

faith and development

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The War Against Poverty : Questioning Development

by Majid Rahnema*

Preconceived ideas are resistant, especially when nourished by the aggressive media of globalized liberalism. This is true of the fight against poverty which we now realize is not limited to so-called “underdeveloped” countries. Political and economic decision-makers ceaselessly repeat that the answer to social inequity and pauperism lies in the return of economic growth and the pursuit of a productivist economy.

But we have to recognize the fact that, even in periods of economic growth, the poor and the excluded continue to grow in number over the earth’s surface. The World Bank itself recognizes that “...development programs seem ineffective and ill-adapted to the needs of the poor”. Even the U.S., considered model-country of economic success, has nearly a million undernourished children.

Someone had to dare contradict such monolithic thinking. Majid Rahnema, Iranian ex-minister and long time active in U.N. institutions, has the great merit of trying to expose the real causes of pauperism and of denouncing the dupery involved in campaigns for poverty eradication which, according to him, “have, up to now, contributed more to weakening or even destroying, to uprooting the poor rather than to eradicating destitution.”

In his article, Majid Rahnema proposes a historical approach to the concept of poverty, and even more, a critical analysis of the idea of development. But, not content with giving a mere warning, he invites us, individually as well as collectively, to seek and invent new paradigms which take into consideration the human, cultural and historical realities as well as the movements of resistance to neo-liberal globalization, in different parts of the world.

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The word « poverty » has never had a single universal meaning. There are as many so-called “poor” as there are human beings on earth and in many cases, the same word has several referents which not only differ but even contradict each other. The word is therefore too general, too ambiguous, too relative, too contextual and therefore too polysemic to accept one universal definition.

In the pre-industrial vernacular¹ societies, the word “poverty” meant first of all a frugal way of life based on convivial relationships, on sharing, on reciprocity and solidarity with the other members of one’s social body, a wise attitude towards the concept of necessity, which meant seeking to live as simply as possible, with dignity, according to the existing resources in a given community. This is the origin of the term “convivial”, to describe this way of life.

On the other hand, we must note that this general form of poverty was perceived not only as the contrary of destitution but also as a shared weapon for all pre-industrial societies, to exorcise and combat this latter.

Poverty and Destitution

At the same time, the idea of lack (notwithstanding the different meanings given this word) has always been associated with that of poverty. For Thomas Aquinas², as for many others after him, poverty meant the lack of superfluous things, whereas destitution meant the lack of what is essential. The poor often considered the lack from which they suffered as a positive challenge and a permanent invitation to ceaselessly cultivate the needed human and social qualities, to avoid falling into destitution.

It was only after the industrial revolution that the dominant discourse would give poverty a single meaning, at once universal and economic. The original concept gradually became confused with that of destitution. The poor’s several ways of representing their condition were then assimilated to those invented by the new dominant powers: a basket of “lacks” and “needs”, purely material and disembedded from their cultural roots, in keeping with these powers’ own perception of wealth.

Limiting the multifarious meanings of poverty to simply that of indigence meant breaking away from the concept’s epistemological, anthropological as well as practical perception. This development reached a high point when the World Bank decided that, in the present state of the world, poverty could be universally described simply, as resulting from a maximum income of one dollar per day.

Parallel to this, the war engaged against “poverty” was based on at least two major *a priori*s: first of all, that all forms of lack which define poverty are essentially the result of “lag” due to the material and social “underdevelopment” of societies which are not yet “developed”; and secondly, that only politics of economic growth, using models from industrialized countries, would be able to save these societies and their members from this historical lag.

An « inventory » of the world, as established by the World Bank itself (particularly in the otherwise remarkable year-2000-report, authored by Deepa Narayan) is far from having convinced the vast majority of the world’s threatened population as to the applicability of this

¹ Societies in which the social and productive activities of their members, as well as their ways of satisfying needs, are based on cultural traditions proper to their history.

² Italian theologian and philosopher (1228-1274)

type of diagnosis and solution to their particular cases. The said Report gives an explanation: “Despite the considerable sums of money spent by national governments and international organizations (...) there are more poor people today than at the start of the decade.” And it adds: “Development programs seem ineffective and ill-adapted to the needs of the poor.”³

The Myth of Economic Growth

Statistics published by the same document provide even more disturbing data on the results of world campaigns engaged on the basis of the earlier mentioned *a priori*s. True enough, they point out the fact that, in the year 2000, 1.2 billion persons on earth had an income of less than a dollar per day and 2.8 billion lived with less than 2 dollars per day.

On top of this, other official statistics have observed that, even in the most “developed” Northern countries, where GNP has reached spectacular levels, hundreds of millions of persons continue to live below the “poverty line”. Though with one difference: due to the accelerated creation of socially and artificially invented new needs, this new line has been set, in their case, at an income of 20 – 27 dollars per day. This by itself tends to demonstrate that the myth of economic growth is not the manna from heaven which, at the start of the last century, everyone believed would solve all problems of populations in precarious situations.

The fact is that, contrary to the dominant monolithic thinking, modern market economy is a two-faced Janus: it produces a certain “plenty” for the rich, in terms of manufactured products; whereas, for the poor, it also acts as a cold machinery creating, at the same time – and often on a much faster pace – socially fabricated scarcities which precisely produce mass vulnerability and modern forms of destitution.

From this perspective, we see that modern productivist economy is finally not the sure remedy which we tend to prescribe against precarisation and pauperisation. It is more likely to be one of their principal causes, in the sense that its own need for economic growth is often considerably different from the needs of the population it is called to serve.

Serving the Richest Clients

These structural limitations are therefore what pushes the economy, on the one hand to better serve its rich clients, by answering the new needs it has created for them, and on the other, to integrate the poor in the pursuit of these created needs despite the fact that it has indirectly dispossessed them of all purchasing power to meet such needs. In this context, the market economy can be designated as principal agent of the systematic destruction of all subsistence economies and, with this, of all the self-defence mechanisms which, for centuries, the poor had built up to protect themselves from destitution.

Institutional logic and the construction of a modern power machinery language, its vocabulary and reinvented words disembedded from their origins, have succeeded in concealing the gravity of the matter, using this same language and related practices. Just recently, in Nantes, Ingram, World Bank representative at the last UNESCO “*Poverty and Human Rights*” forum, served as an example in stating that world poverty had even decreased in the course of the last years, particularly in some important Asian countries like China and India.

³ Deepa Narayan, *Voices of the Poor, Can Anyone Hear Us ?* Oxford University Press/ World Bank, 2000.

However, this type of « statistics » has problems convincing victims of globalized precarisation. For, its argument seems to amount more to an exercise in self-defence and media presentation than to an objective analysis, free of ulterior motives, of what is real in the concerned persons' daily lives (as described by the earlier mentioned World Bank Report, through statements gathered by researchers.)

So, poverty is first defined as a daily « income » of one dollar per person. Then, statistics are provided for those who have succeeded in going beyond this income level, as proof that they have ceased to be poor because their new "income" has finally placed them above the poverty line. This way the campaign for poverty eradication will have known success, despite the fact that new market conditions have, meantime, rendered life among the poor even more intolerable than it was in the past.

Questioning the "Certainties"

As we probe into what is going wrong, a question inevitably comes to mind: "How can one think and act otherwise?...first of all, to be able to understand the unquestionable ill-being of the great majority of humans and, consequently, be able to discover with them the possible ways of working together, in order to help them?"

To clear the wilderness along this route, it seems evident that the first steps to take are towards objectively examining the dead-ends to which past politics have led us, particularly within the last fifty years, under the banner of "development" and economic growth. And this examination will only be meaningful and useful if it starts with rejecting all *a priori*s of an ideological character which, by its very nature, would forbid all surprises or all unforeseen discoveries along the unknown paths.

It is about time the machineries of economic and state powers, as well as social actors, without any exception, free themselves of ideological and all other constraints which block them from questioning the "certainties" which, up to now, have served as references. Most of these certainties stop one and the other from engaging in a serene and fruitful dialogue with different social actors who are now committed, in different and multiple degrees, to reinventing their present reality. It is therefore more than ever necessary to see the world as it is lived and constantly relived in the daily practice of the overwhelming majority of its population.

And yet, the dangers that now accumulate on the world's horizon are becoming an unprecedented threat to the future of all human beings, without exception, be they called poor or rich, "developed" or "developing". If only to protect themselves, the governing institutions have no other choice but to open up to alternatives which are likely to impede the worst catastrophes. On the other hand, the last decades have shown that sedative or face-lift-like politics cannot deceive anyone. In fact, quite often, they only end up aggravating the situation. More than ever, it is necessary to ask, with a totally open mind, the fundamental questions to all the increasing forms of creative resistance to the economy's complete hold on the life of all world populations.

The founding paradigms of so-called economic growth societies must also be questioned, in view of creating new ones. Grassroots movements that, on different levels and scales, are coming up in different parts of the world, have already started an important action in this direction. And these new emerging forms of resistance to the new dictatorship of the market economy quite often carry alternatives that are already working in their own life-spaces.

And yet, these emerging counter-powers are constantly under attack from the dominant economic system and its sub-systems of governance and representation, more and more determined to colonize the “space within” among the poor, to the extent of manipulating their different victims into participating, often unknowingly, in the production and propagation of moral and physical destitution, which can corrupt them. The danger is so real that even if a new configuration of resistance and counter-powers came up but did not question the dual nature of the dominant economy (ie. its exceptional capacity to produce at the same time the “affluence” and the “destitution” which are indispensable to maximizing profits), the problems of poverty would still remain unsolved

In fact, three aspects of this « problem » may perpetuate themselves and, in so doing, may undermine the reappearance of new simple and frugal modes of life in keeping with the tradition that we have called convivial poverty. I am speaking here of: the continued destruction of the balance and proportionality needed to regenerate the “space within” in the life of the poor; the systematic exposure of everyone to the new needs created by the economy; the loss of the poor’s “immune system”, of their cultural and human gains which had always allowed them to maintain their adaptative and regenerative powers. An improvement in their external physical conditions could also be accompanied by a parallel change in their inner world. This would make them lose the essential, the needed harmony with their natural and human environments which they still need in order to live a simple, frugal and autonomous mode of life, within the conditions of modernity.

For all these reasons, a serious study of the different dimensions of poverty, as a simple and frugal way of life must necessarily be part of the search for new paradigms as well as for any other perception of one’s own inner wealths and poverties – on a collective as well as on a personal plane: the first, in view of re-establishing great social harmonies, on new foundations: the second which aims at better formulating basic existential and ontological questions, on the meaning of life, of love, of friendship, of suffering and of death.

Signals from the Grassroots

On the collective plane, it is really encouraging to observe that, in the face of powerful assaults from dominant powers, we are receiving signals from the grassroots, which are sometimes invisible and illegible in the visible world. Significant movements of resistance and social regeneration have emerged within the last decades, seeking new forms of wealth. Whether it involves millions of associations and groups which flourish here and there to exercise their formerly “invisible” power – in the universities, the streets, the villages or other meeting places, in the form of non-violent protests, occupation of lands or the practice of solidarity with women – or whether it involves more spectacular movements like the Zapatista rebellion, the “*sans terre* (landless)” of Brazil, or others inspired by Gandhian or Vedic traditions such as the *sarvodaya* and the *swadhyaya* in India, we are witnessing the emergence of new spaces of resistance aiming at regenerating all the wealth in their convivial poverty. In these different spaces, the different quests for simple and frugal modes of life, in harmony with their cultural heritage, are no more regarded as obsolete fixations on the past but as a challenge to the dominant and manipulative binary language.

However, the advent of these new myriads of “subterranean”, of collective resistance, should not conceal the well-founded anxiety, which is felt by all sensitive students of the history of human societies. In this particularly perilous stage of history where the totality of a body of

economic, technological and political facts, has more than ever allowed the dominant power to manipulate all its victims into “participating” in its own project of hegemony, it is important for all and each of us to understand the extreme fragility of social movements which would tend to neglect the quasi sacred value of the personal “space within”.

It is for this that a serious study of the different dimensions of poverty, as a simple and frugal way of life, must inevitably lead any serious “neighbor” to develop a personal ethics, that is, a perception of his own inner wealth and lacks, to better ask existential questions like the meaning of life, of love, of friendship and of death.

The war against the different forms of destitution could therefore start with each person’s probing into the workings of his own participation in the progress of physical and moral destitution. For instance, each human being could find ways of reorganizing his personal life, to lighten as much as possible the burden that his own mode of living has laid on his neighbour’s shoulders: by benefiting from all forms of social action, from any collective project or commitment to unmask and refute all preconceived ideas; by being a little spark in the dark, and sharing with friends and neighbours the fruits of one’s experiences and knowledge; by inviting them to realize, humbly, what little they can do for the other in peril, rather than act in a quixotic way, with pompous, unrealizable objectives which serve their ego more than they serve the poor.

We must also understand that, even socially, the dream and action for a destitution-free world are not necessarily realized through projects of direct aide to the needy but rather through lucid and multifarious combats against the whole mechanism of scarcity production, against all the political, economic and social systems that perpetuate violence, covetousness and misery. This combat would also necessarily involve all forms of personal resistance and struggles against geopolitical practices, called “aide” or “cooperation” by arms manufacturers and arms merchants towards their protégés and clients (governments and different opposition forces in their service), practices which always make of the poor their permanent victims.

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