

La Pauvreté

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The socially imposed forms of material destitution we see today, often confused with poverty, are unquestionably a disgrace. The visceral outrage that such destitution arouses is all the more understandable given that its spread is directly linked to the very systems of production and governance that should, in theory at least, be able to bring an end to it, just as they have contributed to creating it. With technology and the economy working in tandem, we are more than ever in a position to share the benefits with *all* the world's people so that they can live in dignity. The food industry, for example, produces enough food to feed nine billion people – that is, one and a half times the world's population. Yet nearly one and a half billion people are still undernourished or threatened by hunger. In the United States alone, which is generally regarded as a model of economic success, there are nearly one million undernourished children.

The general indignation provoked by poverty has made it one of the favourite subjects on the web's **World Book Catalogue**, which offers over 60,000 titles on that topic. At the same time, the number of studies on the topic – as well as resources allocated to the “solutions” of “problems” related to poverty – has increased exponentially. Yet campaigns that aim to eradicate poverty contribute in their own way to creating further destitution. For centuries, a kind of “convivial” poverty constituted a powerful shield against destitution for the poor¹. Today, however, global processes that create social destitution are threatening to drive out this regenerative poverty. What I mean by *regenerative* poverty is a simple, frugal way of living that characterizes vernacular societies, allowing them to maintain the social and environmental equilibrium essential for survival in the face of destitution.

A major obstacle to the study of problems related to what we call “poverty” comes from the fact that the word not only does not have the same meaning for everyone, but the very concept of poverty is a social construction impossible to define at a universal level. As a result, what is done for the poor often has nothing to do with those who really are poor. For no two poor people are alike. Poor in what way, to begin with? In money, in relationships, in intelligence, in cattle, in children, in time, in love, in health?

For centuries there was no term for what we currently call “the poor” or “poverty”. The word was simply absent from the world's vocabularies. Of course, the adjective “poor” always existed and was applied to nouns such as soil, health, or a relationship qualified as “poor”. In other words, it was used to denote unflattering aspects of the noun it was applied to. Thus, every individual was, in some way or other, poor – or rich – in some aspects of his or her life, but was never entirely poor. Words such as “poor” and “poverty” were invented relatively recently. Their appearance seems to have coincided with an economic evolution

¹ *Editor's note:* The word “convivial” here expresses the way the author sees the life of the poor in “vernacular” societies in which they are looked after, respected, and included in community life.

around the tenth or eighth century BCE, which made it possible for a small number of greedy landowners to force farmers to give up their land so they could get rich at their expense.

But even then, people described as poor often had little in common. Moreover, the world's many languages seem to have competed with each other to coin a variety of words and idioms to name their "poor" and qualify the various conditions and statuses associated with poverty. In Persian, for instance, there are more than eighty words for naming those who, for one reason or another, are perceived as poor. In most African languages, at least ten words have been identified for poverty. The Torah uses eight for the purpose. In the Middle Ages, the Latin words covering the range of conditions embraced by the concept numbered well over forty. To this impressive variety of words found at the national or dictionary level, many more should be added from the corresponding dialects, slang or colloquial expressions used at the vernacular level. But while this plurality of words made it possible to understand what the person designated as poor was suffering from, the use of a single word to name all the poor of the world leaves no room for such nuance. It thus opens the way to all forms of arbitrary interventions intended to define their needs.

At another level, it is interesting to note that the "poor-rich" opposition is an equally recent construct. For a long time, and in many cultures of the world, poor was not always the opposite of rich. In Europe, for ages, the opposite of the pauper was the potens (the powerful) rather than the rich. In the ninth century, the pauper was considered a free man whose freedom was imperilled only by the potentes. Other considerations such as falling from one's station in life, being deprived of one's instruments of labour, the loss of one's status or the marks of one's profession (for a cleric, the loss of his books; for a noble, the loss of his horse or arms), lack of protection, exclusion from one's community, abandonment, infirmity, or public humiliation defined the poor. The Tswana people of South Africa recognized their poor by their reaction to the appearance of locusts. While the rich were appalled lest the locusts eat the grass their cattle needed, the poor, who had no cattle, rejoiced because they could eat the locusts themselves.

From the Real Poor to the Virtual Poor of "Newspeak"

All human cultures have experienced the ambiguities arising from the multiplicity of words used to define the poor, the destitute, the wretched. Yet a fundamental difference distinguishes these from today's word "poor," which we are trying to define universally. While the former lived in a familiar, relatively narrow environment, today's "poor" – an unknown entity invented by modern "newspeak" – are programmed to be transplanted from their native land to the "Global Village." These poor are abstract beings with universal aspirations, whose stereotyped profile has nothing in common with the traditional poor, which this virtual character wants to absorb (*phagocytose*²).

In the villages where the convivial poor lived, the term given to them was generally precise enough that their neighbours could know, or at least guess, what their problem was and what they could do to help. Faced with a person called *bi kas* in Persian, for example, or *ki amul nit* in Wolof, his compatriots would know that this person quite literally had no one in life to look after him and keep him company. This would move them to include him as well as they could in a group of neighbours who could alleviate his solitude. As soon as

² *Editor's note:* Phagocytose (v.t.): engulf or absorb (a cell or particle) so as to cause isolation or destruction.

he crossed the boundaries of his community, however, he would become an ambiguous character, difficult to define or figure out.

All this changed dramatically when the world to which the poor belonged got larger and turned them into anonymous individuals possessed of an identity or social security card certifying that their daily revenue was below a certain “poverty line” – a line the World Bank fixes today at one dollar per day for all the poor of the world.

However, whatever the time or place, and whatever the criteria used to define the poor, the label is inevitably arbitrary. And it is even less pertinent when applied to an individual who has been uprooted and merged into the anonymous magma of the atomized mass. At best, the label tells us more about the authority from which it emanates than about those it purports to define. It is evident, therefore, that the notion of poverty is too general, too ambiguous, too relative and too contextual to be easily defined, or its precise nature universally grasped.

It is also a theoretical impossibility for another reason: the “needs” that are perceived by some to define poverty are perceived by others as riches. The absence of non-essential goods is seen by the voluntary poor – the “*poor in spirit*” – as God’s gift to the virtuous to help them rise above the enslaving power of materiality.

Poverty vs Destitution

In order to engage in a conversation that is free from the confusion created by so many words and meanings, we thought it essential to put the concepts of poverty and destitution back into their archeological and historical context. In other words, to go beyond words and their interpretation in an effort to rediscover their place – often fundamental – in societies’ struggles to combat need and find a better life. A struggle not circumscribed by simple survival, but one which, according to a Borana sage, should lead the community to what his ancestors called *fidnaa* or *gabbina* – “the radiant satisfaction of the well-fed person freed from all worries.”

It was in this spirit that we revisited an old distinction between poverty and destitution: a distinction attributed to Saint Thomas, for whom poverty meant the absence of the superfluous, of the non-essential, while destitution was defined as the lack of the bare necessities of life. In line with this definition, Proudhon would say later that poverty was “the normal condition of man in civilization,” while Péguy would argue that poverty was like a stronghold, a sanctuary that would enable the person confined within it to avoid destitution. The historian Michel Mollat concluded that destitution was, until the industrial revolution, an accident rather than a sociological phenomenon.

This distinction leads us to understand poverty as a way of life, a condition based on principles of simplicity, frugality and consideration for one’s neighbours. A way of life based on concepts such as *qana’at* (a word which means, in Persian and in Arabic, to be satisfied with one’s lot in life, which is itself determined by a cosmic order), conviviality and mutual support within a community. This way of life represents an ethic and a will to live together according to culturally defined criteria of justice, solidarity and social cohesion – qualities that are the very basis of all the culturally evolved ways of facing need.

Destitution, on the other hand, is an entirely different condition. It describes a fall into a world without landmarks, where the subject suddenly feels deprived of his vital energies, both individual and social – energies that are essential in order for him to control his destiny. Deprived of his means of defense and reduced to a state of total powerlessness, the subject, shattered in body and soul, reminds us of a drowning person whose rescue depends on a lifebuoy thrown to him by someone else. Such conditions of utter dejection and despair can affect the victim's moral fibre and will to survive. As Simone Weil observed, his / , destroyed from the outside, is “all the more readily annihilated if the afflicted person has a weak character.”

The moral destitution that dehumanizes its victims is not, however, confined to the materially destitute. It can also strike the rich and affluent in search of the superfluous, in a way that is perhaps even more pernicious. In this case, it can take the form of a pathological obsession with possessions and lead to a total disregard for others. Paradoxically, it can also lead to bizarre alliances between the utterly destitute and the champions of extremist movements, fascist or pro-fascist, populist and fundamentalist, who dishonour the poor while pretending to save them.

Poverty and Destitution in Vernacular Societies

The fundamental distinction proposed here between poverty and destitution can now help us recognize at least three large families of poverty and two families of destitution: convivial, voluntary and modern poverty, on the one hand; vernacular and modern destitution on the other.

Convivial Poverty

Observed from the outside, the vernacular niche has all the appearances of a simple, even primitive, world. Yet it constitutes a veritable microcosm of signs, symbols, behaviours, discourses, languages, beliefs, myths, customs and traditions that make sense to members of the group and bind them together. This microcosm holds all the wisdom, knowledge and know-how of generations of ancestors and can be compared to a living cell that contains all the genetic secrets that allow it to maintain and regenerate its immune defense mechanisms. Furthermore, when the traditionally established human, social or environmental equilibrium of the microcosm is threatened, the *habitus* acquired by the poor helps them organize themselves to stave off destitution.

It goes without saying that this type of poverty, which combines simplicity and a sharp sense of belonging to a social body, could not have developed outside the conditions that characterize vernacular communities. Six of these conditions are worth mentioning here:

- a) Their size is limited.
- b) They are made up of a living web of social and cultural relations, one that affords its members a protection comparable to an immune system.
- c) The resources necessary for their sustenance are well defined and locally produced.
- d) They have no “need” in the modern sense of the word; rather, what they perceive as necessary and desirable in their common struggle against neediness is continually redefined and reassessed to meet their current requirements.
- e) They do not try to maximize their physical resources at any cost, but rather develop within their community all the wealth that seems essential in their struggle against need. More importantly, they place a high value on social cohesion, conviviality, and

- respect for the natural and social equilibrium so indispensable to the well-being of the group.
- f) Their main activities are oriented toward the satisfaction of the social body's need rather than toward profitability.

For similar reasons, convivial poverty as a way of life encourages practices born of, and dictated by, the same considerations. Take, for example, hospitality, the support given to those in need, or the social control of envy. These practices are all inspired by considerations based on common sense, as well as on ethical and social considerations linked to their communal life.

The Voluntary Poor

A second category of poor commonly found in vernacular societies has been labelled "voluntary". That is, it represents a deliberate choice of a way of life characterized by radical simplicity and based on the conviction that the paths to "more being" are not the same as the paths to "more having". For its proponents, that choice is perceived as a quest for riches of a superior kind and for a life devoid of all forms of material dependence. It is this vision which made Socrates say of his sartorial poverty that it had helped him enjoy total freedom and a wealth that could not be compared with the wealth of the rich.

Destitution

We come at last to destitution, which, as we said earlier, is different from poverty. In its vernacular form, destitution was an accident rather than a social phenomenon. Those who *fell into* a state of destitution were a category of people more or less excluded or abandoned by the vernacular niches. Their pitiful state served as a pretext to discredit poverty, and they were treated like the villain of the *Roman de Renart*, the "*povres hom qui n'a avoir/Fut fet de la merde au diable*".³

The Modernization of Poverty and Destitution

The new mode of production introduced by the Industrial Revolution represented a total sociological and epistemological break in most fields of human activity. It was at the root of a radical shift in perception about "wealth" and "poverty", as these terms had been understood until then. By systematically producing new needs, it dealt a fatal blow to the almost organic equilibrium that characterized vernacular societies. This was followed by a profound change in the culturally established norms that had served to distinguish the essential from the non-essential.

Poverty Modernized: A Direct Product of the New Mode of Production

Modernized poverty is thus as much the result of multiple breaks caused by the establishment of the new mode of production as it is of pressures, mirages and expectations related to the promises made by the new economy. These phenomena had the effect of confronting the losers of this new order with a type of induced scarcity for which they were unprepared.

What is radically new in this condition is the fact that for the first time in history, the techno-economic system imposed on society, which was supposed to guide it towards affluence,

³ *Editor's note:* Loosely translated, this means "the poor wretches who have nothing are born of the devil's shit."

was at the same time structurally involved in the production of scarcity and a modernized form of destitution. The fact that this second aspect of the system remains somewhat less known may be attributed to its remarkable ability to colonize the imagination of most of its victims – so much so that many of them continue to see in it the answer to their unsatisfied needs. Thanks to this ability, the system has managed to transform a large number of its victims into more or less active agents of their own degradation.

Modernized poverty embodies all the contradictions of this system – from those aspects which oppose its practice of multiplying needs for lucrative purposes, to its discourse based on promises to transform scarcity into affluence for the benefit of all its consumers. These aspects of the production system transform it into a two-faced Janus: one face presenting the system as the indisputable creator of an unprecedented wealth of goods and products, the other (well-hidden) face creating socially fabricated scarcity as a direct result of its excessive production of “goods” and “services”. This induced scarcity, unlike natural scarcity, is the main cause of most of the new deprivations that affect the poor today. Aided by its “face” of promises and abetted by powerful promotion mechanisms, the system has succeeded in persuading its victims that they too may attain an earthly paradise of unlimited pleasures – a paradise previously reserved for the rich. Meanwhile, the great majority of poor find themselves exposed to frustrations that Ivan Illich has compared to Tantalus’ punishment. They are placed in a world of “plenty” where everything is *supposedly* within their reach. But the more the objects they long to possess multiply around them, the more they realize that these are only affordable by those with the means to pay for them.

The essence of modernized poverty lies in this new existential frustration - often humiliating and corrosive - which affects entire populations. On the one hand, these are intoxicated by needs that are constantly dangled in front of their eyes, while on the other, they are increasingly dispossessed of the means to satisfy them.

Modernized Poverty

The explosive production of induced needs is at the origin of entirely new forms of destitution and hardship which we may call *modernized destitution*. It is the kind of destitution that historians of the Industrial Revolution have called pauperism: a condition that constitutes a moral degradation of the convivial poor exposed to the violent destruction of their vernacular niche. An even more tragic variant of this destitution was later exported to what we call the “third world”, the very place where, according to anthropologist Lucie Mair, “destitution was unthinkable since there was no reason why someone in need of help could not get it”. The politics of recolonization of these countries, conducted under the banner of “development” and compounded by the massive importation of “values” and products from the dominant economy that ultimately led to the systematic destruction of the moral economies of survival, have all contributed to the transformation of social life into a particularly virulent cultural medium – one that produces ever more abject forms of modernized destitution. Paradoxically, these new forms of destitution have played an important part in the rise of fundamentalist movements.

Helping the Poor: Fraud (Deception) and Metamorphosis

It is this specific context that led the dominant powers in our economized world to elaborate various forms of *aid* and *assistance* to the poor and to organize campaigns aimed at the eradication of poverty. These campaigns, however, have, on the whole, contributed far

more to the weakening of that world – indeed, to its destruction and to the uprooting of the poor – than to the eradication of poverty.

The sense of the word *aid* has been so corrupted that it has come to mean the opposite of what it originally meant. Jesus' famous parable of The Good Samaritan well expressed the rich and profound original meaning of that word. The spontaneous gesture of the Samaritan represents compassion in its purest form: a human being who is so moved by the distress of his fellow man that he spontaneously offers his help, with no ulterior motive.

An archaeological examination of this form of aid shows that it has gone through at least three metamorphoses. The first dates from the actual *invention* of the poor, when the poor were for the first time identified with a pre-existing social image. The institutionalization of this concept, first by churches of various denominations and then by secular authorities (particularly the state) was the beginning of a series of transformations that turned the initially compassionate gesture of the Samaritan into a veritable threat to the "neighbour" in need of assistance. Despite the best intentions, these institutionalized forms of aid eventually led to the creation of an enslaving dependency.

Another aspect of this corruption of aid is the simplistic interpretation often given to the meaning of one's "neighbour" as Christ understood the term. On rereading the parable it is clear that for Jesus, a neighbour is never just anybody. Rather, the compassionate gesture that comes straight from the heart and inspires one person to spontaneously extend his help to another *makes* the other a neighbour. By contrast, institutionalized aid involves interventions that often have nothing to do with one's relationship to one's fellow beings, since the person supposedly being helped becomes an instrument of power in the hands of the one providing the "aid". It is not surprising, therefore, that a large proportion of expenses made under the label of "aid" go toward supporting the infrastructures needed to maintain and reinforce dependency – in particular, measures for controlling and repressing the targeted populations, and economic, financial, and especially military institutions that do nothing to help the poor fight against destitution.

It is important, therefore, that when pursuing a conversation on this subject we clarify from the start what we mean by "aid", and what the aim of aid is for the targeted populations or persons. At the same time we must also ask questions that are both more precise and more substantive. For example: Who helps whom? What sort of "help" do the "poor" really need? Even more to the point: Would they need our help if we had left them in peace, if we did not constantly harass them to change their way of life and style of production, if we had not systematically attacked their own way of helping one another? A deeper analysis of these questions would show that the help we are promoting today under the banner of aid amounts to little more than a self-centred or self-serving kind of aid.

Some Elements of Reflection for an Alternative Approach

If the answers to these questions, as to previous ones, are often disappointing, it is because the sufferings, tribulations and aspirations of the poor have been "diagnosed" without regard to the social structures that have given rise to them. What the poor actually suffer from, and what *to them* seems important and desirable for their well being has, in practice, as little relevance for the recipients themselves as it has for the donor who is giving out of charity in order to save his soul.

Politicians and their experts on poverty refuse to recognize the deep causes underlying the phenomenon of pauperization. They never try to see if they can eliminate the social disparities or mechanisms that create scarcity. They are more concerned with minimizing some of the disgraceful effects of these disparities so as to better preserve the existing structures of the society that generates them. More preoccupied with their own problems than those of the poor, they are forever proposing measures of a sedative and illusory nature, which in practice contribute further the structural dependence of the poor on the forces that exploit them.

At the risk of disappointing readers, this talk will end without a “solution” being proposed, so as to avoid falling into the same trap. However, what we will attempt to do in conclusion is to share some elements of reflection, based on the archaeological examination described above, to explain the different dimensions of this condition.

Poverty Is Not A “Problem”

There seems no reason to think that a way of life based on simplicity, frugality, moderation and the respect of others and of nature – a way of life that has been “the normal condition of man in civilization” – should in itself represent a “problem” for anyone. Yet that is what it became from the moment that this way of life was “problematized” in order to justify a certain discourse and the practices that have become necessary to maintain a structurally pauperizing society. This same type of problematization has made it possible for a society of “non-poor” to reduce poverty to a simple bundle of lacks, to a quasi-congenital, naturalized deficiency and ultimately, although it is not acknowledged as such, to a *de facto* inferiority. Indeed, it is this same tendency to problematize the issue that has made it possible for the protagonists of the gradual economization of human societies to pursue their war of nearly five centuries against the way of life of the poor and their moral economy of subsistence.

The problem of the poor has never been their poverty, however, but rather the particular configuration engendered by a blend of knowledge, power and a style of intervention that has systematically deprived them of their own means of self-defence against destitution – the very same configuration that continues to produce socially fabricated scarcity today and, as a consequence, the type of destitution that drives out or corrupts poverty. It is unrealistic to think that we can bring about an end to this state of affairs as long as this type of problematization is being used by the dominant powers to establish their own objectives of pure profit and technological “progress” rather than focusing on goals based on principles of social justice, respect for equilibrium and a sense of moderation – principles that are indispensable for an endogenous change in favour of the poor.

Does this mean we should do without the economy? Modern economy, as such, is one of the main causes of the spread of destitution in the world today. Unlike the ancient *oekonomia* which gave it its name, today’s economy is no longer the art of providing for the needs of the society it was called to serve. Since the economy has distanced itself from society to impose its own logic of expansion in the service of profit, what it produces serves only those who want to shape it according to their own interests.

As a result, the global market economy has created a paradoxical situation in which everything seems at the same time both possible and blocked. Possible, because the technological/economic tandem is capable of flooding the market with an unprecedented array of goods and services and, theoretically, of providing for the basic needs of everyone

in the world. Blocked, because the same machine that produces affluence is also the one that systematically generates misery.

The way forward lies neither in an economy based on productivity and devoted only to profit-making, nor in a total rejection of economic institutions. As Gandhi once said, not an *egonomy* at the service of the well-to-do, but an economy re-embedded in the social life of the community, one that would respond, first and foremost, to the need of the social body as a whole, and in particular, to the need of its most deprived members.

The Ambiguous Role of External Contributions in the Problematic of Scarcity

One paralyzing aspect of a modern economy based on productivity is its claim that it can eliminate all the deficiencies affecting the poor by an influx of external contributions. This constitutes the basis of its conviction that strong and durable economic growth is the ultimate answer to poverty. Yet no human society depends entirely on the improvement of external conditions for the well-being of its members. The truth is that vernacular societies have always known how to protect themselves against destitution with little external help. For their members, need was not defined from the outside as something that could only be satisfied through mechanical processes implemented by others. Instead there was a resonance and creative tension between the people's felt needs and their perception of what was required to meet them. The solution could involve giving themselves the means to satisfy their needs, trying new techniques, taking refuge in frugality, or sublimating the need to fulfill them by turning to other means drawn from their traditions of self-restraint.

By way of example, the poverty of farmers in the South is attributed by today's experts to the fact that they lack chemical fertilizers, fuel, tractors and other agricultural machinery, along with the necessary capital and technical knowledge. Yet neither the definition of their needs nor the answers put forward correspond to the idea that the poor themselves have of them. When they sense a deterioration in production, they organize themselves according to concrete, multidimensional objectives: how to improve or increase the most practical and cheapest means of avoiding a bad harvest, or even destitution? To use an economic term that is fashionable in the United States, it is the "end use", or the practicality of the objective to be achieved, that concerns them, and that determines the best means to achieve that end.

This example clearly shows that the deprivations attributed to the poor often have nothing to do with the way they themselves perceive them. In the traditions of convivial poverty, needs are perceived and experienced in a very different way. They often constitute a challenge for the poor and give them new incentives to be creative and strong in the face of need. At the social level, this tension, which can be as stimulating and invigorating as it is painful, has constituted the main wealth of the poor by encouraging them to find ways of improving their lives with what they have, while strengthening their relationships and the social and natural equilibriums of their society. All this contributes to preserving the balance that is essential to their well-being.

By reducing the issue of needs to something that can be met by external contributions – contributions that corresponded mainly to profit-making imperatives – the modern economy has exposed its consumers to needs that make them increasingly dependent on its power. In the case we have just described, it has burdened them, in the name of development, with the capital, the technologies and the imported products that have deprived them of all their

means of autonomous self-defence and made them structurally dependent on forces that have become ever more difficult for them to control or stop.

The Poor as Agents of Their Own Destiny

This brings us back to a critical issue to which the modern productivist economy has always been indifferent: the central place that the poor continue to occupy in their own destiny. Whatever image we may have of them or however we define them, the outcome of their fight against destitution ultimately depends on them – on their strength of character, their wisdom and intelligence, their capacity to organize themselves and show resilience in the face of misfortune – and on the strength of people around them. Social or physical contributions coming from the outside are appreciated, as long as they don't become potential instruments of enslavement. Ultimately, it is the poor, and they alone, who can transform a shortage or a threat to their integrity into an opportunity for improvement and a new victory for themselves. They are the ones who are in the best position to find the correct answers and the most realistic solutions to their questions. The “problem” of the poor comes from the fact that the development or aid systems created to help them instead deprive them of their capacity for self-management and self-defence. By systematically pushing them into destitution, these systems rob the poor of the very qualities that had once made it possible for them to resist it.

“Leave the Poor In Peace!”

Gandhi's long experience with the poor led him to urge the would-be Doctors in Poverty to “leave the poor in peace” – or more to the point, “to get off their backs”. He understood that his friends, the poor, would be better off if they were not pushed into destitution in the name of aid. Leaving the poor in peace also meant that we should not fight *against* their poverty but rather give it back to them so that they could rediscover the ability to protect themselves against destitution. This did not mean that a society worthy of the name should extend this principle to the people and institutions that deliberately create destitution at all levels. If it is essential that the poor be protected against the forces which hamper their autonomous ability to protect themselves against destitution, it is just as important that the social actors themselves – starting with the groups that are economically privileged – become aware of the cause and effect relationship between their own activities and the creation of destitution, and that they draw the necessary conclusions.

The fate of the poor in economically developed societies is reminiscent in many ways of the fate of people shipwrecked on old, overloaded boats to whom relief organizations are throwing lifebelts. This type of intervention is what usually qualifies as “aid to the poor” or “the fight against poverty”. Unfortunately, saving a few people makes those who have helped them forget what originally caused the boat to sink. To recognize that there are four billion people on earth whose daily revenue is less than two dollars a day is to realize that the immense economic and technological “progress” we have made has led to an unprecedented increase in the number of shipwreck victims. In such conditions, not only must the poor be left in peace, but we must also realize that the race toward economic growth is not the solution to their problem. On the contrary: it is itself the problem, one that will eventually have to be faced without fear or prejudices.

When Victims Participate in Their Own Enslavement

It is not easy to resolutely tackle this problem at a time when the balance of power and dependence gets stronger with the globalization of the economy. The new order of production brought about by the economic-technological tandem has already swept us all along a tragic course – tragic in the Greek sense of the word. As already noted, we can no longer blame the economy alone for the creation of socially fabricated scarcity. For, once it had established its new empire over all the social institutions that created it, it also succeeded in fulfilling the old dream of all dominant powers: to transform most of the social actors, including the victims most subject to its abuses, into agents of its own pursuits, often without their realization. In all areas where the various social actors carry out their daily activities, be they technological, social, political, cultural, educative, or theoretical in nature, they are actually involved in the production of scarcity. In other words, the interplay of power and knowledge underlying the double system of production of goods and needs tends today to transform all social actors, without exception, into potential participants in the propagation of destitution.

Changing the Paradigms

Faced with such a serious impasse, is it still conceivable that the poor and their friends could rediscover their regenerative poverty in a way that would allow them to regain the fundamental equilibria necessary for their survival? The right answer to that question is not easy to find, and we will continue to come up with the wrong answers if we refuse, as before, to examine the social structures that led to the present globalization of destitution.

Yet, for the objective observer as for most of the victims of this globalization, the reasons are quite clear. They are linked to the existence of systems of governance and economic domination that work hand in hand with large interests – independently of their discourse or political choice – and that today control the global market economy. The relentless battle that these systems have waged against subsistence economies is not foreign to this state of affairs. Where it was successful, it also uprooted most of the vernacular producers and caused them to lose all the tools they had so patiently developed to deal with life's necessities. The dominant discourse continues to proclaim its faith in the invisible hand of the market, notably in the *trickle-down effect* that is eventually supposed to bring some of the benefits of this economy to its present victims.

All the elements we have brought together in the course of this talk demonstrate that the underlying paradigm – i.e. the endless pursuit of economic growth – does not hold anymore. It seems clear, therefore, that our dream of a world free from destitution cannot be fulfilled without a thorough revision of the premises underpinning the new economic imperialism – a shift in direction comparable to the Copernican revolution. New paradigms must be found that will take into account, first and foremost, the multiplicity of human factors, both cultural and historical, that have characterized the experiences of the poor over thousands of years. More specifically, that have characterized their past and present life experiences as expressed in the many resistance movements that, in the past four or five years, have opposed market forces all over the world.

Re-inventing the Traditions of Convivial Poverty and Voluntary Simplicity

A model of reinvented poverty based on the traditional simple, frugal ways of life present in all the cultures of the world seems to be inspiring a growing number of people from all social backgrounds. Even in typical consumer societies where economic agents occupy an ever greater space in vernacular life, voluntary simplicity is again being seen as an effective weapon against subjection. Besides transcending traditional geographical and economic classifications, since it concerns all parts of the world without distinction, the search for a way of life liberated from needs invented by others is as remarkable for its innovative qualities as for its scope.

All over the world, young people in particular seem to have learned a lesson from the past two centuries. Where their elders placed their hopes in great popular revolutions that promised to transform the world within a few decades, today's younger generation does not believe in an abstract humanity built on ideologies. The utter confusion in which millions of people live, and the disillusionment bred by the empty promises of corrupt politicians and power-hungry prophets, seems to have restored a taste for friendship and for more lively relationships with others and with nature, as well as a desire to explore their inner world and the surprises and joys of simple encounters. Faced with the perverted power of the dominant institutions and the temptation of money and personal success, they are giving birth to an alternative world founded on a very different ethic.

The great abstract myths are giving way to an interest in things as they are; as Leonard Cohen writes in his song *Anthem*, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." The logic of a binary world, the developed and the underdeveloped, the scientific and the superstitious, in black and white, is giving way to a world in which all the colours of the rainbow are seen as sources of light and learning. People no longer hold the view that modern pots made of iron or plastic are better than the sculpted earthenware of our "underdeveloped" ancestors simply because those are more fragile or less functional.

A new *épistémè* and new forms of action, interaction and alliances seem about to be born, bringing together men and women who feel and understand the beauty of a simple, frugal way of life free from the obsession of "more having". The birth of this *épistémè*, which embraces all the poor of the world, portends a world that could eventually provide more creative responses to their sufferings; a world in which the various social actors would seriously reassess their productive activities in order to end their participation in creating scarcity; a world in which more and more people would take advantage of all the social actions, undertakings or individual and collective engagements, to bring the masks down and refute received ideas; finally, a world in which everyone would rediscover and infuse "neighbourliness" in their daily activities instead of trying to save an abstract humanity.

In such a world, the dream world free from destitution as promulgated today by the World Bank would cease to be exploited to serve the mechanisms of dependence tied to the so-called aid and welfare programs. Instead, it would help local people create a multiplicity and diversity of *centres* in all the places where the poor live and suffer. These centres would benefit from sharing not only their own experiences, but those of their friends, the men and women who would join them and contribute their own knowledge and unique experiences in other fields.

The search for new ways of thinking and acting that could regenerate the traditions of voluntary simplicity will be a long one, and it will be subject to two conditions that cannot be planned or programmed. The first concerns the inner transformation we must undergo, and the nature of our personal relationships with our friends and our immediate environment. Any social actor is capable of changing that world within his lifetime if he cultivates the sensitivity, attentiveness and presence to the world that makes him a true neighbour in the sense that Christ taught. Such qualities can also make him a source of inspiration and light for others, the *sine qua non* of all lasting social changes. The second condition concerns the world that surrounds us – a vast, anonymous world that is subject to changes of a far more complex nature. This world is more difficult to act on individually and to shape according to our wishes, since the interventions required here are beyond our individual capacity for action.

Nevertheless, if we let go of the world of expectations and replace it with a world of hope, we may be able to glimpse bright clearings ahead. For, whatever the dominant powers' hegemonic mechanisms, it is possible that by being open to new forms of interaction and collaboration with others who are also aware of the contradictions of this world, new, hitherto unexplored avenues can be found. For example, if more populations chose to develop activities aimed at slowing down the production of fabricated scarcity and offering a greater choice of simple ways of life, the power structures that now weigh so heavily on the shoulders of the poor would simply implode. History has shown us that political and economic systems that are insensitive to the suffering of their people ensure their own downfall. But history also shows that if the poor are unable to change their own perception about what constitutes true wealth, then the hopes that the regime's downfall raised will never be fulfilled.

Notes

1. See also: A. Gelin, A. Georges, S. Léchasse etc. "*Pauvreté chrétienne*", in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, fasc. LXXXVI-LXXXVII, Paris, Beauchesne, 1983-1984.
2. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "Poverty".
3. John Iliffe, *The African Poor. A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.78
4. See Gudrun Dahl and Gemetchu Megerssa, "The Spiral of the Ram's Horn: Boran Concepts of Development", in Majid Rahnema with Victoria Bawtree, *The Post-Development Reader*, London, Zed Books, 1997, p. 52.
5. Pierre Joseph Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix* (1861), in *Œuvres*, under the direction of C. Bouglé and H. Moysset, Geneva, Slatkine, 1982, vol. 6, p. 346.
6. Charles Péguy, *L'Argent*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, NRF, vol. 3, 1927, p. 418-420.
7. Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, Paris, Plon, 1947, p. 39.
8. "Vernacular society" refers to any society in which the social and productive activities of its members, as well as the ways of satisfying their needs, are based on their own historical cultural traditions. Vernaculum designates everything that is raised, woven, cultivated or made at home, as opposed to what is obtained through exchange. The term, which was used for the first time by Ivan Illich in his book *Le travail fantôme*, (Paris, Le Seuil, 1981, p. 67), seems to us more appropriate to describe pre-industrial societies, as it avoids the

negative connotations associated with the traditional subsistence economy of closed societies. A vernacular society, like a vernacular language, is made up of habits and relationships developed locally between its members, rather than from contributions coming from the outside.

9. Xénophon, *Le Banquet*, III, 9, Paris: Gallimard, "Tel", 1992, p. 72.
10. *Roman de Renart*, cited by Michel Mollat, *Les Pauvres au Moyen Âge*.
11. L. P. Mair, *An African People in the Twentieth Century*, 1934, quoted by Polanyi, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
12. G. Simmel, *Les Pauvres*, Paris, PUF, p. 45.
13. See, on this subject, the particularly conclusive studies of Lakshman Yapa, Pennsylvania State University (on the University's website), and his article (in French) "Déconstruire le développement" in *Défaire le développement; Refaire le monde*, Paris, Parangon/ l'Aventurine, 2003.
14. See Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, New York, Morrow, 1981 (and his extensive bibliography); David E. Shin, *The Simple Life : Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985; and Serge Mongeau, *La Simplicité volontaire*, Montréal, Québec/Amérique, 1985. See also Marc Luyckx Guisi, *Au-delà de la modernité, du patriarcat et du capitalisme: la société réenchantée*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001 – in particular, the inquiries conducted by the Institute of Noetic Sciences, Sausalito, as reported by the author. According to these inquiries, more than 65% of the American population claims to be interested in finding new forms of voluntary simplicity.