

phenomena that can appear secondary. One usually admits that political oppression and totalitarianism can be primary sources of long-term stagnation, but there are more subtle ways of inhibiting people's involvement in the creation of both material and cultural goods and items.

It has often been the case that classes of the population were deprived of civil freedom, property rights, economic liberty, political and social influence, which resulted in a long-term demotivation of these classes in relation to their economic and cultural creativity. The marginalisation of slaves and foreigners in ancient societies, exploitation of the cheap or free labour of "inferior" races and the exclusion of women from decision-making are notorious examples of how the wealth of one group was built on the poverty of the other.

These ample examples of segregation of the rich and the poor must be taken into account when examining why certain portions of population suffered from a lack of economic and cultural creativity for some time after their "liberation" by their former "masters". The same goes for countries and regions that were treated as colonies and seen as deposits of raw materials and depots of cheap labour. Their "liberation" from the yoke of exploitation often meant an abrupt change from one form of dependence to another. In this situation I am curious to ask what role education is supposed to play in the elimination of poverty.

POVERTY AND EDUCATION

Municipal charity reforms of the XVIth century (eg. in Valladolid, Rouen or Paris) tried to eliminate poverty in different ways. One of them was expelling as many paupers as possible from the city. In Rome the poor were supposed to live in a segregated area. Prisons were often institutions dealing primarily with beggars, rather than outlaws. In many cases the problem of poverty proved to be such an overwhelming issue that those in power applied cheap but effective solutions. Even if it is at times difficult to suggest alternative solutions, there have been other ways of approaching the problem of poverty. These ways, however, were devised mainly by those whose real power was utterly limited.

In his book "The Tragedy of American Compassion" Marvin OLASKY argues that poverty relief work essentially needs an educational element. Or in other words – purely material compassion in which the elements of *love* and *hope* are missing is just a short-term input that evaporates with the vapor of the distributed hot soup. OLASKY argues:

"Poverty fighters hundred years ago were more compassionate – in the literal meaning of "suffering with" – than many of us are now. They opened their own homes to deserted women and children. They offered employment to nomadic men who had abandoned hope and human contact. Most significantly, they made moral demands on recipients of aid. They saw family, work, freedom, and faith as central to our being, not as life-style options. No one was allowed to eat and run. Some kind of honest labor was required of those who needed food or a



place to sleep in return.

Even if the option presented by OLASKY is not applicable in all contexts, it tells us an important truth. People whose motivation and creativity are low or almost non-existent need more than just the basics necessary for their survival.

They need encouragement to go on in a different way. This encouragement, including an element of hope, can be mediated by those who dispose of appropriate instruments that can be offered for an improvement of the situation of the individual struck by poverty. Only at the beginning can there be one-sided giving and encouraging. Afterwards two-sided activity is needed for further continuation of the mutually conceived idea of stepping out of the past.

POVERTY AND RECONCILIATION

Even if those more prosperous often feel the duty to share, they may be forgetting about their duty to learn. People who approach the poverty of others by choosing the same option for themselves – like Mother THERESA – acknowledge that there is much to learn from the reality of being poor. On the other hand, relief workers, who work with the poor but come from an affluent society, often do not look for a lesson coming from the environment of the poor. They give goods and expertise and receive gratitude. But is that enough? Learning from the poor, from their reality, is in many cases a unique chance to come nearer to the essentials of life. Their choices, their expertise of management of resources, their search for the peace of mind, their relationship with transcendence, their creativity – all these are meaningful realities that can teach those more wealthy a lesson they hardly can be taught in their own context.

Reconciliation between the poor and the rich is therefore a reality that requires reciprocity – reciprocated interest and reciprocated instruction. Even if cases of emergency short-term help and cases of longer-term co-operation differ so much from each other, relief work can always be an opportunity to be instructed by new views, approaches and values. The equality of all humans has always been at the roots of relief work. Compassion and knowledge that something similar can happen to us have also been deeply rooted in the idea of helping the ones in need. Learning about ourselves from those who seem to have little to give is, however, another element that should not be overseen when bringing the light of hope into a house where there are already many other lights burning without us knowing.

Suggested Reading

GEREMEK Bronislaw, *Poverty – A History*. Oxford, 1994.
 LANDES David, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*. New York, 1998.
 OLASKY Marvin, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Washington DC, 1992.

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