

CERISY



Rethinking our world from the perspective of poverty with Joseph Wresinski

SOCIÉTÉ

Edited by

**Bruno Tardieu
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In conjunction with

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Béatrice Noyer**

Foreword by

Ruth Lister



HERMANN

Rethinking Our World from the Perspective
of Poverty with Joseph Wresinski

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LES COLLOQUES
CERISY 

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Depuis 1876

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Foreword

RUTH LISTER¹

There is growing – albeit still too limited – recognition of the importance of the expertise born of the experience of poverty. Inspired by the example of its founder Joseph Wresinski, honoured in this volume, ATD Fourth World has consistently shown the way. Yet in the English-speaking world its work and history are too little known. Few have heard of or read the writings left by Joseph Wresinski – representing not just the founding of a movement but also a philosophical and ethical stance, as this volume demonstrates. This English translation of the proceedings of a colloquium to mark the centennial of Father Wresinski, published already in French, is thus very welcome. It provides a rich multi-disciplinary, mosaic that interweaves different forms of knowledge in the best traditions of ATD.

Its key themes all derive from Joseph Wresinski's original teachings. Perhaps most fundamental is his insight that the fight for human rights is at heart a fight for the right to be human. And as the late, much missed Moraene Roberts writes in Part III, all too often people experiencing poverty “are treated as less than human”. These insights derive from what Alain Caillé identifies as the founding principle of ATD: our “common humanity” (Part III). Thus, as Bruno Tardieu observes in his introduction to Part III, “the question of human relations occupies a central place” in ATD's thinking. And the human rights principle of the recognition of human dignity provides its fundamental ethical framework. “The dignity of giving” is the title of Moraene's chapter. It reflects another theme: the importance of recognising the contributions made by people experiencing poverty. This was exemplified by the wonderful Roles we Play UK project described by her and Naomi Anderson.

Underpinning the whole colloquium is ATD's commitment to promoting the contribution made by different forms of knowledge offered by “university”, “life” and “action” researchers, as the Introduction describes them. In particular, the value of the knowledge

1. Member of the House of Lords and emeritus professor of social policy, Loughborough University.

derived from the experience of poverty infuses the volume. This is expressed vividly in Maria Théron's contribution: "We need to start from the concrete, from the real. Which means starting from our experience so as to be real. What we say is anchored in us, in our guts and in our lives." Out of the merging of this knowledge "anchored in our guts" with activist and traditional academic forms of knowledge has developed "a new epistemology" (Tardieu) in which the different forms of knowledge "nourish" each other. This is a fitting testimonial to Joseph Wresinski's path-breaking contribution to the crusade against poverty.

While reading about such an event can never be the same as participating in it, this account of the colloquium does much to convey what is so remarkable about the legacy of Joseph Wresinski and the work of ATD Fourth World. Axelle Brodriez-Dolino writes in Part II that their approach "invents and reinvents itself over the years through a productive alchemy". This volume itself is a rich fruit of this "productive alchemy". It has deepened my own knowledge, already enriched by my association with ATD Fourth World. I commend it to anyone who wants to understand better what poverty means, which is the first step towards its eradication.

Introduction

Rethinking Poverty and the World in Order to Take Action

BRUNO TARDIEU AND JEAN TONGLLET,
CO-DIRECTORS OF THE COLLOQUIUM¹

WHY A COLLOQUIUM ON POVERTY?

Poverty seems to be primarily a call to action. It moves and upsets us, especially as we share the intuition that it seriously impacts our humanity. Victor Hugo, speaking at the French National Assembly, said: “I do not want poverty to be relieved, I want it to be destroyed.”²

With poverty, there can be no equivocating; taking action is required. So why have we locked ourselves away in a mansion to think about it together? Are we wasting time that could be better spent on taking action? Yet a French mayor and member of parliament, Jean-Noël Carpentier, chose to contribute his discretionary fund to support this colloquium because he believes we need to rethink poverty in order to act more effectively.

Following in the steps of Joseph Wresinski, we assert that poverty is often thought about too little, if at all. Theories about poverty are often based on misconceptions and serve only to confuse. Poorly thought-out approaches miss the mark, and their failure is quickly attributed to poor people themselves, who are then described as uncooperative. And in the end, everyone is discouraged.

People often believe that working to overcome poverty means taking action for the poor and meeting their needs for food, drink, and shelter. This idea is found in the oldest texts. The Code of Hammurabi, the earliest known text of law, stated what we must do for the pauper, the widow, and the orphan – what we must do *for* them. They are not part of the “*we*” who conceive the common code, the law. Even

1. This contribution was originally written in French.

2. Victor Hugo, 30 June 1850 speech before the Legislative Assembly in Paris.

today, with the power of the charity industry, society directs us to provide the poor with food and shelter.

In 1987, the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights asked for a contribution from Joseph Wresinski, a member of the commission, to a fundamental reflection on human rights. He wrote: “It is not hunger, illiteracy, or even unemployment that is the worst misfortune for human beings. The worst of all misfortunes is knowing you are considered worthless to the extent that even your suffering is ignored.”³

Restrictive theories about poverty reduce people to their needs and, even worse, only to their physical needs. Any steps taken respond to the supposed need, rather than the known need, and they fail again and again. Even the people who carry out charitable distributions say: “We cannot *not* do it, but we know it's a bottomless pit.” They take action without actually believing in what they're doing.

Another source of confusion is often the idealisation of poverty, when people mistake poverty for the asceticism chosen by Francis of Assisi or Buddha. They confuse the nobleness of humility with the violence of humiliation. And they add more confusion by claiming that poverty could be a form of freedom. People who experience it could have chosen it, they say. And to hide their disappointment, some teachers would tell us: “Don't insist on teaching them to read, their families don't care that much about it. It's their choice, after all.” Joseph Wresinski clarified the difference between “*pauvreté*” (poverty) and “*misère*” (misery, or extreme poverty):

Poverty, material deprivation, oppression inflicted by those who have power are hard to bear. What is truly insufferable, however, is being despised and continuously reminded that one is an inferior and utterly useless being. Fourth World families bring this home to us day by day. Being treated as a person without dignity even by one's own is virtually intolerable. “People treat us like nobodies. Are we dogs to be kicked around as we are [by the authorities]?” This is where the difference lies between poverty and misery. A person in misery suffers an unbearable situation, being considered negligible or, worse, a harmful being who should never have been born, while deep inside he still

3. Joseph Wresinski, “The Very Poor, Living Proof of the Indivisibility of Human Rights” (1988 text prepared for the French Commission on Human Rights). Original translation at: <<https://www.joseph-wresinski.org/en/the-very-poor-living-proof-of-the/>>, p. 4, accessed 16 March 2020.

knows he is a person. To long for dignity, to dream of being someone and yet to be denied this even by those hardly better off than oneself: the neighbours, the grocer, the postman – that is misery. And that is what makes the difference between poverty and exclusion.⁴

The idealisation of poverty and the confused awareness that it is unacceptable and inhumane is another paradox. People in poverty are sometimes considered angels, and sometimes demons.

The historical role of the poor in the fight for justice brings to light another confusion. Karl Marx, a philosopher of a history that moved towards justice, drew a distinction between poverty and extreme poverty in regard to production: on one hand, the productive proletariat and peasantry, capable of waging the class struggle that will lead to change; and on the other hand, a *lumpenproletariat* prepared to do anything in order to survive, including forming an alliance with employers. But this distinction between the good and the bad proletariat, which echoes the eternal distinction between the good and the bad poor person, is not supported by the facts, as Marx himself recognises in his analyses of history.

In his analysis of the revolutions in France, Marx writes that the provisional government in 1849 decided to recruit a mobile guard from the *lumpenproletariat*, which “forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu* [men without hearth or home]”.⁵ He explains that the strategy was to play off one part of the proletariat against the other. “And so the Paris proletariat was confronted with an army, drawn from its own midst, of 24,000 young, strong, foolhardy men.” He adds that the proletariat itself “acknowledged it to be its foremost fighters on the barricades”. Thus, after having set

4. Joseph Wresinski, *Blessed Are You the Poor!* (Paris: Fourth World, 1992), p. 16-17. (First published in French: *Heureux vous les pauvres*, Paris: Cana, 1984.)

5. Karl Marx, “The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850”, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 219. (This volume follows the Russian edition of the book prepared by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Moscow: Political Literature Publishing House, 1966.) (First published in German: “Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich 1848 bis 1850”, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue*, Hamburg, 1850.) Available at: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/ch01.htm>>, accessed 16 March 2020.

them in opposition, he sees the continuity between proletariat and sub-proletariat. More fundamentally, the central paradigm of the class struggle has led Marxism to the paradox of wanting a strong oppressed class to take over the means of production and being incapable of conceiving a role for the people most crushed by oppression.

NAVIGATING PARADOXES: THE WRÉSINSKI APPROACH

The theories on poverty and destitution set out above move from confusion to crippling paradoxes. They contribute to the idea that action is not possible, that extreme poverty will always be with us, and that it's inevitable.

Yet Joseph Wresinski stated that poverty was not inevitable. Where does this certainty come from? He perceived that ideas that come from poverty have not emerged in dominant views. They have not been collected and transmitted. They have not been compiled over the generations. This has two consequences: those who experience poverty look at the world and the culture around them and do not see themselves as part of it. They feel they are irrelevant. They often conclude that it is better to keep quiet about their experience. The violence of extreme poverty remains unspoken. The silence persists. And people who do not experience poverty and cannot help thinking it is disturbing fill the silence with alternative theories and do the thinking instead of the poor. These ideas are external, based on knowledge acquired from a distance, as if through a telescope. Georg Simmel says that, ultimately, poverty can be defined only as receiving assistance. In this way it is defined only by the acts of others, from the outside. Joseph Wresinski wrote: "Educated people are carried away by their own ideas and always end up doing the thinking for others. This is what happened to Lenin and his circle of intellectuals."⁶

People who are living in extreme poverty are prevented from thinking with others and must constantly fight against theories about them, on their behalf, created by others. A point of view that could break this deadlock has historically been missing: that of the people who experience these paradoxes from within. Who knows how people living in poverty experience the tension between basic needs, freedom,

6. Joseph Wresinski, *The Poor Are the Church: A Conversation with Fr. Joseph Wresinski* (interviews with Gilles Anouil) (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002), p. 76. (First published in French: *Les pauvres sont l'Église*, Paris: Le Centurion, 1983.)

and political action? Who knows the efforts, the richness of thought needed to reconcile the suffering of inhuman treatment and the awareness of being a human being despite it all? As Spike Lee says, most of the books on slavery show the dilemma of the owner, never of the enslaved person – the dilemma of the man with his back to the wall invoked by Howard Thurman,⁷ the mentor of Martin Luther King.

Joseph Wresinski spent his life trying to understand why he was considered incompetent at school, why his father was violent, why his mother had only benefactors and no friends, and why there was such contempt of agricultural labourers in his first parish. He said it was only at the age of 40, when he decided to join the residents in the camp of Noisy-le-Grand, who were living in the same poverty his family experienced in Angers,⁸ that he began to understand that his father was a humiliated man.

He could not understand this by himself; he had to find his own people, find ways of understanding with them, through struggling every day and sharing their question: “Are we dogs to be treated like this?” These shared questions became a commitment to take action and created another form of knowledge. Together they moved away from the feeling of inevitability. This forced them to invite people from all backgrounds to join them in their quest. Since his childhood and the early years of his struggle, Wresinski was confronted with ideas that had a crippling effect. At the time, the very existence of poverty was denied. In France in 1950, poverty was thought of as only isolated cases of no social, political, or historical significance. From his camp for homeless people, he had to organise a university seminar at UNESCO to make the fact of poverty exist.

THE PURPOSE OF THE COLLOQUIUM

The colloquium “Rethinking Our World from the Perspective of Poverty, with Joseph Wresinski” is a continuation of this journey. It brings together three groups of researchers working on different issues.

It includes university researchers who constantly strive to question their thinking and who have agreed to let their thinking be challenged by extreme poverty. It also includes life researchers, who have experienced

7. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996). [Editor's note]

8. The city in western France where Wresinski spent his childhood. [Editor's note]

and are still experiencing this poverty and whose very existence is questioned by poverty. In the spirit of Joseph Wresinski, they agree to let others share their existential quest. The effort they put into this is hard to imagine. And finally, it includes action researchers who, constantly questioned by the effects of their actions and inspired by the Wresinski approach, are reinventing with others to find together a way of living without extreme poverty.

These three research groups do not have equal standing in the world, and it will take great tact and care to enable all these different intellects to develop and interact. The aim is not only to enable people who experience poverty from the inside and other people to develop their thinking about poverty, but also more broadly to rethink the world from the perspective of this experienced reality of poverty. In fact, we cannot overcome poverty if we continue to think about the world, politics, God, and science while continuing to exclude the human reality of poverty from our thinking.

The preparatory work for the colloquium had already shown that we can learn a lot from one another – with tact and also without fear – which will enable us to better understand and convey useful concepts for the future.

THE OVERALL SCHEME OF THE COLLOQUIUM

In autumn 2015, it became clear that the centenary year of the birth of Joseph Wresinski would be marked by a colloquium, among other events. But what approach should be taken? Who should be involved in terms of skills and scientific discipline? The thinking of Joseph Wresinski lends itself to analysis in many disciplines: it touches on everything, or almost everything, from law to theology, from sociology to economics, from history to philosophy, from epistemology to political science, and so on.

Of course we took into account what had already been done in the past, particularly the 2008 colloquium held at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, Sciences Po, during which Wresinski's political thinking and important contribution to the thinking on basic rights was explored in depth. These two dimensions are obviously not absent from this colloquium – far from it – but other dimensions have also been introduced.

The seven days of this colloquium do not follow a set pattern, a theoretical vision, but were designed throughout our meetings and

our discussions with people whom we contacted or who expressed an interest. Joseph Wresinski liked to say: “Everything stemmed from a shared experience, never from a theory.”⁹ This premise guided us to approach the Cerisy International Cultural Centre where major intellectual colloquia have taken place for decades, and where people actually live together for a week in order to think together. Edith Heurgon, the director of the centre, agreed and helped us a great deal. The preparatory discussions with Jean-Marc Ferry, Alain Caillé, and others highlighted aspects of Wresinski's thinking of which we had missed the significance. Other aspects of Wresinski's thinking led us to researchers who were working on related issues and who might be interested in coming. The programme was constructed like a mosaic, with the colour scheme progressively revealing elements that could logically be addressed on the same day. Several groupings emerged like this and led to the drafting of the final programme.

History: we consider the history of the very poor, the history of our societies' responses to the question of poverty, the story of Joseph Wresinski and the movement he founded, and the innovations that sprang up through him and his movement.

Philosophy and ethics enable us to reflect on the concept of individual and political responsibility with regard to the issue of extreme poverty and social exclusion. What is our responsibility, as human beings, when it comes to poverty? They also enable us to confront the issue of violence. Extreme poverty is violence; it destroys human relationships, excludes, marginalises, and prevents those who endure it from claiming their rights and fulfilling their responsibilities.

We also address knowledge and culture through various approaches concerning rights: the right to culture; to psychology, with the issue of poverty being transmitted down through generations; to epistemology, with thoughts on the knowledge we need to overcome poverty and how to build up that knowledge.

Although these groupings have some common elements, they are partly arbitrary and partly imposed: some participants we wanted as speakers were available only on specific days. In any case, it would be misleading to think, for example, that the first two days belonged to historians, the following two to philosophers, and the last two to epistemologists. The proposed approach is intentionally multidisciplinary,

9. Wresinski, *The Poor Are the Church*, p. 111.

enriched by the contribution of people who have gained expertise through their work alongside people who live in extreme poverty or through their struggle to free themselves from social exclusion.

In addition to the plenary presentations (mornings) and round tables (afternoons), breakout sessions are also held. These sessions enable one or more speakers to initiate thinking, share experiences, and raise an issue, and then enable everyone at the session to work and think together, with interaction among all the participants and not just with the person who introduced the topic. These breakout sessions mostly feature people who work at the grass-roots level and who are inspired by the Wresinski approach, which they are skilled at putting into practice in their work. Here they present their experiences and the ideas drawn from them.

Finally, Cerisy-la-Salle is an exceptional setting with its buildings, spaces, terraces, and gardens. In the spirit of Edith Heurgon and her team, the informal times before, during, and after meals, during breaks, and in the evenings, are key moments when this learning community that Cerisy seeks to develop is formed and deployed.

And this extraordinary venue also hosts exhibitions, paintings, and other works of art created within ATD Fourth World as a response to extreme poverty. These works, as much as the academic presentations, allow us to enter the mystery of humankind and its irrevocable dignity. Reproductions of some of the artwork can be found in this report.

The following texts are being made available to colloquium participants and other readers to convey the significance of what was experienced in June 2017 at Cerisy-la-Salle and to encourage other people to challenge themselves with ideas from the world of poverty in order to move forward together towards a more fraternal, just, and humane world.



Christian Januth, *Joseph Wresinski, Pastry Chef*, Screen printing

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