

THE URBAN POOREST: THE ANCESTRAL INVITATION TO FIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS¹

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Speech given at the Conference "The Urban Poor," organised by UNESCO at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, from 8 to 11 December 1980

Mr Fernand-Laurent, who presented the conclusions of the Symposium on Human Rights in an Urban Environment, has painted a remarkable picture of the various aspects of exclusion likely to complicate integration into urban life. In it, he shows how exclusion can be caused by poverty. It is this type of exclusion, in particular, that we shall address.

In some ways, exclusion through extreme poverty is representative of all other forms of exclusion. In every city in the world, extreme poverty is a combination of all the factors of exclusion, driving the poorest away from socio-economic, cultural and political life. At the bottom of the social ladder, indifference, intolerance, administrative practices and even legal texts lead to an accumulation of adverse effects on the existence of an entire layer of the population, driving them into a different world, a world of subsistence. In France, since the Estates-General of 1789, we have referred to this world as the Fourth Order or, as we say today, the Fourth World.

In the 1960s, the ATD Fourth World Movement decided to revive this term, which refers to those who, owing to excessive poverty, are unable to enter the established order of the society into which they were born. Since then, others have also seen good reason to adopt it, but they do so to describe other realities. We regret this somewhat, since it is never useful to generate even the slightest confusion when it comes to speaking about the condition of the very poorest. Let us ensure that at least the words and titles which belong to them are not stolen, because spiriting away the term which could help them to achieve the recognition of their own identity and, in this way, return to them the fullness of their rights, is surely a way of depriving them doubly of their fundamental rights.

In light of this recognition, please allow me to recall briefly what has been meant, since 1789, by Fourth Order or Fourth World. All actions to be taken in favour of human rights in urban areas, the inner suburbs or the wastelands around our cities where today's Fourth World families survive as best they can, depend upon this explanation.

A PEOPLE WHOSE HISTORY IS UNTOLD

As we have said, the Fourth World is the segment of the population at the bottom of the social ladder and consequently the poorest, who find themselves to all intents and purposes excluded from the economic, cultural and social lives of other citizens in all our industrialised and developing countries.

¹ „Les plus pauvres dans la ville : incitation séculaire au combat pour les Droits de l'homme“, in: Joseph Wresinski, *Refuser la misère. Une pensée politique née de l'action*, Ed. du Cerf / Ed. Quart Monde, Paris 2007, pp. 163-172. Translated from French, June 2011, © Joseph Wresinski International Centre, Baillet-en-France, France.

In fact, we could undoubtedly say as much, not of the poor but of the totally impoverished, throughout history, especially in Western Europe, which could serve as an example. Here, the poorest have been excluded in every century and it was the representation of this excluded poor that Dufourny de Villiers sought in the Estates-General of 1789. The problem at that time was, as it still is today, that it concerned a population which is both difficult to identify and universal through time.

This population is difficult to identify because the story of the poorest throughout the ages has barely been told. The poorest, we know, only appear in our history occasionally, in flashes you might say, insofar as, occasionally, they attract specific attention from their non-poor contemporaries.

Here, we will not dwell on the persistent exclusion of the poorest from history. Nevertheless, it is often possible to detect universal characteristics by reading between the lines of historical documents. Let us simply take a moment to consider this continual expulsion of the poorest which is a common thread running through the history of our Western cities. Today, expulsion, though it has taken on other forms, remains the same as it was in the Middle Ages.

You will remember that at one time the poor used to be entitled to register, meaning they were guaranteed recognition and assistance. And you will remember the less honoured poor, accepted nevertheless in the almshouses, hospices and lazarettos, even when they were not really ill. The poor were catered for - although not always welcome - and they were entitled to the pastoral care of a bishop at a certain time of the year, as well as the care of monks and nuns during the rest of the year. But above all - because it is they who interest us - remember those who were too poverty-stricken to be considered as the "good poor", and who, for this reason, were ordered to leave the city walls before sundown.

It was these poor who were removed from the cities of Brabant by secular laws using penalties devised by the Inquisition. These penalties made it possible to banish a population in rags, an embarrassment for the good people, to faraway destinations, for thefts of food or other petty crimes linked to poverty. The poorest have always been the bad poor, not for reasons of congenital immorality as has been repeated century after century. They have been and continue to be the bad poor, because below a certain poverty threshold, it is impossible to live according to the standards of good conduct established by the community.

This is why poverty can become a vicious circle. Its effect on its victims drives their contemporaries to deprive them, in one way or another, of their rights as citizens, the fundamental rights of their times. In even earlier times, the city spat them out. They joined the poor who camped outside the city walls or the itinerant crowds of pilgrims, travelling merchants and troubadours, surviving in their wake, imagining themselves in turn to be pilgrims, merchants and troubadours, or simply becoming bandits or cut-throats.

The city spat them out. It also imprisoned them in its "workhouses", its "poorhouses" and its lunatic asylums. In the seventeenth century, people came from afar to visit the prototypes of these institutions in the good city of Amsterdam. In the same way, today, we visit one housing estate or another built for families labelled as "dysfunctional" or "beyond redemption", the principle of which is still the same: to keep them away from the places where other citizens live and, if possible, to educate them. In every age our cities recreate courtyards and streets like the *Cour des Miracles*, or *rue des Francs-Bourgeois*, no longer the preserve of middle class citizens fallen into straitened circumstances, but of those the

Larousse dictionary still calls today the “false, shameful poor, who know how to gain sympathy through their poverty”. Just as they reinvent outright expulsion.

Again confining ourselves to Western Europe, we recognise the ancestors of today’s poorest suddenly appearing from their hovels, shacks and caves near Paris to give their lives on the Commune barricades. Events allowing them to mix with their fellow citizens without too much shame, earning some prestige and – who knows – some material benefit have always brought them out in this manner. In our times, the events of 1968 were an example of this in a number of Western European cities. There again, underprivileged youths suddenly appeared from their housing estates near Paris to tear up the cobblestones alongside the students.

But the Commune, like the events of 1968, is also a good example of the fact that city dwellers do not retain in their midst people and families who are of no credit to them under normal circumstances. The Commune’s poorest survivors and their descendants soon found themselves in that no man’s land between town and country which was called “the zone.” Likewise, the underprivileged youths exploding onto our streets in 1968 now find themselves in mediocre, overcrowded housing estates built in this former “zone” since 1945.

These are instructive examples, which, nevertheless, do not inform us because they are not placed within a more comprehensive history which has been properly analysed and passed on.

THE CURSE

In any case, as to the poorest gaining entry to the industrial age, the die was already cast at the time of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Theirs was the best description of those people whose direct descendants would be the poorest families who are so hopelessly difficult to integrate into today’s cities. They already saw an entire people with an internal class structure which virtually stood apart from the class society which was coming into being.

Marx and Engels first distinguished a “glut of workers”. Although they were “surplus”, most, if not all of them, could still enter the newly emerging urban working class. Then, in Marx’s writings, we find a “stagnant population, repelled rather than attracted by the new centres of industry”. Already, they were no longer potential “workers”. This population was not attracted to the workshops and factories and, for them, there was a growing risk that they would never find their place there. Marx and Engels were equally pessimistic about a social layer in what they called “the sphere of pauperism”. These were people “who have never been in the stern yet steeling school of labour”. Below them were the citizens who had neither a well-defined nor even a questionable source of income and who, at least in some cases, had no fixed address.

For the latter, the curse would be terrible, and remains so to this day: “Lumpen proletariat”, a “mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu* [men without hearth or home]...”

Here, in just a few lines, is the description of extreme poverty by the non-poor that has been a constant in all times and all places. A description which can be heard today of the families from the run-down areas of Naples, of people who still loiter around the dilapidated pubs of Liverpool or the docks of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, families from the underprivileged

housing estates of Caen, Rennes and Nancy, and those who live in the old barracks of Rastatt in the Federal Republic of Germany.

It is a description and a curse at the same time. It is something which will be heard from now on in all countries, wherever industrialisation and economic and social change have cast aside the poorest. Indeed, they are referred to in the same way in Bogotá, Bangkok or Abidjan. Undermined by extreme poverty for too long to be virtuous, the poorest, wherever they are, are struck by the same curse which leads to scorn, fear and exclusion. This exclusion prevents them, more or less forever, from presenting themselves as men, from seeing themselves with human rights whose implementation would allow them to demonstrate that they are men in the same way (if not even more so) as their fellow citizens.

And we should not forget that these population groups driven back into a Fourth World where the 1948 Declaration holds no sway, are, above all, men, women and children who belong to the very country which excludes them. In general, they are not immigrants. Only some of them are from ethnic minorities. There is only a portion of migrant workers to be found in the Fourth World in the West, in the same way as there is only a small fraction of Indians among the Fourth World in Guatemala, Columbia or the United States. The Fourth World is composed essentially of "ordinary citizens", of the same race and ethnicity, born in the same land as the rest of the population.

NO POLITICAL REPRESENTATION WITHOUT A RECOGNISED HISTORY

It was important for us to recall the historical process which drove the poorest in the western world, and which is likely to drive those in all other parts of the world, to lead their lives independently of the rest of society. This solitary history clearly turned them into a "fourth order", because it was impossible for them to enter the new working classes which emerged and grew stronger in the wake of industrialisation and urbanisation.

It is their own solitary history and, above all, it is unrecognised. It is this ignorance that, in our opinion, is at the root of today's negation of the human rights of those at the bottom of the urban social ladder in industrial countries. Indeed, who has acknowledged that the histories of the poorest and of the working class population diverged at the beginning of the industrial era? Moreover, is there not a danger that the historical misunderstanding which has arisen in the West has already influenced how we envisage the destiny of the poorest on other continents? Is there not a danger that this will lead to the same negation of inalienable rights?

In any case, with respect to human rights, it is essential to realise that it is only those populations with a properly recognised common identity, both past and present, that are represented in urban democracies (and equally so, in democracies that are still largely rural). The legitimacy of political representation is based on a common history, which has forged common needs and interests or given rise to a message or a specific ideology which applies to all parts of the society concerned. The two justifications for political representation, based on the recognition of a specific past and present history, are often linked. But the important point is that, without this recognition, it is impossible for a group to become part of the political scene, a true partner in democracy, free to express its thoughts, experiences and aspirations.

If we do not recognise the historical background and identity of this group, we will repeat what has always been said to the underprivileged populations in industrialised nations, namely

that they must turn to the existing political, consumer, family or trade union organisations. Since this population has nothing in particular to offer, they will find themselves in interest groups created by and for other citizens. They know they will be defended by what are known as the “social partners” who already occupy the public arena. This exclusive attitude towards them means that, for the Fourth World in the West, our democracies seem to be the preserve of those who have already carved out their place. Without a history, the Fourth World is also excluded from politics, and thus unable to find a way of calling attention to its history.

WITHOUT POLITICAL REPRESENTATION, THERE CAN BE NO HUMAN RIGHTS

In these conditions, the poorest segment of the population may be the “object”, but never the “subject”, of political decisions. And a democracy which treats them as objects without being aware of their real identity will never produce economic and social legislation, laws for housing, the environment, employment, health and education which are capable of implementing children’s rights and human rights for those at the bottom of the social ladder.

It would be a mistake to believe, as we too often do, that legislation that theoretically ensures the same inalienable rights for all, will, as if by miracle or accident, also shelter the workers and poorest families whose extreme deprivation has never been on the agenda. In view of the fact that they have not been included in the various scenarios to be considered when drawing up laws, implementing legislation and internal institutional regulations, they do not benefit from them.

But there is worse, because by not benefiting from legislation and structures created to ensure the rights of all citizens, the Fourth World population is doubly “marginal”. Indeed, in a democracy that does not understand their lack of participation, this population appears increasingly “deviant”, thus confirming our opinion that they are the dregs of humanity. Without a history to explain their current circumstances, what else could they be, apart from a more or less fortuitous mixture of “marginals” and “losers”? In our cities and democracies which, nevertheless, do have a social conscience, the underprivileged population gives rise to a growing number of marginal measures that we hope will be more or less “educational”. In view of the fact that it is people and not structures which are the problem, how is it possible to do otherwise than to introduce specific, marginal measures into existing legislation? And because we do not “educate” a population with whom our encounters are based on a historical misunderstanding and that we are unable to identify, these marginal measures cannot lead to solutions. Often designed to be temporary, they become a permanent fashion of dealing with poverty.

The cities which have created emergency housing estates or transit areas, which manage social welfare and public assistance budgets designed for emergencies, which create special classes for backward children in poor areas, are already familiar with this situation. In many cases, these municipal authorities have given up the search for real solutions. Who can hold this against them? They have been given responsibility for a problem that, strictly speaking, does not belong to them. It is not a problem of urbanisation or urban administration, but rather a fundamental and general problem of democracy. Until this is acknowledged, municipalities will be left to cope individually with the vicious circle which is a breeding ground for, and consolidates, the negation of a variety of human and children’s rights. In attempting to paint the picture of this vicious circle, in its study “The Fourth World and Human Rights”, the ATD

Fourth World Movement has been led to understand the extent to which these inalienable rights are inextricably linked. This study, conducted under the auspices of UNESCO's Human Rights Division, also includes information about the type of initiatives the Movement has developed with Fourth World families, based on the analysis which we have just outlined. We shall not say more about this subject here. Instead, we shall content ourselves with emphasising just one point.

A PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF RIGHTS YET CAPABLE OF ASSUMING THEM

We would like to stress this point, because today's most commonly asked question is whether the excluded, who come to us distorted and unrecognisable, are still capable of assuming their rights.

The ATD Fourth World Movement's answer is an unqualified "yes". In over 100 programmes run and duly evaluated in some ten countries on four continents, the Fourth World populations have shown themselves to be perfectly capable of standing up and tackling their existence in a new way. The Fourth World is capable of freeing itself. I put it to you that the question which remains is, rather, whether we are capable of restoring Human Rights to them.