

Social Science 176: the (fake) PROGRESS and (utter) POVERTY

By Glen Williams

"We're saying to poor people, look the only way you're not going to be poor is to be assimilated into our society: that means you're going to give as well as take. You're going to have to surrender some of your notions about an independent existence . . . You're going to have to get it through your heads that there is something better and more meaningful than that kind of existence."

This statement comes from the lips of J. Tait Davis, director of a first year social science course called Progress and Poverty.

Davis is not a fascist.

He does not believe that the poor are, by nature, slothful and lazy. His solution to poverty is not one of whipping unfortunates in public places or the institution of forced labor camps.

No, he does not belong to that era.

These ideas, popular at an earlier stage of capitalism, have now lost their appeal. Indeed, if they were being taught at York, it would probably lead to serious classroom disruptions.

Davis' underlying assumptions about poverty, projected through what he teaches, are a product of a different, though equally iniquitous age — the age of small "l" liberalism.

Liberalism is the doctrine of the big lie and the fuzzy thinking.

The big lie is that our social system is without

major faults and the fuzzy thinking is what we must do if we are not to see the blatant contractions which confront us daily.

Middle class affluence has spawned this curious rationalization of the very real kinds of oppression and exploitation which manifest themselves within our social system.

The children of the middle class and poor alike are taught this doctrine from their earliest moments in the educational system. Consequently, it is no wonder that we, in the universities, have absolutely no difficulty in avoiding reality, even in the courses which are supposedly structured around "problem" areas.

Consider Social Science 176. The course description in the calendar sounds encouraging.

"A problem-oriented course. Poverty is considered in several different social and economic contexts to establish the different dimensions of the

"The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas."

-- KARL MARX

cultures of poverty, especially in relation to ideas of social progress. Students are encouraged to discuss

programs for alleviating poverty."

"After all, it's not like we don't talk about the problem" York says liberally.

It is certainly true that we talk. However, from the first the examination has had a determined direction.

The 'problem', it seems, is with the poor. Middle class behaviour is not on trial or the course would be called Affluence and Progress.

In other words, our way of life will be seen as the standard by which 'progress' will be measured.

The status quo will not only be left unchallenged, it will be sanctified.

"A society can't be all that sick," Davis says, "if the majority have a pretty good standard of living."

Here begins the most important liberal rationalization. It's 'what-you-have', not 'how-you-get-it' which will be the criterion for making moral judgments about our society.

We, the Canadian rich, are telling the Canadian poor, that things must be all right because we're happy.

We have seen already that the poor must find a "better and more meaningful kind of existence" — in materialism, consumption, and planned obsolescence, I presume.

Good grief!

It naturally follows that "the culture of minority groups such as Indians is incompatible with a high standard of living. That requires that they make some compromises or some trade-offs."

This is a fine theory for a middle class white, very ego-building, but maybe the 'poor' Indian sees it in a different perspective. (See interview with Wilf Pelletier, this page.)

Now that we scholars have our framework straight, and know that the problem lies not in us but in 'them' we can begin to deal with it in a rationalizing manner.

In the splendid isolation of the classroom, without ever having to confront our values, we can force the poor to strip in a kind of macabre burlesque.

What we shall pass off as detachment will really be obscenity of the lowest order. "Step right this way. A peep show for one and all. See them freeze, starve. Watch them get screwed, exploited. Chills, thrills. No need to get emotionally involved."

Indeed, following the main stream of the social sciences, Davis is most outspoken about not getting emotionally involved.

In one of the first lectures of the school year, he warned his class not to go downtown and interact with the poor because of the danger of "emotional involvement."

He explains this by saying. "The one thing I've learned in working with people with problems is that it isn't a zoo. If you could persuade me that I was going to accomplish anything meaningful by dumping 250 students in Cabbagetown to walk up and down the streets, knock on doors and interview people, then I'd be willing to go along with it."

An Indian view of poverty

The following is an abridged transcript of an interview with Wilf Pelletier, director of the Centre of Indian Studies at Rochdale College.

EXCALIBUR: How do Indian people look at poverty?

PELLETIER: Our people look at poverty in a totally different perspective from your people.

They say that poverty is the person that refuses to assist another person.

If you were to turn someone out of your home and not feed him, or reject him in any way, you would be poverty-stricken.

The person who rejects is the poverty-stricken one.

That's why the Indian refuses to move out into your society, where there is nothing but rejection, where the whole thing is people against people.

He says that you have a 'poor' society.

Now, its got nothing to do with money, its only got to do with people, because the world is only about people. The Indian's whole

way of life is based and centred in humanity.

The only people who see poverty in term of money or materialism are the middle class, who have the need to maintain themselves in some sort of societal structure.

As long as there is affluence, poverty has to be, because there cannot be affluence without some sort of poverty.

These things are relative. For example, the Eatons could be considered poor in a social structure based on more money.

So, if you make people only one class, that's the only way you are going to eliminate poverty.

We're not really talking about poverty, we're talking about class structure and values.

EXCALIBUR: What do you think of someone who would say that the Indians, if they want to progress, are going to have to learn that there is 'a better and more meaningful way of life.'

PELLETIER: That's what I call poverty.

We already know a meaningful

way of life and we've had it for a long time. . . .

'Progress,' by white standards, is not progress to us.

We look out here and take a look at that the whites are doing and all we see is destruction.

Anything that takes away from humanity can never be progress to our people. To your people it might be different, because you have different values.

'Progress' might be the suppression of man in your society. I don't know but I seem to think it is because that's what you do.

You go all around the world creating destructive elements.

We look out at white people from our communities and say you're going backwards.

Our best bet is to hold where we are, because that's what you're reaching for anyway.

We believe we're right too, and as we wait we find that more and more of your people are heading in our direction with more emphasis going toward humanity and people.