared by the proletariat. Nor was this accidental: "to obtain this development of productive forces and this surplus left by labor, there had to be classes which profited and classes which decayed"<sup>15</sup>. Marx's point was that it is not enough to propose a somewhat different distribution of the existing resources; it is necessary to change the present conditions of production. The

emancipation of the oppressed classes cannot take place without the creation of a new society (PP 211). The point of this reference is not to revive Marxism. Marx was attached to the same idea of development that I have been questioning. The point is even if everyone was taken out of desperate poverty, this would not render the present world order just. To be sure, nothing could be more urgent, but we should be clear that this would at very best render the current world order more internally coherent. And whether one looks to Locke or to *The National Security Strategy of the United States* the legitimacy of the prevailing system rests by its own admissions on whether or not poverty is addressed. That is why the evidence that this responsibility is not being discharged is so devastating to the current world order.

The question of poverty and of inequality, when freed from the Western philosophical idea of development which forecloses all novelty, must be seen as the site at which the question of a radically new form of society is raised. To face this problem is philosophy's true task today, because it is here that it most clearly rejoins its own radical vocation. Precisely to the extent that the Western philosophical tradition has allowed itself to be compromised, this task that can best be performed –perhaps only performed– on a stage such as this one: that is to say a World Congress in which many different voices are heard.

#### NOTES

- 1 Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil: Or the Two Nations*, (1845), Book II, chapter 5.
- 2 Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 7-8. Henceforth WP.
- 3 Ludovico Vives, *De subventione pauperum*, Firenze: "La Nuova Italia" Editrice, 1973, p. 75, trans. Sister Alice Tabriner, "On Assistance to the Poor", in *A Sixteenth-Century Urban Report*, The School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, Chicago 1971, p. 50.
- 4 Domingo de Soto, *Deliberación en la causa de los pobres*. See Michael Moffat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Yale University Press, New Haven 1986, p. 109 and Louis Martz, *Poverty and Welfare in Habsburg Spain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, pp. 78-79.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröte* §185, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari: de Gruyter, Berlin 1980, p. 160. The observation is repeated in *Also sprach Zarathustra* where the observation is further clarified by a warning against the possible ill effects of misguided compassion: *Sämtliche Werke*, 4, pp. 114-115.
- 6 A. J. Carlyle, "The Theory of Property in Medieval Theology", *Property, Its Duties and Rights*, ed. Charles Gore, Macmillan, London 1913, pp. 118-132. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, 32, 5 ad.3. For an indication of how widespread this belief was, see Moffat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, pp. 110-111. Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis*, ed. James Brown Scott, Carnegie Institution, Washington 1931, Book

- II, ch. 2, sec. 6, pp. 115-116; trans. William Whewell, *On the Rights of War and Peace*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1853, p. 72.
- 7 S. Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, L. Lichfield, , Oxford 1710, II, vi, 6, p. 165.
  - 8 H. R. Fox Bourne, *The Life of John Locke*, Thoemmes Press, Bristol 1991, vol. 2, p. 390.
  - 9 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 170. Henceforth TT.
  - 10 Onora O'Neill, *The Bounds of Justice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 135-136.
  - 11 Immanuel Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, Akademie Ausgabe vol. 6, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1907, p. 262; trans. Mary J. Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 44. I have developed the argument only hinted at here in "Cosmopolitanism, Globalisation, and Ethical Responsibility", *Acta Institutionis Philosophiae et Aestheticae* (Tokyo), ed. T. Imamichi, vol. 19, 2003, forthcoming.
  - 12 W. Brandt, "A Plea for Change, Peace, Justice, Jobs", *North-South: A Programme for Survival*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1986, pp. 23-24. See also R. Bernasconi, "The Limits of the European Idea of Development", *Social Development*, eds. J. Rendtorff, A. Diderichsen, and P. Kemp. Copenhagen: pp. 185-203.
  - 13 R. Bernasconi, "Can Development Theory break with its past?", *African Philosophy*, 11, 1, June 1998, pp. 23-34.
  - 14 P.-J. Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions Économiques ou Philosophie de la Misère*, 2 vols., Marcel Rivière, Paris 1923.
  - 15 Karl Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy", *Collected Works*, vol. 6, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1976, p. 19. Henceforth PP.