

**LIBERTY  
AND  
ECONOMIC  
JUSTICE  
FOR  
ALL**



JAMES E. HUG

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

**S**ober and important voices are rising against a very conservative and defensive mood in the U.S. today. They are asking us to give serious consideration to quietly revolutionary ideas for the sake of a more just, peaceful, and humane world.

A recent New World Foundation Report on public education suggests that economic elitism cripples democracy. Political democracy, it says, cannot be complete without a realignment of our economic values, structures, and policies to make them more egalitarian and democratic. The report concludes:

In 1985 we are still confronting the conflict between political democracy and economic elitism, between education seen as a tool of universal empowerment or as an instrument of selective mobility. We are still in a contest between extending the democratic potential of schooling or imposing the standard mold of meritocracy on new conditions.<sup>1</sup>

A draft letter on economic justice from the U.S. Catholic bishops<sup>2</sup> makes a similar assessment—that the work of the nation's founders will remain incomplete until our traditions of civil rights and political democracy are balanced by an equally developed tradition of economic rights and economic democracy, both for the U.S. and for the world community. It encourages us to take up this challenge as a New American Experiment demanded by our roots and heritage.<sup>3</sup>

Without realignment of our economic priorities, the gap between the rich and poor will continue to widen. The challenge is to educate for citizenship—national and global.

#### **Accepting Economic Rights**

The intuition underlying this challenge is fairly simple: political rights without the material conditions necessary to enable a person to exercise them are relatively meaningless. We make basically the same argument when we claim that private property is necessary to protect a citizen's freedom against the government. Relative economic independence is necessary for the exercise of civil liberties.

There are various lists of economic rights. One of the more complete ones includes the right to food, clothing, rest, and medical care. Then there are the social guarantees that protect these rights, such as our right to security in case of sickness, inability to work, old age, unemployment, and so on; the



Robert Kerly

**“We are learning that economic democracy is essential to political democracy; economic elitism makes a charade of it.”**

right to free initiatives in the economy; the right to a job and safe working conditions; the right to a family wage; and the rights of labor unions and owners.<sup>4</sup>

The poorer individuals become, the more they lack the resources to participate in society and the power to change their disadvantaged position. They have “no voice and no choice.”<sup>5</sup> Without power to change the situation, they are highly vulnerable to being further and further marginalized, their fundamental human dignity ignored and violated. As the U.S. Catholic bishops noted, “*justice is not simply a matter of seeing to it that people’s private needs are fulfilled. It is also a matter of enabling them to be active and productive.*”<sup>6</sup> A society committed to justice—that is, to respecting the human dignity of every individual by enhancing bonds of community solidarity (which requires special attention to the poor and powerless)—must be committed to guaranteeing

both the economic and the political rights of all. We are learning that economic democracy is essential to political democracy; economic elitism makes a charade of it.

### **The U.S. Economy**

By these criteria, the U.S. is not as just a society as it could and should be. More than 35 million U.S. citizens live below the poverty line, 8.5 million are unemployed, and millions more are underemployed or have given up looking for a job in despair. There is a growing and frightening tendency in the nation to accept that level of unemployment as natural.

These figures frequently mask the terrible social costs that poverty and unemployment exact: hunger and malnutrition, increased incidence of family tension, domestic violence, alcoholism, child abuse, divorce, infant mortality, mental disease, crime, homicide, and suicide.<sup>7</sup> For millions of

Americans, the vision of the American Dream is blotted out by the daily struggle for survival and hope—or, even worse, it lingers as a judgment of failure on their best efforts, an instrument of torture for their self-respect, sense of human dignity, and feeling of belonging.

This situation is getting worse. The current "economic recovery" is a recovery for capital. The gap between wealthy and poor continues to grow. Advances in technology have made it profitable to eliminate many well-paid industrial jobs and to move many others to the cheaper labor markets of the Third World. More than five million of these jobs have been lost in the last five years. New jobs that are opening up are in the low-skilled, low-paying service sector. They are jobs without a

future. The New World Foundation Report succinctly describes what is happening to the U.S. economy:

We have then a labor market with the middle dropping out and with competition growing at every level. Contrary to the human capital theories so optimistically put forward by current education influentials, there will *not* be more room at the top to compensate for the losses. The labor market of the future cannot be pictured as a bell-shaped curve, but rather as a bottom-heavy hour-glass. The emerging top will include only a small, elite stratum of well-paid professional-technical employees, who themselves will face growing problems of skill devaluation and intense competition. . . . On the bottom of the hour-glass will be a shrinking number of blue-collar workers, faced with a continuous reduction of labor standards. The bottom will also include a growing segment of relatively skilled but low-paid employees

**"If schools are not to become restless, long-term child-care facilities for an increasingly elitist society, we must restore a vision of the mission of education that encompasses more than preparing the young for occupational futures."**

Robert Kerh



in paraprofessional, technical, administrative, and service fields, a large proportion of them women, as well as the traditional secondary workforce of low-skill, low-paid service jobs which are dead-end, unstable, and rapidly expanding. In addition, there will be a swelling pool of structurally unemployed workers, joining the vast reserve of irregular workers and "hard-core" unemployed.<sup>8</sup>

Greater inequality and the greater injustice it signals promise to become permanent, structural features of U.S. life.

### A Question of Priorities

Is movement toward a more just socioeconomic order impossible? The reigning popular wisdom in the nation today would say that we must face our limits and cut back. In our compassion for the poor, we have been living beyond our means. It is time to tighten our belts and absorb the austere measures necessary to reduce our massive deficit.

A number of facts are glossed over in this account. The brunt of the austere measures is being borne by the poor, the unemployed, the marginalized. The deficit crisis, on the other hand, has been fueled principally by the Reagan administration's tax cuts and massive military buildup—both of which are of far greater benefit to those on the upper end of the economic scale. A major redistribution of wealth and power is occurring—from those who have less to those who have more.

Another fact rarely given adequate public attention is that the annual GNP now amounts to well over \$60,000 for every family of four. With that degree of national wealth, there is no excuse for the poverty, unemployment, and unnecessary suffering that exist. Two prominent economists—one representing a strongly conservative perspective, the other a strongly liberal one—recently agreed publicly that if they are given the mandate, they could put together a package of economic policies that would guarantee full em-



**“Greater inequality and the greater injustice it signals promise to become permanent, structural features of U.S. life.”**

ployment with just wages and no inflation.

The lessons implied by these facts should not be overlooked. The problem is not technical. The problem is not the limits of our national wealth. *The problem is our national economic priorities*, which undermine the democratic liberties that are our national pride.

We need a new national consensus on economic priorities, one that provides the mandate to reshape our economy to serve human dignity and community solidarity more effectively—and for all. We can do that by recognizing and guaranteeing the fundamental economic rights of all our citizens to fulfillment of basic needs and full participation in society.

### International Consciousness Essential

The demands of social justice stretch us even further. Clearly, the decisions and policies of the U.S. have a significant impact on economies around the world—and vice versa. This is just one dimension of the complex interdependence that has resulted from advances in communications and transportation. Nations widely separated by geography, culture, and ideology are now bound together in an intricate global network. Revising U.S. economic priorities will send reverberations throughout the network.

In a context of such great interdependence, it is not enough to be concerned simply about a more just *national* economy. The commitment to justice demands that we attend to the effects our decisions might have on the rest of the world—and especially on those nations with the fewest resources to deal with external economic shocks.

International consciousness is necessary because of the very nature of justice, which is rooted in the requirements of human dignity and community. As such, the claims of justice belong equally to all peoples. We are all brothers and sisters in the one human family, the one global community. What is common to all people is more basic and important than what separates or divides.

If our economic decisions and policies are to be truly just, they must respond to this reality. We cannot be insensitive to the harm they might cause to the people of other nations, especially the poor. Even more, we must shape them so that they contribute positively to the development of a more just global economic order, one that fulfills the basic needs of all and enables their full social participation.

From the point of view of justice, then, we must think of ourselves as global citizens. The perspective of the sovereign nation-state is too limited

and artificial. In many ways it is a political form that we have outgrown. We can no longer afford it if we are sincere in our commitment to socioeconomic justice. Indeed, it may be, as more and more voices are saying, that we can no longer afford it if we hope for the survival of the human species in the nuclear age.

### Challenges for Education

The implications of these reflections for education are potentially far-reaching. The lesson of the bottom-heavy hourglass, for example, should be fairly clear.

Access to rewarding jobs will require greater educational attainment and proficiency, but there will be fewer chances for success even with the fullest schooling. For the great majority, job destinies will not utilize intellectual skills beyond basic literacy...<sup>9</sup>

If schools are not to become restless, long-term child-care facilities for an increasingly elitist society, we must restore a vision of the mission of education that encompasses more than preparing the young for occupational futures. The New World Foundation Report recommends defining that mission in terms of citizenship.

Education for citizenship means that schools should provide children with the social and intellectual skills to function well as members of families and communities, as political participants, as adult learners, as self-directed individuals. It means educating children about the way the world works, and arming them to influence how it works. Citizenship requires basic skills, but it requires other forms of learning as well: critical thinking, social awareness, connection to community, shared values. The call is for educational values which recognize all student needs as legitimate regardless of their labor-market destinies or economic status. The bottom line for democratic education is empowerment, not employment. In fact only an empowered citizenry is likely to alter our economic priorities and reduce the disjuncture between schooling and jobs.<sup>10</sup>



**“There is a growing and frightening tendency in the nation to accept [our] level of unemployment as natural.”**

Education should empower students to recognize that economic rights are integrally linked with political rights and that both are grounded in our basic humanity. Our brothers and sisters around the globe all have the same claim to them as we do. And we all have a responsibility in justice to help each other attain them as fully as possible.

Empowerment for citizenship capable of a wise alteration of national priorities to create a more just global community is a challenging mission for education today. It will require a critical reassessment of many of our economic and social myths as well as our consumption patterns and lifestyles. It will require the formation of new mindsets and values. Professional

educators will have to work out the implications of this mission commitment for curriculums and policy.

While the amount of work involved could be intimidating, its importance and urgency are compelling. Our deep yearning for liberty and justice combines with the threat of continuing local wars of liberation, which could escalate into nuclear tragedy—revealing that the evolution of a more just socioeconomic world order is not only morally desirable; it is necessary for survival and human growth.□

<sup>9</sup>A New World Foundation Report. “The Mission of Schooling: Quality and Equality.” Excerpted with adaptations in *Christianity and Crisis* 45 (March 18, 1985): 90.

<sup>10</sup>Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy.” Available in *Origins* 14 (November 15, 1985): 337–383. Future references are to this first draft and indicate paragraph, not page, numbers.

<sup>1</sup>*Ibid.*, ## 86–89, 241–269.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, #79, taken from *Peace on Earth*, an encyclical letter of Pope John XXIII, 1963.

<sup>3</sup>The phrase is that of Joan Costello from an unpublished paper, “The Child’s Understanding of the Adult Social World,” presented at a conference on “Justice for the Child Within the Family Context,” Loyola University of Chicago, March 26, 1979.

<sup>4</sup>*Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, # 95. See also ## 92–94. Emphasis is in the text.

<sup>5</sup>Harvey M. Brenner, *Estimating the Social Cost of National Economic Policy*, U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, 1976; see Brenner, *Mental Illness and the Economy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973). See also *Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, ## 164–165.

<sup>6</sup>New World Foundation Report in *Christianity and Crisis*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.

**James E. Hug** is a member of the research staff at the Center of Concern, 3700 Thirteenth Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20057.

Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.