

# THE RIGHTS OF THE FOURTH WORLD<sup>1</sup>

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## BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights defined an ideal to be attained by all people and by every nation. Its formal adoption by so many countries, with their diverse cultures, economies and policies, implies that these countries are ready to promote the rights which they have affirmed. This affirmation goes hand in hand with the will to create a just and egalitarian world. It implicitly recognises that every person, no matter who he is, has the right to control his own destiny and freely participate in the life of the nation.

The first of the basic options on which the International ATD Science and Service Movement was founded in 1957 effectively meets this ideal, since the Movement's activities are based on the conviction that: “Every man possesses a fundamental, inalienable value that gives him human dignity.”

It is because there are people whose fundamental value is not recognised that men and women of all social, political and religious backgrounds founded this Movement.

Indeed, there is an entire sector of the population whose members are unable to demonstrate their fundamental value publicly and have no way of using such a notion to justify their rights. It is the convergence between the belief in the inalienable dignity of all and the recognition that there is a group of people deprived of the rights that allow them to assert their dignity, which drove the Movement to establish a community action project giving priority to the most underprivileged. This was not done solely out of humanity but from imperatives of equity and justice.

ATD Science and Service came into being fifteen years ago in the heart of an emergency housing camp for the homeless near Paris. It began with the encounter between families who were excluded from society and deprived of all their rights, and a small number of activists who were convinced that it was no longer possible to tolerate such injustice. It very quickly became an international movement and, in a growing number of countries, brought together the excluded and all those who consciously opted for the restitution of rights to the most underprivileged minorities.

In 1965, the *Fédération Internationale Aide à toute Détresse* (FIDAD) grouped together the different ATD national associations which had been created in several countries, as well as other associations founded in various regions out of identical concerns for the most disadvantaged. As a

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<sup>1</sup> „Les droits du Quart Monde“, in: Joseph Wresinski, *Refuser la misère. Une pensée politique née de l'action*, Ed. du Cerf / Ed. Quart Monde, Paris 2007, pp. 151-162. Translated from French, April 2010, © Joseph Wresinski International Centre, Baillet-en-France, France.

result, our Movement is currently fighting for this cause in France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, Switzerland, Italy and the United States. It is leading a double fight in these countries: on a political level, to restore their rights to the most underprivileged; and in terms of teaching, to provide these people with the knowledge they need to assert their rights.

With this purpose in mind, the Movement also aims to give the excluded a voice with intergovernmental authorities, so that the rights of the lowliest men and women are officially and universally recognised and guaranteed at the highest level.

In addition to this, as early as 1960, ATD Science and Service created a research institution which allowed it to bring together researchers from the fields of human and social sciences within an International Commission on Poverty Research in 1961, and to organise a first symposium at UNESCO on the condition known at that time, as “maladjusted families”. In 1972, the Commission of the European Communities entrusted the Fédération Européenne d’Aide à Toute Détresse, the European section of FIDAD, with the development of a methodology for carrying out a census of underprivileged populations in the Communities’ member countries.

Since then, all the research and accounts which the Movement continues to collect confirm the fundamental intuition that, throughout the world, beyond the differences in various countries attributable to culture, structures and social legislation, it is always the same population - I consider them a people - whose members find themselves deprived of all their rights.

This evening, let us seek out this population where they are to be found, cast aside from our usual paths. Everywhere, we will find them:

- deprived of their rights or of the means to implement them,
- unaware even that they are subjects of rights,
- condemned to the vicious circle of exclusion, fear and shame.

This people, witness to the shortcomings of all our societies, is, in a way, a prototype of all oppressed peoples. It may also give rise to a prototype of the international action to be undertaken for the benefit of these peoples. Their liberation will become a test of the sincerity of our ambitions for peace and justice.

## **THE EXCLUDED, ONE PEOPLE: WHO ARE THEY?**

But first of all, who do we mean? Who belongs to this people that brought the Movement into being and continues to drive it forward?

Tonight, we will first discuss the millions of families who, throughout the industrialised Western world, are excluded from our cultures and rejected from all systems of redistribution within our affluent societies. They are the most disadvantaged class of the population, whose poverty-stricken condition is the only legacy passed on from father to son.

We speak of millions of families whose members have known since childhood not only a lack of money, employment, housing and health, but also, as a result, have experienced domestic insecurity and been deprived of normal schooling and professional training. Their future is barred as a result of the ignorance which goes hand in hand with extreme poverty. Millions of families are rejected in this way, absent from the places where our world lives and progresses, absent from its concerns,

deprived of the fundamental rights which give people dignity in others' eyes and a reason to exist and fight for their rightful place in the human community.

Confined in the same shameful housing conditions, doomed to come together in the same flight from the police, or the bailiff, or those who want to take their children into care, and obliged to share the worst-paid, most marginal work, they well and truly form a people sharing family and neighbourhood relations, and, above all, sharing a common memory of a history of extreme poverty with no possible escape.

Unfortunately, these families are so hidden and unknown that we have not yet been able to count them precisely. Nevertheless, certain indicators allow us to assume that they represent at least five percent of the total population of industrialised countries. Five percent means 2,500,000 people in France and 10 million people in the countries of the European Community, as suggested in the journal "*30 Jours d'Europe*".<sup>2</sup> They probably exist in the same proportion in the United States where, at present, there are up to 25 million "economically poor" people.

Around 1900, in London, Charles Booth called them the twenty percent of the city's "completely submerged" population. Not long before that, Karl Marx spoke of the "Lumpenproletariat", while today, the Chinese press describes them as "led astray and ideologically beyond redemption."

Initially, the Movement called them the Underprivileged, those who do not even have the capacity to work. Later, it referred to them as the "Fourth World" in order to emphasise that these people are victims of the same exclusion within our societies as that faced by Third World countries on an international level. It was also to emphasise that they are among those minorities which are victims of legal or *de facto* discrimination, and as such are the concern of major international public authorities in the name of the 1948 Declaration. For is it not largely for the benefit of such minorities that the main international organisations have striven over the years to improve their instruments in order to ensure that, at long last, the rights of all are respected?

## **WHAT DOES EXCLUSION MEAN?**

The interest of international organisations is all the more important since the deprivation of fundamental rights traps whole families into living in isolation on the outskirts of cities or in their least habitable areas, devoid of normal communication with others. Indeed, they are the impoverished residents of the temporary housing complexes around Paris, the insalubrious areas of Brussels or London, the slums, the decaying housing complexes of Hamburg, the most dilapidated buildings in Manhattan's Lower East Side in New York, the many "ghettos" in American cities, and, more generally, the areas abandoned by the more fortunate because the buildings there have deteriorated and are deemed by them uninhabitable.

To give a single example: one night in the middle of last winter, when the temperature had fallen well below zero, 28 children were poisoned by fumes in the building where the ATD Science and Service team lived on 4<sup>th</sup> Street on the Lower East Side of New York. The tenants had been burning kerosene in trash cans to protect their children from the cold. Indeed, for 10 days the building's heating had been out of order and their calls to the landlord had remained unanswered.

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<sup>2</sup> A monthly journal on European affairs published in Paris until 1986.

The deprivation of rights means that those who have jobs in these families must toil at obscure, night jobs, they are driven into slaughterhouses, wastewater works and sewers, or made use of to clean train carriages or do other menial tasks with no future: salvaging scrap iron, rags or other garbage. They are temporarily employed in small workshops, without union membership, unprotected, hired by the day or by the hour. They are the first to face unemployment during times of economic hardship. Often sickness, worry and hopelessness deprive them even of the energy they need to seek new jobs. Also, their lack of training and qualifications prevent them from hoping for a better rank among workers.

Of course, these citizens deprived of all means of participation are not welcomed into our associations, circles or clubs. They are not part of our relationships in any aspect of our lives. It can be said justifiably that the Fourth World consists of those who keep company only with the police, social workers and charity workers.

Indeed, cultural events do not reach this people. Knowing nothing about art, music, theatre and literature, they are strangers to humanity's cultural heritage, although they, too, could share in the world's poetry if they were given the right to do so. Moreover, the Churches are absent from the residential areas of the underclass, and rarely encounter them. Yet, these people hunger for and are capable of a spiritual life, too.

Such exclusion from our economic, cultural, social and spiritual networks can only reinforce the downward spiral of handicaps of all kinds: less and less adequate resources, increasingly poor health and ever worsening schooling, to name a few. Needless to say, later generations' opportunities for the future are reduced to nothing by these conditions, which eliminate all possibility of promotion for today's underclasses, and help to ensure that the poorest children of today will become the underclass of tomorrow.

## **A PEOPLE TRAPPED IN DEPENDENCE**

In this general negation of professed inalienable rights, I put it to you that the denial of the right to participate in political, cultural and spiritual life is the most serious. We have understood that even though the poor are recognised in theory as having these rights, just like other citizens, their situation is such that they disregard them and have no means to claim their application.

Indeed, the Fourth World is deprived of the right to freedom of opinion and speech as defined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration, and on which, in a way, depends all intellectual or spiritual participation.

They are deprived of these rights down to the lowest level: being completely dependent on others for their survival they cannot even say what they think to the grocer, for do they not rely on this man to grant them credit to feed their children when they have no money left?

In the same way, they are dependent on everyone who has the power to grant or refuse them what they need for their families. They are dependent on bureaucracy, on those behind a desk who can grant or refuse them help, housing or access to medical assistance.

Let us picture a few situations.

Once again in New York, there was a mother who lived on 47<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan in deplorable conditions (but is this not the lot of all Fourth World mothers?). She was refused better housing by

the social services under the pretext that this housing, although of better quality, did not comply with the regulation standards for family housing!

In another region, last year, following flagrant abuse by a landlord, the tenants of a completely dilapidated housing estate attempted, with legal backing, to organise a rent strike. During the week which followed the start of this endeavour, one-third of the tenants, those who were the least destitute, were given help to move out, thus rendering the strike by the most disadvantaged population completely ineffective.

Why were the strongest so easily persuaded to give up the strike, to the detriment of the weakest? To understand this, it is necessary to consider their past. They know from experience the consequences to which stubborn reactions can eventually lead. Tomorrow, given their still extremely precarious situation, they may require aid, assistance or leniency for a late rent payment. And to whom would they turn, if not to the landlord or the social services? Tomorrow, access to a job may depend on the municipal authorities, therefore, it is always better to bow one's head, rather than to be accused of stubbornness.

We understand the shame and the scandal of this situation, because it is the great tragedy of Fourth World families: in every country, the conditions of dependence, poverty and ignorance mean the Fourth World population must draw on welfare, emergency assistance, and public or private charity.

As for publicly expressing an opinion, this same Article recognises the right: "... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media."

Yet a man of the Fourth World could not even dream of doing this. He does not think that such a right could concern him, since he finds himself in a continual struggle for survival. He is deprived of exercising his right to express himself, and does not have the means to reverse the situation, nor even does it occur to him to do so.

Without freedom of expression, he is clearly unable to enjoy freedom of thought, conscience and religion as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration. In his state of dependence in relation to those who sometimes bring him charity, he is unable – or believes he is unable – to express his convictions or develop his own thoughts or beliefs in a free exchange with others.

Besides, how could he adopt a religion or convictions which have not been passed down to him, considering that the Churches only rarely come into contact with poor people such as these, and since recent modern thinking does not reach the bottom of these grey areas?

Is it necessary to say that under these conditions the recognition in Article 21 of every person's right to "take part in the government of his country" and the right "of equal access to public service in his country" can only appear to him as a mockery? How could he? How could he even dream of it, since poverty and ignorance have kept him away from any contact with governmental bodies and from all information about the problems in his country and the world?

In the same Article, it is asserted that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government". This will is certainly not found in the core who live at the very bottom of our nation's social ladder, because those who comprise it are not committed to any party or pressure group. Furthermore, no authority has ever come to the emergency housing estates and the decaying districts to hear and take note of the will of these most maligned citizens - a will they cannot voice, but which they proclaim with all their being!

## **FROM DEPRIVATION TO DEPRIVATION, ALL LAWS ABANDON THE POOR**

What is left to give the poverty-stricken access to freedom and protection? Can we speak of the right to education which, according to Article 26 of the Declaration, “shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”? When the majority of the Fourth World's children – who are neither stupid nor mentally disabled – are condemned to complete failure at school, that is, they are unable to read when they leave school at 14, 16 or even 18 years old, and when school is a place of suffering and humiliation for them, where their classmates explicitly reproduce the exclusion which they see put into practice more discretely in the adult world, what remains of this “full development” which is their right?

Finally, what can be said about the fact that, in a country where a Revolution took place in 1789, the Fourth World still finds itself deprived of the right to equal protection under the law as guaranteed by Article 7 of the Declaration?

When youths commit some misdemeanour in the vicinity, the offenders will be sought in these accursed areas. A Fourth World man will be absent on the day of his trial, because the summons did not reach him, for his address is in a place no one has heard of, or else, he counts so little that that no one remembers to notify him in his cell on the day of his trial and, as a result, he will receive the maximum sentence.

In any case, he is imprisoned within a legal system whose mechanism he is unable to understand. He has learned some responses which “work”, as they say: plead guilty, be as humble as possible, focus on an unhappy childhood or disown one's parents and denigrate them before the whole court. Is this really the justice intended by our legislators?

## **IMPOSSIBLE JUSTICE**

In every instance we have just considered, the Fourth World is deprived, either of the simple recognition of the very existence of a right, or of the means to exercise it.

Any action is more complicated when one lives in a constantly changing situation in a remote, poorly served area, unaware of the world which barely knows of your existence except when you have the misfortune to disturb it. In order to assert their rights, people must know what they are. They must know how to defend themselves, or find others to defend them, and they must know how to express themselves.

Asserting these rights means not only knowing that they are responsible for their own and their family's future, but also being able to exercise that responsibility. They must recognise their rightful place in the human community. We have seen that all of this is impossible for the people of the Fourth World who live in a state of dependence, vulnerability and humiliation, forcing them to abandon any rights which they could claim if they accepted to demean themselves further.

Consider the father whose wife had died and who, against all odds, fought to raise his child himself. His status as a worker was unrecognised, because he did thankless jobs which were often illegal and always of short duration, and he did not receive any family benefits because he did not declare himself as unemployed. Yet, the social worker visited him and tried to regularise his

situation. But he replied, “I don’t need anybody, I can get by on my own, I don’t want to have to thank anyone!”

We, ourselves, were unable to understand his refusal to take the necessary steps to secure his rights. However, we could have understood the humiliation which this dependence on social workers and unemployment services represented for him. We should have recognised and admired this last desperate call for dignity and recognition of his right to be a free man. “Better hunger than shame...”

In all of these areas where members of the Fourth World lack full possession of universally recognised human rights, the result is a position of shamefulness which reinforces their exclusion, casting them even further into poverty and ignorance. The deprivation of a person’s rights places him in a world where he is unable to cope, where he is unable to connect with others or count on anyone else. It leads to permanent insecurity and fear.

Faced with this fear, some react by violence, others by shutting themselves away and giving up. Like that family, which, at the end of a long series of misfortunes, saw the social services intervene to remove all of its children with the exception of the three youngest. From that point on, the courtyard was barricaded. When people visited, the mother answered from behind the gates, refusing to open them. When she had to go out, she locked her children inside, even the eldest, who was eight and who, when temporarily back home, was not even allowed to go to school. The family withdrew from the world, completing the process of exclusion which they had always been made to suffer. This attitude inevitably led to a police raid, the destruction of the gates and a forced entry with the removal of the remaining children, who were subsequently placed into care.

As we have said, others react with violence, some turn to drink and, thus, the chasm of incomprehension and rejection widens. The surrounding world trembles and responds by increasing the distance between themselves and those they have already rejected. Thus, the vicious circle of non-rights and exclusion is established.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Fourth World, a people deprived of rights and, therefore, of status and identity, a humiliated people whom we no longer encounter in our daily lives and who are no longer part of our concerns and our plans, challenge us. They ask us to take a new look at our society. Above all, they ask us to grant them their rightful place in human institutions and thus to commit ourselves to building a different society with them, one which is truly just and egalitarian.

As we have already said, this people, whose poverty has been a pretext for all kinds of ideologies and projects for change, but whose members have never benefited from them, are the prototype of oppressed people. Fighting for the actual recognition of their rights would show that the defenders of the law were moved by a desire to banish exclusion and to create a society in which all minorities, whoever they are and whatever their social status, would have a voice and be part of its development and creativity.

Extreme poverty was created by man; man can destroy it.