

Observations on poverty and the struggle against it

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This article has been published in book on history of Finnish solidarity movement which was a joint project of Finnish Environment and Development and Indian Lokayan. I was asked to write about my own experiences during 90's. I do not like this article a lot, but they wanted to publish it anyway. Unfortunately I have only publishing information of the Finnish version of the book (Unelmia maailmasta, toim. Outi Hakkarainen, Miia Toikka ja Thomas Wallgren, Like 2000).

In looking at this issue from the viewpoint of the new generation of activists it's interesting to return to what the starting points of the Finnish third world solidarity movement actually mean. To me there's nothing surprising about the existence of such a movement. It's natural that whenever there is misery and poverty, there are also attempts to reduce it. This has been something common to all cultures at all times. Activists are just a minor part of the movement, the fact is that more than half of Finnish people have made some kind of contribution in recent decades, either by donating a few pennies to Red Cross fund raising or taking part in the 'Taksvärkki' — annual day of voluntary work by schoolchildren — the proceeds of which help finance projects in the South. It's also obvious that some people are willing to sacrifice much more than others.

But what is this misery we're dealing with? Before aid is given there must be some indication that there is misery, and some indication that aid might help. These indications have been evident for ages, but were they the same before as they are now?

The Birth of poverty

There are two towering ideologies behind colonialism and development aid. They are the Christian religion and the larger and stronger force of free market capitalism. Long ago, when conquistadors and traders set out on their voyages of conquest their aim certainly was to create as much wealth as possible, and by any means. Among them were (Christians) Jesuits who reckoned they could bestow a human status on indigenous peoples by baptising them. But their concept of humanism was linked with that of early capitalism: anyone who became part of the world trade system, deserves human dignity. Dissident priests fought against the brutal repression of indigenous people by adopting them into the (Christian family) Christendom. When non-religious development aid began hundreds of years later, it integrated its subjects directly into to capitalism without the intermediary step of Christianity.

Was development aid born out of the same western arrogance that gave birth to colonialism — the idea that western people know what's best for other 'less fortunate' nationalities? For hundreds of years, people were considered pagans, primitive and living in misery if they existed on a self-sufficient economy. The first indication of the need for aid was their 'barbarism', the sign that they needed to be 'saved' from primitivism. And this is still the picture of the South in the eyes of most Finns. Although it has been lately mixed with pictures of starving children of the Sahel, few people have any idea why these people are starving — they are seen as savages, neither their governments nor they are capable of taking care of themselves and that's why they need help.

Long way from images to information

Attempts to construct a more realistic southern image in the west are almost as old as the false images themselves. Hot on the heels of the conquistadors came the first westerners who put across the notion of universal human rights. There are today strong echoes of the 18th century Enlightenment debates. At that time one of the concerns was the slave trade, which was eventually abolished the following century. Voltaire's *Candide* castigates the hypocritical kings and Jesuits in South America, as well as an image of Eldorado, that place in the South untainted by the western development, a picture that is still in the minds of western idealists.

Nevertheless, the image of Eldorado hardly matches the reality of indigenous southern cultures. Few cultures in the world have ever ignored wealth and military power, and this has enabled the submergence of indigenous cultures by that of the conquerors. Poverty and misery have always been judged through the prism of our cultural criteria, but after the cultures of the conquered and the conquerors merged, the understanding of the misery of the conquered has not been anymore a stupid image based on narrow-mindedness. It became very true. Newcomers to our society always start from the bottom, and the vast majority of the colonised Africans, Americans and Asians have remained there ever since.

Development aid has come a long way from its beginnings and it is still being refined. Hopefully, every step backwards has been followed by one or two forward, towards real solidarity based on the need. Thus aid is still living and we have learned something, at least we hope so. A more cynical view would be that stopping development aid would merely lead to the unemployment of those employed in it.

Tributaries of the third world solidarity movement

A new definition of misery and poverty would be of no help to the majority of people – we are too late by several hundred years. But we have begun to understand that actual misery is not just the lack of basic sources of livelihood, it is also a destruction of biodiversity and indigenous cultures. And suddenly we realise that it is happening in our own backyards as well as thousands of kilometres away in the South. Thus it has given rise to what I call the “tributaries of the solidarity movement”: the environmental movement and the later movement against globalisation.

Of course the environmental movement is much more than just a branch of the solidarity movement, but traditionally it has borrowed most of its analyses of nature, society and methods of change from Gandhi, the American-Indians and other anti-colonialists. People in the north struggle against highway projects, logging and closing of factories using an ideology they have learned from the South, an ideology that was weakened in the north after the First World War and has to be taught anew from the South. Many people have become part of the development movement without ever thinking about it. The people of the North and South have common needs, and for the purposes of survival it is important to also learn to defend them together.

Notes on my generation

In the 1990s young people joined the development movement in various ways. Some volunteered for development aid projects, others studied development at university and wanted to do something practical, while others have lived in the South or have friends there.

The youth movements of the 1990s as portrayed in tabloid headlines are more subcultural than their predecessors. The most important of these movements are animal rights movement, radical ecologists, anarchists and socialists. The membership of these movements overlaps. Where do these people come from?

The youth movements of the 1990s have their roots in punk-culture, although most of the activists have no punk background and the ones who have, have grown out of that culture years ago. Nevertheless a large part of the people who sustain these organisations and movements by buying their materials, enrolling as members and attending demonstrations are part of the punk culture. At least three-quarters of the 500 participants of the eco-anarchist Black and Green Days meeting in Tampere in 1999, where there was a debate on self-sustaining economy and demonstrations against Shell and McDonald's, were from punk culture.

The role of punk as the "avant-garde" of conscious youth is contradictory. It is connected with heavy use of alcohol and all the other forms of losing control of one's own life but it also involves dedicated political activism. The movement opposes globalisation and homogenous culture, and yet it is a homogenous culture par excellence — there are few countries in the world without punks, and the culture is the same from Philippines to Finland. And everywhere, some 90 per cent of the punks don't bother about politics except for a sporadic presence in demonstrations, while five to ten per cent dedicate most of their time to politics. Their music is often very political but you can hardly make out the words.

In Finland the punk movement was political during its peak years, from 1978–1981. In several other countries political bands remained in the shadow of the commercial ones, and punk became more political when it stopped being part of the mainstream. Since this change, around 1980–1983, most of the culture, hairstyle, lifestyle and dressing code, have remained unchanged — though there are a few exceptions, such as the Straight Edge protest against the destructive use of drugs and alcohol within the movement. Straight Edge abstained from all forms of intoxicants and soon adopted veganism, which became the basis for the enlargement of animal rights movement from English speaking countries to Europe and the rest of the world.

Animal rights and the South

What has the development movement got to do with this new wave of radicalism, which unfortunately has often forgotten a lot of Gandhi's teachings? The birth of political activism often requires a sort of shock, a wake up from the dream that says that everything is all right on this planet. I would argue that the striking misery of the South and environmental destruction is often a shock to many people who are working for animal rights, although at first sight their aim does not have much to do with the issues. But as far as I know this was also what happened within the Leninist militant youth movement of the seventies — the misery of the South was a cornerstone of their rhetoric, but the main target of their activity was opposition to Finnish membership of the EEC and NATO, which at first sight does not appear to have much to do with

poverty in the South. The South also has its place in the work of animal rights movement. A leaflet advocating vegetarianism produced by the group Rights for Animals, of which several thousand were distributed in Finland in 1996–1997, puts the arguments for vegetarianism in this order:

1. Health reasons – this is expected knowing the atomistic values of the target group – urban youth.
2. Global reasons – vegetarianism as a way to ensure food security in the next millennium.
3. Environmental protection.
4. Suffering of animals – this only ranks fourth in the list!

Other links between the development and animal rights movements are reflected in the influence on the Finnish animal rights movement by its Indian counterpart. To some extent the new movements attack global power structures even more directly than the movements of 60's and 70's. The old generation unlike the new movement didn't organise campaigns against certain selected multinationals for instance, Nike, Shell and McDonald's which are the targets of today's activism.

Punk culture is also a very strange kind of youth culture in the sense that it is something of a relic of the past. Youth culture is usually reckoned as something that changes with time. But because the world changes so slowly, punk culture's permanence has guaranteed a sort of safe space to speak about global equality when speaking about such an issue is otherwise no longer trendy among young people.

Sub-culturalisation is not a good thing for a movement because it makes it very easy to marginalize and creates strong barriers for 'regular, honest middle-class people' to join in. I have noticed that even projects which have been formed by lots of different people from the beginning have slipped into the hands of those who came from a subculture – such is the history of some animal rights groups. But it's still better for a movement to take the form of a subculture than not to exist at all.

Internal power Some words about internal power

I justify my actions based norms and morals, but although they might appear to create a consistent philosophical theory, there is very little you can do with that theory in motivating yourself. If you adopt a Kantian morality based on a categorical imperative – “do as everyone else should do does to make a better world” – you take on an impossible task because it's vain to expect other people to act as you do. Utilitarianism is not a big help either because if you always try to maximise the results of your actions, you get no peace – staying up all night wondering whether your projects are really the most essential ones to save the planet or whether you are just playing with inessentials! And even if you are sure that they are the right ones, can you be sure you'll reach your goal? You also can't avoid envying others who've already achieved something great.

I think the moral that will allow us to work in peace is the moral of communality. You don't have to think anymore why you are out here in the cold handing out information to busy ignorant people who wouldn't care less. If you've found out it's your mission to be a pain in society's ass, you are just sure you are once again in the right place. Moral of activism is also based on feelings. If you don't feel that some project is yours, you cannot work for it for long. Activism is joy. If

you occasionally suffer burnout, take a break and then come back. What better can you do in your life?

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