

The burning of popular fear

Zygmunt Bauman

The way we define the poor is a reflection of the kind of society we live in, argues Zygmunt Bauman.

‘The poor will always be with us’; so insists popular wisdom, and there is no shortage of historical evidence to confirm this verdict. No society we know of was ever free of a category of people who were seen by the rest as incapable, for whatever reason, of eking out a living by their own efforts; incapable of living as the rest do. It is a social decision to classify people in such a way. Since it has little to do with who those people really are, or even what they do, the expectation that the ‘poor will always be with us’ can hardly be faulted. Each society constitutes and perpetuates itself through setting and prompting certain standards it expects every member to follow, and those standards can only be made visible if some people are seen to fail to meet them. Such people can then be declared a ‘problem’ which the rest of society must and should cope with.

The poor of different times and places differ between themselves in virtually every aspect of their condition, just like the societies of which they are part. Who is cast in this way depends not on the way the poor live, but on the way society as a whole lives. It is the standards reached and promoted by a given society which define the ‘threshold’ of poverty, the ‘bread-line’, the point at which the human condition becomes a matter of concern for others, warning lights are lit and the urge to ‘do something’, to help, to censure, or both – prompts people to act or to reproach themselves if they do not. The treatment reserved for the poor, the way in which pity and condemnation are mixed, help and fault-finding are balanced, is a matter for society at large rather than for the poor themselves; a reflection of the standards a given community holds dear and is bent on cultivating.

Flawed consumers

Societies in most parts of the world are today driven by the market; the standards are those of wealth and consumption.

By no stretch of the imagination are the poor leading the way out of recession or contributing to the ‘supply-clearing’ demand. If anything, they make a profitable economy all the more difficult to achieve. The kind of goods that would be a priority if people were allowed to choose freely (bread, basic healthcare, schooling, low-rent housing) bring little or no profit to their manufacturers. The better-off consumers who would be enticed to buy the ‘right type’ (that is, profitable) of commodities are less likely to do so as long as they feel they have less money in their pockets because of the need to share their income with those they see as poor. A dollar in the taxpayer’s pocket makes much more economic sense than the same dollar in the pauper’s pocket: the chances are that the former will be put to more ‘sensible’ economic use. Economically speaking, the poor can now be seen, purely and simply, as flawed consumers.

And so one option for the poor is to ‘declassify’ them – exactly what the American ‘welfare to workfare’ or the ‘welfare to work’ scheme in Britain are attempting to do. Few people hope that the programmes, even if successful, would feather poor people’s nests or even make their life more tolerable; meagre and insecure wages in an erratic labour market are a poor substitute for regular and guaranteed welfare provisions. The move would cross the poor out of the social register, would make them ‘disappear’ from the public agenda as objects of care and moral duty, and therefore cease to be ‘poor’ in the eyes of the public.

The problem, though, is that the move is not likely to succeed, since new workplaces are hard to come by and even when available tend to be fickle and unreliable. More important still, the

move may at best un-make the 'problem of poverty' as a matter of public concern, but it would not make poverty vanish.

A secular hell

In this kind of contradictory situation the best strategy is to blame the victim. Because the poor are not seen to contribute either to production or consumption, they are described not as deprived but as depraved. They stand accused of flaunting the values by which 'decent' people live, while claiming their rights to the benefits which arise from pursuing the values they neglect: a sin evidently ugly and likely to find its way to many a consumer's and taxpayer's ears. The way the poor live (have chosen to live, as their accusers insist) is painted in lurid colours, as the hotbed of moral laxity (neglect of parental duties, loose marital ties, sexual abuse), dishonesty (welfare sponging and fraud), vice (drug addiction, alcoholism) and downright criminality (youth hooliganism, car stealing, mugging). The complex reality which lies behind such a picture of the poor in our extravagantly consumerist society is quite separate from the major effect of painting it this way: namely, shifting the people living below the poverty line from the realm of moral responsibility to that of law and order. Shifts of this kind justify transferring a part of the funds allocated to the poor from welfare provision to subsidizing employers, and another part to employing more police and building more prisons.

Day by day the portrayal of the world's poor does its silent work in undermining confidence in all those with a regular income

So the poor are written off, neither producers nor consumers. But in their new socially inspired avatar they still have an important role to play.

Once upon a time people were induced meekly to endure their lot, however harsh it might have been, by being shown vividly painted pictures of hell ready to devour anyone guilty of rebellion. Like all things other-worldly and eternal, the nether-world designed to achieve a similar effect in our modern times has been brought to earth, placed within the confines of earthly life and presented in a form ready for instant consumption. The poor are today the collective 'other' of the frightened consumers; where they live is today's own secular hell.

The lesson one learns when hearing about the poor is that certainty is more to be feared than the detested uncertainty, and that the punishment for rebellion against the discomforts of daily uncertainty is swift and merciless.

The sight of the poor (or at least the portrayal of poverty, for the poor themselves are increasingly swept out of sight, to the periphery of cities, to ghettos and estates) keeps the non-poor at bay and in step. It thereby perpetuates their life of uncertainty. It prompts them to tolerate or bear placidly the unstoppable 'flexibilization' of the world and the growing precariousness of their condition. The sight incarcerates their imagination and handcuffs their will. They do not dare to imagine a different world; they are much too chary to try and change the one they have.

This is a good enough reason for the political economy of uncertainty to include, as one of its indispensable ingredients, the casting of the 'problem of the poor' as alternatively, the issue of law and order or the object of humanitarian concern – but nothing less and no more than that.

When the first representation is used, the popular condemnation of the poor comes as close as conceivable to the burning of popular fears in effigy. When the second representation is deployed, the wrath against the cruelty and callousness of the vagaries of fate can be safely channelled into innocuous carnivals of charity, and the shame of impassivity can be disposed of in short-lived explosions of human solidarity.

It is buying and consuming more, not producing more, that is seen as the source of wealth and prosperity

Day by day, the portrayal of the world's poor does its silent work in undermining confidence and resolution in all those still working and with a regular income. The link between the poverty of the poor and the surrender of the non-poor has nothing irrational about it. The sight of the destitute is a timely reminder to all sober and sensible beings that even the prosperous life is insecure, and that today's success is not a guarantee against tomorrow's fall. There is a well-founded feeling that the world is increasingly overcrowded; that the sole choice open to government is, at best, one between widespread poverty with high unemployment, as in most of Europe and Australia, and widespread poverty with a little less unemployment, as in the US. This time round unemployment looks more sinister than ever before. It does not seem a product of a cyclical 'economic depression'; no more a temporary condensation of misery, to be dissipated and wiped out by the next economic boom.

The politics of insecurity

The shrinking volume of employment is not, though, the sole reason to feel insecure. Such jobs as can still be had are no longer fortified against the unpredictable hazards of the future: work is today a daily rehearsal of redundancy. The political economy of insecurity saw to it that the orthodox defences have been dismantled and its defenders outlawed. Labour has become 'flexible', which in unadorned speech means that it is easy now for employers to fire employees at will and without compensation and that solidarity and effective trade-union action in defence of the wrongly dismissed looks increasingly like a pipe-dream. 'Flexibility' means a refusal of security; the growing number of available jobs are part-time or fixed-term, most contracts are 'rolling' or 'renewable' with frequency high enough to prevent the right to relative stability from acquiring force. 'Flexibility' also means that the old life-strategy of investing time and effort in specialist skills in the hope of a steady inflow of interest makes ever less sense – and so the once most common rational choice of people wishing for a life of security is no longer available.

This is a new kind of unemployment. For the better part of this century, just as for the duration of the last one, poverty – at least in the so-called affluent world – was identified mainly with not having a job. 'The poor' were people who for one reason or another could not draw their livelihood from selling their labour; an activity which was considered the 'norm', at least for every adult male in a society of producers. Labour was seen as the prime source of a nation's wealth. To have a claim to a part of that wealth one had first to contribute to its creation. The unemployed were therefore considered abnormal, and the presence of unemployment was a threat to society's standards. To meet that threat, one had to try to 'get people back to work'; to the condition considered obligatory for all. By the same token the poor were a 'reserve army of labour': today, temporarily, not in the ranks, but tomorrow or the day after bound to be called once more into active service.

This being so, keeping such reservists in good condition – properly fed, clad and shod – was not just in their interests, but in everybody's. Yes, it would be morally repulsive were the poor to suffer hunger, cold or homelessness while unemployed and unable to pay their own way: but no, helping them out of their misery was not just a matter of pity, compassion and moral conscience – it was also a matter of good housekeeping. Healthcare, schooling and decent housing for the poor; keeping people above the poverty line was, economically speaking, a good investment. All expenditures would be repaid with profits once labour, now redundant, was called back to the market. Through thick and thin, through lean years as much as fat, labour had to remain, at least potentially, a commodity – just the thing that prospective buyers would be keen to purchase when they needed it once more.

Welfare state

When victorious countries after the Second World War introduced the idea of a welfare state which would provide everyone with state guarantees of secure livelihood and decent life conditions, there was almost complete consensus among Left and Right that its implementation was both necessary and desirable. No-one at that time argued that however nice the idea looked ‘we couldn’t afford it’. It did not occur to any party to set the ‘interests of the taxpayer’ and the needs of the poor against each other and to imply that they were in conflict. On the contrary, there was common agreement that the rich and the poor were equally interested in the welfare state working well, and that all would eventually benefit from its work.

The snag is, though, that to all practical intents and purposes the poor have ceased to be this ‘reserve army’. Today, there is no labour-greedy industry waiting for more people to be employed. Technological progress means fewer working places; good accounting means less money spent hiring labour; better productivity means slimming and ‘downsizing’; good management means selling or phasing out the branches which do not bring enough profit. Nowadays, wealth grows through investment in high technology, scientific research and information, and higher employment may only impair its chances. Stock exchanges have been quick to note the difference; they react nervously to the news of any increase in employment or wage-funds, and lavishly reward the companies shedding labour. Thomas Labreque, director-general of Chase Manhattan Bank, was voted a salary of nine million dollars in recognition of his role in eliminating 10,000 jobs.

The truth is that from the point of view of commodity production, unemployed people are not just temporarily out of work; they are structurally redundant. Fewer and fewer people are needed to produce more and more commodities. It is easy to envisage unstoppable growth of productivity coupled with a steady fall in employment. In these circumstances, paying the upkeep of the poor is no longer an investment in future wealth, let alone a good investment; it does not make economic sense.

No, the major worry which troubles the producers of commodities these days is not how to find enough skilled labour to supply what the market would sell, but how to ‘liquidize’ the stocks; how to find or better still create enough demand to clear the existing supply.

Today, it is not producers but consumers – eager and willing consumers – who are in demand. Whenever we hear of an economic recession, we also invariably hear that the ‘consumer-led recovery’ – the will of consumers to buy more and to borrow more in order to buy more still – is the main way out of present trouble and the sole hope of getting the economy going smoothly. It is buying and consuming more, not producing more, that is seen far and wide as the source of wealth and prosperity.

And yet, as Karl Marx once said in the times of capitalism too young and self-confident to read the writing on the wall, the workers cannot liberate themselves without liberating the rest of society. We can say now, at the consumerist stage of capital’s history, when the walls themselves have been kicked out of the way, that society cannot free itself from its paralyzing anxiety unless the poor are liberated from their misery.

Basic income for all

It was Thomas Paine, radical thinker and writer, who first advanced the idea of a ‘basic income’ independent of work done or sold. His idea was, typically, born well before its time: the next century was to entrench labour as a form of commodity which could be bought and

sold. Not only was employment to become the sole legitimate entitlement to income, but work was to be identified with sellable activity and conditioned on the presence of buyers eager to pay for it; market demand was to be given the sole right to distinguish 'work' from 'non-work'. Another century was needed to expose the limitation and dire insufficiency of that arrangement and to reveal the threats to ethical standards, social solidarity and the tissue of human relations which it held in store.

Two centuries after Thomas Paine, the idea of detaching essential livelihood from employment has been broached time and again. First in France in the 1930s by Jacques Duboin; in Belgium by the Charles-Fourier circle in the 1980s and in recent years by the Greens in Germany, Holland and Spain, and in Ireland by no less an authority than the National Conference of Bishops. The most comprehensive and closely argued proposal to 'decouple' the right to basic income from employment has been put forward by the German political sociologist Claus Offe.

The decisive argument in favour of the unconditional social guarantee of basic livelihood can be found not in the moral duty towards the destitute, however redeeming for the ethical health of society the fulfilment of that duty undoubtedly is. Neither is it there in philosophical renditions of justice, however important these are to arouse and keep awake human consciences. Nor in benefits for the quality of life in common, however crucial these are for the general well-being and for the survival of human bonds. No, it lies in its importance for a truly autonomous, self-governing society; for restoring to all men and women their courage to exercise the role of citizen and for the daring and imagination needed to exercise it properly. Fully fledged citizenship and a society capable of choosing its way are conceivable solely in the company of self-confident people; secure people; people free from the existential fear of poverty.

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