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FIRST-WORLD WEALTH AND THIRD-WORLD POVERTY

"In one world, as in one state, when I am rich because you are poor, and I am poor because you are rich, the transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor is a matter of rights; it is not an appropriate matter for charity." Such are the angry claims of Julius Nyerere, president of the African nation of Tanzania.[1] His sentiments are echoed by the Third-World revolutionary Frantz Fanon: "The question which is looming on the horizon is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question, or be shaken to pieces by it."[2]

Are the charges of Nyerere and Fanon supported by the facts? Do we as members of the more affluent nations have a moral obligation to give "reparations" to the poor of the Third and Fourth-World nations? Does our wealth cause their poverty?

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The World Outlook

It is useful to recall some basic facts about poverty in the past and present for the sake of gaining historical perspective. As twentieth-century Americans, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that poverty has been the normal lot of the vast majority of mankind for most of recorded history. As the economic writer Henry Hazlitt has observed, "the history of poverty is almost the history of mankind."[3]

Poverty was the order of the day in the ancient world. Greek dwellings had no heat in winter, no adequate sanitary arrangements, and no washing facilities. The average Roman house was little better. Recurring famines took thousands of lives. In a famine in Rome in 436 B.C., thousands of starving people threw themselves into the Tiber River, so great was their desperation.[4]

General and widespread poverty was also characteristic of the middle ages. "Alternations between feasting and starvation, famines, crime, violence, scurvy, leprosy, typhoid, wars, pestilence and plague were part of medieval life to an extent we can hardly imagine today," wrote historian E. Parmalee Prentice. The homes of typical medieval laborers were hovels. The walls were made of boards cemented with mud and leaves; there was no sewage or water supply. The entire family was crowded into a single room or perhaps two, together with the family's animals.[5]

The Encyclopedia Britannica listed some thirty-one major famines from ancient times down through 1960. Famines are still common in the less developed countries. In modern socialist nations food shortages are still a recurring problem, as this recent headline attested: "Rationing of Sugar and Meat in Poland."

The fact of poverty as the "normal" condition of the human race began to change with the rise of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-eighteenth century. Through the benefits of modern science and technology, in the Western industrial nations poverty has been changed from the *normal* condition of the *majority* to the *abnormal* condition of the shrinking *minority*. It is easy to forget what a dramatic change this transformation has meant for the average person. The less developed nations are responding to a "revolution of rising expectations" created by the advances of the Industrial Revolution.

Here in the United States substantial progress has been made in the effort to reduce poverty to a residual level. Warren Brookes, economic writer for the *Boston Herald American,* has called attention to the fact that "In spite of spiraling inflation, and energy costs, socio-economic data now shows that less than 7 percent of all Americans live below the U.S. poverty line, and even this 7 percent live better than 85 percent of the rest of the world's population." While it may be true that the U.S., with only 6 percent of the world's population uses over a third of the world's energy, Brookes points out that the critics usually fail to mention that the U.S. produces 40 percent of the world's food, and supports nearly 80 percent of the world's private charities.[6]

Dr. Michael J. Boskin, a professor of economics at Stanford University, has recently called attention to features of the government's "poverty index" that tend to exaggerate the size of the problem. While the index is adjusted for inflation, family size and location, it excludes the actual cash value of transfer payments such as food stamps, subsidized housing, and medical care. "Even conservative estimates of the cash-equivalent value of these programs result in a startling discovery," writes Prof. Boskin, "only about 3 percent of Americans live below the poverty line."[7] If Boskin's analysis is correct, then the "war on poverty" in America is a war that has practically been won.

In the world as a whole, it is undeniable that there are multitudes of poor and hungry people. But even