

Why do people think inequality is worse than poverty?

Viewpoint
Informing debate

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The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'inequality'. Jeremy Seabrook argues that, in the face of extraordinary imbalances in society, the myth that accumulating wealth is the supreme human purpose needs to be replaced before any improvement will occur.

Key points

- Society more or less faithfully reflects profound natural and human-made inequalities.
- After the Second World War, a vast increase in wealth and a general rise in living standards reduced the number of poor people to pockets in the inner city and in ex-urban estates.
- Capitalism has led not only to intolerable pressure on the resource-base of the earth, but also to extraordinary imbalances in wealth. Government efforts to mitigate poverty fail to close the gap between the status of the poorest and those favoured by extravagant market-driven rewards.
- The consistent discrediting of collective action over the past two generations has been a major contributor to the unequal society.
- Absolute equality is an impossible aim and, like absolute inequality, has led to extreme 'nightmare' societies.
- With globalisation, two-thirds of Britons now belong to a global middle class, and the poor are in a minority. Mass poverty in the 'developed' world has been much mitigated.
- The problem is that while extravagant rewards are now reaped at the top, those at the bottom live at a level of deprivation which makes inequality as unacceptable as the poverty of the majority at an earlier time.
- If inequality is ineradicable, can we consider a fairer distribution of wealth, goods and services?
- Inequality has historically seemed more abstract than poverty, so poverty has been the primary focus of campaigners and social reformers.
- A different narrative is required: the story of quiet satisfactions, contentment with sufficiency and admiration for those who declare how much humanity can do with little money.

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Introduction

It is sometimes hard to distinguish between 'natural' inequalities, that is to say the unequal distribution of positive human characteristics – intelligence, creativity, beauty or strength of personality – and those which are clearly socially determined – power, wealth or privileged education. Most of the discussion about 'equality' focuses on the latter, since it is virtually impossible to alter natural attributes, which favour some people in the world over others.

Attempts to reduce inequality base themselves on raising the life chances of the socially disadvantaged, so that, in the tiresome but ubiquitous cliché, they compete on a 'level playing-field' with their more fortunate peers. 'Equality of opportunity' is the slogan which is supposed to compensate for all social, educational and cultural handicaps endured by those not born into privilege. This is a shallow and meretricious approach to the issue, since the only way in which actual equality of opportunity could be achieved would be by raising everybody to the level of the most advantaged. The idea that 'education' can make good all deficiencies is a sentimental – or ideological – fiction.

In India, shortly after the policy of liberalisation was introduced in the early 1990s, I attended a seminar conducted by a western enthusiast of the Washington consensus, who was instructing the then Indian government in the mysterious arts of deregulation. He spoke enthusiastically of the 'creative imbalances' that would be a necessary prerequisite for the development of India. This was, of course, a euphemism for even more gross inequalities than those which have historically disfigured that country. These have duly occurred; and the consequences may be seen, on the one hand, in the suicides of at least 140,000 farmers engulfed by debt in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka; and on the other in the extravagant palace constructed by Mukesh Ambani in Mumbai, a 27-storey structure with its own helipad, pools and elegant rooms, private theatre and staff of 600 ...

Establishing 'equality of opportunity' is the flimsiest justification for a society which likes to think of itself as rewarding 'merit'. For that merit is overwhelmingly concentrated upon those favoured either by birth or endowment. In other words, society more or less faithfully reflects profound natural and human-made inequalities. When people rise in what is labelled meritocracy, the meritorious look with complaisance upon the rewards which their ostensible worth bestows upon them; and although they may be troubled by the lack of meritoriousness in those from whom significant rewards are withheld, they rarely contest the basis on which their good fortune has been constructed.

It is, of course, very difficult for those at the bottom of a highly stratified society to view this assessment of their worth (or lack of it) with equanimity. Some will, of course, accept the state of affairs and adapt expectations and lifestyle to the humble position to which the market (if no longer providence) has summoned them. But if the meritocracy is illusion, and many able, competent and intelligent people find themselves assigned an undeserved lowly status, they are unlikely to go meekly about their business without some form of protest or resistance. It may be that the considerable levels of crime and violence, the unofficial, and highly private, enterprise of dealing in prohibited substances, stolen or counterfeit goods, the weaving and diving, the scheming and contriving whereby the law is evaded, is a consequence of significant portions of the poor taking into their own hands personal remedies for their exclusion and alienation.

It may also be that the inability of the authorities to do very much about it (apart from publishing a continuous stream of statistics which claim a contested and steady reduction in crime statistics) is less a reflection of their impotence in the face of lawlessness than of a collusive tolerance. Private remedies for economically and socially induced wrongs are far more acceptable than the alternative, which would be collective, solidarity-based movements of poor people themselves to change the society which – arbitrarily in their view – determines their condition. Indeed, the consistent disgracing of collective action over the past two generations has been a major contributor to the unequal society: such action was called socialism, and its comprehensive discrediting has led to fragmentation, breakdown of belonging, social incoherence and that intense individualism which also now troubles policy-makers and politicians.

Of course absolute 'equality' as dogma is an impossible ambition; and those societies which have yielded to its seductive appeal have (like those which exalt inequality) been prodigal with the lives of those they seek to assist. When human beings have failed to respond with conduct that conforms to the ideologically predicted, they must be coerced into compliance. Pol Pot's agrarian nightmare, the 'liquidation' of enemies of the people, the execution of 'class traitors', the human sacrifice of the cultural revolution in China, are examples of the inevitable consequences of rigid egalitarian doctrines.

The warning these fateful events of the twentieth century have given the world does not necessarily mean that the only possible response is to abandon a tainted belief in equality, and to permit both natural and socially determined differences between people to freely express themselves in daily life. One day – not yet certainly – we may come to look back with incredulity on societies which, given the vast differences in ability, competence and intelligence of their people, chose to enshrine and aggravate these distinctions by replicating them in their social hierarchies. People may wonder that such primitive thinking endured for so long in a future time in which, although talent and distinction will be recognised, efforts will also be made to compensate the vulnerable, the unskilled, the under-endowed for disadvantages they are not personally responsible for.

It is one thing for people, contemplating their material success, to congratulate themselves on their enterprise, courage and hard work; but when this is set against the weak, the timid and the confused, the lustre of their attainments is tarnished. They usually take good care to avoid such unhappy contrasts. Pride in achievement is a perfectly justifiable sentiment; but the fortunates who do so find it difficult to resist moralising their accomplishments.

Poverty – social not moral

The issue of accepting personal responsibility for socially determined circumstances has an important bearing on the difference between the poor and the unequal. In societies in which a majority are poor, and no matter how hard they labour, cannot provide enough for themselves and their families, people know that their experience of need is not their fault. Efforts were made in the early industrial period to blame the poor for their poverty: they were said to be idle or improvident. The tendency to make poverty appear as moral failing and to castigate the undeserving poor was enshrined in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and indeed most subsequent legislation aimed at 'the poor'. The iron law of 'less eligibility' was imposed upon all who threw themselves on the rough mercy of the workhouse: they were to understand that those worst off outside the loveless embrace of that institution were nevertheless better off than the most comfortable inhabitant within its cold stone walls.

Despite attempts to make the poor responsible for their own condition, people fiercely repudiated this version of the world. They did so by organised resistance, formally and informally, both in the workplace and the dingy neighbourhoods and grimy industrial suburbs of Britain. This project was supported by reformers and philanthropists, who also worked tirelessly against the prevailing ideology. Some of the upper class did so out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*, others because they were animated by a fierce moral or religious sense of justice. The story of the rise of the trade union and labour movements, friendly societies and mutual help organisations, is a matter of record; as indeed is their subsequent decline.

As long as people were aware that their poverty was largely induced by social determinants, they retained a sense of latent, if not actual, power. In the long shadow cast by the French Revolution, it was clear to ruling elites that if the poor majority chose to exercise their brute power, they could conceivably overturn a system, from which it seemed, well into the nineteenth century, they were destined to remain permanently estranged. Contrary to much of the rhetoric about our 'ancient' democracy, the franchise was extended to the mass of the people only slowly, as more and more people were seen to have a 'stake' in the country. The second Reform Bill of 1867 conceded the vote only to male urban householders. Farm labourers and domestic servants had to wait till 1884, while women over 30 could vote only in 1918. It was ten years later when women under 30 were enfranchised and property qualifications abolished.

The dissolution of collective resistance, the weakening of trade unions, the decay of community, took place at a time of vastly increased prosperity. The vast majority of the people of Britain are not poor, but have something very tangible to protect. This has at least two important consequences. First of all, it ensures that only a small minority would now conceivably vote away a system in which most people are beneficiaries. Secondly, where individuals resisted taking responsibility for their own poverty at a time of mass misery, no such reluctance exists when it comes to taking credit for their prosperity. In other words, an ideology fiercely contested in the early industrial era has an easier passage at a time when people are only too ready to claim that their good fortune is a result of work, diligence or worth. In consequence, they are also more ready to accept the idea that the poor are also authors of their own fate, and to censure them accordingly. Nothing, it seems, is forgotten so swiftly as poverty.

This is the context in which poverty appears simply as a residual problem. The theory is that, with time, the excluded and marginalised will all be caught up in the tender clasp of a capitalism which once made privation the experience of most people. This has not happened: the poor, now a minority, are effectively disempowered in a democracy in which most people are well-to-do, since the limits of their electoral power ensures they can do little to alter unjust social or economic structures. This widespread sense of impotence may lie at the heart of declining participation in elections.

How has less poverty led to more inequality?

Mass poverty in the 'developed' world has been much mitigated; but growing inequality is an unintended consequence of this improvement. Rising living standards occurred for a number of reasons. Firstly, the wealth accumulated from colonial extraction; secondly the organisation of the industrial working class and its growing political power; thirdly, the threat to capitalism from the socialist heresy. Until the 1960s, it was not clear that the Soviet system would not vanquish its rival; the more so, since newly independent countries emerging from colonialism all affixed socialism to their banners of liberation. Self-preservation demanded that capitalism show itself both more just and more clement than its global competitor. This was achieved by spectacular economic growth, distributed according to the happy formulation that as the rich grew much richer, the poor might become a little less poor.

Unhappily, the rate at which the rich have improved their position exceeds the pace at which the poor rise. Greater inequality is thus written into the very scenario on which perpetual improvement is based. Governments have sought to lessen the gap; but their intervention cannot keep up with the promiscuous and extravagant way in which the free market spreads its rewards. So although people are kept securely out of absolute poverty, the bottom 20 per cent lag further and further behind the top 20 per cent. Globalisation means that rewards are increasingly articulated to a single transnational standard. This justifies excessive remuneration to the already favoured, on the basis that if top talent were curbed or unduly taxed, the possessors of these desirable qualifications would swiftly relocate overseas.

Indeed, the pattern of economic growth which prevails now in almost every country on earth leads to growing inequality both within nations and globally, a concern reflected in the United Nations document of 2005, *The Inequality Predicament*. Optimists sometimes airily wish this away by another glib, but pervasive cliché, that a rising tide lifts all boats. This homely image is yet another version of the famous – and discredited – trickle-down theory, although cast, this time, in terms of raising up, 'levelling up, not levelling down'. But some boats leak, while the fate of those without boats is unrecorded; and in storms many simply capsize.

So universally accepted is this interpretation of the world, that economic imperatives are now regarded with a profound fatalism. Societies which pride themselves on their mobility, their can-do resourcefulness, their technological wizardry and capacity for innovation, are suddenly powerless to do anything about inequality. As soon as redistribution is mentioned, the defenders of the present order reach readily for myth and fable

– the sanctity of the life of geese that lay golden eggs, the ‘golden touch’, the ‘magic of markets’ and the economy which is the only site in a secular society where miracles still regularly occur. How odd, that cultures which have believed in fate, predestination, the inevitability of things, have always been regarded as backward; yet here we have the most dynamic societies the world has ever seen throwing up their hands in the face of an economic necessity which has been elevated into the underlying principle of life.

What is more, while such societies readily promise transcendence in areas of experience which religion and common sense alike have stated to be impossible to cure – ageing, prolonging life, escaping the ravages of time, the impossibility of the earthly paradise – they show an obdurate inability to move in those areas which have always been thought to be in the gift of human beings – the establishment of economic justice, the regulation of the relationship between rich and poor. These have become unalterable existential realities, while our subjection to time, loss and death are frontiers which we shall surely conquer. Hopelessness and impotence in the presence of the holy mysteries of wealth creation seem to banish alternatives. There is, it seems, no other way. Capitalism is the least worst of a bad bunch of options. At this point, argument usually falters; the knowing shrug and sigh in resignation. That is the way things are.

The rulers of Britain have rarely had any great quarrel with inequality. Of greater concern has been the geometry, as it were, of society, the pyramid at the base of which the poor were dangerously concentrated. The changes we have seen have altered the shape of society, from pyramid to rhomboid; or perhaps we might say, diamond; a more satisfactory economic morphology, since it means that the majority are now concentrated in the middle, and the poor have become a minority. As the squat pyramid was extruded into the diamond shape, threats to security from the density of disaffected poor people appeared to subside. The problem today is that this shape has become more and more elongated, so that while extravagant rewards are now reaped at the top, those at the bottom live at a level of deprivation which makes inequality as unacceptable as the poverty of the majority at an earlier time.

These awkward developments should be the starting point of any useful discussion. It may be vain work to establish absolute equality. ‘Fairness’ is, perhaps, a better term, since it is one to which most people respond. It is, after all, the protest of childhood at unjust treatment. “It’s not fair” is a cry that resounds in the ears of parents worldwide. If inequality cannot be eradicated, can we consider a fairer distribution of wealth, goods and services?

Redefining wealth and inequality

Before we wonder how this is to be accomplished, it is necessary to demolish some of the myths that prevent us from moving beyond the brutal proposition that only if the rich become much richer may the poor become a little less poor; for this makes all of us pensioners and dependents of the generators of wealth, by whose grace alone we survive.

The sanctification of an extremely narrow version of what wealth is should be the first casualty in any struggle against inequality. The reduction of all the richness and diversity of the world to money is, perhaps, the greatest limitation on our ability to distinguish the roots of the multiple and artificially sustained impoverishments in the world. In daily speech we refer to a wealth of experience, the richness of life, the resourcefulness of people, the treasures of the mind. In doing so, we acknowledge aspects of living which have not been enclosed, transformed into commodity or service and sold back to us. Rather than acquiescing in the invasive power of the market to penetrate ever more deeply into the inner spaces, we might perhaps declare certain areas off limits, to protect all the freely offered acts of mercy and kindness, the services and small gifts which we, unbidden, share with our neighbours; the tenderness and kindness which expect no reward, the vast storehouse of our common humanity, which is under assault as never before, in the great transformation of the peoples of the world into the reductive stereotype of economic man and woman.

The only resources that are boundless are not, alas, the rapidly depleting riches of the earth, but the ingenuity, inventiveness and contriving of people. While we stand agape at the array of goods conjured before our wondering eyes in the display cases of the world, acknowledging the materialisation of things we had hitherto always taken for granted, and avowing them truly indispensable, we are complicit in our own powerlessness. Life and dynamism have deserted us and become invested in shimmering commodities, the desirability of which is designated by price, even when, as we cherished them in our lives, they were acknowledged to be priceless.

The demolition of clichés is, perhaps, a first step, since it removes obstacles which are nothing more than the tired imagery of privilege – away with the level playing field and equality of opportunity and the ‘free’ choices in the diminished areas in which they are permissible; away with the rising tide and the medicalising of the economy – sick or healthy, the injection of cash, the shot in the arm, the volatile, nervous or excitable markets – and all the anthropomorphising of what is inert and the lifeless ...

Inequality has historically seemed more abstract than poverty, which is why the latter has been the primary focus of campaigners and social reformers. In the process, poverty has become institutionalised; indeed, an amicable companion to wealth, since without a focus on the poor, how will the urgencies of perpetual growth and expansion be sustained? By setting the poverty line at 60 per cent of the median wage, poverty is immortalised. It serves as a spur to even greater feats of production and expansion, to yet more extravagant consumption than anything yet seen. In this sense, poverty is the ally of wealth, just as the rich have become not enemies, but friends, of the poor.

In the meantime, inequality was felt to be tolerable, since it grew in a context in which everybody was becoming better off and, comparing their status with that of yesterday, enjoyed an agreeable sense of enhancement of life. This serene progression has been interrupted recently, not least by the exorbitances of wealth, which now appear dishonourable in a global economy which is pressing hard against the resource base which must support it. Worsening inequality in the model of continuous expansion in a limited world has illuminated the delusion underpinning globalism. The co-existence of showy and extravagant fortunes with the hunger-stricken conflicts between agriculturists and nomads in central Africa, the water-stressed regions of the world and the turbulent mega-cities of Asia demonstrate defects in the theory that indefinite growth is the guarantor of social harmony.

These, then, are some of the ways in which inequality has been transformed from a manageable and subordinate problem into a great evil. Whether or not the Millennium goals on poverty are achievable¹, the problem of poverty now appears more tractable than that of inequality. It is not only the injustice of inequality that has created the crisis: it is the limits of the biosphere to carry the system we have created, and to which there have been, lately, few dissenters.

Equity becomes more salient once the establishment of limits has been accepted. (It has not yet, of course. Reduction in the carbon footprint in order to forestall global warming, the use of clean technologies, science as salvation – all these are mechanisms for deferring the consequences of 200 years of industrialisation.) The heroic age of consumption is surely over. Eventual curbs on consumption, the result of an omnivorous and accelerating depletion of the natural world, are inevitable. This will bring to the fore the issue of distributive justice once more. The economic freedom to exploit the planet and its people will come to seem as archaic as slavery, apartheid or any of those totalising ideologies that have tempted peoples in the age of industrialism.

If we want seriously to address inequality, we have to look at the divergent and incompatible interests of the unequal. In this respect, another myth needs to be destroyed – that which claims it is impossible to distribute wealth that has not been made. Of course we would like to help the poor, the rich have protested, but you have to allow us to make the money first. The criticism of socialism was that it sought to distribute wealth it had not created, and its interference in the art of wealth creation dried up at source the means to relieve poverty.

The proponents of this theory have had a good run over the past generation or more. And this version of economic freedom has brought us to the brink of ecological ruin. The apparently conflict-free proposition that if everyone is getting richer, no one will notice the disparities between rich and poor, is no longer tenable. The disparities have become too great, too glaring. And set against the exhaustion of the planet, the whole enterprise looks, not like the happy compromise of 1945, where the lion of capital would dwell with the lamb of labour² (or should this be the other way round?) but like the shaky and unsustainable proposition it has become. *Has become*, because the early formulation of this idea was both neat and elegant. The historic compromise was reached in good faith. It seemed that the interests of capital and labour had converged, and would continue to do so. Whether this might also have been collusion or conspiracy is less important than dealing with the further consequences of this sometime amicable arrangement.

The ideology of consumerism

It is significant that much of the modest security enjoyed by the people depended upon public goods – health care, social security, unemployment and sickness pay and old age pensions. The welfare state laid down the basis for the compromise. And inequality was indeed reduced in the early post-war period. The growth in private affluence was dependent upon the promise and premise of freedom from want guaranteed by the welfare state. The entertainment, fashion and other consumer industries could scarcely have grown, if significant numbers of people had remained prey to Beveridge's five giant evils: want, idleness, disease, squalor and ignorance.

But older ideologies were only sleeping, biding their time until the moment of resurrection presented itself. The 1970s showed the limits of a Labourism characterised by high public spending and high taxation: the trade unions were believed to have gained too much power, while enterprise was represented as increasingly hobbled and stultified by a punitive government. The coming of Margaret Thatcher changed all that. Moving

with the spirit of the times, her achievement – or crime – was to make explicit what was actually happening in a world in which globalisation was already in train.

The working class which, in the most persuasive ideology of liberation, was to have been in the forefront of radical change, vanished almost overnight. The labour movement was demoted from being the primary agent of change into just another interest group, along with evangelists, chambers of commerce, ratepayers, spiritualists, sporting clubs and antiquarians, while the industrial base out of which it had grown was dispersed, and re-established in the suburbs of Jakarta, Dhaka, Mexico City, Manila and many other countries. In place of the erased vanguard of the future arose a new focus for hope. The rich who, in an earlier ideological iconography, had been the devourers of the substance of the poor, exploiters and bloodsuckers, were transformed into the ideal model of all human aspiration and ambition. Their showy lifestyle, their munificence, their desire for luxury and inventive spending patterns became the supreme object of emulation and striving.

It is impossible to overestimate the consequences of this change. At a stroke, the rich were rehabilitated; their excesses became prowess, their heroic capacity for consumption an inspiration to the world. This has led directly to the cult of celebrity, fame, wealth and power. These have displaced any archaic notions carried by a suffering and impoverished population, who demanded only a secure sufficiency for themselves and their families. For now, the sky is the limit, and no one any longer knows what would constitute 'enough' for a human life. Indeed, in a world of perpetual economic growth, the word itself is a kind of secular blasphemy.

This shift, underpinned by policies of liberalisation and deregulation, together with the weakening of supports for the most vulnerable and least defended, have set in train the extremes of inequality we see in most countries, and have restored a process that has been under way for 200 years. The income ratio between the richest and poorest countries has continued to increase. Within countries, the elongation of the axis of rich–poor has also continued. In 2005, the top 1 per cent of Americans received 21.2 per cent of personal income, an increase on 2004, when they received 19 per cent. The bottom 50 per cent received 12.8 per cent of all income in 2005, down from 13.4 per cent in 2004.

According to the UNDP Human Development Report in 2005: 'The richest 50 individuals in the world have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million. The 2.5 billion people living on less than \$2 a day – 40 per cent of the world's population – receive only 5 per cent of global income, while 54 per cent goes to the richest 10 per cent of the world's population.'

International institutions, charities, humanitarian organisations and NGOs regularly publish such figures. Yet this does nothing to dent the perception that it is only by the energetic endeavour of the generators of wealth (that sexy, asexual form of reproduction) that the poor and the unequal can expect their situation to improve. The poor have been demobilised in the struggle of remedying their own poverty. This onerous task has now been entrusted to global wealth creators, their agents and representatives, who have undertaken the fulfilment of 'Millennium goals', and shown it is they who are now in charge of the noble mission of alleviating poverty.

These changes are bound to lead both to paralysis and impotence. What is to be done about it? Tenderness for the poor increases; inequality is universally deplored, yet the global economy continues to reward those it favours without regard to justice, while governments vainly try to repair some of the damage. No matter how much they spend on tax credits, compensatory payments, benefits and handouts, this can never match the prodigious sums deployed by the well-to-do, for whom wealth itself determines their unequal (superior) status and position in the world. The tax havens – rest homes for the most reclusive creature on earth, money – continue to play host to the most secretive fortunes; the pressure of the super-rich and transnational companies on governments to decrease the 'burden' of tax, with the threat that they will simply depart for more welcoming shores, undercuts any serious will to confront the widening gulf, which is more or less presented to the world as though it were a reflection of the natural order of things.

It is not in the realm of government policy-making, the representations of NGOs or through charitable activity that change will be found. The myth that wealth is the supreme purpose of human striving on earth needs to be attacked head-on. It is an ideological struggle. While the rich are revered and regarded as universal role models, while celebrity and fame are sycophantically admired, as long as what money will buy continues to be exalted over what it cannot, nothing will happen. While the lachrymose exaltations of pop stars and the give-away philanthropy of the conscience-stricken can achieve little, the plausible fables of wealth have to be attacked. One story can be contested only with another. A different narrative is required: the story of quiet satisfactions, contentment with sufficiency, admiration for those who declare how much humanity can do with little money and not how little we can achieve without more, another tale that celebrates the heroism of the everyday, that retrieves from darkness the acts of charity and kindness, the ample storehouse of human rather than material resources.

Conclusion – can we achieve sufficiency for all?

What can be done is intensely political, yet it has nothing to do with the sterile quarrels between existing political formations which are all aspects of the dominant conservative world view. It may be that the people of the world are not susceptible to the possibility of a secure sustenance for all. It may be that the ancient imagery of wealth – jewels and yachts and fur coats and sequestered mansions, exclusive brand names and all the other attributes of the unquiet supremacy of power – retains a stronger hold over the imagination of people. It may be hard to paint the exorbitant consumers of disproportionate quantities of the world's treasures as monsters of egotism, to be scorned for their vacuity rather than admired for their capacity to use up the riches of the earth. But maybe not.

There is a widespread sense of dissatisfaction in the world. People are hungry for the opportunity to be effective actors, to shape the society which also shapes them. That means not so much the change of heart beloved of evangelists, as a change of perception: those to whom we look for succour and salvation are actually responsible for the global crisis, the exhaustion of resources, the using up of the planet, a prodigality and immoderation which is devouring today what ought to be conserved for the tomorrow of new generations. All the conventions that declare wealth as progress, and money the source of all hope, have to be subject to question and scrutiny. Poverty is not the problem in a world of such abundance, wealth is. New definitions of wealth are also very old ones. 'Give me neither riches nor poverty,' sang the prophet, 'but enough for my sustenance'. 'There is no wealth but life' wrote John Ruskin. Without some such re-appraisal, the people of the world will continue to be wasted, either by excess, of which the 56 million people in the US who are obese are a powerful image, or by want, of which the world's 900 million malnourished are the emblem. The stigmata of inequality are borne in the bodies of living human beings.

It may be that a more gentle myth than the violence of wealth creation fails. Perhaps our hearts and minds (significant phrase) are simply too full of the images with which our overloaded senses are assailed. Perhaps the knowing of the earth – the ideologues of accumulation without limits – are right, and greed and selfishness really are attributes of human nature rather than aspects of the nature of capitalism. Perhaps efforts to rectify inequality really are doomed. But that is scarcely a reason to abandon the attempt. On the contrary, it makes our efforts all the more poignant and necessary.

It is dawn in a glass and steel tower in the city of London. In the glare of shadowless strip lighting, a cleaner is already at work, moving her polisher noiselessly over the marble floor, between unidentifiable plants, vegetation known to no other global climatic zone than the arid spaces of office blocks. The cleaner has probably not yet calculated that she will have to work 50 weeks a year for a century and a half to earn as much as the CEO of the company receives in one year.

Footnotes

1. There are eight Millennium Development Goals formulated by the United Nations in 2000 and supported by every country and major development organisation in the world. These include, by 2015: halving the proportion of people suffering from hunger; ensuring primary education for all children and eliminating the gender disparity in education; reducing by two-thirds the mortality rate of children under five, and by three quarters the maternal mortality rate; reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development.

2. The Bible, The Book of Isaiah, 11:6
'The wolf shall also dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid ...'