

The war on poverty.

Anarchist Age Monthly Review. No 80, July 1998 pp. 32-34

John Tomlinson

A lot of nonsense is talked about poverty: clerics see it as a moral quandary, economists conceive of it as an economic question, social workers see it as a social problem, and politicians view it as a political dilemma. No one is prepared to admit there is a military solution. Counsellors are aware of its impact on individuals while social policy analysts interpret its social dimensions. Conservatives point to individuals shortcomings as the cause of poverty, whilst leftist blame the systems of societal distribution for its widespread manifestation. The experts all agree that *the* solution to poverty lies within *their* area of competence. Well, all the recognised experts have had a crack at eliminating it. If the experience of the last two decades in the Western World, where poverty and inequality have increased; or the results in the Third World, where there are one million people starving or on the brink of starvation, are anything to go by then we must reluctantly admit the experts have failed us. The time to let the military have a go at solving it is now upon us.

Why the Military.

It is probably a bit surprising that in a liberal democracy an anarchist with pacifist and socialist tendencies would opt for a military solution to poverty. The prime reason for this is that the other options currently on offer have failed and despite the fact that the military hierarchy have in the past only shown interest in installing a regime which ensures those in the military hierarchy escape the poverty trap it is reasonable to believe that once assigned the task they will take to it with alacrity - after all they have no other sensible function to fulfil in society.

The strategic plan

Clearly there is sufficient food available in the world to feed everyone. The problem is equitable distribution. There is enough wealth in the world to ensure no one lives in poverty. The problem is equitable distribution. The military itself can make a real contribution in this regard. If the money which now goes to support war games for just one month of each year was spent on removing poverty there would be sufficient funds available to feed, house, cloth, educate to basic literacy levels and provide basic health services to every human on the planet.

The easiest way to make this budget saving in military expenditure would be for all the military forces in the world to take a four week unpaid holiday starting on the 1st January each year. Anyone engaging in unpaid overtime for the military during this holiday period would be sacked from the military forces. An alternative way to achieve the same savings would be to stop buying military equipment. As there would be no wars to fight and no

widespread insurrections to put down the need for new lethal equipment would evaporate.

The reason why the military machine has not been prepared to divest itself of one twelfth of its income is not that it is thoughtless or greedy but that *in the past* its entire reason for being has been to 'go round the world meeting lots of nice people then killing them'. Once the military has been assigned the task of ending poverty it will provide the generals with a socially meaningful existence and they will be able to psychologically cope with jettisoning their previously violent persona.

The military necessity

It is hardly likely that the military will encounter resistance from those experiencing poverty as it sets out to end their poverty and or starvation. The military would not need to divide the reserve army of labour, benefits would in any country be paid universally, thereby increasing workers solidarity with those excluded from the paid work force.

But it could be expected that there will be privileged sections of society who may find that the military's policy of equitable distribution could conflict with their desire to amass inordinate wealth. Some of the top hundred billionaires who own as much wealth as 40 per cent of the world's population, and even less rich people who have constructed their personalities around their capacity to take more from the common wealth than others, might have difficulties adjusting to the new world order.

It is not contemplated that the military would need to purchase new weaponry to accomplish the necessary re-education - there is more than enough firepower in existing stocks to eliminate reactionary bourgeois elements.

Economic spin offs

Once the demand for new lethal technology had disappeared those 50 per cent of scientists in the OECD who get their living developing new weaponry could turn their attention to solving the real problems facing the world. They could devote their time to the issues of environmental sustainability, protection of habitat, the prevention of species extinction, fighting disease and ignorance, developing new anti-pollution technology, expanding recycling, creating alternative sustainable energy programs and working out ways to enhance food production. All of these research areas would result in a wealthier/healthier world.

Redefining contribution: not as obligation but as a right to contribute

So confused have conservative social policy analysts become that some like the British ideologue, David Green, have railed against the threat of the emergence of 'dutiless rights' or in John Howard's terms 'mutuality between

rights and obligations'. In 1997 in Auckland, the New Zealand Government became so preoccupied by the bogymen of 'welfare dependency' they hosted a major conference to which they invited right wing ideologues to pronounce upon this perceived threat to civilisation as they know it. The predictable solutions to emerge from this Government conference were: more tightly targeted welfare payments, compulsory 'work for the dole', and increased surveillance of welfare beneficiaries.

The real challenge facing the world is not the emergence of 'dutiless rights' nor the failure of poor people to meet their 'obligations' to the state. The real challenges facing governments are twofold: the state has so far failed to set in place sufficient opportunities for poor people to make a contribution and secondly the equally sanctimonious failure by the state to recognise the contributions that poor people actually make. For example, a person with an intellectual disability who, without support might need to be institutionalised, may make a contribution to the society by undertaking literacy training or by going to cooking classes thereby decreasing the level of support that the person requires to live independently. Facing the challenge of overcoming years of non-literacy or an inability to cook one's own meals is of the same order as that faced by a conceptually bright able bodied student getting a PhD. Yet in my country one is rewarded by increased job security and enhanced reputation whilst the other's contribution is ignored.

In my country the efforts of the managing director of a woodchip company who, through either corruption or by way of government negligence, has a concession to clear fell native forest for an amount less than replacement value, is recognised in the national accounts. Yet the contribution of the young who spend months in the forest protesting the loss of habitat of endangered species like the long tailed potoroo goes unrecognised or worse. These young eco-warriors, if 'recognised', find they are suspended from receiving any social welfare benefits.

The military and contributions

In setting out to eliminate poverty the military will need to utilise the efforts of *all* people in order to ensure they succeed. One tactic to facilitate such cooperation, which community groups have long realised, is the importance of acknowledging each and every members contribution towards the common ends. Unlike political leaders who thrive on dividing the electorate in order to promote and retain privilege, the military will not be able to afford to ignore the people's contribution.

The profound question

Critics of this proposal will point out that, in the past, when the military has been in control repression has increased and inequality has not ended. Why would people living in a liberal democracy willingly let the military attempt to eliminate poverty? The English liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill over a

century ago pointed out that 'while anyone was in chains he could not be free'. Perhaps obesity in the West may be explained by the fact that many eat too much. But this explanation does not explain *why* they consume too much - could it be they feel that 'while anyone is hungry their appetite can not be satiated'?