

Children of the Fourth World : a chance for all children

The children who speak in this document are strangers to most of us. The world around them seems unable to understand who they really are.

Yet these children were born amongst us, in our western societies. Why then is it so difficult to acknowledge and explain their past and present history? The consequence of our incapacity to recognise them for what they are, is to leave millions of children without adequate education and health care, deprived of decent housing, of a satisfactory environment and of financial security. And we do so, while leaving their entire milieu deprived of political representation.

Some people still think that the condition of these children and their families is accidental, the result of some individual misfortune or deficiency. Should we not know better to-day ? History clearly tells us that they are the victims, not of a blind fate, but of the very societies that we ourselves have developed. They represent the hidden face of these societies whose present functioning and struggle for future change concern only those citizens whose historical identity has been properly recognised. Those, whose identity is assured in this way, can avail themselves freely of their civil and political liberties, but they have never enlarged their vision, their institutions, nor their struggle for justice so as to include the unrecognised and totally voiceless.

Within our industrialised societies, these children and their families have been compelled to form a world apart, a Fourth World, whose origins can be traced back to the very beginnings of industrialisation during the last century. Their ancestors were unable to prepare the way to a better future for them, deprived as they were of the means to participate in the productive process and the evolution of the new urban and rural working classes. Successive generations of parents and children have continued their solitary history of exclusion ever since.

In the United States, a similar but even more hidden process has developed, as the poorest among urban and rural workers were left aside by rapid economic expansion. Successive waves of migration and immigration of relatively deprived population groups have blurred the picture. They too were, or still are, poor. But only the most deprived among them join the ranks of that North American Fourth World of total exclusion, some have termed the underclass.

Be that as it may ; in all our countries thus exists a social stratum of our fellow citizens who have never even received the means to reach the lowest rung of the social scale. Who can remain indifferent to so baffling a discovery ? Can it really be that we have never used our own rights and liberties to denounce such injustice inflicted upon minorities so close to us ?

The question is all the more disturbing as our efforts to implement Human Rights and the Rights of the Child have been sincere. We have truly believed for a longtime that, at least in western democracies, we were well on the way to success. Has not our progress been steady, our economic and social change far-reaching? No-one, of course, will deny that we never do enough, or that any society could ever be perfect. But imperfections do not necessarily mean that there is an inherent weakness in our democratic foundations, even less in our basic concepts of democracy.

Fourth World children, for their part, do question our foundations and the basic thinking underlying our democracies, for the entire fabric of present socio-economic and political structures was woven at their expense. They do more than just throw doubt on our political behaviour ; they force us to take a new look at the very convictions behind it. If, even after the first twenty years, the Rights of the Child remain so devoid of meaning for those at the bottom of our social scale, if in the European Economic Community alone, more than four million children remain totally deprived, is it not because our very concept of the child, of its meaning for humanity, is no longer clear and well rooted in western civilisation ?

Issuing a universal declaration of inalienable rights is of course necessary. But would it not be even more urgent to redefine the basic motivations underlying such rights? Are we still able to do so in our western societies? Do we possess a clear, unequivocal idea about the fundamental significance of the child, an idea we are ready to defend at all cost ? Do we truly respect our children because of that basic vision or philosophy ?

Nothing seems less certain, today. One might even be tempted to say that the more we talk about the rights of children, the less they appear to exist in their own right. The Preamble of the 1959 Declaration, magnificent as it is, does not define the deep rooted motivations behind it. We can imagine why, in a text that all the world's nations had to be able to sign. But this cannot justify the absence of a clearly expressed common philosophy among western nations sharing the same cultural heritage. Rediscovering common motivations is a difficult but urgent task ; the future of all our children depends on it. For the life experience of Fourth World children is but the extreme form of conditions imposed, to a lesser degree, on all.

At times, our behaviour gives the impression that we believe Fourth World children should not even be born. Mothers in the Fourth World are hard put to defend themselves against criticism or well-intended advice against pregnancy, against pressures to have abortions. The lack of adequate housing, the absence of a father or his unemployment, are among the plentiful reasons given to justify all kinds of interventions to prevent the arrival of another baby, or his abandon into foster care or adoption at birth. But is such behaviour, which in some of our countries takes the form of virtual «child-hunting», not simply the ultimate sign of a much more general confusion in our thinking ?

Could it be that our prevailing preoccupation with the material and physical well-being of children, as an end in itself, has diverted us from clarifying our thinking on their significance in terms of unconditional love ? Has our idea of the child, as recipient of more tangible goods and rights, blotted out our vision of him as an agent of ever-renewed conciliation and hope ? Have our children, who have always been our strongest shield against discord and disruption, now become the final obstacle in our path to living, each one of us, for himself ?

We know that Fourth World children do not count in our schools. But then, how much do other children count ? Many of us are anxious to introduce our own ideologies and even our political struggles into the classroom. Children are already involved in our adult strikes ; supposedly, the results will be to their advantage. But do we make sure, before hand, that our own frustrations and pre-conceived ideologies have not obscured our vision of what children really need or hope for ? Are we certain that it is in their nature to represent objects of division and warfare ? Are not their games and dreams more related to harmony and conciliation ? Could their true role be to teach us their way of looking at the world, rather than to learn to adopt ours ? What have we done to ensure that we never use them as pretexts for the fulfilment of our own ambitions, or as a symbol of our own achievements ?

Likewise, we know that children's right to an environment enhancing the quality of life is in no way considered by town planners. Fourth World children, who grow up in slums or low quality housing estates, bordering factories and dumping grounds, or squeezed between cemeteries and motoways, are deprived of their childhood almost from the cradle. But how many other children do we oblige to grow up in concrete housing blocks, where their games and laughter become a nuisance to be suppressed ? What right to childhood do any children have, in the promiscuity of crowded apartments, where they are bound to share too early their parents' preoccupations ?

Finally, what can we say about the right to parental love and family affection ? Fourth World children, clearly, are too frequently placed in institutions or foster homes. But are we certain that we protect the right of other children to their parents' love ? What measures do we take to protect family life at other socio-economic levels ? Do all our policies express our conviction that the home is still pre-eminently the universe where our children may learn to love and to be loved ? Do we allow parents to devote the necessary time to their children when their hearts and minds are most receptive to the universal values of mankind. ?

Today, we are left with no alternative but to look at these questions with honesty. We have to face the overwhelming evidence that universal inalienable rights become conditional and relative, almost as soon as they are formulated. And it is no longer enough to say that this is a problem of inequality. Inequalities exist and are a serious problem. But the total exclusion and denial of all rights, inflicted upon the poorest and most vulnerable of our children, indicates a much deeper conflict ; a problem, not only of society and social structures, but of civilisation and mankind's most profound beliefs. It is at this basic level that Fourth World children question us.

These children, that we have kept at so great a distance from us, can render us a priceless service. To disregard them any longer, would mean an incalculable loss for our children in the West, but also for all children throughout the world. For western socio-economic achievements have given industrial nations the power to impose their ways and means of economic growth in other parts of the world. But in doing so, they also impose the underlying weaknesses. So far, only our western societies seem to have consolidated exclusion of the poorest children, almost beyond a point of no return. So far, they stand out, more than many other less privileged nations, in their uncertainty and confusion about traditional human values, especially those regarding the child. Can we allow them to spread confusion and exclusion, as they have western notions of economic growth and efficiency ?

Throughout the following pages, we shall hear the voices of innumerable Fourth World children calling us back to the basic needs and aspirations of mankind. These voices, at the frontiers of our societies, may be felt as a threat to our peace of mind. They may also be heard as a timely reminder of what is essential to all children and to all people. For, whatever we do to stifle it, sooner or later what is essential to humanity will always return to the surface.

Will we hear the appeal of the children in hard-core poverty on our very doorstep, and seize the opportunity they offer to all the world's children ?

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