

Material Poverty, Symbolic Poverty and Alternatives for Social and Political Thinking in Israel

Written by Marcello Weksler for the Alternative Information Center (AIC) Thursday, 06 March 2008

Last month, an Israeli government report was issued regarding the level of poverty and income gaps in Israel for the years 2006-2007. I will not analyze here the statistics of the report, for they speak for themselves: As time goes on, an increasing number of people fall below the poverty line. There are more poor children (one out of every three children at present) and more workers who are unable to survive on their income. It is clear that this trend will continue to worsen, and that the government's neoliberal and racist economic policies will drag additional sectors of the population, especially the young, senior citizens and children, into the sea of poverty.

This article will also not attempt to convince the pseudo-liberal yuppies—the Israeli upper-middle class—who choose to ignore the statistics of income gaps from which they benefit. Or to convince the “Ministry of Finance officials,” who in essence represent the academic-organizational segment of the oppressors. There is no point in attempting to show them the error of their ways when they suggest “alternative” ways to calculate poverty. For example, the idea to calculate the expenditure index of the poor, in a manner suggesting that the poor don't know how to maintain themselves in a rational manner. In simple words, the poor smoke, have cable television, spend more than they have and so on. These contentions are not a slip of the tongue; they are part of their ideology.

Instead, this article was written with the goal of deepening thought about the possibilities for social and political action, with an understanding that the phenomenon of poverty will deepen and be an integral part of the sociopolitical scene for many years to come.

There is a substantial difference between classical poverty, from which humanity suffered for more than 100 years under industrial capitalism, and current poverty, in the globalized neoliberal age. Today's poverty, throughout the world and particularly with the rise of economic sectors based on high-tech skills demands, is poverty without escape, without a future, without hope. The reason for this is the gradual disappearance of tenure at work and the social benefits that derived from that tenure, in addition to the ongoing movement of industries from the center to the world's periphery. In Israel, less than 30 years ago, it was possible to specialize in an industrial profession and receive tenure on the job. These conditions ensured a life, admittedly modest, but without fears of losing one's livelihood and with a clear future. For example, a construction worker with the Solel Boneh company knew that he would receive a pension from his workplace. A textile worker in Dimona knew that even though her contribution to the family income was modest, it was guaranteed. This world was destroyed. Those with capital moved their factories to countries with a cheaper labor force, such as Jordan, India or China, or conversely began using their money towards the high-tech and software development sectors, and financial services, areas in which workers with insufficient education could not find their place.

This process resulted in the marginalization of entire communities, whose livelihood depended on production.

Education and degrees have become increasingly essential in the workplace. In parallel, a process of eliminating the concept and institution of tenure has taken hold. This has been occurring not only because of the elimination of industry, but also and primarily because of the changes in the structure of capital. Capital in our days must travel quickly, be invested quickly and make quick profits. Capitalists do not want or are unable to take long-term responsibility for a community of workers, for their welfare and for the continuation of the next generation.

In education, the bubble of social mobility, which became a catch-phrase in Israel during the 1990's, has begun to burst. As the number of students passing their matriculation exams rises, so does the number of students from all populations. In order to provide an answer to the demand for studies, private colleges are growing like mushrooms following a rain shower. After a few years of investment in time and money, the young people are forced to contend with jobs inappropriate to their skills and with low wages. The number of those over 40 years old among the unemployed grows, as they have experience and expectations for higher wages.

Amongst children and youth, the ability to understand the importance of formal education has declined, as their feeling is (even if they are unable to provide political analysis for this reality), at the end of the day, their education will not reward them sufficiently. And from here they feel trapped: no matter how much they study or where they turn, they feel that doors will be closed to them.

In Israel, in addition to the marginalization of all the weakened populations, there is the structural marginalization which derives from racism, for example toward the Palestinian minority, new immigrants, Mizrachis and women.

All of these processes occur in a society that encourages constant exposure to wealth through malls, cable television and other media outlets. The poor can see the wealth, but cannot touch it. They can dream about it, but are unable to obtain it. Everyone can see the merchandise, standing in glass cabinets, but their money is insufficient for buying. This is symbolic poverty. The fetishism of merchandise, in Marxist terms, is double: it hides the production process as it always did, and today it further hides the fact that it is for show, a type of "you can look but cannot have." This is a new phenomenon that the neoliberal "democratization" permits. A situation like this creates unbearable and accumulative fury and frustration. In the beginning of the industrial revolution in England, more than 150 years ago, textile workers who lost their livelihood released their frustration by destroying machines. Today the fury finds its release in destruction and vandalism of another type. Thus, for example, the riots which occurred in Los Angeles and Paris. However, it must be recognized that actions of fury such as this do not result in any movement of consciousness of the demonstrators in relation to the reasons for their oppression. Fury is fury is fury. The parallel on both sides—the 19th century English textile workers and the rebellious youth of today—is not only in the method, but also in the non-crystallization of consciousness.

The primary reason for the lack of a change in consciousness today is the crumbling of class and community vis-à-vis the oppression of the global neoliberal policies. The disintegration in the community stems from an inability to gather all of the oppressed under one social-political umbrella: adults, senior citizens, the youth and children, the unemployed, the working poor, those lacking education and the educated, women and men.

Creating solidarity within a community is not a given. Common interests must be built anew on a basis other than the existing one. Amongst other things, it should be a base of class interest, today in a different stage of development following the end of tenure in places of employment. The new class partnership must take into account the changing structure of the oppressed community, with the temporariness of work, structural underemployment and that a large part of the cheap and available labor has become unnecessary in our society. Parallel to this, it must be taken into account that the politicization of the social struggle is a necessity derived from the separation of the social and political in Israel. In marginalized communities, there is a tendency for the level of racism, fascist nationalism and fundamentalism to rise. The more marginalization of, and within, a community, the less solidarity that exists. These are reasonable ideologies of refuge in a situation of a struggle for survival. There exists a human need for group survival that often justifies racism, discrimination and even a complete negation of the different and the other.

Here, there are several common assumptions amongst social and political activists that are not appropriate for this changed situation. For example, the "stages" methodology, which determines that in working amongst oppressed populations, their needs must first be met and the community mobilized on the basis of their existing experiences and consciousness, and, only later, when they feel sufficiently strong and we have gained their faith, should the topic of the national conflict between Jews and Palestinians be raised. This methodology has never proven itself and mostly highlights arrogance toward the oppressed, who are treated as small children who do not understand. Moreover, this approach cannot work in reality as the "hiding" of information prevents discussion with members of the community and does not allow for a chance of a change in consciousness. It is clear that there exists a problem, racism, fear and more, but the role of the activists is to say aloud what they think, even if it is not accepted by the community. The community and activists must understand that the fact that the community does not cope with these issues is the problem, and not the gap between the consciousness of the community and the activists.

An additional example is of agenda. What is more and what is less important to do? With whom is it most important to work, and with which tools? In the processes of marginalization in our society, it is not easy to determine what is most important to do. The limited methodologies born of the experience of the international organized Left, with a strong class basis, are no longer relevant. Class, in the classical sense of the word, is not the sole actor in the arena. Work must be more complex, taking into account that the methods of action and struggle have to be founded on what exists and what is needed—and these can be changed at any moment.

The final example is connected more to a world view. As the oppression becomes crueler and day after day hurts so very many people, a world view that connects political and social activists must focus on universal, humanistic values—values of justice, social justice and equality. The reason for this lies with the jolt that revolutionary ideology suffered in the past two decades, leaving it confused, divided and always fighting the ongoing attacks of the Right. To build a new ideology is a matter of time, power relations and of successes in the struggle.

In order to promote processes of change in consciousness regarding symbolic poverty, it is necessary to expand the scope of issues in the lexicon of political discourse, as we live in a reality in which the oppressed populations dream and are jealous of what they do not have, and will likely never have. This is the biggest and most sophisticated victory of neoliberalism. This is the reason that every social-political action requires time and a substantial investment, and cannot rely on brief interventions. A change of consciousness is not a matter of one act, but of accumulative acts. In this sense, we must think carefully also about the methodology of action: how to change consciousness and how to lead change.