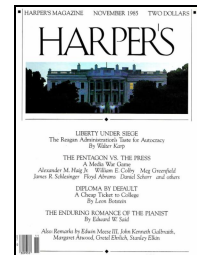


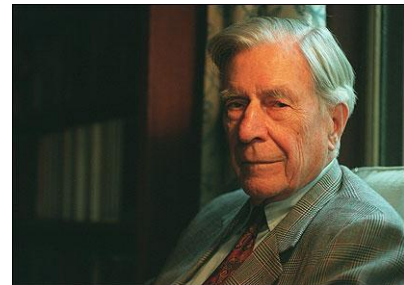
How to Get the Poor off Our Consciences

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I would like to reflect on one of the oldest of human exercises, the process by which over the years, and indeed over the centuries, we have undertaken to get the poor off our conscience. Rich and poor have lived together, always uncomfortably and sometimes perilously, since the beginning of time. Plutarch was led to say : "An imbalance between the rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of republics." And the problems that arise from the continuing co-existence of affluence and poverty — and particularly the process by which good fortune is justified in the presence of the ill fortune of others — have been an intellectual preoccupation for centuries. They continue to be so in our own time.



One begins with the solution proposed in the Bible : the poor suffer in this world but are wonderfully rewarded in the next. The poverty is a temporary misfortune ; if they are poor and also meek they eventually will inherit the earth. This is, in some ways, an admirable solution. It allows the rich to enjoy their wealth while envying the poor their future fortune. [Harry Crews's "Pages from the Life of a Georgia Innocent" discusses the romanticizing of poverty.]

Much, much later, in the twenty or thirty years following the publication in 1776 of *The Wealth of Nations*—the late dawn of the Industrial Revolution in Britain—the problem and its solution began to take on their modern form. Jeremy Bentham, a near contemporary of Adam Smith, came up with the formula that for perhaps fifty years was extraordinarily influential in British and, to some degree, American thought. This was utilitarianism. "By the principle of utility," Bentham said in 1789, "is meant the principal which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question." Virtue is, indeed must be, self-centered. While there were people with great good fortune and many more with great ill fortune, the social problem was solved as long as, again in Bentham's words, there was "the greatest good for the greatest number." Society did its best for the largest possible number of people ; one accepted that the result might be sadly unpleasant for the many whose happiness was not served.

In the 1830's a new formula, influential in no slight degree to this day, became available for getting the poor off the public conscience. This is associated with the names of David Ricardo, a stockbroker, and Thomas Robert Malthus, a divine. The essentials are familiar : the poverty of the poor was the fault of the poor. And it was so because it was a product of their excessive fecundity : their grievously uncontrolled lust caused them to breed up to the full limits of the available subsistence.

This was Malthusianism. Poverty being caused in the bed meant that the rich were not responsible for either its creation or its amelioration. However, Malthus was himself not without a certain feeling of responsibility : he urged that the marriage ceremony contain a warning against undue and irresponsible sexual intercourse — a warning, it is fair to say, that has not been accepted as a fully effective method of birth control.

In more recent times, Ronald Reagan has said that the best form of population control emerges from the market. (Couples in love should repair to R. H. Macy's, not their bedrooms.) Malthus, it must be said, was at least as relevant.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a new form of denial achieved great influence, especially in the United States. The new doctrine, associated with the name of Herbert Spencer, was Social Darwinism. In economic life, as in biological development, the overriding rule was survival of the fittest. That phrase — "survival of the fittest" — came, in fact, not from Charles Darwin but from Spencer, and expressed his view of economic life. The elimination of the poor is nature's way of improving the race. The weak and unfortunate being extruded, the quality of the human family is thus strengthened.

One of the most notable American spokespersons of Social Darwinism was John D. Rockefeller — the first Rockefeller — who said in a famous speech : "The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. And so it is in economic life. It is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God." [Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* was written during the time of Social Darwinism and played a major role in this ideology's demise.]

In the course of the present century, however, Social Darwinism came to be considered a bit too cruel. It declined in popularity, and references to it acquired a condemnatory tone. We passed on to the more amorphous denial of poverty associated with Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. They held that public assistance to the poor interfered with the effective operation of the economic system, that such assistance was inconsistent with the economic design that had come to serve most people very well. The notion that there is something economically damaging about helping the poor remains with us to this day as one of the ways by which we get them off our conscience. [It doesn't follow, however, that government aid to the affluent is morally damaging ; see "The Next New Deal" and "Reining in the Rich".]

With the Roosevelt revolution (as previously with that of Lloyd George in Britain), a specific responsibility was assumed by the government for the least fortunate people in the republic. Roosevelt and the presidents who followed him accepted a substantial measure of responsibility for the old through Social Security, for the unemployed through unemployment insurance, for the unemployable and the handicapped through direct relief, and for the sick through Medicare and Medicaid. This was a truly great change, and for a time, the age-old tendency to avoid thinking about the poor gave way to the feeling that we didn't need to try — that we were, indeed, doing something about them. In recent years, however, it has become clear that the search for a way of getting the poor off our conscience was not at an end ; it was only suspended. And so we are now again engaged in this search in a highly energetic way. It has again become a major philosophical, literary, and rhetorical preoccupation, and an economically not unrewarding enterprise.

Of the four, maybe five, current designs we have to get the poor off our conscience, the first proceeds from the inescapable fact that most of the things that must be done on behalf of the poor must be done in one way or another by the government. It is then argued that the government is inherently incompetent, except as regards weapons design and procurement and the overall management of the Pentagon. Being incompetent and ineffective, it must not be asked to succor the poor ; it will only louse things up or make things worse.

The allegation of government incompetence is associated in our time with the general condemnation of the bureaucrat — again excluding those associated with national defense. The only form of discrimination that is still permissible — that is, still officially encouraged in the United States today — is discrimination against people who work for the federal government, especially on social welfare activities. We have great corporate bureaucracies replete with corporate bureaucrats, but they are good ; only public bureaucracy and government servants are bad. In fact we have in the United States an extraordinarily good public service — one made up of talented and dedicated people who are overwhelmingly honest and only rarely given to overpaying for monkey wrenches, flashlights, coffee makers, and toilet seats. (When these aberrations have occurred they have, oddly enough, all been in the Pentagon.) We have nearly abolished poverty among the old, greatly democratized health care, assured minorities of their civil rights, and vastly enhanced educational opportunity. All this would seem a considerable achievement for incompetent and otherwise ineffective people. We must recognize that the present condemnation of government and government administration is really part of the continuing design for avoiding responsibility for the poor.

The second design in this great centuries-old tradition is to argue that any form of public help to the poor only hurts the poor. It destroys morale. It seduces people away from gainful employment. It breaks up marriages, since women can seek welfare for themselves and their children once they are without husbands. There is no proof of this — none, certainly, that compares that damage with the damage that would be inflicted by the loss of public assistance. [See Robert Greenstein's congressional testimony.] Still, the case is made — and believed — that there is something gravely damaging about aid to the unfortunate. This is perhaps our most highly influential piece of fiction.

The third, and closely related, design for relieving ourselves of responsibility for the poor is the argument that public-assistance measures have an adverse effect on incentive. They transfer income from the diligent to the idle and feckless, thus reducing the effort of the diligent and encouraging the idleness of the idle. The modern manifestation of this is supply-side economics. Supply-side economics holds that the rich in the United States have not been working because they have too little income. So, by taking money from the poor and giving it to the rich, we increase effort and stimulate the economy. Can we really believe that any considerable number of the poor prefer welfare to a good job ? Or that business people — corporate executives, the key figures in our time — are idling away their hours because of the insufficiency of their pay ? This is a scandalous charge against the American businessperson, notably a hard worker. Belief can be the servant of truth—but even more of convenience.

The fourth design for getting the poor off our conscience is to point to the presumed adverse effect on freedom of taking responsibility for them. Freedom consists of the right to spend a maximum of one's money by one's own choice, and to see a minimum taken and spent by the government. (Again, expenditure on national defense is excepted.) In the

enduring words of Professor Milton Friedman, people must be “free to choose.” This is possibly the most transparent of all of the designs ; no mention is ordinarily made of the relation of income to the freedom of the poor. (Professor Friedman is here an exception; through the negative income tax, he would assure everyone a basic income.) There is, we can surely agree, no form of oppression that is quite so great, no construction on thought and effort quite so comprehensive, as that which comes from having no money at all. Though we hear much about the limitation on the freedom of the affluent when their income is reduced through taxes, we hear nothing of the extraordinary enhancement of the freedom of the poor from having some money of their own to spend. Yet the loss of freedom from taxation to the rich is a small thing as compared with the gain in freedom from providing some income to the impoverished. Freedom we rightly cherish. Cherishing it, we should not use it as a cover for denying freedom to those in need.

Finally, when all else fails, we resort to simple psychological denial. This is a psychic tendency that in various manifestations is common to us all. It causes us to avoid thinking about death. It causes a great many people to avoid thought of the arms race and the consequent rush toward a highly probable extinction. By the same process of psychological denial, we decline to think of the poor. Whether they be in Ethiopia, the South Bronx, or even in such an Elysium as Los Angeles, we resolve to keep them off our minds. Think, we are often advised, of something pleasant.

These are the modern designs by which we escape concern for the poor. All, save perhaps the last, are in great inventive descent from Bentham, Malthus, and Spencer. Ronald Reagan and his colleagues are clearly in a notable tradition — at the end of a long history of effort to escape responsibility for one’s fellow beings. So are the philosophers now celebrated in Washington : George Gilder, a greatly favored figure of the recent past, who tells to much applause that the poor must have the cruel spur of their own suffering to ensure effort ; Charles Murray, who, to greater cheers, contemplates “scrapping the entire federal welfare and income-support structure for working and aged persons, including A.F.D.C., Medicaid, food stamps, unemployment insurance, Workers’ Compensation, subsidized housing, disability insurance, and,” he adds, “the rest. Cut the knot, for there is no way to untie it.” By a triage, the worthy would be selected to survive ; the loss of the rest is the penalty we should pay. Murray is the voice of Spencer in our time ; he is enjoying, as indicated, unparalleled popularity in high Washington circles.

Compassion, along with the associated public effort, is the least comfortable, the least convenient, course of behavior and action in our time. But it remains the only one that is compatible with a totally civilized life. Also, it is, in the end, the most truly conservative course. There is no paradox here. Civil discontent and its consequences do not come from contented people—an obvious point to the extent to which we can make contentment as nearly universal as possible, we will preserve and enlarge the social and political tranquility for which conservatives, above all, should yearn.