

Poverty and neo-capitalism in the 1990s

Professor Dario Composta says that the “perverse wealth” of usury began to make headway with Calvinism. Part I of II.

Professor Dario Composta is a theologian at the Urbaniana University in Rome. He lectured at the Cultural Center of Viterbo, Italy, on March 10, 1990, touching upon Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Sollicitudo rei socialis of Dec. 30, 1987, and the Pope's attack on the “structures of sin.” The capitalism of the Renaissance was perverted, Professor Composta charges.

1) Introduction

A study on poverty in the neo-capitalist world might appear paradoxical: In fact, it is maintained that wherever the system of profit and the free market reign supreme in the economy, poverty has vanished and prosperity is within everyone's reach. Since we in Italy and Western Europe live within this system, we are in a position to verify this widespread belief—i.e., to either confirm or deny it.

This twofold possibility which is offered for our consideration cannot be a matter of mere hypothesis, but must be located at the center of our experience: familial, local, regional, and national, or even beyond.

For this verification, we need to start by defining some terminology, especially: What is poverty? and then: What is neo-capitalism? I state from the outset that for purposes of this study, the mere assertion of sociological methods is insufficient, as are mere diagnosis and statistics: We need to penetrate into the labyrinth of the great one-worldist plans which are hanging over us, and, in the end, supply a Christian vision for whatever problems may emerge from our investigation.

2) Preliminary notions: poverty

Poverty is a term which resounds in our memory, invoking bitter recollections; or it may stir up present or recent burning experiences.

One could say that in a certain sense, a definition of poverty is useless. Yet, with René Descartes, we may state with some degree of certainty that we possess a clear but confused idea of poverty. *Clear*, because of direct or indirect experience; *confused*, because like all obvious realities, it is

not always easy to find the corresponding technical concept in our minds.

We can start from what sociology has attempted to explore on the matter of misery, poverty, and need. Sociologist R. Rowntree (*Poverty, A Study of Town-Life*, 1901) says there is a primary and a secondary poverty. *Primary* poverty is the condition of life where income is insufficient to procure the vital minimum that assures physical efficiency. *Secondary* poverty would be differentiated from the primary insofar as income could guarantee physical efficiency, but is absorbed by some useful but superfluous expense. Poverty would then be *extreme* when regular employment is lacking, or when work accidents or illness hit the wage-earners.

Some sociologists not only have determined the limits of poverty, but have pointed out the methods for overcoming it. Thus, for example, Bowley (*Livelihood and Poverty*, London 1951) and Lavers (*Poverty and Welfare State*), authors closer to us in time, have stated that the welfare state and the policy of full employment can defeat extreme poverty.

As you see, sociology does not say much beyond our experiences; and its very prescriptions for defeating poverty seem rather utopian. Among other things, sociology does not take into account voluntary poverty and conditions of life which are accepted and desired as the minimum to live on, like certain “hippies” who, even if they are princes, choose a vagabond life.

Let us now turn our considerations to *theology*, which is not only capable of ascertaining (as sociology does), but also of explaining.

Theology, first of all, states that poverty is not a virtue, since it is privation of material goods, but consists of fear for the future and for the present: for the future, insofar as fear in the face of imminent lack of material goods creates a certain inner anxiety; for the present, in that when the minimum to live is lacking, the fear of encroaching mishaps, diseases, breakdown, and death provokes sadness and desperation.

In the second place, theology distinguishes voluntary poverty from that to which one is subjected (which St. Thom-

as Aquinas calls “necessary” in the medieval sense). *Summa contra Gentes*, III,191-195. Voluntary poverty is an act of will with which a believer frees himself or herself of all fears and timidity and entrusts himself or herself to Providence; voluntary poverty therefore is not only a renunciation of superfluous goods, but also the seeking of the minimum to live, for an internal freedom in the face of the demands of bodily necessity (*Summa Theol.* II,II,19,2 ad V um). Voluntary poverty therefore corresponds to the Gospel admonition, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and whoever chooses poverty does not directly intend to be stripped of material goods, but rather seeks inner freedom; in fact “to be poor in spirit,” does not mean stupidity at all (which is what the phrase normally expresses in Italian) but—as the Hebrew *aanwim Yahweh*, God’s poor man, suggests—he who fears the Lord and hence empties himself of the foolish ambitions and vain pomp that derive from riches and honors. The renunciation of superfluous temporal things requires an act of the spirit (“poor in spirit”) which only God can bestow upon souls (II,II,19, 12). It is thus possible that the voluntarily poor person (being primarily an inner-directed person) could be a rich man who lives in a sumptuous palace, but detaches himself from luxury and dedicates his goods to charity and philanthropy, or that the voluntarily poor person could also be a worker who, having only the minimum to live on, accepts his condition in happiness and internal freedom, trusting in Providence and earning what he needs to live by working.

It is obvious that according to theology, the greatest evil of poverty is not the lack of material goods for subsistence, but the internal anguish over the uncertainty of tomorrow. In fact, animals, who also live in a state of continual poverty, do not suffer morally on account of their state. They satisfy their elementary needs by instinct, but they do not seek ambition, and they feel no passion for accumulating infinitely or for assuring themselves esteem and honor. Poverty, therefore, is primarily a spiritual state, or the predominance of fear and fright for the future.

As to “necessary” poverty or poverty which one undergoes, St. Thomas Aquinas recommends that those responsible for policy promote income-generating and productive work. In a letter to the Duchess of Brabant (1270), the daughter of the sainted King of France Louis IX, he recommends allowing the Jews to work in farming to get them out of usury and to grant them free access to ownership of land. The reason is obvious: A perverse wealth such as usury is to be condemned just as much as poverty provoked by social injustices. In the *Summa contra Gentes*, he treats at length the question of wealth as a human good which man must earn without tempting God, i.e., with indolence (III,135).

Finally, I wish to recall that the great medieval teacher distrusts both the voluntarily and involuntarily poor in political leadership positions. In short, they are not made to rule (*Summa contra Gentes*, III,134), insofar as they lack magnanimity.

3) Imposed misery

Thomist theology, in all its subtlety, was dealing with a civil society still dominated by the spirit of the Gospel: Down to the 17th century, until the advent of Protestantism, the economic condition of the Christian was not that of misery. In other words, during the centuries of the Faith, whenever a Christian fell into serious calamity, which today we call misery, charity intervened with alms, philanthropy, and donations. Misery started to make headway in Europe with Calvinism, which constituted the justification of capitalism. I don’t intend to dwell on this point of troublesome historic analysis, but I think that the thesis of Max Weber, expounded in his famous study *The Spirit of Capitalism*, is by and large true. Amintore Fanfani definitely does not contradict the thesis of the German sociologist when he states that capitalism, born in Florence in the 13-14th centuries, would not have undergone a downward curve if it had been regulated (as it was, until the Reformation), by canon law and by Catholic morality (Cf. Dario Composta, *Lavoro e liberazione*, Rovigo, 1978, p. 34, note 23). Calvinism preached the abolition of the Sacrament of Confession; from this arose the Protestant conscience: Who assures me that I am absolved of my sins? assures me that God forgives me? Calvin replies in his *Institutiones Christianae* that there is one instrument for knowing God’s benevolence: success in business and the honest accumulation of wealth. When these ideas, brought by Knox to Scotland, migrated from thence into New England, then a British colony, Calvinism found the *Lebensraum* for a rapid and tumultuous expansion: Mercantilism was born between England and its American colony, but mercantilism slowly extinguished the Calvinist faith until in England, Adam Smith, dismantling the Calvinist ideology and stripping it of its religious mantle, proposed in his noted essay on the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) the new formula for classical capitalism. This system is the layman’s version of Calvinism: The individual (and he stressed the individual), can and must get rich in any way and by any means, passing above morality and law. An Anglican and Deist such as Smith was bound neither to the Calvinist elect nor to Catholic morality, and much less by canon law, which in previous centuries had safeguarded the first steps of capitalism from degeneration into the immorality and perversity of exploitation. With capitalism begins misery.

I insist on this thesis, because if you compare the economic condition of farmers during the medieval period with the horrible conditions of workers in the first textile factories of England in the 18th century, you have to surrender to the evidence. Around 1450, the daily earnings of rural workers were: 18 liters of grain, 4.5 kilograms of beef, 5.5 liters of wine, (cf. Dario Composta, *Op. cit.* p. 119). Even a numerous family could live in those pre-industrial times in a dignified manner. Not so after the advent of capitalism: Even women and children worked 12 hours a day, without hygiene, in dark, filthy holes. The indignation of Marx was not

sentimentalism, but already in Germany and before Marx, the Bishop of Magonza, Ketteler, had raised a cry of alarm in his essay "The Worker Question," six years before the "Manifesto" by the founder of communism. In short, in Europe there appeared the misery of the majority, juxtaposed to the wealth of the few.

How much industrial progress cost, how many tears and how many victims capitalism immolated on the altar of the golden calf of profit, is already a memory. And anyway, this is not the time and place to retrace the history of the two systems born of Protestantism: capitalism and its reaction, communism. Revolutions, wars, and social upheavals already separate us from those events.

But here a question is imposed on us: If we may admit that capitalism's cruelty was defeated by means of appropriate legislation and economic-social therapies, what can one say of our own era, which has seen in 40 years an impetuous emergence of prosperity and its spread over all social strata? A car for every family, washers, water heaters, household sanitary facilities, luxury clothing, television and radio for everyone, abundant food, a downpour of luxurious goods with deluxe vacations and entertainments which are more and more exquisite and refined!

4) The global objective

May we consider ourselves sated and satisfied, we who live in this era of imposing transformations, without knowing the outcome and much less the origin? But there is a more basic question which regards us directly: Do we live in a time of prosperity or is there poverty around us, too? If by poverty we mean not only insufficiency of material goods for a decent life, but also anguish over the future, we do not hesitate to state that there is poverty. The Holy Father in his Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* of Dec. 30, 1987, affirms: "Among the specific indications of underdevelopment which strike also the developing countries to a growing extent, there are two which are particularly revealing of a dramatic situation. In the first place there is the housing crisis. Another common index for the overwhelming majority of nations is the phenomenon of unemployment and underemployment" (notes 17-18). Going toward his conclusion, he invokes as a remedy the application of the social doctrine of the Church and, in particular, the preferential option for the poor, taking the frightful world situation into account. In No. 42 he states: "Today then, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this preferential love, with the decisions it inspires in us, cannot fail to embrace the immense multitudes of hungry, of beggars, of homeless without medical aid, and above all, without the hope of a better future: We cannot fail to take notice of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean to become like the 'rich man' who pretended he did not recognize the beggar Lazarus, lying outside his door" (*Ibid.* n. 42).

Why has our era, which boasts of rapid technological

progress, not been able to attenuate so many evils? In my view, we have to look sharply at the frightening diagnosis of the Pontiff, by trying to understand why, who is causing so many lacerations and sufferings not only in our lands, but in Europe and throughout the world. A first key to interpretation is offered to us by the question which the Holy Father puts so bluntly regarding the two dominant economic systems, neo-capitalism and Marxist collectivism. We can go further. In an allocution, he denounced the iniquity of the Yalta Treaty. Why? Because the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. have not renounced their lordship over the world; we can even say that the times through which we are living—surely they are guided by Divine Providence, as he himself said in recent days—but perhaps the intentions of the protagonists do not aim at resolving the problems of our time, but if anything, to tighten ever more the noose of hidden domination.

In reading certain quite informed sources, it seems that the time has come in which Moscow and Washington will launch a new period of even tighter and more concerted domination via the hidden powers of finance and politics.

For this diagnosis (as John Paul II states), it is not enough to make a "socio-political" analysis asserting the "short-sightedness and selfishness" of the politicians, or to refer to "wrong strategic calculations or imprudent economic decisions" (*Sollicitudo*, n. 36). No! We need an ethical-religious diagnosis which is able to link the events of our time to the "second tablet of the Ten Commandments" (*Ibid.* n. 36) and hence "to the structures of sin," even beyond ideologies. This expression, "structures of sin" which appears eight times in the Encyclical, tweaked the ears even of the secular press and certain so-called Catholics. I refer to [Italian Republican Party leader] Giorgio La Malfa, [left-wing political scientist] Norberto Bobbio, [Socialist Party-linked publisher] Eugenio Scalfari (*Repubblica*, Feb. 22, 1988), and Giuseppe De Rita who was amazed that the Pontiff denounced neo-capitalism in the same way as communism, when in Italy—in his opinion—poverty has disappeared and the proletariat is but a memory (*Corriere della Sera*, Jan. 2, 1988). This "Catholic" accuses the Pope of teaching populist moralism. Even in France the daily *Le Point* objected to the condemnation of capitalism and defended economic progress in poor regions such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The *Washington Times* and the *New York Times* descended to add a heavy hand to the attack on the Encyclical (cf. D. Composta, "Il senso di una enciclica" in *Palestra del Clero*, 67, 1988, pp. 788-803).

This sudden zeal to defend capitalism reveals that in the Western world there are social evils and "perverse structures," "structures of sin," which generate poverty and misery but which must be hidden. What evils? And what obscure centers of evil? They can only be one-worldist, neo-capitalist potentates whose program, however much it is kept within their "secret conclaves" of their meetings, cannot hide their entire perverse strategy.