

THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE, A LASTING ALLIANCE¹

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Speech delivered at the opening of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Research on Poverty and Exclusion on 5 October 1979 in Paris, on the occasion of the International Congress on Fourth World Children at UNESCO Headquarters.²

A LASTING ALLIANCE

In welcoming you here this evening, allow me to enter immediately into the heart of the subject that brings us together. I believe we can get straight to the point, without wasting time with the usual courtesies, due to the friendship between us which, for most of us, extends back over a period of many years.

As you know, the crux of the matter is the role that we hope you will agree to play concerning the extreme form of poverty which we call exclusion. So far, each of you has personally accepted to guarantee the importance of the Congress to be held this weekend. This evening, we would like to talk to you about how you can effectively guide and even ensure its success, and how you can select the results which appear to be the most promising for the future.

However, in our opinion, it is even more important to discuss the more enduring role which can be expected only from men and women like yourselves, by those populations which are the most neglected in our modern societies as well as by our international organisations.

In the course of our exchanges in recent months, we have expressed our deep anxiety concerning a dual phenomenon about poverty: on the one hand, unemployment and relative poverty are increasing in the industrialised world; on the other hand, at the same time, those rare international institutions which were devoted to drawing attention and action towards that persistent poverty which has never been eliminated, even during the most prosperous times, are disappearing or becoming jeopardized.

This is not a paradox. It is perfectly human and comprehensible, even if we cannot condone it. The slowing down of the economy, unemployment, the return to harder times, and above all, a feeling of insecurity, now mark the lives of a growing number of our fellow citizens who believed themselves safe from such regression. Some believe that this allows them to understand better, and thus better support the cause of those who have never been free of unemployment and paralysing insecurity. This is undoubtedly true, but only in part, because generalised insecurity also leads to a tougher stance with respect to a population which has never been able to find its place in today's labour market. Now, more than ever, we criticise them for burdening our assistance or social security system budgets.

Indeed, already during the past year or two in the eight western European countries where we are present, our Movement has registered signs of distrust and attitudes which intensify exclusion. Objections are raised to allowing these people even basic rights, such as access to certain compensatory benefits. It seems undeniable that, in these more difficult times, the understanding, compassion and political will, which came into being during more prosperous times, are once again under attack.

¹ Entitled "Le comité scientifique, une alliance durable", this paper was reedited in: Joseph Wresinski, *Refuser la misère. Une pensée politique née de l'action*, Paris, 2007, pp. 45-50. Translated from French, August 2009, © Joseph Wresinski International Centre, Baillet-en-France, France.

² This Congress fell within the scope of the 1979 celebration of the International Year of the Child, twenty years after the United Nations adopted the International Declaration of the Rights of the Child. A first English translation of this paper, entitled "The Sponsoring Committee, a Lasting Alliance", was published in the proceedings.

As a result, it is as though the Fourth World has been sent back to its age-old exile. Whether in the political arena or from an economic point of view, including this group in our struggle for equal opportunities and a better distribution of power appears to be a luxury. Neither politicians nor economists seem able to afford it. Even when we broaden the scope of social security systems, even when we attempt to adopt forms of guaranteed family income, we are not looking towards these families. Moreover, the conditions which must be met in order to accede to such systems generally remain above their restricted means.

Thus, through the ups and downs of more than a century of economic life, the Fourth World has remained the same; excluded, pursuing its own solitary history. It is a history of suffering, not so much because of material deprivation alone, although this is undeniable, but because of the scorn which weighs upon these families, who are prohibited from having a place and a voice in the social and political lives of other citizens.

We cannot accept this return into exile for two reasons. The first is for reasons of simple humanity. It is unthinkable that those who have suffered the longest from injustice and disregard for human and children's rights in all their forms should once more be those who pay the greatest price for our economic decisions. We are, once again, witnessing the blatant, repeated destruction of the poorest people, and this is unacceptable. Moreover, in allowing such dehumanisation of the poorest, the entire community loses out in terms of brotherhood and love.

But there is another side to the question, one which concerns our modern societies as such. By removing the poorest population from our sight, from public opinion, from the collective consciousness and from the political arena, we are preventing the advancement of our democracies. We know that these democracies have become truly "exclusive domains", the bastion of those who have already carved out their place; in political parties, in polling systems and places of dialogue, in the three-party government triangle, etc. The struggles led by today's political players against each other, attracting, turn and turn about, slightly more power to themselves, cannot change the fact that our democracies still have a fundamental weakness: their exclusive nature.

And yet, in a democracy where exclusion remains possible, no citizen is ever immune once and for all. A democracy of this nature remains well below the ideal of equality and justice that our western civilisation holds dear.

Therefore, it is for pressing social and human reasons that we seek to increase our efforts to bring excluded populations back into our thoughts, and into the economic, social, cultural and political life of our societies.

But how do we achieve this aspiration, which corresponds so profoundly with the ideals of western civilisation, and which, nevertheless, encounters so many obstacles? As you know, the ATD Fourth World Movement goes back some twenty-two years. That is not very long, but it has nevertheless taught us many lessons. From these lessons, allow me to cite two which have inspired our approach towards you.

First of all, under current circumstances, today's poorest people must be able to count on our personal commitment. For them, there is no shortcut, no direct path which leads from their marginal lives to participation in our social structures.

In our democracies, historical analysis clearly shows that for excluded citizens to enter the political arena and take part in legislative action, there must first be the personal commitment of people who have the prestige to influence their fellow citizens.

Today, more than ever before, the Fourth World needs prestigious individuals, recognised for their competence, integrity and loyalty, to gather and unite in an assembly which may be few in number, but entirely independent, whose word cannot be doubted, discredited or suppressed.

It appears clear that only an initiative of this kind, by personalities who are convinced of the need to maintain and extend public interest, can prepare the changes we hope for.

As you know, we are inviting you to participate in a group that would be free of all allegiances. Or rather, there would be but one: an allegiance to the proposal that the poorest people can freely take their place and play their role in society's thinking as well as in mankind's practical endeavours.

Certainly, for the moment, such a group must be ready to pay the price for its independence: the human price of extra effort; perhaps a social price, as we face professional circles that do not immediately understand the cause which we defend; and also a financial price, insofar as we do not yet have guaranteed funding. But so long as this price is paid at the outset, it seems reasonable to think that we will eventually obtain the status and financial security that such a group deserves.

There remains a second lesson drawn from our history which we would like to share with you. It concerns the indispensable alliance between men of action and men of science. It has been discussed frequently throughout the world since the 1950s, and I would like to remind you that our Movement has continually planned and pursued it.

When we wonder about those who, over the centuries, have borne witness not only to poverty but to the exclusion of the poorest from the human community, we always find men of action. The academics, men of knowledge, were seldom the first to rekindle consciences, to influence the thinking of their times. They never even seem to have recognised that an understanding of the age-old, universal phenomenon of the exclusion of the poorest might be a necessary component to understanding humanity in general.

Thus, since the Middle Ages and even before, western history is punctuated with reminders that the excluded exist, but the witnesses are always individuals who are part of the real world. Those with academic knowledge seem only rarely to have heard the call. Nor have they helped verify and lend credibility to the voices which come from the very lives of the poorest.

That is perhaps the main reason why, even in the nineteenth century, the exclusion of the poorest from the newly emerging urban and rural classes was overlooked.

The history of our own Movement includes a happy twist to this age-old condition. From the moment academics such as Christian Debuyst, Henning Friis, Jean Labbens, Mike Miller, Lloyd Ohlin and others took the intuitions and knowledge of our activist Movement seriously, the voice from the grassroots became audible, credible and acceptable. This taught us the vital importance of the alliance between science and action which we seek to establish with you. We speak of an alliance where science does more than simply lend an attentive ear, and where it devotes itself to the task of:

- recognising true insights born of real experience, and testing them;
- translating into logic, analyses and theories the factual knowledge that only a man involved in the lives of the poorest can recognise.

Just as there is no direct path from the exclusion of the poorest to their participation in the democracy of others, so there is no direct path between field experience and a policy to combat poverty.

The facts related by men of action remain, almost, merely incidental, so long as men of science have not studied, organised and translated them into a logical theory.

Today, all of this is self-evident in our societies, which are certainly democratic in their own way but where policies and programmes are largely the concern of technocrats. Men of action very often have an accurate sense of reality. They often move in promising directions, on the basis of their own intuition. But to be followed, and to see their actions translated into genuine

policy, their sense of reality must be confirmed, as it were, by men of science. Each of them must remain what they are, and, in no case, should they try to take on each others' roles. It is by linking the best of both of them that changes in opinion and public policy may be brought about.

In order for change to occur, the world must know what exclusion truly is, and must understand the condition of contempt and exile inflicted upon millions of children and families.

The world must know, and whether or not it knows in the future will depend largely upon you.