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## Poverty

Majid Rahnema

Poverty has as many meanings as there are human beings. For it is a social construct, built upon a combination of external factors and the ways each subject – or social agent – interprets them in one’s own way. As such, the word is given a different meaning according to the context, the time and the place to which it is related. Hence the impossible task of defining poverty on a universal basis, or that of addressing the subject without indicating in advance to what exactly it refers.

A main source of the many confusions created by the word poverty is that it is generally used to describe two very different phenomena: on the one hand, a human predicament and a particular *mode of living* and, on the other hand, a passive condition of material precariousness or economic destitution attributed to a series of *lacks*. In this case, the poor are described as objects defined by a level of income or “resources” that are considered insufficient to provide them with what equally pre-defined goods and services necessary for their living.

Historically and anthropologically speaking, the word has been used more often in the first sense: that is, a particular mode of living and relating with necessity. Many of the “lacks” presently listed to define the so-called *poverty line* – i.e., the line of unmet “needs” below which a person is officially pronounced as “poor”- were considered as part of an inescapable necessity that had to be respected. Some saw that necessity as part of one’s “fate”, “*qismat*” or “*karma*”; some as a call for attaining one’s inner freedom from material enslavement. Yet, as life on earth was generally thought to be a gift of God, adversity was perceived as a challenge aimed at receiving one’s share from the ever living source of the Creation’s unlimited *baraka* and *ni’ma* (abundance and boon or bounty in Arabic and Persian). Living was a way of sharing and using with others one’s God given gifts with a view to bringing together the two worlds of necessity and *baraka*.

For all these reasons, to be poor had not always a negative connotation. Spiritual or voluntary poverty was even perceived as one of the highest forms of self-realization and of true riches. Convivial poverty was viewed as a mode of sharing together the common gifts of a community and, consequently, enhancing everyone’s potentialities. For the Christ, blessed were all the poor who lived their predicament with dignity. By contrast, he said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God”. The Prophet of Islam is also quoted to have said: “Poverty is my glory”. In many a vernacular society, only those forms of destitution and indigence were depreciated and reprimanded that expressed the moral demise of their authors.

### **Simplicity and frugality: a consistent “choice” of the vernacular poor.**

There is enough historical and anthropological evidence for challenging a main “certainty” of the modern economic discourse: that the earlier human societies were unable to provide for their members the essential things that were important to their well-being. These societies had indeed less in terms of things, “products”, or consumer goods and “services”. Yet they were not “poor”. They

were even living in “a kind of material plenty”, insofar as “they adapted the tools of their living to material which lay in abundance around them” (Lorna Marshall). Moreover, the “lacks” imputed to them by modern economists were not due to their inability to “underdeveloped” productive capacities. Their simplicity and frugality reflected a different philosophy of being and relating with each other. They were more eager to make the best of what God or Nature had given them, than to divert *all* their energies to producing and making more money.

Everyone perceived her or himself as members of the same social *body*. People’s wealth was in their capacity to produce richer and more convivial relations. It was natural and normal for them that their needs would remain within the limits of whatever that body was in a position to produce for the welfare of all its parts. Living in a convivial fashion was thus a semi-voluntary choice imposed by necessity. To have few possessions was, for most of these societies, “a matter of principle” and not a misfortune. *Homo oeconomicus* was not yet born to teach them how to trade their freedom against material possessions.

The gradual emergence of people and groups interested in money and profit making changed the picture of poverty. The word *poor* which had always been used only as an adjective (a poor soil, a poor health, etc.) became a substantive. First the *powerful*, then the *rich* emerged as the opposite of the *poor*. Yet, even then, not all the poor were pitied or looked upon as wretched persons. The *anawim* of the Biblical world were particularly respected because they “did not seek to be cunning with God”. As to the *spiritually* poor, they were venerated and elevated, often as saints, because of their totally free choice of poverty. For them, *all* kinds of possession represented an obstacle to their freedom from enslaving attachment to material belongings.

To the convivial (semi-voluntary) and voluntary forms of poverty that prevailed in vernacular cultures, should be added a third category called *modernized poverty*, typical of contemporary economized societies. These new poor are characterized by an ever increasing gap between their socially induced needs and their inability to find the “resources” necessary to meet those needs.

### **Poverty versus material and moral destitution.**

The various states of *destitution* or imposed indigence are generally confused with poverty. The *poor* and the *destitute* are both subject to harsh external conditions. Yet the poor seldom lose their capacity to adapt themselves to necessity. Thanks to this quality, which they acquire from life, they learn how to build themselves “beds” of poverty that prevent them from falling into destitution. A main characteristic of the vernacular poor is that they often succeed in transforming their “lacks” into assets or boons.

This is not the case with the destitute who suffer from a double misery. *Socially and outwardly*, they live in a state of extreme solitude and isolation. They are the “*bi kass*” (in Persian, those who “do not have any one” to take care of them), with no bed or hammock to lie down on them. *Inwardly*, they have lost the inner strength or the regenerative powers of the voluntary or semi-voluntary (convivial) poor. This double misery sometimes reaches such proportions that the destitute lose even their abilities to think and to act intelligently in defense of their own interests. The last thirty years have

witnessed the corruption of some very important social movements, mainly because the destitute masses have been manipulated and misled by unscrupulous politicians. When the deprived lose their “poverty beds”, they easily fall into destitution and become prey to manipulative populist ringleaders or abusive social systems.

A main reason for which the dominant discourse on poverty has remained irrelevant to the predicament of the poor is that it views them only as destitute persons in need of assistance. As a result, it has failed to see the specific and many folded riches of the poor, thereby failing also to appreciate and respect the central position they hold in dealing with their difficulties. The so-called campaigns or wars against poverty have, thus, often served only as subtle ways of converting the poor into modernized destitute.

The underlying assumption of these campaigns is that the poor suffer from a worldwide scarcity of goods and services required to meet their “basic needs”- these being also defined by modern consumer societies. Hence, their call for a rapid adoption of technologically advanced methods of maximized production. Accelerated economic growth remains, for these campaigns, the *only* realistic way of meeting the poor’s needs.

What is totally concealed by this reasoning is that the modern systems of production geared on profit are themselves the main *producers* of the scarcities from which the poor suffer. Economy does indeed produce many an unprecedented goods and services for those who can afford paying their cost. Yet it creates, for those who cannot, new scarcities in the same areas.

To take a vital area for the survival of the poor, all modern systems of agricultural production do increase food productivity. Yet the same process dispossesses the poor of their own means and ways of producing and exploiting land. Their natural and social environment, their instruments of knowledge and know-how are thus destroyed, together with their possibilities of finding their own solutions to the problems created for them. Most advances in such other fields of human endeavor as technology, education, health, housing, etc., force their “dropouts” into a world of increasing scarcity.

The major economic institutions of modern world manipulate their audiences by using one-sided statistics to conceal the scarcity-producing aspects of economy. The latest World Bank’s poverty eradication programmes are a case in point. A number of carefully selected projects are highlighted to show how they have improved the lot of a few amongst the “targetted” populations. Yet nothing is said about the overall effects of the Bank and the IMF policies that have systematically destroyed the endogenous capacity of the poorest populations of the world in addressing the new scarcities created by economy. Neither are these institutions ready to accept their responsibility in the processes that further pauperize the ordinary people all over the world: namely the increasingly intolerable debts imposed on the poor, the forceful liquidation of the poor’s local economies and the transformation of the uprooted victims into globalized modern destitute.

**No “solution” to “poverty”, within the prevailing paradigms.**

Economic growth and its globalization *cannot* therefore be the answer to socially created scarcities such as lack of land and of the means of production, destitution, mass misery, hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, environmental destruction, disease and subjugation. Economic growth and the new modes of production *are themselves*, more than any other single cause, *the main producers of modern, socially generated scarcities*.

On another plane, the economic discourse refuses to acknowledge that the poor, i.e., the victims of these socially generated scarcities, are ultimately, more than anyone else, in a position to reverse the processes triggered by economy’s apprentice sorcerers. The answer to their hardships is therefore NOT for modern institutions to impose on everyone new modes of living, production and entitlement that are totally alien to their cultures and to their own particular forms of creativity. It is to find, together *with* them, radically new alternatives for life under modern conditions.

During the last decades, many a grassroots movements have emerged everywhere, with a view to opposing the globalizing trends of market economy. These movements – some as tiny as the CHODAK in Dakar, others as massive and powerful as the Chiapas in Mexico - are a testimony to the worldwide resistance against such trends. In the search for new alternatives, millions of the world’s poor are using their imagination and creative capacities with a view to saving themselves from destitution. These efforts take however place in a political environment that is generally not very supportive of such initiatives.

That environment is also vitiated by the fact that two opposite forms of power have appeared in modern times, both making it difficult for the poor to develop their own, different form of power. One is the institutionalized and often autocratic “power” of many an emerging Nation-States, the other is the “elegant”, invisible form of modern power incarnated by the new forces of market and technocracy. The first – which owes its survival on the other- uses the new universalist discourses of development, sovereignty and representative democracy with a view to oppressing and terrorizing the very people who serve to legitimize it. Both forms of power seek to subvert, undermine or suppress all forms of popular resistance to them. Both, in their own way, serve the interests of the “haves”, their “national” and foreign supporters, to the detriment of the poor. Both, finally, serve to aggravate the processes by which the “have-nots” are led to internalize the values of the “Economic Man”.

The only rays of hope that come out of all these interactions is the emergence of a new grassroots praxis based on self-reliance and the need for the poor to use their own forms of resistance. Their personal and collective histories have shown them the danger of submitting themselves to totalizing ideologies and beliefs that have no living roots in their own experiences. New voluntary forms of simple life are appearing everywhere in greater number. They could well be the forerunner signs for totally new approaches to the poverty issue. More and more, the wisest groups seem to be set on the search for *local* alternatives to such questions as dependence, suffering and socially generated scarcity. The emergence of new forms of voluntary poverty, based on the choice for simple life under modern conditions, seems to pave the way for resolving the growing contradictions of the presently ultra polarized world.

Grandiose master plans and ideologies that followed the Enlightenment era with a view to reshaping life on a “scientific” model have lost their lustre and appeal. The question for the “ordinary persons” seems no longer to be how such socially construed axioms as Progress, Development, or even Democracy can best be implemented, but *who* are the particular persons or groups who may benefit or suffer from them, in given spaces and times. And, consequently, how such specific groups of people could best put up, for themselves, the most efficient and desirable forms of resisting oppression and injustice, of remaining autonomous and self-reliant, of preserving one’s human dignity? An important lesson of the last century’s social adventures is that there are no grand expert or guru and no “revolution” can provide humans with master plans of salvation. Instead, any concerned community (or person) can become a powerful agent of change. In other words, the regeneration of everyone’s riches is in one’s own hands. For culturally constituted groups, this can be done through small but meaningful daily activities, through the power of convivial and creative relations with their fellow humans on the very sites where they are threatened in their dignity.

A final point to bear in mind is that poverty or riches, as conditions defined by the lack or the possession of certain goods and facilities, is not the real issue. What is at stake is, *firstly*, the search for a “good life” for everyone without impinging on other people’s lives or destroying the social and natural environment; *secondly*, the organization of society in such a way as to give each of its participants the full possibility of nurturing one’s unique gifts to the greatest benefit of all. As a rule, class based societies are not organized that way. They often pretend to protect their poor, but, in reality, they tend to protect themselves *against* the poor and their potential threat to economy. In modern societies, in particular, as the means of production and the apparatuses of power are mostly in the hand of the “haves”, the latter also define good life. Worst, the “have-nots” are constantly placed before binary choices, such as material destitution or acceptance of the market rules, traditional hardships or modern comfort, “progress” or “regress”, advanced technology or primitive tools, high tech medicine or second rate shamans, school systems or illiteracy. The only way for the social majorities of the world to free themselves from this binary tyranny is to fully realize their untapped force as agents of change of a new kind: This implies that every individual starts, *firstly*, by changing one’s own perception of a good life based on simple and convivial choices, *secondly*, by constantly searching with others the thousands of possible liberating alternatives that the modern digital world is presently preventing them to discover. For the “poor” and the “dropouts” of modernity – whose number may now be more than four billion people -, the two classical verses of the great Persian poet Hâfiz could be an inspiring light for their personal path: Referring to *Jâmi jam*, the crystal ball of King Jamshîd that could show him all the secrets of the world, he said, “For years, my heart was asking me to provide it with the *jâmi jam*. [He was not aware that] it was asking from others what he had in itself.”