

THE THINKING OF THE POOR IN A KNOWLEDGE THAT LEADS TO COMBAT

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Very early in the history of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, its founder declared that “knowledge [must not be] the step-child of charity.” He constantly called on scientific researchers to contribute to a body of knowledge useful for the liberation of the poorest of the poor. In December 1980 Joseph Wresinski brought together an international committee of specialists at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. The text that follows is a translation of his opening address.

Introduction

As I greet you this morning within the walls of UNESCO, I realize that for nearly twenty-five years you, scholars, researchers, and the scientific communities you represent, have responded generously to calls from ATD Fourth World with faithfulness, concern, and shared hopes.... I want to remind you this morning of the role, even the duty, of all those dedicated to scientific research on poverty to make a place for the knowledge which the poor and the excluded themselves have of their condition. Beyond that, to give it pride of place because it is unique and indispensable, as well as autonomous and complementary to all other knowledge about poverty. Finally, you should help this knowledge to develop.

To this function, you will guess, one needs to add another: that of making room for the knowledge of poverty and social exclusion which is available to those practitioners who live with the very poor and carry out projects with them, giving it the importance it deserves, and helping its development.

We have spoken to you before about these two components of global knowledge of poverty, of which yours, that of the outside observer, is the third. But in view of the work to be carried out during this three-day session and the months to follow, I take the liberty of once more clarifying some ideas our Movement has on this topic. . . .

Academic Knowledge and Mobilization for Action

From the beginning, our Movement has held that in order to fight effectively against poverty and exclusion the following questions must be posed:

- What kind of knowledge do the poorest people need?
- What kind of knowledge do practitioners and action teams need?
- What kind of knowledge do our national societies and our international communities need?

¹ Joseph Wresinski was the Founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. This paper was published in *Participatory Approaches to Attacking Extreme Poverty. Cases Studies Led by the International Movement ATD Fourth World*, Edited by Xavier Godinot and Quentin Wodon, World Bank Working Paper N° 77, Washington D.C. 2006, pp. 13-21. Entitled *La Pensée des plus pauvres dans une connaissance qui conduise au combat* it was initially a speech delivered in french in 1980. It was published in *Revue Quart Monde* n°140, 1991, and then translated into English by Alice Husson, Bruno Tardieu, Xavier Louveaux and Charles Sleeth. The translation was revised by Charles Courtney in July 2005.

It is fair to say that we have lived and struggled in a historical period when the answer to the question “What knowledge?” has for the most part been: properly scientific knowledge. Many expected that the knowledge best suited to the struggle, and thus to the promotion of social policies and legislative measures, would be of the same kind as that created in universities and other standard research institutions. In other words, one expected much, if not everything, from that part of knowledge available only to academics and specialists who are observers from outside the reality of poverty. This latter knowledge has been highly regarded because of its methodology, its rigor, and what was thought to be its objectivity or neutrality. These characteristics were reassuring to those who, faced with immensely complex problems which politicians construed subjectively, wished to find an objective truth, capable of guiding a clear plan of action, rooted in truth and effective for the poor.

The university came to be regarded as a guarantor of security in face of problems so difficult to understand. It was a refuge for those who did not want to be frustrated or led into error by ideologies, whether of the dominant or the dominated. You, as well as we, have at certain times wanted to use the university in this way. And, no doubt, we weren’t wrong, but we weren’t totally right either.

However, contrary to what some seem to think, it is not the general discovery of the non-neutrality, the non-objectivity, of science, and particularly the human and social sciences, that proves us wrong today. Neither is it the knowledge that all science and scientific methodology are tainted with ideology that convinces us that we were not right. These are interesting problems, but, in our opinion, they are of secondary importance.

The basic problem, which we did not recognize and still haven’t mastered, is that academic knowledge of poverty and social exclusion—as of all other human reality—is only a partial knowledge. We ourselves haven’t said, or even sufficiently understood, that it can be only indirect and purely informative, that it lacks, by definition, a direct grasp of reality and, consequently, is not a knowledge that can mobilize people and prompt them to action.

Many of us have had the experience of being keenly disappointed when one or another of our studies had no effect. Perhaps we did not pay enough attention to the fact that academic research in the strict sense must necessarily produce an abstraction, an image of reality seen from the outside and translated into general terms that no longer include the feelings, colors, and other things that move people to take action for others.

Of comprehensive knowledge about poverty and social exclusion, knowledge meant to inform, to explain, and to lead people to action, academic research will never be more than one component among others, namely, the information component, partially explanatory, and thus lifeless. It will remain lifeless as long as two other components of knowledge are missing. These two autonomous and complementary components, which will add life and meaning, are:

- the knowledge which the poor and excluded have, from their first-hand experience, of the twin realities of poverty and the surrounding world which imposes it on them; and
- the knowledge of those who work among and with these victims in places of poverty and social exclusion.

Caught in the trap of a society that believes in the supremacy of academic knowledge, our universities believed this themselves. . . . And when the costliest and most thorough studies and research disappeared into the drawers of politicians and administrators, we said that it was for political reasons. . . . This was correct, but did not allow for the possibility that the problem was not

with the politicians but rather with our studies that were not the kind to prompt politicians to take action.

However, I believe that at no time did the universities admit that the political ineffectiveness of their research could be attributed to the fact that knowledge thus constructed was instructive but not convincing; nor acknowledge, moreover, that the supplements needed to convince could not come from the university researcher but solely from the poor and those who work with them.

Without Freedom of Thought, No Communication

Certainly, not all researchers ignored the two components of knowledge represented by the poor and those who work with them. However, and this is the crux of the matter, they did not regard them as autonomous components to be pursued by and for the authors themselves. Scholars quickly turned them into the object of their own research; they regarded these components as sources of information to be used for their own purposes, rather than as equally valid research projects, as supporting subjects and not objects of exploitation. They have, to some extent, subordinated these components to their own exploration as outside observers of the life of the poor and the actions undertaken with them. Thus, they have deflected a knowledge, which did not belong to them, from its own goal. More seriously, these researchers have often, unintentionally and unwittingly, upset or even paralyzed the thinking of their interlocutors. This happened essentially because they did not recognize that they were dealing with a thinking and an autonomous inquiry that followed their own path and goals. Consequently, they have not respected these goals. They have treated their research subjects as sources of information rather than as independent thinkers. This is why we have always doubted the value of the information obtained by academics.

As for communicating with the very poor, many years of observation have convinced us that even the so-called participatory observation practiced by anthropologists and ethnologists runs the danger of misusing, tampering with, and paralyzing the thinking of the poor. This is so because it is an observation for a goal external to their life situation, one that they did not choose and which they would never have defined in the same way as the researchers. Consequently, the observation is not truly participatory since the thinking of the researchers and that of the population which is the object of their observation do not pursue the same goals.

It is not a problem of method, but a question of life situation, one that cannot be resolved by adopting other methods but only by change in situation. Moreover, participant observation, which certainly will not disturb the thinking of a group in full possession of its powers of reflection and culture, runs the serious risk of disturbing the thinking of the very poor who do not master them nearly as well.

It goes without saying that a similar problem arises for the cooperation between researchers and men and women of action. These difficulties have often been analyzed. For example, it has been said that action teams have difficulty collaborating in research because they don't see the point of the project and because they are suspicious of the scrutinizing look of the researchers and of their inability to understand the human reality and chaos of everyday life. It has even been said that collaboration does not work because practitioners lack logical skills and base their action on intuitions and impressions rather than rational reflection.

There may be some truth in these explanations, but it seems to us that they do not go to the heart of the matter. The basic problem is that if practitioners are to make a valuable contribution they must be seen from the outset not as mere providers of information, but as thinkers having to pursue to the very end their own quest for knowledge, according to their own goals.

Here again we are convinced, thanks to what we have learned from many years of experience, that even social scientists who have been brought in to analyze an action and evaluate its results often run the risk of going astray. In fact, don't they often arrive when the dye has already been cast and try to understand, after the fact, a situation which is totally foreign to them? They face a situation different from any they know, one fraught with unimaginable insecurity and for which they have very little feeling.

One will not be able to grasp such a situation and perceive its dynamics unless one experiences the insecurity and shifting sands of conducting an action within a population living in extreme poverty. One can understand such an action only to the degree in which one has participated in the development of the thinking of the action team and by adopting the objectives of that thinking.

Having said this, our purpose was not to draw attention to the weakness of academic studies resulting from problems of communication. We wanted above all to make the point that these studies all together, whatever their quality, would not be able to provide the totality of the required knowledge.

Let us turn again for a moment to the two other sources of this knowledge. In principle, they are complementary to that of the university, but they can only take shape and be fully complementary when they are autonomous and allowed to reach their final goals on their own.

The Secret Garden of the Poorest of the Poor

Let us consider for a moment the knowledge and way of thinking of the people of the Fourth World. They deal not only with their life situation but also with the environing world which traps them in poverty and with the contrast between what is and what ought to be if the weakest are no longer to be excluded.

Thinking and knowing are acts which all human beings perform, and they do them with whatever means, sophisticated or not, that life has provided. Each person thinks, knows, and strives to understand in order to achieve his or her own goal. Since their thinking is oriented to that goal, every act of thinking can become an act of personal liberation. The Fourth World Movement, on the basis of its experience in diverse areas of poverty throughout the world, can attest that every person and every group attempts to perform this act, however meager their means of thinking and analysis. All human beings and groups are researchers, seeking independence through understanding themselves and their situation so that they control their destiny rather than submitting and being afraid.

Those who think that human beings reduced to total poverty are apathetic and consequently don't think, that they retreat into dependency or the simple struggle to survive day to day, make a serious mistake. They ignore the strategies of self defense that the poor create to escape the influence of those on whom they are dependent.

They protect their own existence, which they carefully hide behind the "life" that they spread out like a curtain and "play" to create an illusion for the external observer. Finally, they ignore the desperate effort to reflect and explain of those who constantly ask themselves, "*Just who am I, after all?*" or who say, "*They treat me like a dog, like a spineless coward, an idiot, a non-entity. . . . Am I really a spineless coward?*" And there are those who through a painful effort of thinking constantly rise up from under their own personalities and those accusations which are so many monstrous identities heaped upon them by repeating to themselves, "*But I am not a dog. I am not the idiot I am made out to be. I know things, but they will never understand.*"

And they are absolutely right to come to this conclusion that always emerges once the doubts have been dispelled, even though they are left totally exhausted in body and mind.

Surely they “know things” that others are unlikely ever to understand or even imagine. This knowledge, not well structured to be sure, is about being condemned for life to contempt and social exclusion. It covers everything that that signifies: facts, suffering, but also the resilience and hope called forth by those facts. It also includes knowledge of the surrounding world, including certain attitudes toward the very poor that only they would know.

Even the best researchers find it difficult to imagine these things; consequently, they have a hard time formulating suitable hypotheses and questions. They find themselves facing something that they do not have the tools to master. It is so to speak the secret garden of the very poor. Entry is open only to those who change their life situation and become partners with the poor in a project which is no longer one of mere research but of liberation. Otherwise, it is hard to imagine how those coming from another world and whose thinking is shaped by that world could gain entrance to the secret garden. And there is more. Besides not being able to enter, they would not have the right to do so.

In fact, no one has the right, even in the name of science, to hinder another’s effort, perhaps clumsy but nonetheless relentless, to develop a liberating outlook. No researcher has the right to exploit the efforts of the poorest to liberate themselves in order to put them back into servitude. For it cannot be said too often that to hinder the poorest by using them as informants rather than encouraging them to develop their own thinking as a genuinely autonomous act is to enslave them. All the more so because their thinking is almost always a search for their history and identity, and they alone have direct access to an essential part of the answers. They ask themselves questions about their history and identity, much more than about their needs or even their rights, because they know, perhaps confusedly but profoundly, that it is through these questions that they will find the path to freedom.

We do not mean to say that it is always a mistake to speak to them about their rights or to question them about their needs. However, such an approach can be liberating for them only the extent that these exchanges take place within the perspective of their understanding of their historical identity, the only knowledge that can help them to be subjects and master of their rights and needs.

This has rarely been the case so far. Throughout the entire period of what was called “the war on poverty” in the United States, we did not see a single truly historical piece of research on the lives of those who in those days were called the “hard-core” poor. Nor, even less, was there research carried out in close collaboration with the “hard-core” poor themselves.

In the European Community at last some interest is being shown in what is called persistent poverty, that is to say, poverty having an historical dimension from which would logically follow the historical identity of a “lumpen-proletariat.” But this dimension or this historical identity is rarely brought out and can be developed only through an ongoing dialogue with the families of the Fourth World. We are concerned because we do not see any bridges being built between the University and the Fourth World. We do see a search for ways of collecting information without having to go through a process of creating a lasting collaboration with the families concerned.

This also holds true for Great Britain, a country which we regard as exemplary because it steadfastly continued research on poverty even during the great prosperity of the 1960’s. But even there, historical research does not exist. The only identity the poor have is through what they need, what they lack. This is partially attributable to the respect researchers have for the poor and their concern not to put them in a category of their own, thereby contributing to their segregation. However, is this right when we consider that their historical identity is one of immeasurable

resilience and inalienable dignity? When we consider furthermore that it is an identity that carries an essential message to the whole society?

It is not our intention to criticize, much less to denigrate in any way, the sincere and intelligent efforts made by our friends from the United States, Great Britain, and Europe. Our role is simply to remind everyone what the very poor families gathered in the Fourth World Movement have taught us. To talk to them only of their needs, or of those “social indicators” which characterize them, without helping them to better understand their own history or the common traits of their lives is just another way of trapping them. It is the families themselves who call on the Movement; and their request is not, “*Explain to us,*” but rather, “*Help us to think.*” Some families, and they are growing in number, say, “*We must think, because others will never be able to understand.*”

Restoring Thinking, Supporting the Effort of the Fourth World to Know

We count on you academic researchers for a careful study and interpretation of what the Fourth World has taught us about its right to have its thinking and autonomous knowledge recognized. It is up to you and to us to discover how to support its effort of reflection. For, if the people of the Fourth World have shown clearly that they want to carry out their own thinking to the end, they have never said that they need no help in this undertaking. On the contrary, wherever our teams are established we hear, like a leitmotiv this request: “*You, who have learned to think, teach us how to.*” Whether it be in Guatemala, Switzerland, New York, Bangkok, or the run-down areas of London, the poorest are calling for the presence not of “thought masters” (they see too many of them), but of competent and intelligent men and women who can teach them how to think without insinuating themselves into the thinking itself.

However, do we know enough about the tools, the methodology, and the pedagogy needed for this endeavor? I am not so sure. It is not that there are no pioneers in this area. But, a careful look at the experiments carried out in several countries leaves us with our doubts. Perhaps it is because the projects carried out in the name of one or the other of the pedagogies of “conscientization” in Latin America, India, or even Europe seemed almost without exception to leave out the poor. Whether in Indian villages of Colombia, hamlets of untouchables of India, slums of Calcutta, or a poor area of Portugal, the most impoverished inhabitants find themselves marginalized even from these projects.

Perhaps these projects raise questions for us because they transport curiously Western language and concepts all the way to the Far East and to the perched villages on the high plateaus of Bolivia far from modern civilization. Did these people invent this vocabulary strangely familiar to our Western ears: “power relations,” “exploitation of man by man,” “class warfare”? Would they not have chosen to speak in the words of their own civilization?

I believe that those of us here could have something to say about this question: we could bring to light the conditions required for authentic support of the thinking of the poorest; we could recognize those projects favorable to the development of an independent knowledge proper to the Fourth World. Without the knowledge that the poor possess and ought to be able to develop, university studies risk being knowledge which is much too partial and which lacks precisely what would make it life-giving and precipitate action and struggle.

Without getting into philosophy or social psychology, let us simply state the two reasons which, in the experience of the Movement, explain why only the voice of the poor is conducive to action and why all other knowledge is only supportive.

First, in a world full of good causes, appeals of less than far-reaching importance, despite what we might expect, are not going to convince our fellow citizens to make a serious commitment to

sustainable action. Partial knowledge which does not go to the heart of the problem, namely the suffering and the hopes of the totally excluded, will not challenge people and call forth indispensable major commitments. It is because it never compromised its presentation of the extreme consequences of poverty that our Movement of ordinary citizens managed to take on dimensions that its modest resources could not explain. Yet, only the very poor know these extreme consequences. They alone know all the injustice, all the denial of human rights, all the suffering due to exclusion. They alone know what must be changed in hearts and minds and in the structures and functioning of our democracies. But of all that, the conclusions of the past twenty-five years of academic studies are only a weak reflection, an abbreviated message.

Second, when we look at the totality of the message communicated by the families of the Fourth World, we can see that it is not marginal but central and essential because it tells us everything we need to know about society as it is and as it ought to be. Some of you will recall the attempts made to get that message across in the 1960's at the International Association of Sociology Forum. These efforts were repeated in the 1970's in the pilot program, "European Program of Research and Action Against Poverty." Our Movement proposed a study of the tools and conditions which would be required to enable the poorest of the poor of the European Community to speak for themselves rather than having to wait for social scientists to do it for them. Even though the proposal came at the time of the election of the European Parliament by universal franchise, governmental experts did not find the project of immediate interest.

Experience shows us that the Movement gains new members around the world only when it gives Fourth World families the floor and lets them express their own truths. We are only a non-governmental organization; yet, if we have been able to endure and expand, is it not because the message from the poorest can convince, is irrefutable because of its integrity?

Let me repeat, what matters to a Movement that is confronted every day with the harsh reality of a struggle is that our fellow-citizens hear the voices of the poor themselves, in their very own words, rather than a translation by some university study. Should we not be modest enough to admit this? Political support has been gained because people realize that our Movement makes the voices of the poor heard so that everyone can listen.

Our Committee should spend at least part of its time strengthening both the thinking of the poor, which is essential in gaining an understanding of exclusion, and their way of expressing themselves, which is essential in securing the commitment of our fellow citizens to the struggle. The issue will be brought up as early as today during our debate about the Seminar, "The Fourth World in Africa." It will come up again tomorrow during our debate on the significance of European policies on poverty in the member states of the European Union. And the issue will come up for a third time in its most crucial dimensions when the subject of alliances and partnerships in the struggle against exclusions will be broached by our friend, Professor Jona Rosenfeld.

The question is therefore relevant to all the discussions planned for this session of the Committee, but more importantly, in our opinion, it seems to be part both of the *raison d'être* of this Committee and of its long-term goals. This is the reason why we felt it appropriate to bring it up right at the start of this conference.

An Action that Thinks and Communicates Itself

Is it necessary to expand on our previous comments about the necessary independence of the knowledge gained by people of action? What we have just said about the rights of the Fourth World in this regard obviously applies to them as well. A necessarily unique way of thinking must be built on the action, the uncertainties, the stalemates, the reactions and changes, as well as the

new ideas and actions that are called forth. This thinking needs to be supported by competent outsiders while remaining autonomous and free to pursue its own objectives.

Those responsible for action need this thinking in order to be able to fulfill their commitments. Equally obvious is that Fourth World families need to have alongside them teams that are free and able to think independently.

Of course, as is the case for the poorest of the poor, practitioners and their activities can become a topic of academic research. One can even attempt, as we have mentioned, to evaluate the results of their efforts. While admitting that there exist very interesting studies in this area, we have reservations. Our first concern is that these academic studies attempt to capture the action from the outside and cannot replace the knowledge that the action can and should have of itself, for itself. This is an area that remains virtually inaccessible to social scientists for the same reasons which put the reality experienced by the poorest of the poor beyond their reach.

The knowledge of practitioners, the third kind of knowledge mentioned earlier, is an essential component of the comprehensive and stimulating knowledge that we need. The wider world needs it to be able to take action. It needs examples of citizens who are committed to action. It needs to listen to them as much as it needs to listen to scholars teaching.

Besides listening to the very poor, is it not the stories of actions told by the actors that prompt people to action? These stories can instill in others the desire and the courage, in their turn, to undertake new actions.

Here again, academic researchers could render an invaluable service by committing themselves to value and support this knowledge rather than appropriating it for their own purposes.

A Committee Ready for Action

We believe that the very poor point to a key role for university researchers. They can bring together academics, people from the Fourth World, and teams of practitioners for a successful collaboration in which each partner remains free. Together the three groups can value, support, and assist in developing new approaches to knowledge of poverty. This Committee is in position to contribute to this effort.

Whereas academics can do other valuable things, at this time this work appears to be the most necessary and innovative. That is the case, provided that we all agree that this Committee, into which we have put our energy and hope, should be not be just a wise and intelligent reminder of the extreme poverty in this world, but rather a leader calling our fellow-citizens to action.