

# The Culture of Misery and the Culture of Contentment

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## **Six years of broken promises**

Between October 16 and 21, 2006, in more than 70 countries and with the purpose of sensitising civil society to the fact that promises made at the Summit of the Millennium had been broken, different days of mobilisation were held to demand definite measures to eradicate world poverty from world leaders. These events concluded on October 21 with an *International Day Against Poverty*.

In the year 2000, and on the initiative of the Secretary General of the United Nations, 189 Heads of State committed themselves to eight objectives whose fundamental goal was to reduce current levels of poverty and misery around the world. As a first step, they assumed the responsibility of arriving at the year 2015 having reduced the number of people who suffer hunger as well as the number of those who subsist on less than one USA dollar a day by half. Furthermore, by that date, all boys and girls around the globe would have the possibility of finishing a first complete cycle of primary education, the mortality of children under five years of age would be reduced by two thirds and maternal mortality by three quarters, effective measures would have been taken against the spread of AIDS, malaria, and all those endemic diseases that cover large areas of our planet, the number of people without access to drinking water or basic hygiene would be reduced by half, and an open basic financial system would be developed, based on non-discriminatory norms, using technologies that could reduce the isolation and the total lack of perspective of so many people of our world.

Six years later, the more optimistic forecasts predict the fulfilment of some of these objectives around the year 2045 (in the case of the reduction of infant mortality) or 2150 (as regards the reduction of extreme poverty and hunger, as well as universal primary education), while others would see present trends moving in a negative direction, leading to a worsening of these problems.

"We are the first generation that can eradicate poverty," was proclaimed in the United Nations when the objectives were set forth. And indeed, we can affirm that today, while we have the financial and technological resources to undertake such a task, something important has to change in the way political leadership is exercised and political agendas need to be modified at the local, national and international levels before these resources can be put to good use. We all know that ending poverty is the surest way to obtain security and peace.

## **The culture of poverty**

In the middle of the last century, as the processes of decolonisation took place, it was thought that the way had been opened up for the economic development of the freed States. However, after the oil crisis of the early 1970's, a more realistic vision began to emerge.

Today we are quite conscious that our world is split apart by great inequalities that are not only not improving, but getting wider everyday. For instance, the reports of the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), as well as those of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN) in 2005 are not, indeed, optimistic. To the situation of misery of the poorest countries, a sense of hopelessness in the future is added. Moreover, in spite of its gravity, this is a second or third tier problem for the mass media, which only in some specific instances, for instance and always in a sugar-coated manner, confronts the problem of real misery.

Among these forms of distortion, one of the most frequent and most serious is the identification of misery exclusively with hunger, blurring the distinction between both, thus causing a fundamental part of the problem to be hidden. Not all people who live in permanent misery suffer hunger. According to recent estimates, 852 million people are condemned to chronic hunger, whereas

misery affects two thirds of humanity, that is to say, 4000 million people. In the same way, another method for concealing information is to identify the resolution of the problem of hunger with food aid. We know that the problem of misery is a much more complex phenomenon than hunger, and that hunger itself is more complicated than the availability of food, and that hence it cannot be solved with food sent by an international organisation for humanitarian aid. As a result of hunger, other destructive phenomena occur that can lead to inactivity and the total lack of perspective: endemic diseases, illiteracy, sub-human life conditions, disintegration of families, etc.

The problem of misery is more serious than the problem of hunger. With the technical and financial means available today in the developed world, the problem of hunger can be fought, but how can we solve the problem of misery? Hunger and misery are phenomena that shame their victims. In many cultures, poverty is seen to be a result of sin. Hence, anthropologist Oscar Lewis coined the term "culture of poverty": behind hunger and misery there is an entire culture, that of a negative human existence, demotivating and destructive.

If we are convinced that poverty is the most important problem that must be confronted by the world today, then the question is: what role do we play? In a globalised world, we all depend on each other. However, it seems that apart from great speeches, nobody assumes that responsibility. In particular, the mass media want to exempt us of this responsibility by unloading it on purely budgetary and technical means.

### **The culture of contentment**

Some years ago, John Kenneth Galbraith wrote a book entitled *The Culture of Contentment* in which he describes the satisfied (electoral) majorities of the West and contrasts their perception with its opposite, that of the marginalized subclass that experiences increasing conflict. Let us recall four characteristics that he attributed to the culture of contentment in that book:

a) The conviction of those who belonged to that "contented" class that they were receiving what they deserved. What they aspired to have and enjoy was the product of their own effort, personal intelligence, and personal virtues. Fairness would

not justify any act that would reduce that which is enjoyed or can be enjoyed by this group.

b) The culture of contentment always prefers the non-action of government, even at risk that the consequences of this could be deleterious in the long-term. The long-term is too far away and so it is a comfortable and frequent belief that it will never arrive. And a more decisive and important reason for this attitude is that the cost of today's action falls or could fall on the existing privileged community, i.e., they might have to pay higher taxes. The long-term benefits meanwhile may very well be enjoyed by others.

c) The State is seen as a burden. No political declaration of modern times has been so frequently reiterated nor so warmly applauded than the necessity "to get the State off people's backs." The need to lighten that load and, with it, the corresponding taxes, is an absolute article of faith for this group.

d) The tolerance that the contented show concerning the great differences of income is another characteristic of this group that Galbraith emphasises.

The problem of poverty is complex. It cannot be focused on only as the problem of what needs to be given, or given away. It is, fundamentally, a question of changing mentalities. If we are convinced that all the citizens of the planet, including those at the margins of their culture or of their historical period, must live in peace, it is necessary to think about how to change the mentality of those who live in the *culture of poverty*, because that culture also generates powerful mechanisms of aggressiveness, distrust, resignation and adaptation, especially when people are in the most precarious circumstances. Solutions must arise from their own development and the possibility of managing their own natural resources. It is also a problem of changing the mentality of those in the *culture of contentment*. There are signs in poor countries that point towards their desire to manage their own resources but they encounter serious difficulties in accomplishing this in a globalised economy. The interdependence between the different regions of the planet is an inevitable and positive fact. But that interdependence has to be between areas that have the capacity for interchange that makes of that relation a way for

growth, otherwise, it is a means towards deepening misery.

We are all responsible for the current dehumanising situation faced by so much of humanity, or at least, we should see ourselves to be so. Even if the predominant models enjoy wide consensus, when the consequences of their application are unjust, the responsibility for presenting

alternatives becomes the task of us all. If we recognize the necessity for dignity, freedom and equality for all, this recognition cannot remain an abstract idea, for we cannot avoid the task that falls on each one of us to make it a reality. That every day the counterfactual should become ever more the factual, this is the very essence of the ethical dynamism in our social communities.