

Majid Rahnema

THE RICHES OF THE POOR

An archeology of poverty

**A summary presentation of Majid Rahnema's book to be published in French
by Fayard (Paris) in November 2001**

Filename and date: majid.doc June, 19, 2001

STATUS:

- Copyright Majid Rahnema

For further information please contact:

Silja Samerski

Albrechtstr.19

D - 28203 Bremen

Tel: +49-(0)421-7947546

e-mail: piano@uni-bremen.de

THE RICHES OF THE POOR

An archeology of poverty

**A summary presentation of Majid Rahnema's book to be published in French
by Fayard (Paris) in November 2001**

For centuries, the lot of the poor has almost everywhere been marked by social discriminations, injustices, deprivations and humiliations of all kinds. In addition, the attitudes of the “non-poor” towards them have been so egocentric and contemptuous that poverty, as a whole, has been assimilated only as a state of destitution, of material lacks and of degrading misery. The longstanding traditions of respect that, in almost all cultures, have prevailed for poverty as a liberating mode of life have thus been ignored or disregarded. Similarly, wealth has been so much identified with the sheer possession and accumulation of material things that less people, particularly in the North, are today ready to accept other historical perceptions held by pre-economized societies: namely that attachment to ostentatious forms of riches were often perceived as evidence of a different form of human misery and destitution.

A main objective of this essay is to show the wrongs done by the reduction of poverty to a predicament solely defined by a series of material “lacks”. This reductionist approach has not only served as an epistemological tool to perpetuate the discriminatory attitudes of the non-poor towards the poor. It has also become a major obstacle to a serious debate on poverties and riches, free from the confusions created around the words signifying them.

Poverty, when it expresses the ordeals of a person socially deprived from the most basic necessities of survival, is indeed a harsh and often unbearable reality. Yet this is only one definition, one perception and one aspect of poverty. Historically, poverty has meant very different things to different people and cultures. It has been a road both to hell and to paradise. In one context, it has represented a demeaning condition; in another, a self discipline aimed at liberating oneself from all kinds of servitudes. In both cases, it is a social construct, an “invention of civilization” (Marshall Sahlins).

This essay seeks to apply an archeological approach to the study of this invention and of the changes occurred in the perception of the notions of poverty and riches. It hopes that the approach could help the student of these changes to engage into a more sensible and fruitful conversation on the social and human dimensions of these two phenomena.

The structure of the book.

The study is composed of four parts.

1. In a first one, it presents the author's own *point of view* and the roots of his thinking as a "social agent" and a culturally defined person.
2. The second part deals with a history of the concept, a theoretical study of the social construct called poverty, the reasons for which it refuses to be defined and the many attempts at its classification. It confirms Michel Mollat's conclusion that poverty is too general, too relative and too ambiguous a notion, to accept a universal definition. It cannot be defined outside the specific sites and contexts in which it is generally placed. In the chapter on the discursive construction of poverty, it is argued that for centuries, *poor* was only used as an adjective. People had very few things but they never thought of themselves as *poor*. Richness constituted the riches of relations tying together the members of a community. On the other hand, poverty as such did not exist (or had a totally different meaning that it has now), because whoever was lacking something important could rely on those who could help him satisfy his "lacks". The poor quality of a given thing still expressed the existence within that thing of certain deficiencies and lacks that only prevented it reach its own level of perfection (example: a poor health, a poor soil, a poor mind). When money imposed itself as a major and socially accepted standard for measuring *all* things, the *lacks* defining poverty were also all identified with the lack of money and of what money could buy. Moreover, lacks were no longer defined by their authors. Neither the lack of generosity, the lack of compassion and of solidarity, the lack of virtue, was perceived as another form of poverty. The Chapter argues that what is called today poverty is a socially fabricated concept that tends to dispossess the people, placed under an arbitrarily defined "poverty line", from developing their own riches; the riches that had allowed them throughout their history not to fall into destitution and misery.
3. The third part suggests a new categorization of poverties with a view to only facilitating a fruitful conversation on the subject. Considering the cardinal position of the *subject* in both perceiving and addressing his or her lot, it argues, firstly, that a major difference exists between different forms of *poverties* and states of *destitution* and *indigence*. The *poor*, presently called so, are generally very different from the *destitute* and the *miser*. For notwithstanding the hardships to which they are subjected, they do not loose their capacity to act over and to somehow live their predicament. This quality allows them not to completely surrender to the external conditions that seek to break their will. It is this same quality that enables them to build for themselves "beds" of poverty that prevent them from falling into destitution. Thanks to such beds, they often succeed in transforming their "lacks" into assets or boons.

Three forms of poverty are then identified: the voluntary, the semi-voluntary or the convivial, and the modernized. 1) The first category represents a highly personal and ethical choice. The voluntary, in particular the spiritually poor, are known to have made their choice with a view to freeing themselves from any possession that might hamper their quest for self-realization and greater inner freedom. 2) Poverties categorized as semi-voluntary or convivial apply to people and communities who have come to realize their need to share simple modes of living within the constraints of necessity. They have learned to respect and confront necessity, while considering it both as an indicator of, and a

permanent challenge to, the limits of their possibilities. For millennia, convivial poverty has represented not only a genuine expression of the poor's dignity and common sense, but also the most sustainable expressions of riches in human societies 3) A third category, of “modernized poor”, is finally singled out as typical to contemporary economized societies. These new poor are characterized by an ever increasing gap between their socially induced needs and their inability to find the necessary “resources” for meeting those needs.

The various states of *destitution* or *indigence* are placed under a fourth and separate category. In the current economic language, these conditions are generally confused with poverty, a confusion that the study tries systematically to avoid. The destitute, it is argued, are persons who seem to be condemned on two fronts: *socially and outwardly*, their lot is one of extreme solitude and isolation. They are the “*bi kass*” (in Persian, those who “do not have any one”) who have no one to take care of them, no bed or hammock to lie down. *Inwardly*, they have lost the inner strength or the regenerative powers of the voluntary or semi-voluntary (convivial) poor. This double misery sometimes reaches such proportions that the destitute lose even their abilities to think and to act intelligently in defense of their own interests. The most destructive social movements of the last thirty years are tragic examples of rebellion deeply marked by such features. Having lost their “poverty beds”, the destitute are particularly prey to abusive social systems and manipulative populist ringleaders. The social and human implications of the basic difference between the two categories of deprived are generally overlooked by the dominant discourse on poverty.

4. The last part of the study begins with a history of aid and its different mutations. It shows how the compassionate gesture of the Good Samaritan was corrupted, first, by the Church, then, by the secular institutions that thought to “rationalize” the flow of aid to the “neediest”. It concludes that the need by the society of the “non-poor” to protect itself against the mounting threat of the poor, has gradually led to the establishment of a “government of poverty”. This new phenomenon, it is argued, expresses the rise of modern power, an “elegant” and invisible power that pretends to be democratic, yet represents the true nature of subjugating power. In that sense, it aims primarily to change the conduct of its prey, without the latter even realizing that she or he has been manipulated. The *problématique* of institutionalized assistance and its relations with the socially assisted are then examined, together with the two faces of economy – as a producer of both “affluence” and scarcity. Finally, the study examines the different aspects of the search for genuine alternatives to the lot of the materially deprived and how such a search could be pursued from their own perspective.

The main contentions of the book

The main contentions of this study are the following:

Poverty was not a major social and economic “problem” when the scarcities faced by the deprived were of a “natural” origin. So long as the communal ways of living together had not disappeared, vernacular communities were dealing with their poor in ways specific to their cultures. The “problem” has appeared since society perceived “poverty” as a serious threat to its own interests and stability.

Economic discourse contends that the scarcity of goods and services, required to meet people’s needs,

is the main cause of poverty; hence, its call for a rapid adoption of technologically advanced methods of maximized production. It argues that even if, at its earlier stages, such a goal is likely to create some social inequalities, the growth process will ultimately trickle down in time and expand its benefits to all the deprived. In actuality, modern methods of production have indeed produced an unprecedented amount of “wealth” in terms of things, commodities and services, but only for those who have been privileged by economic growth. For the others, the same processes have paradoxically *created* scarcity.

The Janus side of economy

This Janus side of the economy has resulted, namely:

- a) in polarizing the new societies into two separate groups of “haves” and “have-nots”;
- b) in widening the gap between the creation of new “needs” and the “resources” required to meet the latter; thereby constantly increasing the number of dissatisfied and frustrated persons (i.e., the “modernized poor”);
- c) in making the unprecedented productive capacities of the new societies irrelevant to the real needs of the social majorities (a dramatic example of this irrelevance is illustrated by the fact that, despite a record production of food that can meet the needs of 9 billion people, i.e., one and a half the actual population of the world, more than one billion persons suffer from hunger and malnutrition) ;
- d) finally, in causing an irreversible loss of autonomy for the greater number of people who had generally succeeded in meeting their needs out of their own systems of production.

A thorough examination of this double, Janus-like face of economy, together with the latest findings of prominent anthropologists and social scientists has led the author to the following conclusions:

1. The assumption that poverty, in all its forms, is a demeaning phenomenon and a worldwide scourge to be eliminated is a discourse that needs to be seriously challenged and, ultimately, discarded. As a matter of fact, new and imaginative approaches aimed at a revival of voluntary and semi-voluntary (convivial) forms of poverty could well be the answer to modernized forms of material and moral deprivation.
2. It is false and dangerous to assume that poverty is only a matter of “lacks” to overcome; equally so it is to believe that the answer to these lacks lies in integrating everyone into a highly technologized system of production, or turning them into “rich” persons. Both assumptions are doubly misleading. On the one hand, there are no “lacks” *per se*. The same object which, under given circumstances, appears to be a negativity in the eyes of a given individual or social group, could well be appreciated by others as a liberating chance for meeting higher and more essential needs. Poverty and riches are far more complex and culture specific than their reduction into lacks. On the other hand, policies aimed at indiscriminately imposing modern systems of production on everyone are not an answer to the lacks in question. They often tend to add new “lacks” to the old, the new ones being generally more difficult to overcome, namely, because the poor are unable to address them through their own means. They are neither technologically, nor

culturally prepared to do so. The destructive impacts of high tech agriculture and genetically modified food on the life of the poor are a typical case in point.

3. Economic growth and its globalization can therefore **NOT** be the answer to socially created scarcities such as lack of land and of the means of production, destitution, mass misery, hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, environmental destruction, disease and subjugation. Economic growth and the new modes of production *are themselves, more than any other single cause, the main producers of modern, socially generated scarcities.*
4. Furthermore, no other persons but the poor are in a better position to address the scarcities and lacks which economy creates for them. The answer to their hardships is therefore NOT for modern institutions to impose on everyone new modes of living, production and entitlement that are totally alien to their cultures and to their own particular forms of creativity. It is to pave the way, together *with* them, for radically new alternatives for life under modern conditions.

The numerous, diversified and often inspiring, grassroots movements which have emerged, in the last decades, with a view to opposing the globalizing trends of economy, are a testimony to the worldwide resistance against such trends. In the search for new alternatives, it is imperative that the highest attention be paid to the ways the populations concerned have learned to organize their lives on the basis of their intuitions and their cultural traditions.

The irrelevance of the “wars on poverty” to the lot of the poor.

On the practical side, another contention of this study is that the so-called wars or campaigns against poverty, presently led by national or international organizations, have no relevance to the ordeals of the poor. Even though they are generally supported by the public opinion, these campaigns are “spectacular” and mediatic fireworks than can eventually serve the society of the “haves”. As to their impacts on the lot of the poor, they are ultimately negative. What the social majorities and other dropouts of economy aspire to is to regain the conditions under which they could lead a good and decent life. The wars on poverty serve other, often opposite purposes. The modern modes of producing and relating they promote are the same that, directly or indirectly, destroy those which have traditionally prevented the poor to fall into destitution.

The “successful” implementation of some good looking development projects, by international or national assistance organizations or NGOs, can indeed produce, here and there, new “resources” or income generating processes, hereby improving the lot of some localized target groups. Yet examples are galore to show that such achievements have often ultimately aggravated the deeper trends of economy to create socially generated scarcities.

Two main reasons may explain the failure of the so-called wars on poverty. Both their economic and their social objectives run against their actual practices. Their **economic justification** is that they are waged with a view to eradicating scarcity. In practice, the scarcities they eradicate for the rich benefit only the rich, the same processes *creating* new scarcities for the poor. Besides, modern systems of production are essentially geared to profit making; thus, it is difficult to imagine that economy would invest in projects for the deprived who, by definition, are unable to meet that objective. As concerns

the **social justification** of the campaigns, their claim is to help the poor to become self-reliant citizens free from the degrading status of the assisted. In practice, the aid extended to the poor is far from responding to their real and long-term needs. The objective is never to reshape society with a view to giving the poor the means *they* need. It is not to help them live in dignity like all the others, or to make all the members of society to benefit from their untapped gifts. It is only to create, for the “haves”, security valves aimed at protecting *them against* the poor. To use Georg Simmel’s words, the aim of assistance is only “to mitigate extreme manifestations of social differentiation, so that society continues to be founded on this very differentiation”. To continue thinking and acting as if “poverty” could be alleviated through economic development is thus an illusion. The false hopes generated by this belief serve no one but unscrupulous politicians, pompous institutions of “aid” in need of public assistance. and their hired army of experts and consultants.

Are there ways out of the present tragedy?

The study explores the threats of different kinds posed by economy to culture specific modes of living and production. It suggests that a worldwide tragedy is in the making. In the name of Progress and the eradication of poverty, the inhabitants of the planet are separated into two groups: on the one hand, a minority of morally deprived individuals, extracting material “wealth” from both their fellow humans and their Mother Earth; on the other hand, an ever increasing number of uprooted masses, fighting desperately for their survival. As constant pressure of socially generated needs and scarcities makes their lives ever more fragile, their tragedy is aggravated by two other processes. *Firstly*, the poor are systematically dispossessed from all the knowledge, the know-how and the wisdom they had acquired throughout their history. *Secondly*, the more vulnerable victims of this process are perniciously manipulated into becoming voluntary agents of their own servitude.

Under these circumstances, can any “solution” be envisaged to bring about a change in the course of events?

The study is of the opinion that no magic “solution” could be found to eradicate *poverty*. The idea does not even make sense, for poverty remains a social construct. It is not a “problem” that could be defined without regard to specific cultural, human and historical contexts. Even when the phenomenon is “problematized” in abstract and general terms, i.e., as a series of “lacks” to address (such as lack of income or absence of certain goods and services), the sole fact of stating that they *should* or *could* be removed or overcome, is not a “solution”. Not only the way those lacks are defined, but the methods chosen to remove them are all integral parts of the “problem”. For example, to imply that poverty is only a collection of lacks that can be eradicated, by using the latest modern and highly methods of mass production, *adds* only new elements to the “problem”. Worse, the approach often closes the doors to the only effective alternative ways of addressing these “lacks”, the very alternatives that the so-called technocratic “solutions” from above tend to systematically nip in the bud. For all these reasons, it is both misleading and immoral to continue luring the poor through empty promises of a worldwide “solution to poverty”. Even if such a position could appear “politically incorrect”, to maintain it is to perpetuate a dangerous myth.

Keeping together the small yet ever lasting lights of poverty. To suggest that there is no

worldwide solution to “poverty” should not however be interpreted as a renunciation to meaningful hopes. The myriads of small yet resilient lights that made it possible for the different world cultures to develop voluntary and convivial forms of poverty cannot be easily extinguished. And as long as “ordinary” humans have not been totally transmuted by *homo oeconomicus*, there is no reason to abandon the search for alternative modes of relating, thinking, acting and producing. A surprisingly great number of grassroots movements are emerging that seek, in their majority, to regenerate simple modes of life. The repressive forces of the Market use all their dissuasive *and* persuasive power to co-opt them for their own purposes. Yet, the enthusiasm raised by these movements is strong enough to show that lucid and good people all over the world have not lost the hope that new forms of simple and humane life are still possible. New currents of thought are even developing within such disciplines as economic and social sciences to suggest that radically different approaches could eventually reduce or even stop the production of scarcity. The search for these approaches is nonetheless dependent on the combination of many factors.

The first is that the poor and their friends, at least, fully realize that essentialist, ideologized, technocratic, and “politically correct” solutions to “world poverty” are doomed in advance, as it has already been suggested. No miraculous formula, no professionally prepared “master plan”, no grand strategy of any kind, not even the advent of more “democratic” or “revolutionary” régimes are the key to reverse the situation. Nothing of that sort can change the scarcity producing dynamics of the modern systems of production, based on material profit.

The second is to fully appreciate the need for a radical change of perception. The “problem” is not poverty or riches, or any similar social construct to which a particular meaning has been given by others for their own hegemonistic reasons. It is to cast a different look at our fellow humans and to share the belief that their mutation into “economic *homenem*” would doom us *all*, including the “haves”, to extreme solitude and impotence. It is to understand the need, for all of us, of that “milk of human kindness” without which no “good life” would ever be possible, even for the economically wealthiest. It is to realize that each one of us *can* be a candle for our own life and, at least, those for whom we actually *care*. It is, finally, to appreciate that any one of us can be a creative agent of change in the familiar spaces where other caring humans may also need us, the way we need them.

Every human being is indeed a unique gift of Nature to everyone and a possible agent of change for oneself and for others. Hence, the need for a full exploration of all these gifts and of the actual possibilities and limits of action of all agents of change, free from any kind of ideological blinkers. The study argues that none of these agents is *per se*, more or less important than any other. Each acquires - or loses - her or his importance, depending on the site, the context or the field of activity to which one is related. As a rule, every person engaged in modern relations of production, produces also some form of socially engendered scarcity. Similarly, the same person is always theoretically in a position to act differently. When the number of social agents acting in the right direction reaches a certain critical mass, the relations that are created amongst them, trigger new interactive processes of change that highly increase the search for new alternatives.

In the field of “aid”, an archeology of the concept of “the neighbor” – as it was spelled out by the Christ – could prove very useful to the search for such alternatives. Because the Samaritan

represented the perfect example of a good neighbor, the aid that he extended to the unknown traveler, robbed in the Galilean desert, incarnated the ideal form of assistance. Institutions, being set up according to pre-defined and self-centered rules, are, by their very nature, unable to act like neighbors. The search for true alternatives implies, however, that the neighbor's spirit be present in all kinds of aid and assistance to the poor. Otherwise, the exercise would only perpetuate the logic of social preservation

To regenerate the meaning of the neighbor. For reasons easy to understand, the economic discourse has remained alien to the concept of the neighbor. Disregarding the personal and spiritual qualities that are essential to agents of change as *neighbors*, it has only favored the creation of *institutions* and technocrats. The discourse continues to be insensitive to the fact that such institutions and their protectors tend only to protect themselves and society *against* the poor and their potential threat to economy. This is particularly true of societies where the haves and the owners of the means of production are in a position to actually control all the apparatuses of power. *For a society that seeks to protect its poor* against their potential enemies, rather than the opposite, the present trends should indeed be reversed. This implies that “neighbors” acting as social agents start by changing their relations with the dominant institutions: namely, either ignoring or opposing them, or reinventing new ways of using or subverting them.

Modern conditions have made it particularly difficult for social actors to uphold their neighborly qualities. In a profit-based environment where good neighbors – in the Christ's sense – have no economic “value”, they should therefore be highly inventive in order to remain true to themselves. Moreover, the reign of economy and their need to be “employed” somewhere in order to have a regular income puts them, more often than not, in an ambiguous position. They are led to participate, like every one else, in the creation of the very scarcities that cause social and economic destitution. Moreover, like all other members of society, they are constantly placed before binary choices: material destitution or acceptance of the market rules, hardships or comfort, “progress” or “regress”, advanced technology or primitive tools, high tech medicine or second rate shamans, modern systems of education or illiteracy. Such a black and white presentation of reality has become the most serious obstacle to any creative thinking and action, aimed at finding genuine “solutions” to the many **real** and concrete “problems” of life. In Berthold Brecht's play “*The one who says Yes and the one who says No*”, it is a young school boy who, defying his teacher and other companions, refuses to submit himself to this binary reductionism of reality. The “way out” that he opposes to the two equally bad solutions proposed to him, is an answer that combines the wisdom of both with the dangers of none. It represents a beautiful example of the way the founding “Yes” of old cultures could be grafted to the challenging “No” of creativity.