

THE PLACE OF THE POOR IN OUR THINKING¹

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Under this title, Joseph Wresinski presented his introduction to the work of the Study Programme on Maladjusted Families, which, in 1962 and 1963, brought together scientists, social workers and organisation activists working alongside families in extreme poverty in Europe and North America, as well as the first permanent volunteers who had joined him in Noisy-le-Grand.

During the preceding study group, we noted that many families continue to live in a state of shocking poverty because society has been incapable of giving them access to its goods. This situation, we thought, resulted from a lack of analysis of the situation of these families and how they cope.

Yet, the poor are not absent from our thinking. Quite the contrary, we are more and more concerned about them. Today, who has not asked him- or herself about poverty in one respect or another, regardless of his or her philosophy, religious or political persuasion or social position? That being the case, how can there be a state of destitution within today's wealthiest societies which is oddly reminiscent of images of extreme poverty from previous centuries, yet we make no serious effort to understand why?

POVERTY AS A CONDITION IS CONFUSED WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE POOR

Firstly, we must acknowledge that we tend to see individuals or groups who experience poverty, rather than poverty itself. Perhaps we see it this way because, in our Judeo-Christian civilisation, poverty is presented to us in the guise of people, such as widows, orphans, etc. From these images, we have retained the individual aspect, instead of the unambiguous picture they paint of its universal traits. Thus, through Lazarus we see a person who is excluded, repugnant and filled with shame...

As a result, we take into account widows and orphans. Alongside them, other poor people have been introduced into our thinking: slaves, peasants, workers, populations in developing countries, etc. One by one, they have become familiar to us, often through conflict, and subsequently, we have analysed their cases. However, we have not sought to understand the universal aspects of their condition, in order to be ready to recognise, or even to anticipate, poverty in all its forms.

This tendency to see individuals rather than the condition they share with a significant portion of humanity is reinforced by the concept which has been handed down through history of the "good" and the "bad" poor. In such a concept – which, moreover, none of us can be free of entirely - there is no question of blaming poverty itself. Rather, we are indignant that a certain category of people is obliged to accept poverty, whereas, for others, we say that it is deserved.

Today, the "good" poor are undoubtedly workers, refugees, the elderly, and, above all, the hungry in the less-developed countries.

Others, perhaps temporary workers, released prisoners, or vagrant families, continue to be far too distasteful for us. These are the "bad" poor: they neither deserve nor desire anything else.

¹ Entitled "La place du pauvre dans la pensée", this paper was initially published in: Nouveaux aspects de la famille. Principes de promotion sociale de la famille inadaptée, Paris, 1964, pp. 7-10. It was reedited in: Joseph Wresinski, Refuser la misère. Une pensée politique née de l'action, Paris, 2007, pp. 13-18. Translated from French, August 2009, © Joseph Wresinski International Centre, Baillet-en-France, France.

In sum, we do not acknowledge the true dimensions of their poverty and suffering.

It must be admitted that problem families are still not readily seen as deserving poor, and as such, worthy of our intellectual effort.

THE DIFFICULTY OF ANALYSIS

Our lack of universal knowledge means we are unable to recognise poverty. Finding it in one form or another is always a painful process, and once we recognise a given form of poverty, we then have difficulty analysing it because of this lack of knowledge.

Indeed, ignorance of poverty's fundamental features means that each poor person we meet is a new phenomenon. How should we communicate with this unidentifiable person? To reach the poor, we seek points of reference. We approach their suffering from a point of view that is familiar to us because it corresponds to what we have seen in other poor people. Our ignorance frequently turns these points of reference into genuine stereotypes.

Which one of us, at the sight of a slum, has not initially reduced it to a problem of housing shortage, lack of work, or inadequate salaries? It is clear that these factors play a role, but how, and why? We do not know because this situation is new and unknown to us.

It is also human nature to compare the suffering of the poor to what we, ourselves, have suffered, or believe we could suffer. As winter approaches, we imagine the families in the slums suffering from the cold; or rather we imagine how we ourselves would suffer from the cold. We scarcely know what the cold really means for these families. We can suffer from the same thing but since we do not live as the poor do, we do not suffer in the same way. There is little in common between us.

When we relate to those aspects of poverty which are already known to us or relate to our own experience of suffering, we may be misguided by our excessively subjective reasoning. We will invent forms of assistance which do not respond to actual needs. In order to understand these needs, we must force every preconceived notion out of our minds and conduct objective research.

We do not easily engage in an approach which involves observing, listening to and questioning those who live in poverty. First of all, it requires humility and great receptiveness. We need humility in order to admit that the poor person has something to teach us. We need receptiveness in order to accept the consequences of what we learn. After all, where will he lead us, this man who seems to defy our efforts to save him, who entrenches himself in that poverty which is an accusation of our social or religious failures? Would we not prefer to destroy this poverty purely and simply, by imposing our will on the poor, by dividing them up and obliging them to become like us or to disappear?

Objective analysis also demands great competence. Do we know simply how to listen to the poor and interpret their words, words which do not carry the same meaning in their world as they do in our own? Do we understand their gestures, which belong to a world we have not yet truly penetrated? Can we detect how the poor perceive us – we, the people around them – since this will largely determine how they will communicate with us?

There have been too many badly-designed questionnaires, poorly-conducted surveys, ineffective and even harmful approaches, because we have not known how to put ourselves in tune with those we seek to question. Even in our research, we seek to make the poor adapt themselves to us and our past experiences, rather than the other way round.

It is true that specialisation does not yet exist in this field. There is no psychology, sociology, history, or geography of poverty. There are not even any specialists of the economic system of the poor. Therefore, it is possible for every scientist to consider him- or herself as an authority.

"WHEN THE POOR ARE ABSENT FROM OUR THINKING THEY REMAIN EXCLUDED FROM OUR SOCIETIES"

As long as there are no specialisations in research to provide universal knowledge, the poor will only enter our reasoning in the form of categories, and, as we have seen, not very easily at that. And as long as certain groups of people remain outside of our thinking, the world will be built without them.

Of course, we can accept them into our hearts. However, societies are not built through love, but through intelligence, whether or not it is sustained by love. The poor who are not part of human intelligence will not be introduced into their cities. As long as the poor are not heard, as long as officials responsible for the organisation of cities do not learn about the poor and their world, the measures they implement for them will merely be gestures made in fits and starts, responding to demands that are shortsighted and expedient. Subjective action that is not inspired by the personal experiences of the poor themselves, no matter how well-intentioned, will not include them in social structures.

Thus, the wave of impulsive generosity for the homeless² which arose throughout France could not draw problem families into large housing complexes. These families, perhaps already loved but unknown, remained outside our walls, in wretched emergency housing estates. Until human and social sciences provide true knowledge, town planners and builders can only recreate a world apart for those on the fringes of society. Social workers will exhaust themselves in vain, providing the poor with resources that have not been designed for them. Magistrates, lacking knowledge about their capabilities and potential, will be unable to ensure them equality before the law. And the Church will not know the language of those it seeks to evangelise.

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We wanted to hear these families who live outside our walls and our thinking, and to know their faces. We wanted to know who they are, before asking what we can do in order for them to become something else. Now, while continuing to listen to and observe the poor, we want to understand their true needs before wondering how to convince them that they have other needs.

By thus introducing these rejected families into our way of thinking, perhaps we will learn to grasp the universal traits of their poverty. Then, we will have taken a tiny step forward in gaining the knowledge that will allow us to recognise poverty as it has always been. By bringing today's poor back into the fold, we will have prepared to receive tomorrow's poor.

² The author is referring to the mobilisation of opinion following the appeal by Abbé Pierre (the founder of Emmaus International) in February 1954.