

Rich Man, Poor Man: No Insults Allowed

A well-known religious figure is reported to have said: “For ye have the poor with you always.” This is even more the case if economic inequality persists (as the history of the world suggests it might) and poverty is defined in relative terms. The same well-known figure added, however, that “whensoever ye will, ye may do them good.”

The question, of course, becomes what constitutes good in this context.

A new way of doing the poor good has been proposed in France: namely, a legal prohibition of pejorative remarks about them. It’s an idea that a British journalist, [writing in the Guardian](#), found worthy of adoption in her own country. We may not be able to reduce poverty (howsoever defined), but at least we can boost the self-esteem of the poor and stop them feeling bad about themselves. Such, at any rate, is the theory.

Poverty, said Doctor Johnson, is an insufficiency of necessities, but this definition is far less categorical than might at first appear since what is considered a necessity tends to expand with general wealth and technical advance. I suspect that, given the choice between wholesome food and a mobile telephone, many people in the modern world would choose the telephone. No matter how much infant mortality declines or life expectancy increases, no matter what the rising tide of consumption, then, the poor we shall continue to have with us.

In a world that is supposedly meritocratic, in which the possibility of social mobility is believed to be the norm, morally if not empirically, the poor—the relatively poor, that is—have two choices, neither of them very attractive: to

consider themselves failures or, as a way of avoiding doing so, to resent the difference between the world as it is supposed to be and the world as (they believe) it is. And since belief is often a determining feature of reality, the world does indeed come to resemble the one of their imagining. Even where there is opportunity, or at least no formal obstacle to advancement, they do not register this, for the manacles forged by their minds are gratifying. By which I mean being a victim of injustice has more appeal than being a failure.

No one, as far as I know, has yet advanced the idea that the rich should be protected from derogation. The same newspaper whose columnist thought it would be a good idea to censor unpleasant or insulting comments about the poor regularly publishes cartoons that, with all the subtlety of *Der Stürmer*, use iconography little changed from that of a century ago. Vilifying the rich is taken by the newspaper as the sign of a generous heart, and furthermore, one which costs nothing.

The rich are, of course, a small minority. We are constantly reminded of the division of the population into the 99 percent and the 1 per cent—references to which always leave me worrying neurotically about which category I belong in, my desire to be among the economically successful conflicting with a desire to be inconspicuous and ordinary. In any case it is always carelessly supposed that the members of this small group can look after themselves and require no anti-discriminatory assistance from lawmakers. The feelings of the rich do not have to be spared because 1) they have other compensations and 2) they can defend themselves.

Let us disregard the economic status of the rich and just consider the indisputable history of the 20th century. If communism counts as a form of economic egalitarianism and therefore as a movement to destroy or abolish the rich as a class, ideological antagonism toward the rich may be said to have been responsible for scores of millions of deaths. This

is not altogether surprising, for if poverty is relative, so is wealth: As countries decline in wealth, so a poorer and poorer man will come to be regarded as wealthy. In Russia a *kulak* was often defined as a man who owned a horse, cow, or pig, and was therefore considered as an exploiter—of his fellow man, not of the horse, cow, or pig—and rightly to be eliminated. But no matter how much elimination you go in for, ye have the rich with you always.

Few emotions are as easy to stir but as difficult to control as envy and hatred of the rich. What Freud called the narcissism of small differences means that increased equality does not necessarily assuage or lessen such hatred, for there is no end to the pettiness of humankind. How much envy and jealousy are provoked by trifling differences in status?

If it were right, then, to censor the expression of dangerous or unpleasant sentiments, it would be right above all to censor expressions of economic egalitarianism, a doctrine that proved so dangerously inflammatory only a few decades ago and that we have no reason to believe could not have the same terrible effects again. Under such a law, anyone who argued that the rich *ipso facto* exploited the poor would be subject to prosecution for a form of so-called *hate speech* that has abundantly demonstrated its potential for provoking violence.

This proposal, incidentally, could be justified irrespective of the actual conduct of the rich. Personally I have not found the rich to be much better (or worse) than the poor, though it is surely easy enough to understand that if poverty is often an extenuation of bad behavior, wealth is sometimes an aggravating circumstance. But what we are concerned with here is not the actual conduct of the rich, but the effects—and they have been historically disastrous—of provoking hatred of them.

I hope it is needless to say that I do not really think people who shout “Rich bastard!” (odd how the connotation of the word

bastard has survived social acceptance of bastardy itself), or even Nobel prize-winning economists such as Paul Krugman, should be hauled away and prosecuted. For the term *hate speech* is itself hateful—a provocation of the very emotion that those who make use of it claim to hate.

Preserving them from insult will do them no more good, at least in a secularized world, than telling them they are the beloved of God.

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