

# The Poverty Of Progress

by Art Reddin

Since the last article on the stratified (rocket-shaped) certified society, I've had a few replies concerning the effects of large and increasing economic inequalities between people. Although the injustice of such a situation in a sense is obvious, I want to clarify the relationship between external wealth (certificate, money) and the human dimension of independence and would still appreciate any comments on this.

What we've come up with so far are five factors which are all closely related: land, food-dollars, societal direction, meaningful work, and monopoly tools. To say that man is independent is to say he has the free potential of becoming fully human. The needs for independence have traditionally been defined as food, clothing and shelter (i.e. sustenance and protection). I think this has been a mistake and that we must upgrade this definition to include the abilities naturally inherent in man (i.e. mobility, health, imagination, communication, etc.). To do this is to bring new light on the concept of "modernized poverty" in the schooled society.

The explanation of the five poverty factors below attempts to illustrate the relation between infringement of independence (poverty) and human liberation. Space available here only allows me to briefly explain each of these.

**LAND**-- By working on nature, man creates culture and transforms his world. Food and shelter come directly from the land and clothing nowadays comes indirectly. To be landless is to be dependent on others. Where land is a commodity it is the rich or the accreditation of agri-business that create poverty for others. Also in our language-thought we talk

of the need for "roots" or "a homeland" and of "protection of our natural environment".

**FOOD-DOLLARS** --High consumption patterns and a large service sector (both of which are de-humanizing and are perpetuated by schooling) produce a high monetary turnover and create economic wealth. Such "rich" nations or regions can outbid underdeveloped areas on food markets even for food produced on rich landowners or multi-nationals plantations within these areas. Although food production has increased faster than world population over the last two decades, there is even worse starvation and malnutrition in the Third World (where ironically increases in production have been greatest). We can't speak of human liberation while our economic power means other people are starting to death; and in this situation, unequal wealth most certainly does matter.

**SOCIETAL DIRECTION**-- Public allocation of resources and private corporate wealth influence the spirit or character of our society. Unfortunately we have been obsessively guided by economics and technological science and most critical analytical theory has been aimed at understanding the inner workings of these two bodies of knowledge instead of looking which way, as a whole, these are sending us. For example, it is actually "sound economic practise" to have industrialization, conspicuous consumption, waste, pollution clean-up, and social engineering; furthermore, it is quite "scientific" to produce atomic reactors or biological or chemical weapons. Although they don't have to be, these are our guides of applied knowledge directing public wealth at the present time; in neither case, however, is human liberation increased. If the

corporate elite and the government are looked at as two immensely rich persons, it is easy to see that their economic power often creates our poverty.

**MEANINGFUL WORK**-- If the inappropriate allocation of the public funds degrades the spirit of society and directs our efforts towards non-convivial ends, it also reduces at the individual level, the availability of meaningful jobs. If neither the government nor the market system make available meaningful jobs and you lack the resources for independence (read "are poor") than you will probably have to settle for employment that ranges anywhere from unfulfilling to outright slavery. But there is no moral or logical reason that these two employers should alone dictate what jobs are available or should the rich be the only ones entitled to personally-initiated, creative, productive, and meaningful work.

**OBSESSIVE MONOPOLY TOOLS** Tools or systems take on the label of "obsessive monopoly" when they 1) overwhelm others methods of ability use, and 2) lock the imagination into obsession even after the monopoly tool clearly becomes dysfunctional. The problem starts when we translate the use of a natural human ability into the consumption of an industrial product or output. Thus, mobility is defined as high speed transportation, learning is defined as attendance at school, and health is defined as medical service. For example, those who can't afford the several thousand necessary for the operation of a car (transportation pack-

age) risk life and limb if they drive a bicycle. Yet the latter is a terrific machine in terms of mobility when compared to high speed transportation. Transportation exerts 45% of the huge national energy budget of the U.S. The average American spends over 1,600 hours to travel 7,500 miles -- less than 5 miles per hour. Poor countries achieve a comparable performance by simply walking -- yet have greater freedom in direction, more equality and safety, and less stretched out distance between home, the work place, and the market (eg. urban sprawl). Clearly after a certain limit of speed the wealthy speed addict overpowers the poor, and dysfunctionality and other industrial sickness increases. Parallel analysis can be made for most of our machines and service systems.

I apologize if I've made this sound complicated -- it is, of course, much easier to simply talk of rich and poor in dollar terms. But if you check back over the five factors given, it seems questionable whether more money for the poor will cure the situation. The analysis given in this article has obvious faults: there are, no doubt, more than five significant dimensions of poverty; the area labeled "societal direction" doesn't yet fit neatly into the rich dominating the poor; the fifth category of "monopoly tools" deserves much more attention than I've been able to give here. (Incidentally, Ivan Illich does just this in Tools For Conviviality). Despite these faults, I hope this article can be of some help.

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