

Bashing the Poor

by Sam Venturella

There's a new game around. Its called "bashing the poor". Its played in the public policy research think tanks.

① Players ought to never have felt the pinch of poverty. It helps to be superficial or muddleheaded. You see, if you're not superficial you might look beyond appearances. That would be an error, for then you might begin to ask real-world questions.

One of the games is "Here's how I would live if I were poor."

② ~~A cardinal rule of the game is to ignore the logic of language.~~

You must ignore the fact that the words *poor* and *rich* are comparatives--that they have meaning only in relation to each other. ~~That way you can imagine a time and place where population is sparse, and technology is limited to machines powered by humans or animals.~~ These are conditions which do not permit much variety in the production of wealth. You <sup>can then</sup> call these people poor--if you compare them to an Illinois farmer or a La Salle Street stockbroker.

③ ~~Step one is to~~ Step two, ~~in this instance,~~ is to imagine you are forced by some mysterious circumstance to live in such a community for the rest of your life. Again ignoring logic, you begin this new imaginary life by bringing capital, knowledge and skills from your own time and circumstances. The capital would enable you to buy some land to work. You see, without land of your own you would have to work for one of your new neighbors at wages he would be willing to pay.

So, now, with the capital you bring in you buy land and learn how to make and use the kind of capital appropriate to the circumstances of population, soil and climate. You survive as an equal to your neighbors. You participate in their entertainments and festivals, their joys and sorrows. Then you say being poor isn't bad.

It would be no great trick for someone from a modern industrial society to adapt to a technology based almost entirely on human physical power. Physically difficult? Yes. Mentally difficult? No. One's psychology would adapt to the limitations as long as no one with greater physical force or legal power takes what you produce.

In an area where all must work to live, there is no great disparity of wealth. Some may have a little more and others a little less; but, there are no rich and no poor. So long as all have access to land, and trade is not prohibited by custom or law, there can be no poor. It is not electric lights, air-conditioning and BMWs that define whether one is poor. It is whether one is prevented from laboring, or from keeping all that one produces.

Poverty is relative. It can't be defined by a government clerk. The dollar income which purportedly defines poverty is meaningless. Ten thousand (1990) dollars cash income to a family who own a house, a few acres of fertile soil and some chickens is gravy compared to a family who have no land, and must rent a few rooms.

To compare the poverty of an unemployed or lowpaid laborer in a high-tech society to the standard of living in a society where primitive technology is prevalent, is to compare apples and oranges. If a rural third-world village lacks the amenities one might find in even a small American city, it does not mean that the people are poor.

A variation of <sup>on the same</sup> ~~step two~~ is to imagine living in a public housing

project, say Taylor Homes in Chicago. Here the advantage you want is to have not only the 'welfare' payment, but the three major expenses -- rent, food and medical care -- furnished free. No need to bother with hard choices. That is, you won't be bothered by trying to decide between a gallon of milk or a box of detergent.

You can probably think of other variations to play. The important thing to remember is that you have an advantage.

Don't try to play by the same rules that apply to a family on welfare, or as a one-parent family trying to get by on minimum wage. You may despair if you do.

Another game is "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps."

In this game it is important to substitute symptoms for causes. That is, one is poor because of lack of education. That's a favorite. Haven't we been bombarded with statistics on how much more than a drop-out a high school graduate makes? Or, how much more than a high school <sup>diploma</sup> graduate one can earn with a college degree?

So, what is one to do to get out of poverty? Why, go to a free public high school. Never mind that public schools are being castigated for turning out illiterates. Never mind that going to school requires both physical and psychic energy. Never mind that many who have completed high school, and even college, are either unemployed or underemployed.

You get the picture. Poverty is the fault of the poor.

Let's see. Once upon a time there were no poor in Egypt. Along came Joseph the Dreamer. Pharaoh made him Prime Minister. Joseph instituted a production tax on agriculture. Then the crops failed. The people (that is, the farmers who had been taxed, not the priests and public officials) asked Pharaoh for help. Pharaoh sent them to

Joseph. After trading their money, then their tools, then their cattle, then their seed, then their land for food, they had nothing left to trade but their bodies. When once again the crops came in, the once proud farmers worked for whatever wages Pharaoh dictated. Result? Poverty in Egypt.

Maybe the 'thinkers' ought to go out into the real world. If they look hard enough they may find some answers. Henry George did. But, he was motivated to by a desire to extirpate poverty.

Shouldn't our purpose be Justice? There can be no Justice without Freedom, nor Freedom without Justice. Justice requires an end to trade restrictions, privilege and monopoly.

END

4

Sam Venturella is a president of the Henry George School of Social Science-Chicago. He is a retired city planner, and former public school teacher.