

IS PERMITTING POVERTY A CRIME?
 A SIN?
 A TRAGEDY?
 NONE OF THE ABOVE?

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
 Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

There they go again, trying to make me feel more guilty than I do and probably than I am. The media. The headlines and the soundbites are screaming-whispering-pontificating that poverty is a crime, homelessness is a crime, "hunger in the richest country in the world" is a crime. And we shouldn't permit it. Permit it. **Permit**: That's the word that bugged me into doing this Thinksheet. Not that I think nothing should be done about poverty, homelessness, hunger, and all the other forms of human wretchedness and misery. Not that I'm against using motivational words toward doing something, getting something done. Not that I'm using my rhetorical skill to deflect appropriate incentives aimed at me--me an American, me a Christian, me a human being. But....

1. The antonyms of "permit" are (WID2) "forbid, prohibit," (RHD2) "refuse." In what sense or senses can you--let's get off "I"--be said to be in a position to **forbid** poverty? to **prohibit** it? to **refuse** to permit it? The authorities issue permits: are you in office, with the power of office, the power to permit or forbid-prohibit-refuse? And if you have authority, power, by virtue of office, is it such as can rule on the non/existence of poverty? If, on the other hand, your power is that of private or corporate wealth, and you have the will to eliminate poverty, is the power of the wealth you control enough to do the job? Or could you get the job done by initiating a public coalition, a private coalition, or a combination of the two? Or by starting a movement that would suck both private and public resources into itself?....What I'm trying to surface by this line of questioning is the **promethean arrogance** of the verb/object "permit poverty." This mentality assumes (1) that we have the monetary, human, procedural, and structural resources to forbid-prohibit-refuse poverty; (2) that since we can, it's a crime not to; and (3) that the poor are an inert mass to be acted upon by us the nonpoor--an ironic mix of compassion and insensitivity.

2. I'm half sympathetic with those who say "Let's cut the talk and do something about poverty, homelessness, hunger!" I need the other half of my sympathy for the hard thinking that doesn't get done if we, without taking sufficient thought, throw our hours and dollars at "poverty." Here I've put "povety" in quotes: what is it? What's the **anatomy of poverty**? its **physiology**? its **etiology**? In the soil of any situation-definition are the seeds of its solution--seeds planted, usually unconsciously, by the definer: the definition is not wholly objective, need not be, often should not be. A critical consciousness will ask both (1) whether adequate consideration has been given to situation-definition and (2) whether the subjective elements in the definition bode to aid or impede progress toward solution. I expect these tests to be applied to this Thinksheet. So on to....

3. **Etiology**. Social philosophers conveniently, ie for their convenience, treat "the poor" as a lumpen proletariat of have-nots forming a layer under the haves--a lower level somehow caused by the higher level, an underclass caused by the upperclass (for this analysis, the middleclass existing only as transitional in both directions). Marxian class-analysis treats "the classes" as societal lumps: the bourgeoisie or uppers not only "permit poverty," they **cause** it; and as they were free not to cause it, they are now free not to permit it. All this is a refinement and ideologization of a Biblical theme, eg of Amos and Jesus--but also a reductionism, for the Bible adds to the social category "crime" the theological category "sin" and the metaphysical category "tragedy." To whatever extent we are not in position to forbid-prohibit-refuse poverty, however, and therefore not in position to permit it, to that extent "permitting poverty" is "none of the above": not crime, not sin, not tragedy. Some, eg Fabian Socialists, deny there's any extent to which we're not in position to forbid/permit poverty: they define "poverty" so as to effectuate this denial. (The very sentence, "Permitting poverty is a crime," is from Fabian Socialist Geo. Bernard Shaw.) So much for **collective etiology**.

over

Individual etiology investigates how the poor not as a lump, a collective, but as individuals got into the fix they're in? Why? In hope that knowing how a person got in the fix will provides some clues for getting out, clues for individual and/or societal action. Reality, realistic action, rejects the doctrinaire "nonjudgmental" attitude: blame-location is a necessary piece of the analysis puzzle. We should "blame the victim" when the victim is a self-victim, blame others when the blame is theirs, blame "society" when the blame is ours together: to be addressed, a fault must be both identified and located.

Take homelessness, eg. (I take homelessness here to show the etiological spread of the poor, because of being recently in a meeting with the exec of the Cape Cod Housing Assistance Corporation, which has a splendid record of weighing all the factors.) What's the degree of individual blame in the various types of homelessness? It ranges from zero to total, the latter in the case of a man who murders his family and then burns the house down in the hope of destroying the evidence. But blame-assessing has to be case by case, the motive being (1) to "get to the bottom," to bottom-line in **reality**, as the basis for (2) designing and encouragement movement to **new reality** (as repentance is confession of sin, the betrayal of relation with God, + return to relation with God: a double movement vis-a-vis the divine-human reality). The efforts of a secular society to evade the moral dimension are pathetic and doomed; much "social work" is a sentimental, amoral scratching of the surface of human woe.

People may be homeless (1) **accidentally**, by tornado, flood, or fire not due to their negligence; (2) **circumstantially**, by birth or war or captivity (slavery, kidnapping, hostage-taking) or gentrification; (3) **unfortunately**, by having taken a legitimate risk, and lost (eg, taking out a second mortgage to start the third child in college, just before being fired in a general recession-layoff); or (4) **culpably**, eg because an addiction eats up the money needed for the rent or mortgage payment (no addiction being beyond the reach of will and therefore of moral responsibility). Even the slightest experience in working with the poor on housing would convince you that there are these four well-defined categories of them, each to be dealt with differently, in addition to each person's being dealt with individually. It was profligate madness to throw them all together willy-nilly in "the projects," public housing. The 25 Oct 88 WSJ editorial, "Free the Inner City," celebrates the "liberation" of the Kenilworth-Parkside (Washington, DC) public housing project, the residents signing a contract with the city to buy their apartments, own their own homes. The 1987 Federal housing law permitted this (as the British have for almost a decade), an advance in capitalism and compassion, a deliverance from the "wards-of-the-state mentality" that didn't give a damn about property that was "not ours." (The editorial concludes: "George Bush has endorsed the sale of public housing, while Michael Dukakis hasn't.")

4. While we--as individuals, families, churches, communities, states, nation, world--cannot preclude all poverty, we can **intervene** to prevent some causes of poverty. Eg, we have anti-fraud laws--against ripoff artists, scams, insider trading. Of Cape Cod's homeless families, 90% are women with children: what earlier interventions might have relieved these tragedies? I have worked with some youth whose synapses are so drug-blown that they've little prospect of ever again thinking clearly: what earlier interventions might have prevented this misery and waste? There are situations in which I do believe that "permitting poverty," in the sense of permitting socially preventable behavior leading to poverty, "is a crime," and a sin, and tragic.

5. We come finally to the question of the **trade-off** between individual freedom and societal health. I'll put it starkly and not entirely fairly: Conservatives are against individual freedom (which they preach) and liberals are against societal health (which they preach). Instance: For both societal and environmental health, birthing must come to be viewed and treated not as a right but as a privilege. Accordingly, pregnancy must come to be viewed not as a right but as a privilege. It is immoral to hold "society" responsible for a flood of babies over whose existence society has had no control, yet that immorality is widely preached in our country today.