

## **Addendum 2**

### **Reflections on the Discussion of Ethics and Poverty at the Triglav Meeting on 2- 3 May 2003**

by Peter Marris

#### ***The Importance of Disaggregating the Idea of Poverty***

People have basic biological needs for food, shelter, water, and health care. We also have basic psychological needs for self-esteem, belonging, meaning. (A meaningful life requires that we identify with some endeavor more enduring than ourselves, whether it is expressed through the ideals of a social movement, a religion, the survival of a lineage, or the perpetuation of a culture). These needs are always met, or not met, in a social context. We need security, rights, respect, and these social needs are also basic. These three kinds of needs are interdependent, but the interdependence is not hierarchical. It is often assumed that basic biological needs must be met before psychological or social needs can be considered. But psychological and social needs are equally important, and may take precedence, depending on the circumstances. For instance, someone may choose honor over survival, sacrifice their share of food for the sake of another, risk illness to fulfill their duty as a doctor or nurse. Or someone may prefer a way of life that provides respect and belonging to an innovation that would undermine that way of life, even though it promises relief from poverty. Loss of a sense of meaning to one's life can be as lethal as starvation.

Since these needs are interdependent, people lacking basic biological needs are usually also treated with little respect, just as those without security or rights are unlikely to be well fed. But aggregating poverty invites the use of single measures, which are taken as representing all kinds of basic deprivation. For instance, the World Bank uses a dollar a day of income as a minimum below which anyone in the world might be defined as poor. It corrects for the differences in living costs between countries by estimating what a dollar will buy in each country, creating a measure of purchasing power parity. By this measure, the Bank sees a substantial reduction in world poverty over the last few years. (The measure is largely meaningless, firstly because the dollar is assumed to buy more in developing countries, where labor and services are much cheaper. But these are services the poor cannot afford, so their cost is irrelevant to them. Secondly, many crucial nations were excluded from the count.) No such crude measure can demonstrate anything, except perhaps aggregate growth in an economy, which may or may not reduce deprivation of any of the basic human needs I have described. Such measures obscure the relationships between biological, psychological and social deprivation, and in doing so, promote a particular economic prescription for aggregate growth as the solution to all kinds of poverty. The result may be to increase many aspects of poverty.

### ***Autonomy and Interdependence of Needs***

It is very difficult for an outsider to understand how basic biological, psychological and social needs can all be met in a society other than one's own. A middle class American understands a set of relationships in which individual effort is rewarded in a labor market that also confers respect and belonging, within an ideology of capitalistic nationalism, offering a sense of identification with the world's most powerful nation. None of this is transferable to any other country, or even to many minorities in the United States. When the ideologues of the Bush administration claim that democracy and free enterprise have been shown to be the only viable prescription for the well being of the whole world, they deny the relevance of any culture but their own. But people can reconcile their biological, social and psychological needs only within a context of values, expectations, and possibilities which makes sense to them. To do that, they need to be in charge of their own lives. They need enough autonomy to be able to choose relationships that are meaningful to them, relationships which fulfill their purposes and reflect their values and in which they believe they can trust. No outsider, however well intentioned, can impose such relationships on anyone and hope to have them assimilated without great psychological damage and social disruption.

When people cannot create a structure of relationships which fulfills these needs, they will be attracted to other worldly ideologies which promise fulfillment only in some future life (for instance, in a heaven); or to movements which project their frustrations on an external enemy (such as another ethnic group, or America, the Great Satan). Both reactions are, I think, morbid, in the sense that they distort or inhibit the struggle to create, in the present, relationships, which can satisfy basic social, psychological and biological needs.

### ***What Are the Ethical Implications?***

The oversimplification of poverty is morally obtuse. Anti-poverty policies have to respect the autonomy of poor people. Policies need to increase their control over assets, their power to create and sustain their own relationships, and to respect the integrity of the values which matter to them. This implies tolerance and humility in those who seek to help. It does not imply cultural neutrality: there are widely held values which denigrate women and deny their autonomy, for instance. But the more people enjoy a sense of autonomy and control in a context of relationships in which they feel respected and accepted, the more their own values are secure, the more they will be willing to let other people also enjoy the fulfillment of those same basic needs. So I believe.