

Poverty and Human Rights in the Light of the Philosophy and Contributions of Father Joseph Wresinski

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One of the persistent concerns which have oriented my work as an anthropologist has been the effort to seek explanations and solutions for the prevailing economic, social and political inequities in my own country, Peru. My own origins in a poor, rural family helped spur a great commitment to such issues, and strengthened my option of work and service on behalf of the poor of the southern Andean region of Peru. On this occasion I would like to share with you my experiences and reflections regarding the conceptualization and treatment of poverty issues which are the fruit of long years of work with poor families and also of my knowledge about the philosophy and actions of Father Joseph Wresinski.

During the 1960s, at the beginning of my professional career and relationship with the Andean communities of the Cusco region, my understanding was that poverty among rural families was the product of backwardness and of their inability to integrate themselves into the larger society. I assumed that poverty could be overcome through schemes that would enable the integration of such families, and it is for this reason that I collaborated with projects of applied anthropology in the rural community of Kuyo Chico, in the Písaq district, sponsored by Cornell University, the national ministries of Labour and Indigenous Affairs and the Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad del Cusco. Our theoretical framework assumed that overcoming poverty required the implementation of development projects that could capitalize on the dormant capacities of these kinds of communities.

In order for such a process to be unleashed, we had to begin with those in the community who were most propitious for involvement, and could thereby ensure quick success for our efforts. Our emphasis was on the promotion of centers of development which could then serve as models for other, equally

backward, communities so that in this way development could spread by means of contagion or influence. With time we came to realize that our rationale proceeded from ethnocentric assumptions which led us to differentiate between modern and traditional societies, that is on the one hand societies closed to change and innovation, and on the other, societies open to western conceptions of development, science and technology, understood as fundamental prerequisites of development itself. As an example I could cite how in Kuyo Chico our applied anthropology project promoted the construction of new stoves which were a meter high off the ground, assuming that this would benefit women in such rural communities. But the stoves were never used by these women because Andean peasant culture provides for ground-level cooking fires, which enable women to sit on the ground, gather the food to be cooked around them and tend the fire as well as converse with visitors, without having to get up or change position. Another factor weighing against acceptance of the new stoves is the traditional belief that fires at waist level or higher may directly impact the womb and cause sterility, a very negative consequence. Women's activities beyond cooking include tending gardens and domestic animals, and ground-level cooking fires protect their unsupervised children from being hurt in the way they might be if a pot located at a greater height were to be knocked over.

The failure of our efforts for such reasons helped us to understand that we could not denigrate the knowledge, culture and rationality of such communities. If we wanted to promote development, we had instead to build on such elements by respecting their culture, values and conceptions of life and of the world. Years later I came to understand the full significance of this recognition while working on research and development projects for the International Movement ATD (*Aide à Toute Détresse*) Fourth World. Such experiences also led me to realize that poor people have typically been studied as objectified others akin to natural phenomena alien to and outside of the framework of reality of social researchers and development workers. This is a grave error which not only distorts reality but also creates a sharp distancing effect from those who are supposedly the beneficiaries of our actions, which also creates serious resistance to our efforts on their part.

The magnitude of poverty in our societies demands a new conceptualisation stressing its human dimensions, enabling a vision of the poor not as ciphers or statistical data but rather as human beings, with a story to tell and a dignity that must be respected. Life testimonies can assist us in exploring these dimensions which are ignored by so many. Dario, a youth from the Province of Cusco, tells us:

I live alone with my mother. I never knew my father. My mother works hard to support us and to send me to school. We live as caretakers at the construction site of a house, where there is no water or electricity. In school I always had a lot of problems, was held back several times,

and labelled a 'bad student' by the teacher because I rarely finished my homework and when I did complete my assignments, I did so the wrong way. I also had a lot of problems learning and doing schoolwork, because I don't have any books and no one who could lend them to me. My mother can't help me with that, because she doesn't know how to read or write, and works all day washing clothes.

A father, who had abandoned his wife and children, when asked about his behaviour, responded:

I love my family. Every day I left the house early to look for work and to bring back something to eat for my wife and my children, but I couldn't find anything. When night fell, I had to go back home. I didn't know how my wife would manage to find something to cook, but I couldn't eat, the food stuck in my throat. I felt useless, and my presence just meant one more mouth to feed. I was a burden on them; this is what led me to go away.

David and Vilma, 8 and 10 years old, two orphan siblings, also have a story to be shared. Their mother died last year, leaving them alone. While she was alive they used to spend the night in a room in the Cuesta de la Almudena, and after she died they were kicked out of there. These children give us the following testimony:

They say my mother died of a strange illness. The room we used to stay in was just for sleeping, as soon as the sun rose my mother would wake us up and take us with her to work. Her work was peeling potatoes in a guesthouse, and her pay was leftover food from the day before. But one day she got sick and the neighbors took her away to the hospital.

David and Vilma always remember what their mother told them: 'Don't ever split up, stay together, and always love each other'. They continue: 'When we went to the hospital they told us my mother had died, we never saw her again'. Since then, David and Vilma's home has been on the streets.

These testimonies are evidence of how extreme poverty results from a lack of compassion by others, and how it is characterized by instability and by the efforts of the extremely poor themselves to resist their misery, all typical scenarios among the families of the Fourth World. It is for this reason that we should not look at the poor as mere ciphers or statistical artefacts. An emphasis on the human dimension should enable us to focus on poverty from the standpoint of the capacities demonstrated by those who live in poverty, transcending those approaches that reduce poverty to a matter of material deprivation. The latter approach generally leads to efforts tending towards charity or welfare dependency. A capacity-centered approach permits us to focus on the following key inquiries: (i) to what extent do we have the knowledge we need about the daily efforts engaged in by the poor to emerge from their misery, and about their constant struggles to transcend that condition?; and (ii) how can we join together with them in defence of the concept of the indivisibility of human rights?

Gathering together the life testimonies and oral histories of families trapped in extreme poverty on a day-to-day and long-term basis permits us, through the verification of these experiences jointly with them, gradually to build, bit by bit, the history of the Fourth World. By returning this history to them in written form, the poorest of the poor cease to be invisible and recover their right, equal to that of any other citizen, to participate in the political, cultural, economic and social life of the community.

Poverty is not Destiny

Our stress on the human dimension of poverty demonstrates in turn that poverty is not a fatality nor is it an accident since, as Father Wresinski has pointed out, families in extreme poverty generally come from poor origins. It takes a long time to create an extremely poor population in any country, since it is not so easy to drag people down into the abyss voluntarily. Misery is generational in character, transmitted from parents to children, by means of shared conditions and experiences. In the words of Father Wresinski: 'If the Fourth World is transmissible from parents to children, it is because the world that surrounds them reproduces in each generation the same rejection and lack of understanding' (Wresinski 1987: 92)

This generational characteristic of extreme poverty is graphically evident in Sebastiana's testimony:

Misery did not separate us, because my mother refused to hand us over to the landowner, who offered so many advantages in return. Our only protection was our work: first that of my grandparents in haciendas in the Puno region; then the work of my parents, which took us from Llave to Santa Rosa, from Taquile to the Tiquina Strait, from Yunguyo to Moya de Ayaviri, and from there to Cusco. It was there that my father worked on building the Huatanay River canal, helped build the regional hospital, worked in the railway station, and also as a bricklayer and journeyman. My mother sold food on the street, sold everything she could, was a labourer like me, my brothers, and now like my sons.

This generational aspect of poverty transforms its experience into a kind of 'vicious circle' from which it is difficult to extricate oneself. The following is testimony from a participant in the Seminar on Extreme Poverty as a Denial of Human Rights at the United Nations Head-quarters in New York in October 1994:

When you live in extreme poverty and lack education, it is not easy to work. Without resources, it is impossible to find decent housing to pay one's bills. Our family was left without electricity and even without water. It is hard for us to feed ourselves adequately. Under such conditions, my children find it difficult to complete their studies (quoted by Despouy 1996: 30).

Since misery is not predetermined, it has its explanation in the injustice of the prevailing economic, political and social systems which enable a situation of privilege and wealth for some, and of exclusion and poverty for the vast majority. In the case of Peru, this pattern of social inequality is expressed in the abysmal gaps which characterize the distribution of national income: according to the periodical CUANTO (Santiago de Chile, July-August 1995), the distribution in 1994 was as follows: 10 per cent of the households concentrate 31.3 per cent of all income, while the bottom 60 per cent, or more, obtain only 30.8 per cent of the total income.

Leandro Despouy 's Final Report regarding Human Rights and Extreme Poverty notes that 'the term Fourth World was coined by Father Joseph Wresinski in order to give a positive social identity to all those people in the world living in extreme poverty' (Despouy 1996: 56). A representative of the Fourth World families of Cusco who participated in the Second Congress of Fourth World Families held in New York and Washington DC in October 1994 said upon his return:

What I learned there I transmitted to my community, so that they would know that in other countries there is poverty too, and that there were people sleeping in the streets, alcoholics begging for money, people selling trinkets and singing in the metro. I also let them know that we, the poorest of the poor, can be found on all five continents, and that despite differences of race or language, we are one people, and that we have important things in common, such as our stories and our commitment to solidarity with each other which is being lost among the richer societies because of individualism.

New Paths to Bring us Closer to the Poor

A new conceptualisation of poverty cannot be arrived at without taking into consideration what the most poor think, feel and want. To do this means transcending the already ingrained tendency to think of the poor as passive subjects, without initiative, incapable of thinking about and overcoming their situation, and still less so of contributing to the development of their country and of the international community.

In the already cited report, Despouy tells us:

Those who suffer the most painful consequences of the problem of extreme poverty.. . dedicate virtually every hour of the day to the struggle to satisfy the basic needs of their families. It is indispensable to support the efforts of the poorest who will continue to struggle, as they always have, to satisfy their basic needs, by means of their own efforts. Without an understanding of this struggle, of this constant rejection of misery, it would not be possible to break with a fatalistic understanding of misery (Despouy 1996: 47).

This path was first walked by Father Joseph Wresinski and by his people of the Fourth World, who once again placed on the table the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights in the light of the experience of the most poor, affirming that misery is the negation of human rights and posing extreme poverty as the central problem of humanity at the dawn of a new millennium. To continue along this path is the challenge of our time. The highest-ranking cultural institutions have the historical responsibility of recognizing and accepting the experiences, thoughts, wisdom and knowledge of the families trapped in extreme poverty, not as a data bank but rather as the basis upon which to pursue the elimination of misery, and to place human rights at the service of humanity.

Jean Diene, upon being received by the Pope in Rome as part of a delegation of Fourth World families, stated on 27 July 1989:

Our first concern is our children, our youth and their future. Our children are deprived of their infancy. They have their heads and their hearts filled with 'our worries'. We want our children to go to school. We want them to have real work, and that the doors of the future be opened to them. If not, tomorrow, like us, they won 't be respected. We are not idle ourselves, but frequently no one recognizes our efforts. We sacrifice everything we have for the future of our children. Others have to come to share with us the most beautiful, the best of their knowledge. They will have to go to the most distant corners of our neighbourhood, so that the whole world can learn then in respect and friendship.

The Family and its Role as a Basis for Social Cohesion amid poverty

Every human being needs the protection and security that a family can provide. But one of the greatest harms that misery can engender is the deterioration or destruction of the family: women abandoned, children living on the streets. Alcoholism, promiscuity and child abuse are among the many ills which tear apart families trapped in misery. But at the same time we cannot ignore that, even amid misery, the family fulfils a key role as a factor of cohesion and resistance. The testimonies we have gathered demonstrate the deep-seated need for the family which exists among the extremely poor. Martina, a mother who became ill with an affliction that was misdiagnosed as contagious tuberculosis, left her children in an orphanage as recommended by her doctor. Here she tells what happened when she went to pick them up.

The people who worked in the orphanage did not want to give them back. They asked me why I wanted to take them away since they were ok, each of them had a bed, ate three times a day and the place where they were was good and safe. But I insisted. I refused to give up the hope

of getting them back and had to deal with a lot of paperwork to achieve this. I talked to the director of the orphanage and finally persuaded him. Finally now they've been given back to me and we live together in our room. Many things are lacking but the most important thing is that we're together.

As Father Joseph Wresinski said, to place the necessary restored value on the family and to give it its due place in the fight to eradicate extreme poverty is basic:

The family is a person's only refuge when all else fails; it is the only place where a person might still feel a welcome; it is the only place where one can still be 'somebody.' A person finds identity in the family. The children, the spouse, or the companion constitute a person's last refuge of freedom (Wresinski 1996: 18).

Proposal for an Integral Definition of Poverty

In 1987, Father Wresinski proposed a definition of poverty and extreme poverty, later adopted by France's Economic and Social Council, which we believe provides the means to focus on this problem in an integral manner, linking it to the exercise of rights and responsibilities in a way also suggested in Despouy's report. Wresinski suggests that social vulnerability is the absence of one or more assured capacities which permit individuals and/or their families to carry out their basic responsibilities and enjoy their fundamental rights. The insecurity which results from such a condition frequently leads to extreme poverty and tends to prolong itself over time, becoming persistent and gravely compromising the ability to recover the exercise of these rights and responsibilities within the foreseeable future (Wresinski 1987). The value of this approach is that it was developed in conjunction with Fourth World families and permanent grassroots volunteers. It provides us with a theoretical framework appropriate for focusing in on the problem of poverty and extreme poverty, reflecting both the proximity and the difference between both conditions. It also establishes poverty and extreme poverty as human rights problems, related to the rights to life, education, health care, housing, etc. At the same time, by stressing that extreme poverty is the final outcome of a series of vulnerabilities, Father Wresinski's approach demonstrates that the vindication of rights in a decontextualized way is not enough to enable the extremely poor to recover the full enjoyment of all of their rights. This definition takes us, therefore, to the terrain of the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights.

This new conceptualisation enables an ongoing search to find, among those who are impoverished, those who are the poorest and the most excluded. To search out the extremely poor is the expression of a commitment to eradicate extreme

poverty. Misery cannot be somehow limited to certain countries, cities, towns or communities as poverty maps would have us believe. We must be conscious of the fact, as Father Joseph Wresinski stressed, that: 'Behind any poor community is another which is poorer. Behind a poverty-stricken street is another even worse, and behind a poor family we can almost always find another poorer' (Wresinski 1996).

Poverty as the Negation of Human Rights

All of the above leads us to call for the re-evaluation of research regarding poverty and extreme poverty from the perspective of the human rights-centered approach set out here. It has become a general practice in Latin America to reduce human rights to the terrain of political rights and civil liberties, ignoring the original objective of such rights was to guarantee and defend human dignity in an integral way, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does by stressing their indivisibility and interdependence. In this way extreme poverty, which denigrates, excludes, mutilates and kills, has become the single greatest violator of human rights in the world today.

Human rights lose their meaning and their force if we separate them from each other. The life testimonies of the extremely poor demonstrate that we are subject to a chain of vulnerabilities from which there is no exit if they are not confronted in a holistic manner. To struggle for the human rights of all poor people, for them to be respected in the most integral way, is to undertake the most effective action to eradicate extreme poverty.

A fundamental step forward in the battle against extreme poverty and in its understanding as a matter of human rights was taken by Joseph Wresinski on October 17, 1987 when he spoke at the unveiling of a plaque in commemoration of the victims of extreme poverty in the Plaza of Human Rights and Liberties in Paris, France:

On that day the poorest people of the entire world demonstrated to other citizens that they were the first to reject extreme poverty. In this way they affirmed their conviction that poverty is not inevitable, and pledged their solidarity with all those who, throughout the world, strive to eradicate extreme poverty.

This approach demonstrates that 'Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty.'

Conclusion

The scale of poverty in the contemporary world challenges us to develop new research able to permit a more integral conception of poverty, overcoming general or reductionist approaches and highlighting its human dimension. This leads us to place it in the context of human rights, highlighting the fact that poverty implies not just levels of material deprivation but above all the negation of rights.

When we place poverty in the context of human rights, we must be aware of the latter's indivisible and interdependent character. The decontextualized vindication of a right is not enough to enable the poor to enjoy their remaining rights.

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