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JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S PAPERS
ON CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND MEASURES OF POVERTY,
ON INCOME ADEQUACY AND ON MINIMUM INCOME STANDARDS.

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CAN POVERTY BE ABOLISHED?.

Making poverty history is a noble aim, but which poverty? Ordinary conversation rarely distinguishes the many kinds. Third World poverty is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from that in the Fourth World (people suffering poverty in the affluent countries), but they are both exclusions from decent and dignified lives in their societies. Exclusion may not be deliberate but it is the foreseeable consequence of poor people's lack of power over the resources needed to buy their way out of poverty, and the lack of respect by the non-poor for their human rights to dignity and to resources needed for social participation.

Not everyone really wants to abolish poverty. All the better off, and the affluent most of all, benefit from other people's low wages and from their own low taxes. Some people don't want a more equal society; not everyone thinks that all human beings deserve respect, or that one should treat others as one would wish to be treated oneself. Abolishing poverty, whether globally or nationally, has political costs because it requires redistributing power over resources. We must never confuse proposals to *help* people who are poor and excluded with the political action needed to *prevent and abolish* poverty.

Descriptions of intolerable conditions are often confused with their causes or consequences (and consequences often cause other social evils). The muddle is made worse by abstract statistics misrepresenting lived poverties. Muddle benefits political inaction – politicians resemble Humpty Dumpty's insisting words mean what he declared them to mean, which hampers both problem analysis and policy planning. The question is, whose version of poverty is the subject for debate? It is easier to abolish a poverty which is mean and imprecise than one which is realistic and clearly identifiable.

The only thing which counts is what people in a particular society mean by it. Whatever bloodless statistical definitions politicians use, poverty is not abolished until those who know the suffering of poverty at first hand agree that it has ended. Whether we like it or not, in our marketised society what people mean by poverty is two things. One is not having enough ready cash (or equally disposable assets) to be able to afford to take a decent part in what society considers ordinary life and not suffer lack of necessities. The other, deeper and more important, is to be treated with a lack of respect for one's human dignity because of one's poverty, being made to feel one is an outsider or different, to suffer from social exclusion as poor.

What must be done? The more governments promote the primacy of market choices, the more important it becomes for everybody to have as much money as it takes to make real choices and not suffer market exclusion. Taking decent part in social life means more than adequate food and shelter: customary clothing is a necessity for the human right to appear in public without shame. In the UK, low income families may have enough money to pay for some necessities *but not for all of them, at the same time*, to the levels which respectable social inclusion demands.

If governments want to abolish poverty, they must attack its two causes – the inadequate incomes and disrespect poor people get. Income adequacy is not achieved at a statistical point but when households demonstrably don't suffer enforced deprivations – the government must find that out and pay minimum wages and benefits to those levels. Reducing the cost of necessities can reduce poverty even when incomes don't rise. Means tests are not neutral technicalities but disrespectful ways of distinguishing poor people from those who have enough money. What methods would enhance your dignity if you had to claim help? Since increasing income inequality underlies many social and physical disorders, reducing it as well as raising lower incomes will bring benefits across society. In short, UK poverty can be abolished, but only by policies which no government has yet been willing to implement.
