

## Poverty and Peace?<sup>1</sup>

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I want to approach the question of poverty in a “Peace Studies” class by discussing how sociologists have viewed poverty. Logically, we can argue that poverty causes the absence of peace: you cannot have social peace and, at the same time, social injustice. On the contrary, however, I want to argue that the existence of poverty may be compatible with peace (in a specific sense), while the growth of wealth may not be.

Sociology was born in a world that was being overwhelmed by industrialization, the growth of big cities, mass migration, and social upheaval. The early sociologists saw their job as helping to restore the lost world of social order. So, to begin with, I am adopting a simple definition of “peace,” by which I mean the existence of social order, or more precisely, the absence of direct social conflict between the haves and have-nots in a society.

Nineteenth-century sociologists believed that, within the nation state prior to modernity, there had actually been social order and internal peace. This peace had coexisted with living conditions which, from the point of view of more modern standards, were wretched and desperately poor for large parts of the population. Social order was largely maintained in a situation of extreme inequality of wealth and life chances, and even in the face of considerable actual poverty for the majority of people. Poverty and peace co-existed, the sociologists believed, because of ideology. It is not the conditions in which people live which are most important, but what people think about these conditions and whether these inequalities and actual living standards are seen to be legitimate.

Traditional, pre-industrial society was propped up and supported by traditional ideas and institutions. Regardless of whether you were a have or a have-not, you occupied a certain status, a position which was largely your destiny and fate. As a have-not, you were deferential to your social betters and not envious, because that would imply that you deserved more and they deserved less. Social conventions, customs, and an absence of invidious comparisons (they have more than they should) allowed, in ordinary circumstances, for the coexistence of great inequalities and social peace (the absence of overt conflict).

Maintaining the existing order was the social objective of the established religion. In Christianity, there was supposedly a certain virtue in poverty, and the poor were worthy recipients of pity, hand-outs, and charity. In this way, the rich, who might have a difficult time ascending into heaven, could buy their way in. Not only the meek but perhaps especially the poor would inherit the everlasting kingdom if not the earthly one, provided they knew their place and kept within it and, fundamentally, kept the King’s Peace. It should be added, though, that with this image of eventual, other-worldly equality, Christianity possessed a radical subtext that surfaced periodically in bouts of violence, which however violent, usually ended up with the reassertion of the status quo. If ideology was not enough, in these extraordinary circumstances, power would unleash its wrath to restore “peace” and good order.

What social peace there was in this traditional society was radically undermined by industrialization. How to re-establish society on an even, peaceful keel was the essential problem of sociology. Traditions were being swept aside, the traditional glue of society was being dissolved, and with it went the old justifications for social inequality. The potential for the disruption of social order – social peace – had never been greater.

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It was in this context that poverty was discovered by sociologists. Poverty, however, did not mean being poor in any absolute, material sense but, much more importantly, it was viewed as a state of mind, the contrast between your real-life living conditions and your expectations and aspirations, your sense of what you might have, or should be entitled to. Living in poor material circumstances in traditional society may have been your fate in life; but living in poverty in industrial society was perceived to be unjust. Because poverty might now seem to be unjust, it posed a threat to social peace and social order. What, then, was the solution which would restore social order? Living in poverty, being poor, must again be seen as socially just or legitimate.

How could this revaluation be accomplished? If traditional ideologies were no longer effective in justifying great inequalities in wealth, it was important that the new capitalist system be buttressed by new justifications, new ideologies. The most important of these ideologies was moral individualism, propounded by the sociological prophet, Herbert Spencer and his followers in the United States. You were no longer the victim of fate, but the captain of your destiny. You were free to pursue your best advantages in the competitive marketplace. The best people, the cleverest, the smartest, the most hard-working succeeded; the worst people failed. Poverty was, in this sense, the fate you deserved. The person in poverty was morally derelict. Poverty was the just outcome of failure in a competitive world. There was no virtue, but only sin in poverty. Charity from the rich could no longer be tolerated; it only encouraged more people to be poor and be morally derelict.

Like a belief in everlasting life, in eternal rewards or punishments, any ideology is successful only if people believe it. In the new ideology of moral individualism, you were free to strive for a success which was, it was alleged, potentially available; and you were to be envious of those with more. Envy was not a sin; it was a motor of economic success. Invidious distinctions were the meat and drink of life. More importantly, you were to attribute your failure – and there were far more losers than winners – to your individual weaknesses, your moral unfitness. And even if you were unwilling to blame yourself for your own failure, at least it went a long way to explain the failure of so many others who were poor.

And this new individualistic ideology worked internationally. Poor countries were poor because of the moral failures of their populations. They didn't work hard enough, they lacked entrepreneurial vision, they still accepted their fate, and they made too many babies. Underdevelopment – vast territories or nations in poverty – was the sum total of millions of individual failures. This ideology, however, only potentially reconciles poverty and peace. On the one hand, frustration over individual failure leads to breaches of the King's or Queen's Peace – to individualized crimes of violence and property redistribution (theft). For some sociologists, these breaches of the peace are unconscious acts of social rebellion, although since they occur at all levels of the social structure – from the poor to the well-heeled, including Olympic figure skaters – they are better seen as alternative routes to individual success.

Much more potentially threatening, it would appear, would be collective or group threats to social order. Don't people in poverty constitute a potential social movement dedicated to the greater equalization of wealth? Is not poverty consistent with conflict and not with peace, or social order? I'm not so sure.

What about internal social order, within the nation? Here we come back to the question I began with: who is *poor*? And who *is* poor? A large proportion of the poor is made up of children; many more are elderly, especially elderly women. Single mothers are disproportionately poor. These are very difficult groups to organize into collective protest, for a

variety of sometimes different reasons. They pose threats more to the bourgeois conscience than to the wealth or power of the dominant class. And consciences are more easily mollified.

There is poverty that is widely dispersed in rural areas and among isolated communities. By-passed by history, they are not about to make historical change. To make matters worse, some sociologists will come along to explain how rural populations want to be poor. Maritimers and Newfoundlanders can survive with very little. They can hunt moose, have a small garden, fish for trout, barter in the underground economy. They're used to being poor, so they accept it passively, peacefully, and don't suffer so much.

Many minority groups are also poor – natives in particular. They do constitute a threat to the established order, but the effect of poverty here is compounded by racism, by the collective knowledge of additional forms of injustice; it's not just that they are poor.

International poverty, on the other hand, is even a greater threat to "peace," that is, the established order here in Canada and Nova Scotia. Who is it that most wants peace? Those with the most, the most to protect, and the most to lose.

Even minimally educated Canadians know that poverty is especially endemic in large parts of Africa. Latin America, Asia, even if they are unaware of the role the West has played in creating these conditions. But it is not the fact of poverty that threatens our peace, but what the poor in other countries may be led to believe, to expect, to think they have a right to and have expectations of reaching.

To Eastern Europe, it is the promise of prosperity as enjoyed in West Germany; in China, the example of Hong Kong and Singapore; in Havana, it is the myth of prosperity in Miami. And what happens when the limitations of these dreams are revealed? Can the North American, the West German standards of living be replicated world-wide? I don't think that is possible, for many reasons.

A young student from Mainland China with whom I spoke recently was amazed by two things in Canada: the overall richness of the country and what he saw as the unhappiness of the people. He said: "You people have refrigerators; how can you be unhappy?"

Can every Chinese home have a refrigerator? One or two cars? If so, at what cost to the planet's resources and environment? There will come this great barrier, this contradiction between what people in developing countries can have and what they feel they should be entitled to. This gap will breed a real understanding of poverty, and real discontent. This realization leads to two possibilities. One possibility is a new social revolution, the form of which can only vaguely be imagined given the failure of twentieth-century revolutions.

The second is that the social elites in those countries will harness this discontent and channel it into nationalism, chauvinism, and war. The existence of the Communist Bloc didn't actually threaten world peace, despite the rhetoric of the Cold War. It is the restoration of capitalism that is the danger – capitalism in Russia, China, and Cuba creates both the ambitions of the new economic elites and the ideology of poverty; that is, the contradiction between poverty and plenty. And it is this growing contradiction that will threaten our social peace in the twenty-first century.