

INTRODUCTION

Plight, Fight, and Insight of the Poor: The Need for a Pedagogy to End Poverty

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Education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential. Social action without education is a weak expression of pure energy. Deeds uninformed by educated thought can take false directions. When we go into action and confront our adversaries, we must be as armed with knowledge as they. Our policies should have the strength of deep analysis beneath them to be able to challenge the clever sophistries of our opponents.

—Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here?* 1967

Our *Pedagogy of the Poor* is based on the assessment that an unprecedented polarity between wealth and poverty is the defining issue of our times. This argument is being strengthened by the current crisis, which has hastened the impoverishment of the working and so-called middle class. We are witnessing worldwide the worst human indignity and injustice of poverty in the midst of plenty, abandonment alongside an unheard-of abundance. The devastating economic and cultural consequences and all the continuing social ills of racial, gender, and other group inequities, which have been aggravated by this crisis, are far from over. Bankruptcies, unemployment rates, and foreclosures are rising at enormous rates. More and more families default on mortgages, student loans, auto loans, and credit card debt. The consequences have been a mounting toll of preventable deaths and unnecessary pains and miseries. These are among the many manifestations of a society whose economy is torn by deepening economic inequality. A major contributing factor to

this inequality today is computerized, high-tech globalization, which has created a collision between an unprecedented production capacity and a declining world purchasing capacity.

For millions of people the real crisis of stagnating wages, contingent labor, and unemployment began long before the financial meltdown started and will last long after the crisis is “officially” declared over. From the mid-1970s onward, we have been facing a devastating and rapidly increasing polarization of wealth and poverty. Whereas the richest 10% of the U.S. population owned about 30% of the national income in the time span between 1953 and 1973, their share soared to 44% in 2000 and to 49.7% in 2007, higher than in any other year since 1917. At the same time the traditional correlation between the increase of productivity and the increase of wages, which was the economic bedrock of the “American Dream,” was broken: While the productivity level kept rising continuously from the 1980s onward, real wages fell or stagnated. People started to borrow what they could no longer earn and plunged into debt. With the dismantling of the welfare state, the transition from unemployment or underemployment to dire poverty can happen even more quickly. Foreclosure and homelessness are often just one illness away.

The structures and power relations of high-tech capitalism that accelerated the spread of the precarious conditions and engendered the economic crisis have been successfully banned from the official discourse. Even relatively modest demands for federal work programs to alleviate unemployment or wage and unemployment benefit increases to strengthen the domestic demand are kept off the table. Although poverty is spreading throughout the country, rarely are the realities of poverty analyzed in a way that speaks to systemic causes. The stories and struggles of the poor are reduced to statistics and stereotypes. They are seldom portrayed as agents of change capable of fighting for themselves, thinking for themselves, speaking for themselves, and providing overall direction to a broader social movement. While poor communities are presently growing and becoming more disenfranchised, enlisting more members from the downsizing middle-income strata, their struggles for survival are too fragmented and weak to exert broader influence. They are still lacking critical analyses, coherent strategies, and a competent core of leaders developed particularly from the ranks of poor to organize the latter into a united social force, a powerful voice that has to be heard.

In the midst of a reality of increased polarization, poverty, and disenfranchisement it is difficult to find opportunities for the intellectual study, dialogue, and reflection that provide the fodder for creative strategizing. Every attempt to open up such a space is severely hampered by, among other

things, a deep disconnect between the struggles of the poor and research and debates in academia. Although the community organizing field has provided sophisticated methods for putting poor people into motion (e.g., the Alinsky model), the institutions that drive this methodology usually do little to develop knowledge of structural inequities and are often confined to ad hoc mobilizing for “realistic” goals—this is in part caused by the tremendous influence of American pragmatism, which tends to separate practice from theory and thereby leads to eclecticism and narrow categorical thinking. While progressive scholars have provided multiple opportunities for the study of critical theories and society in academia, this work is usually cut off from social justice movements and therefore lacks grounding and relevance. The emerging practical struggles in communities and the theoretical work on the campuses represent two indispensable sources of knowledge and scholarship. However, their lack of combination and coordination weakens all parts. The poor are limited to simply managing their poverty, while the academics are limited to simply rationalizing poverty. Both the organized poor, working without access to critical analysis, and intellectual communities, functioning without grounding in the realities of poverty, are stalled in their ability to develop a vision for how things could be different.

The complexity, scale, and scope of the problems of poverty today demand a comprehensive pedagogical approach. This is especially true for the poor and powerless, as they have nothing but their numbers and are only reckoned with when organized and led by knowledge. *Pedagogy of the Poor* derives much of its approaches from the recent experiences and history of community struggles and academic debates. It draws on different kinds of knowledge and seeks to combine them in an interdisciplinary approach to education.

Our book cannot be traced back to a single origin. There were different events, encounters, and experiences that seemed coincidental at first and then, at a certain stage, materialized in the idea that we needed the condensed form of writing to convey the experiences of our co-teaching.

There was, however, an early encounter that in hindsight proves to be formative. In October 1999, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) led many other organizations of the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) in a monthlong March of the Americas from Washington, DC, to the United Nations in New York City, where it delivered its protest against poverty as a human rights violation. When the march

arrived in New York, hundreds of participants came to Union Theological Seminary and held a series of seminars on the campus about the spreading of poverty in the Americas and about how to organize a mass movement against poverty led by the poor. This was a crucial pedagogical experience for many students and faculty at the seminary: To their astonishment, they did not see poor victims to be pitied, but self-confident people with agency and creativity, and instead of being lectured to on the plight of poverty, they were listening and learning from what this organized grouping of poor people had to say, not only about the immediate experiences of survival, but also about the structural causes of poverty and the strategies to build up antipoverty movements. Academics got a sophisticated lesson in social theory and praxis.

Among the March of the Americas leaders who organized the seminars on campus was Willie Baptist, who at that time was the education director of the KWRU and co-coordinator of the University of the Poor, the educational arm of PPEHRC. Among the listeners was Jan Rehmann, who had just moved from Germany to the United States to teach philosophy and social theories at the seminary. A few years later, the student-based Poverty Initiative was founded, “dedicated to raising up generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor,” as it declared in its mission statement. With the support of the then seminary president Joseph Hough, Willie became a scholar-in-residence at Union Theological Seminary, and the group grew into an educational center focused on poverty and social justice movements against poverty. It staged National Poverty Truth Commissions and organized regular poverty immersion trips for students to impoverished areas (e.g., the Gulf Coast, Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, New York). It established a Poverty Scholars Program that brings together community organizers from New York City and nationwide who are organizing in their communities around such issues as water privatization, ecological devastation, eviction and foreclosures, housing, health care, food, education, living wages, and workers rights. And it reached out to faculty members that were interested in including poverty and the experiences of poor people into their teaching programs.

It was in the midst of these multiple activities that the pedagogical collaboration between Willie and Jan took off. At the time, Jan had just offered a class on the philosophical foundations of social justice struggles so that students had the opportunity to integrate their interest in antipoverty movements in their academic program. Encouraged by this experience, Willie and Jan developed an interdisciplinary approach that brings lessons from anti-poverty grassroots activism, particularly from the experiences of the poor organizing the poor, together with social theories and ethical reflection. It

soon turned out that the classes they offered met a substantial need that was not yet covered in the seminary's curriculum. As a condensed result of this co-teaching, the book is meant to be useful for both grassroots organizers who feel the need to combine their practical work with a thorough analysis of society and educators who are looking for resources on struggles for economic and social justice to incorporate in their curriculum.

Today's poverty is not an "underclass" phenomenon in which the pain and suffering of the poor is self-inflicted. It is a product of high-tech capitalism and its organization of labor. Technological innovations are not implemented in a way that they alleviate the work and shorten the labor time of all, but in a way that renders more and more people "superfluous" while extending the labor time of those who are still employed. The working class is split into those who are overwhelmed and exhausted by increasing work hours and those who are pushed out of sustainable jobs. Since poverty is produced by this systemic irrationality, it is not another "identity issue" but rather defines where our society is headed. It is the issue where the manifold injustices and oppressions in society in regard to class, gender, and race culminate and condense. This position gives the poor the least stake in the status quo. If consciousness of their social position could be created, a united and organized poor could have mass influence and impact. When Martin Luther King Jr., transformed the traditional civil rights movement into the Poor People's Campaign, working across color lines, he stated in his December 1967 Massey Lectures before the Canadian Broadcast Corporation:

The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but must organize a revolution against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. . . . There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life. (*The Trumpet of Conscience*, 1967, p. 650–651)

In many ways, Martin Luther King anticipated what we are trying to accomplish today when we propose a new approach to education, teaching, and learning. Our book tries to develop analytical tools forged from the perspectives of the poor and in the perspective of building a "new and unset-

ting force.” Since the poor have little or no stake in the status quo, they have every incentive to understand the complex causes and mechanisms of misery and impoverishment without blinders, prejudices, and apologies. Since the movement of the poor is not just another “identity movement,” it cannot be reduced to simply poor people leading poor people. Such a simplistic notion can easily be incorporated into a neoliberal system of governance that grants social groups and movements their “autonomy” while dismantling the welfare state, denying their economic human rights, and destroying their means of life. The aim is instead to build up a social movement that includes broad segments of society (including from the threatened “middle classes”) and develops effective strategies to change the power structures that engender poverty. But the segment of the population most affected by the social problem that has the least or nothing to lose in its social solution must be brought with its basic needs and demands into the forefront of the struggle. Studies of social movements in the United States and in other parts of the world show the importance and indispensability of developing and uniting individual leaders to educate and organize such movements.

In the course of history, while small forces have overtaken larger ones, a dumb force has never overtaken a smart force. That is why the American slaveholders made teaching a slave to read an act subject to corporal punishment and even execution. Still today, there are many efforts to keep the mass of the people ignorant of the workings of the poverty-producing system and of what to do to change it. According to a widespread understanding of pedagogy, the oppressed and marginalized get a dumbed-down version of “popular education,” while the intellectuals connected to those in power get rigorous academic study. Our *Pedagogy of the Poor* intends to question and to overcome this social division of education and knowledge. It is not just a book *for* the poor or about educating poor people. It is a pedagogy for all who are concerned about finding the appropriate solution to the defining issue of our times. It speaks to a broad range of people committed to the elimination of poverty, including practical organizers, university, college and seminary educators and students, high school teachers, religious leaders, denominational and ecumenical networks, social workers, and policymakers. This pedagogy questions the long-standing notion that the poor and poverty are to be viewed as categories unto themselves or separated entities. It poses the argument that the socioeconomic position of the poor is not one to be pitied or guilt-tripped about. Instead it argues that the predicament of the poor is indicative of a breakdown of the whole of society today.

To overcome the separation of grassroots movements and critical social theories is certainly no easy task. It requires a careful balance that avoids both theoretical hyperabstraction and simplistic explanations. A pedagogy of the poor has to deal with the contradiction famously expressed by Antonio Gramsci that *all* people are intellectuals, but not all “have in society the function of intellectuals.” All people use their intelligence and wisdom to make sense of their lives and life conditions, individual and social, but most do not have the time and means to study systematically. This does not mean that we have on the one pole the “theory” waiting to be “applied” and on the other pole the immediate grassroots “experience” waiting to be “enlightened” by theoretical truth. Such a separation is as misleading as its pedagogical consequence is patronizing and ineffective. In reality, there is much theoretical reflection to be found in experiences of struggle and movement building, and every sound theory that relates to social realities needs to contain a lot of condensed life experience as well. The false dichotomy between “theory” and “praxis” is to be replaced by the concrete pedagogical task to combine different kinds and layers of knowledge and reflection that are currently separated and polarized in our prevailing education system.

Pedagogy of the Poor tackles this task by what might be described as a “hybrid text,” that is, a combination of different idioms and discourses that permits one to look at the same subject matter from multiple perspectives. The book is framed and held together by an interview with Willie Baptist about his life in poverty and the lessons he draws from his participation in social justice movements against poverty. The interview is divided up into six parts and interrupted by other chapters so that it can be read as a serial. Readers will notice from the outset that this not just an expression of “immediate” experience (which is a myth in itself rather than lived reality), but rather a narrative interwoven with social analysis and theoretical reflection. For example, they will learn about the economic causes of the Great Migration from the South to the North and West and about the dynamics and ambivalent consequences of the Watts uprisings; they will get to know a differentiated account of the appeal and the shortcomings of black nationalism and the Black Panther movement; they will participate in an evaluation of the paradigm and strategy shift from the civil rights movement to Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign; they will become acquainted with Willie’s analysis of the rise and demise of the National Union of the Homeless, and get an introduction into the debates on how to build up a broad movement to end poverty led by the poor as a social force united and organized across color lines. Willie argues that while the strategic task of uniting the poor across color lines could not be accomplished in history, this is becoming more of a possibility as well as an absolute necessity in today’s conditions. The critical lesson underscored by both the defeat of Dr. King’s

1967–1968 Poor People’s Campaign and the demise of the National Union of the Homeless organizing drive during the late 1980s and early 1990s is that, especially in the initial stages, in the development of a social movement all energies and resources must be concentrated on the systematic education and training of an expanding core of committed and competent leaders in close connection with the practical struggles of the poor.

Complementing Willie’s interview, Jan contributes four essays that were developed out of some of his lectures in class. These lectures were buttressed by multiple readings, which the students prepared at home. They were designed to introduce the social analysis of poverty and the conditions of movement building and often served as a starting point for a textual analysis in class. Chapter 2 gives an overview of four different perspectives on poverty, namely, traditional conservatism, liberal “modernization” concepts, neoliberal and neoconservative approaches, and liberationist perspectives that connect the struggle against poverty with an alternative project of society. Since religion plays a crucial role for the perception and interpretation of poverty, the different perspectives are described in such a way that they cut across politics and Christian denominations. Jan’s introduction is further connected to contemporary debates about poverty by an in-class presentation by the doctoral student Colleen Wessel-McCoy on Jeffrey Sachs’s book *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities of Our Time* (London: Allen Lane, 2005). It shows an approach that tries to move from a neoliberal position to a neo-Keynesian one while remaining within the framework of global capital. Chapter 4, “Root Causes of Poverty,” breaks down the complex mechanisms by which today’s poverty is produced. After describing the ideology of a neoliberal “market totalitarianism” that became predominant in the late 1970s, the essay shows the devastating consequences of neoliberalism’s social and economic policies. It also unveils the underlying development of a high-tech capitalism that transformed large sections of the traditional working class into contingent laborers (precariat) and the structurally unemployed. The current global crisis that is drawing more and more people into poverty, misery, and exclusion raises questions of the legitimacy of a system that reveals itself less and less capable of securing the “pursuit of happiness” for the world’s citizens.

Chapter 8 provides an introduction to the theory of the Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), which we think is of crucial importance for building a social movement to end poverty. By focusing on the hegemonic (or ethico-political) aspects of struggles, he outlined the conditions necessary for a new class to actually become a “class for itself.” His analysis of the production of consensus in “civil society” helps to avoid the two typical pitfalls of social movements, namely, to be either co-opted into the existing framework or marginalized. His theory of “organic intellectu-

als” is directed against any academic elitism and highlights the task of anti-poverty movements to educate its own competent intellectuals and leaders. Given the relevance of Gramsci’s approach for social justice movements, we decided to complement Jan’s contribution with a conversation between Willie and John Wessel-McCoy (who wrote a master’s thesis on the relationship between Gramsci and Saint Paul) that brings Gramsci’s theory in dialogue with Martin Luther King’s Poor People Campaign and connects it with the uprisings and struggles in which Willie was involved.

Chapter 10 discusses the relationship between ideology theory and anti-poverty movements, two areas that at first sight seem far apart from each other. But the topic of ideology theories—the study of how and why masses of people subject themselves actively and voluntarily to systems that exploit and oppress them—is certainly of importance for any social justice movement that organizes to change society. The chapter takes up a specific theory developed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918–1990), whose key concepts “ideological interpellation” and “subject construction” became influential in the humanities (including in postmodernism and gender studies), and confronts it with a concrete example of poor people’s resistance in community struggles. The pedagogic goal is to learn how to critically investigate the merits and shortcomings of a sophisticated social theory from the perspectives and the experiences of struggle of the poor.

Numerous subjects analyzed and discussed in our classes could not be presented in this book. On several occasions, for example, we invited scholars and community organizers as guest speakers and experts, to describe the basic manifestations of the current economic crisis, to learn from the struggles of the United Workers in Baltimore or the strategies of the Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia, to study the campaign Let Justice Roll or to share the experiences of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico and of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil. One of our regular guest speakers, Chris Caruso, doctoral student at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), presented a case study on the community struggles in postindustrial Detroit that revolved in particular around water privatization and its devastating consequences. We are glad to publish an enlarged version of this presentation in Chapter 6.

Our pedagogy implies a strong component of student participation. Each week, class is prepared by a working group consisting of two to three students who share with us the responsibility for the next meeting and kick-start the discussions on the readings. We have selected two class discussions

that we believe are indicative of the culture of debate that developed in the course of our teaching and co-operative learning, one on resistance and unintended consequences (in Chapter 3), the other on the question of whether Althusser's ideology theory is useful for an understanding of poor people's agency (Chapter 10).

Our *Pedagogy of the Poor* is determined not just by what is happening in the class room or by whether we apply this or that sophisticated didactics. It is also important that our classes are embedded in and interact with the larger pedagogical framework of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary. Many of our students participate in the immersion trips or in other activities of the Poverty Initiative, which contributes to the consistency, motivation, and knowledge of the group. We therefore conclude our book with a chapter by Willie Baptist and Liz Theoharis that summarizes the pedagogical principles and lessons of the Poverty Initiative model. By laying out different teaching methods, forms, and activities, we hope to contribute to the emergence of many more educational projects that connect theoretical reflection, social analysis, and movement building to end poverty.