

Thursday 18th December 2008 – Workshop D1: From One Country to Another: the Question of “the Poorest People”

SENSIBILITIES, OBAMA, AND ATD

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Below are some quick thoughts about the US and ATD-Fourth World. I particularly want to offer these thoughts in the context of the recent US election and Obama's election. My hope is to at least outline an argument. In doing so and doing it quickly, I most certainly am going to be using caricatures and gross overgeneralizations. My apologies, in advance, for these offenses.

My first contact with ATD was in 1994 when Bruno Tardieu took my course on poverty at Harvard (an oxymoron?). The following year Genevieve took the course. Since that time I have been more or less continually involved in ATD, although certainly with varying intensity. I have been to Méry sur Oise a number of times, attended several conferences, and participated in several summer camps. I have also worked with the ATD project with the World Bank. I have made only one visit to the US office. I have never made it to any other US sites. I have, however, been fortunate that various volunteers and allies, both US and non-US-based, have visited me in Boston and even lectured in my class. I wrote the introduction to Wresinski's *The Poor are the Church*, though I never had the opportunity to personally meet him or hear him speak.

I want to be precise about the nature of my involvement in ATD, as I want my comments below to be understood in that context. I have nothing to say about Father Joseph's visits to the US. I have nothing to say about ATD's programs in New Orleans, Appalachia, or New York. My comments are not about the history and activities of ATD in the US. Fanchette has done a wonderful job of this in her book, *Taking a Country at its Word*. Rather they are offered as an American whose primary involvement with ATD has not been with the US group. As such, they are based on my observations and engagement with the group in Méry and ATD more generally.

My involvement with ATD has certainly enriched my life enormously. However, I have found it extremely difficult to explain to other Americans what ATD is about. And let me be clear, given my enthusiasm for ATD, I have tried to explain it to many, many people. Even my family does not get it.¹ I don't think the difficulty in explaining ATD is mine alone. When I have witnessed volunteers try to explain ATD, Americans just don't get it. Why don't Americans understand ATD? I would offer several related reasons. First, I have always seen ATD as committed not so much to an ideology or theory of the world but a set of sensibilities and practices – not to demonize others, to be inclusive -most importantly those in extreme poverty; but also for those who are well-to-do, to look for practical not ideological solutions and finally, to have a sense of humility. If I had time, I would elaborate more and perhaps I could be more precise. Hopefully this is enough to suggest that to my mind ATD is about a way of being in the world, what I will call a sensibility, more than a theory of the world.

¹ My single real success has been Adam Seligman, at least successful in that I convinced him to go to Méry and see what ATD was about for himself. In doing so, he got hooked.

For the last fifteen years at least, perhaps as far back as the Vietnam War, Americans have generally understood themselves in terms of their political ideologies. I can remember being interviewed by writer for a very prominent and intellectually sophisticated journal about one of the prominent Black ministers in Boston. He kept asking me to explain the minister's political position. It took four phone calls to convince this writer that describing this minister in terms of his political agenda was to totally misunderstand him. In general, Americans have believed that to understand someone is to understand who they are politically. Of course, there is a reason for this. For decades, American politics has been highly polarized. Individuals on one side literally see the other side (left or right) as evil, as well as those unlike them more generally (Who will ever forget George W. Bush's comments about there being an "axis of evil?"). One should avoid associating with people who do not agree with you. We have become more segregated along a variety of dimensions. In policy debates, the goal more often than not has been ideological victory (most recently, thwarting the auto unions) as opposed to solving practical problems. Hubris, not humility, has been the order of the day. Given the polarized state of American political discourse in the last several decades, it is not surprising that Americans really don't think about sensibility, ways of being in the world, ways of interacting with others, much less the type of sensibility that ATD models. An additional complication is that the kind of sensibility that ATD projects is typically understood by Americans as a Christian one: out of a sense of service to God, one commits oneself to living a life in community with the poor. Of course, many individuals in ATD explicitly reject the idea that ATD should be understood in religious terms. More on this later. The key point is that Americans find it difficult to find a way of thinking about ATD so that makes any sense to them.

What I would like to suggest is that Obama's election may provide an opportunity and a way for Americans to understand ATD. As the news media in the US, and I hope the world, portrays, our new President very much wants to reach out to people across the political spectrum. His cabinet includes people from a diverse set of backgrounds and political perspectives. In his campaign, he showed enormous, though not complete, restraint in not demonizing the other side. Certainly, he showed a level of restraint unknown in recent American politics. He has made it clear that he is first and foremost committed to solving America's practical problems as opposed to achieving ideological victories (much to the regret of his more left-wing supporters). Interestingly, initially the media sometimes described him as a humble and Christian man, despite his considerable policy differences with the religious right. Obama has himself to a great extent avoided defining himself in religious terms, despite the fact that this would be a natural way for Americans to understand him (as the humble Christian). The notion, however, that Obama brings a different style (or sensibility, perhaps to use my term) to the Presidency is much discussed.

It should be obvious that Obama's sensibility and that of ATD overlap in a number of important ways. I have yet to find the time to think through the similarities and differences in any detailed way. What I do want to point out is Obama's election as President and America's attempt to understand the new sensibilities he brings to governance are likely to produce a context in which it should be far easier for ATD to explain itself to Americans. I do not think the language we need is there yet. If I am correct about the fact that it will be, then the next few years may well be a real opportunity to get America far more interested in ATD. Whether ATD will have the opportunity to connect directly with the Obama administration, I have no idea. This is something that ATD should certainly be strategizing about.

Let me finish with something of an addendum. Over the years I have seen some conflict within ATD about whether the movement should or should not be understood in religious

terms. Apparently, this tension has been further heightened by the possible Canonization of Father Joseph. It seems to me that ATD's own history, as well as Obama's election, are evidence that what is really important is the sensibility. If it is useful to some to understand this sensibility in religious terms and for others to see it as having nothing to do with religion, that is fine. It is the commitment to a particular type of sensibility, a set of practices, a way of being in the world, that will make the world a better place. Belief is a secondary, if not tertiary consideration.