

Letter to World Citizens

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What is poverty? (Webster's latest Collegiate Dictionary): "The state or condition of having little or no money, goods, or means of support." Spiritual, emotional, intellectual "poverty" is not mentioned here much less defined. So let's stick with the terse dictionary definition.

First, somehow, poverty seems inhuman. One feels degraded, even condemned by the word. If wealthy, one feels guilty. And if conscientious, challenged. One human's poverty is another human's shame.

Then, how can poverty exist in a world of seeming abundance? Does it have a cause...or many causes? What is wrong with human society itself when literally billions are living in poverty while others are affluent and some excessively rich beyond any reasonable degree. Does capitalism create poverty (as well as wealth)? If so, does socialism eliminate it (or both)? Last month's article on "stakeholders" by Shann Turnbull focused on expanded capital ownership. Is that the solution to poverty?

And what is the role of the nation-state in causing or eliminating poverty. Large questions, all. But even beyond these seemingly fundamental questions, I want to address another and what I consider a more fundamental question.

Is poverty just or unjust? The automatic response would be: unjust. But then, can justice exist alongside poverty? Or does justice exist independent of poverty? These are questions not often asked either by economists or jurists. Poverty is seen as primarily an economic phenomenon while justice is a legal doctrine.

And yet many treatises exist on "economic justice."

When justice in Los Angeles in the Rodney King verdict was considered by the black community denied and only law remained, the tenuous link was violently broken and only poverty remained unleashed. Doesn't that indicate the poverty and injustice are dynamically related?

I am going to Rio in June for the Earth Summit representing the World Government of World Citizens. I am told there are a million children in Rio living literally on the streets. Don't carry any excess money, I am warned. Take off your watch. Wear no jewelry. In other words, defend yourself, one of the wealthy against the poor. Is there justice in such a situation? That the poor, bereft of justice, must resort to lawlessness? Is justice only for the wealthy? We heard about Rio "killer squads" in Miami at the World Women's Conference in preparation for the Earth Summit. They were going to "clean the streets" before the delegates arrived. We were appalled.

Then some Brazilian peasants in the name of poverty are burning the Amazonian rain forests in order to clear the land for grazing beef cattle while we will be talking in Rio about preserving the earth's precious resources. I have also been recently briefed on multi-national corporate interests in the Amazon ravaging the land and exterminating indigenous tribes for exploitation of natural resources.

Then how can we not think about starving children in Ethiopia and the Sudan and elsewhere? Indeed, the problem of poverty is worldwide. Is injustice then also worldwide? We are obliged to think so.

The Earth Summit will discuss the world's ecological oneness and presumably the lack of a world authority to cope with it. But will it deal with world poverty and its linkage with the lack of world justice?

You can't discuss world poverty without bringing in world military budgets. The 1993 global military budget is about \$1 trillion. Last month we published Leslie Gelb's NYT article on the Pentagon's \$1.5 trillion 5-year "defense" budget. In all the commentaries, both

press and TV, of the reasons for the Los Angeles riots, not one mentioned the linkage between poverty and the military budgets of the world. It is a colossal blind spot.

Then there is the North-South debate. Without going into details, I want only to point out the military arsenals of so-called poor nations in the Southern hemisphere. I have questioned in this space the need at all for national armies in the post-Cold War. But ridding ourselves of the national military option means replacing it by just world law. (Is there another option?) Moreover, is there not a direct connection between world poverty - whether in South Central Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Addis Ababa, Dhaka, or Bangalore - and world militarism?

President Eisenhower in 1953 said it best: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children...This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

Yes, poverty and injustice are indeed allies. We who call ourselves world citizens cannot but treat them together and in doing so, help to eliminate both from the human scene.