Systems Analysis

and the

Roots of Poverty

By
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The Carnegie study of poverty in South Africa was brilliantly written up by Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele under the title 'Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge'. In response this paper examines the distribution of wealth as the symptomatic topology of underlying system dynamics. Any attempt to redistribute wealth without engaging in the causal psychodynamic system which produces the symptom is at best impotent and usually counter-productive. Attention and intervention in the long term must be focused not only on the relief of poverty but on the systemic dynamics which split the accumulation of wealth so unjustly between rich and poor.

SYSTEMS ANALYSIS AND THE ROOTS OF POVERTY

SOME COMMENTS IN RESPONSE T0:
UPROOTING POVERTY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN CHALLENGE
BY FRANCIS WILSON & MAMPHELA RAMPHELE

The distribution of wealth and the attitudes towards it within society are presenting symptoms which constitute a syndrome. They are the surface topology, determined by underlying dynamics and driven by forces whose roots are deeply hidden in the depths of the political and psychological unconscious. So the writers indicate:

> ... that poverty in many societies is itself symptomatic of a deeper malaise. For it is often the consequence of a process which simultaneously produces wealth for some whilst impoverishing others. [p.4]

Here the symptomatisation is recognised. The underlying system behaviour is indicated. The causal dynamics lie in an attitude to wealth that is fundamentally bifurcatory. It is paranoid and competitive, rather than resourceful and collaborative. It is polarised between self and society, between in-group and out-group. It is characterised by concern for the aggrandisement of wealth of the self and of the in-group, at the expense of the impoverishment of the environment, society, the out-group and the other. In other words it is a philosophy of subsystem optimisation at the expense of the system as a whole. Any attempt to uproot poverty therefore requires fundamental shifts in this bifurcatory dynamic.

The splitting is held in place by superior power and technological advantage which are, of course, politically and historically conditioned. As a result while the conditions of poverty are the most obvious and distressing symptoms of this system, excessive wealth accumulation is an equal and opposite evil, though apparently more socially acceptable. It is unlikely that any significant shifts in the symptoms of poverty can take place without systemic transformation in the global value system as it relates to the accumulation and protection of wealth, power and privilege. To keep that system intact, while attempting to ameliorate its effects is not only morally obscene it is also dysfunctionally impotent.

Change in the value system requires intervention in the value generator level of social psychodynamics and it is to this level of analysis and intervention that our attention must now be given.

There is always a tendency to reformulate one problem by stating another. Thus the bifurcation of riches and poverty is the presenting symptom, the cure for which is apparently to do with:

> .. a fundamental redistribution of power. [p.5]

But the distribution of power is itself a congruent and concomitant topology, a parallel surface. Given the universal paranoid resource struggle then the distribution of power determines the distribution of wealth. Conversely the distribution of wealth reinforces the distribution of power. Both are para-symptomatic of the underlying system dynamic rather than causally dependent on each other. Here, then, similar comments to those used about the redistribution of wealth apply also to the redistribution of power. The psychodynamics of the system as a whole, generated by and under-girded by the value system of that society determine the attitudes to power and the bifurcation between the powerful and the powerless. It is the fundamental psychodynamics of the system as a whole to which attention must be given. While that underlying force-field is in place any readjustment of topology, be it of power or wealth, can only be a temporary redistribution. The underlying bifurcatory patterns will inevitably re-emerge, strengthened by the resources poured in during the phase of redistribution.

What is required is a profound modification of the processes which generate the pattern of distribution of power and wealth. The focus needs to shift from the presenting symptomatology of poverty and impotence to the paranoid sickness of hyper-capitalist wealth accretion and the concomitant attempt to gain impregnable omnipotence. When we are able to understand and transform those drives in society then the system can anneal. Until then the impotence/poverty trap is an inevitable consequence of the inherent victimisation embedded in the system process.

The understanding of social change in terms of organic evolutionary process is critical in any long term solution. The conversion reactions, discontinuities and dislocation of revolution tend to redistribute the pain while leaving the bifurcation itself unaffected as the underlying process. It is simply that power shifts from the omnipotent to the impotent.

There is a kind of fractal, or holographic phenomenon in the distribution of wealth. The symptoms of bifurcation and inequity are replicated in congruent patterns whatever the scale chosen. So for instance, an examination of the richest 10 per cent will show an inequitable distribution between the ultra-rich, say the top 10 per cent of this sample, compared to the lower 30 per cent or 40 per cent of the sector. Similarly a study of a comparatively impoverished area like that of the rural households in Swaziland indicated that even here:

> both poverty and inequality are acute. In terms of wealth (measured by a system of points, which takes into consideration livestock-holding, vehicles owned, and a selection of other household assets as well as cash income) the poorest 10 per cent of households received only 1 per cent of the wealth points whilst the richest 10 per cent received 33 per cent. In terms of cash income alone the chasm was even greater: the poorest 10 per cent of households had no cash income at all, and the bottom 20 per cent only 0.4 per cent of all cash income, whilst the top 10 per cent received nearly half (47 per cent) and the top 20 per cent received two-thirds (65 per cent) of the cash [p.76a].

The processes of bifurcation and the development of inequity are systemic, and emerge at each point within the system at whatever scale the measurement is taken. The indications are therefore that we are dealing with systemic dynamics which have universal impact, rather than an injustice between the rich and the poor taken on the macro scale. There are similar injustices of scale at the top end and at the bottom end of the spectrum. The redistribution of wealth/power requires a reformation of the underlying force-field, which drives the bifurcation process within the system as a whole. Without that systemic intervention simple

redistribution tends to exacerbate inequity at new points within the system rather than resolving the basic inequity of system behaviour.

Reversal of the dynamics of polarisation within social systems is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for the uprooting of poverty.

The symbol structure utilised by Wilson and Ramphele treats poverty as the symptomatic superstructure, the plant form showing above ground, whose very life and existence draws its sustenance from the hidden infrastructure, the complex interlocking fibrous web of roots within the social, historic, political and economic fabric of South African society. Any attempt to deal with the presenting symptoms without tackling the underlying root structure is, of course, counterproductive, pruning only increases the fruitfulness of the tree. So they affirm:

> It is important to uncover the roots of a system which continues, despite rapid economic growth during a hundred years of industrial revolution, to impoverish millions of people. For the present has grown out of the past, and so if the future is to be different it is essential to understand the way in which the present has been formed, in order that we may act to overcome the past and, hence, reshape the future. [p.190]

There does appear to be some confusion and ambivalence here. The authors speak of 'a system which continues ... to impoverish millions of people'. In that case the system itself is the tree form, but the product is not simply impoverishment. The product is the splitting in the distribution of wealth which drains riches from the many and adds them to the few. It impoverishes the impotent and enriches the powerful. That is the system. On the other hand the authors consistently speak about uprooting 'poverty' rather than uprooting the system which generates such intense differentiation in the distribution of wealth. One is left wondering whether it is possible for any report such as this to engage in a full systemic analysis, which would itself be so threatening to those powerful and wealthy elements of the system, which whether out of benevolence or guilt have sanctioned and resourced the research enquiry into the roots of poverty in the first place. The issue of collusion cannot be ignored.

Further examination of the symbol structure employed reveals a quite significant paradox. In so far as a system of roots is an appropriate image it is so for the generation of wealth rather than the generation of poverty. Those institutional centres of wealth and power whose structures reach head and shoulders above the rest have their roots in the resource-rich foundations of the economy, utilising that network of radical probing, searching, sucking and extraction, which precisely characterises the function of a set of roots in order to take resources out of one area, refine and purify them and accumulate them in another. In that sense poverty is the waste product of the system of wealth aggregation. The impoverishment of the populus is a parallel concomitant of the impoverishment of the environment. In this sense the malignant organism which is generating poverty as a by-product, and which therefore has to be uprooted, is in fact the system of wealth accumulation. The symptoms of poverty are just what is left over when that system of extraction has carried out its task.

South Africa is not, of course, a unique example of that system in operation. it is virtually universal and has its origins way back in the value system of Western Christendom. It is based upon the tacit agreement that might is right under all circumstances in the economic field, that all wealth is mine to expropriate provided I have the power so to do. The in-group

is in the right, the out-group represents a dehumanised resource to be exploited if at all possible. In any culture where the differing interest groups are roughly balanced in power the resulting resource-struggle may not lead to intense impoverishment of one group by another. Where, however, culturally, historically, politically or technologically, one group is disadvantaged in relationship to another, this value system leads inevitably to the denuding of resources from the out-group and their accretion to the powerful in-group.

The process of colon-isation is familiar. In organic terms the colon is inserted into some indigenous culture, which is passed through the tube, all goodness is digested out of it, and passed back into the originating system. The detritus is dumped in a resourceless and impoverished condition back onto the land. In extreme cases the process can lead to genocide and the annihilation of the indigenous species, as in North America and Australia, with a small residual population serving as a grim reminder of an all too easily forgotten history. Today the process of colon-isation is carried on by multinational corporations rather than by nation states. It is also perpetuated by the use of liquidity and the injection of capital assets into an economy which are then used to leach out the interest, increase dependency, and impoverish the indigenous cultures, under the justified terms of world trade, and the unjust financial structures of the market place.

South Africa is not unique. It is just that in this particular context the symptomatic effects of this global system are seen in the stark reality of an acute presentation. Within the world system the structures of international apartheid, the world distribution of the means of production, selective abandonment of the most impoverished and under-resourced areas of the world, and the setting up of boundary controls in terms of population movement from one area to another, are taken for granted. They are not challenged. However when the same system is applied at an intra-national level its injustice and immorality are explicit. The Province serves as some kind of displacement scapegoat for the guilty consciences of the whole world community, which throws up its hands in horror and demands that South Africa 'puts its house in order' without realising that precisely the same dynamics drive the system for the rest of the world. If South Africa did indeed get its act together in a non-racist, non-classist society, with an equitable distribution of wealth and power, services and resources, then it would present a profound challenge to the whole of the world system. There are, I suggest, powerful vested interests in sustaining the system in South Africa, whose persistent and visible injustices serve as a smoke-screen and perform a vitally important task in the maintenance of similar structures of inequity and injustice within the global community as a whole.

In stating that

> Power lies at the heart of the problem of poverty in southern Africa. Without it those who are poor remain vulnerable to an ongoing process of impoverishment. [p.258)

the authors target a sensitive intervention point within the structure of the system. One of the problems unaddressed however is that the view of, and use of power is universally distributed throughout the system. We have to look not only at the distribution of power but also the use and misuse of power. Indications are that in the comparatively powerless areas of the most impoverished, those with most comparative power use it to dominate those with less. The system of comparative impoverishment is held distributed throughout the system dynamic. It is naive to assume that the emergence of a uniformly democratic state with the full franchise of all sectors of the community necessarily devolves power to the poor. It may redistribute

power to a new elite. It may redistribute power across the racial groupings but it does not necessarily transform the system dynamics into an equitable, just and sustainable society. Transformation is required not simply in the distribution of power but also in the use of power and its vectoring as power used for the powerless, rather than to bolster the power of the powerful. It is a transformation towards empowerment of the least empowered as a continuous and evolving cyclic strategy which has to replace the current use of power, which seduces and strips power from the most powerless and moves it towards the most powerful.

It is to this end that the writers emphasise:

> It is fundamental that a change in the political power structure in South Africa needs to be infused by a value system which would ensure that the process of transformation and the creation of a new society is of real benefit to all those living in it. [p.267]

This moves the argument on to another level so that we are no longer simply talking about the redistribution of power, nor indeed a change in the value system that under-girds that power, but the processes by which change in values occur and are disseminated until they reach critical mass within a culture. In other words it is transformation of the value-generation system that is at issue. The valuing of each person in society simply and wholly because of their personhood within that society, whatever their sex, colour, creed, or class is a fundamental plank of any such value system (concepts in parallel to Ubuntu, p. 269).

There are however even deeper processes at work within society. I refer of course to those dynamics of splitting, bifurcation, polarisation, projection, scapegoating, and denial. These, rooted in the fundamental levels of the personal and social unconscious, can be reified into a social construct which destroys any democratic, humanistic, person-valuing structures which may emerge. The authors indicate their awareness of this shadow side of social process in their reference to the insights of Jung (see p.270). While the negativities of an in-group are totally projected onto an out-group and conflict is across that boundary, then the shadow of the in-group is denied and repressed. In so far as the battle begins to be won, just so far do those same negativities irrupt from the intra of the group process, splitting it apart and creating at the intra-level precisely the dynamics against which the whole energy of the group has previously been mobilised in its struggle with the external enemy (see also the paper Kairos in Question, D. Wasdell, 1987).

There are close parallels between the misuse of power and its distribution of wealth and the misuse of power for subtle and corrupt self-aggrandisement. So the authors write:

> It is important to face squarely one further problem that may loom large in a new South Africa: corruption. We do not agree with those gloomy conservatives who assume that human beings are incapable of altruism, that they pursue always only their own selfish gain, and that bureaucrats can do no good. However it is all too easy for idealists, Marxists no less than democratic socialists and liberals, to be naive about 'the people' or 'the state' or 'the vanguard of the people' or a number of other collections of human beings expected to act for the common good with no thought of their individual self-interest. Corruption can take many forms, including the abuse of power either to manipulate, control, and diminish other people or to enrich oneself and one's family and friends through nepotism and the misappropriation of public funds. ... To guard against this malpractice it is essential to create a whole system of checks including structures of accountability - and a free and independent press with access to information and power to publish it. At the same time the values permeating the society must encourage individual integrity, incorruptibility, and a spirit of public service. Ubuntu is a vital ingredient of this value system. [p.271]

The dynamics of value formation, reformation, and spread within a society are critical. It is not sufficient simply to put in a series of checks and balances to control the outworking of a value system which destroys the very aims and objectives of a just society. The value system itself must come under severe scrutiny and transformation. That requires a penetration to the meta-value levels and the development of structures of value formation, value spread and personal integration and formation along new value lines. It is vital that these penetrate the whole of society at every level and inter-link in a matrix of value-enforcement and value-enhancement. A small and practical step towards this end has been taken in Manila in the introduction of 'integrity circles' to the armed forces, somewhat along the lines of the 'quality circles' within Japanese industry (Organization Development Digest, 2nd Quarter 1989, p.l-2: ODAI, 1341 Leon Guinto St. Malate, Manila). One of the questions that has to be asked is what, if any, institutional platforms and network structures exist or can be generated which could effectively seed and culture the kind of value transformation envisaged. The design, testing, nurture, spread and evolution of high growth, high penetration, matrix learning systems, tailored to meet and match the cultural requirements and differences of the various sectors within South African society must now be an urgent priority.

After a review of a few models of micro development, focussing on issues of self-help, preventative health care provision and access to safe drinking water etc. the authors note:

> Signs of hope, whether in Tiakeni, Ithuseng, the Valley Trust, or elsewhere, are very real but they are at the same time breathtakingly fragile. The fundamental problem facing all who are concerned with real development is how to multiply and then to nurture a whole range or network of small organisations which together can transform the wider environment. [p.291]

The design and management of exponentially growing networks of grass-roots development cells is essential. The integration of development in both task and process is also critical in any such venture. In other words the networking of ventures that simply deal with developmental tasks but ignore the development of persons is inevitably doomed to failure. Conversely, structures which are only dealing with the development of personal skills, interactive processes, personal integration, the overcoming of slave mentality, passivity, and so forth, but which do not also focus upon the essential tasks required for the structural redevelopment of society are, and are seen to be, a luxury which cannot be afforded. The two must walk hand in hand.

As Jay Forrester of MIT has argued ('Churches at the Transition Between Growth and World Equilibrium, Zygon, Journal of Religion and Science, Vol.7, No.3, pp.l45-167), the institutions of religion are entrusted by society with the development, protection and promulgation of the long-term values of the system. In that sense it is to the religious institutions of South Africa that one should look for both the creative thinking and the institutional presence and penetration of society which could give rise to the required value-system regeneration. Tragically, the churches themselves appear to be caught up in the dynamics of splitting, polarisation, scapegoating, introversion and regression, which typify the dynamics of the shattered South African social system. At a much more fundamental level, the value system of religion per se appears to under-gird and validate precisely those bifurcatory dynamics which in turn give rise to the paranoid struggle group with its concomitant inequity in the distribution of both wealth and power. The situation appears to call for the emergence of meta-religious institutional forms dedicated to humanistic goals and offering models of leadership which are concerned not simply with the optimisation of a sub-

sector or subsystem at the expense of the wider environment, but with the optimisation of the system as whole within its holding environment over a long time base. Leadership within such a system is concerned not simply with intra-boundary optimisation strategies but with the issues of balance in boundary transactions and the health of the out-group as well as the in-group. In-group sanction, which legitimises leadership in this kind of global responsibility can only emerge as the value system across group boundaries is transformed. Political and economic strategies must move from a win-lose to a consistent win-win scenario for all parties. The culture has to shift from a destructive competitiveness to a mutually empowering and problem-solving collaboration across every boundary and at every level of the system.

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