



“ Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. It is our solemn duty to come together to ensure that these rights are respected. ”
Father Joseph Wresinski

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What model are we talking about ?

The most recent European Union summit saw a confrontation between different concepts of Europe, and especially of its « social model » or, more broadly, of the model of society which Europe wishes to represent and to offer, at least implicitly, to the rest of the world. The French model as opposed to the "Anglo-Saxon" model, the « Chirac model » versus the « Blair model »: this is the heart of the debate, we are told. Rather than debate, we have witnessed some pretty dreary disputes, marked by the selfish defending of national interests, the lack of any sense of the common weal and the rejection of any solidarity with the economically weaker members of the European Union. Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg and President-in-Office of the Council, spoke well when he said that he was ashamed of the image the summit participants showed to European public opinion and to the world. This is certainly not a model to follow.

Look where you will in Europe, you will not see a single country which has discovered or instituted a model of society, a way of living and sharing citizenship together, which respects the equal dignity of every woman and every man who are its citizens or residents. Nowhere. Everywhere in Europe, in the train stations, on the shopping streets, in the Underground, women and men are reduced to begging. They carry the same placards, they try to sell the same gadgets. All over Europe and in a variety of languages, they sell street papers which have more or less the same contents. From the south of Italy to the north of Sweden, parents are involved in the same struggle to live as a family, to keep custody of their children and to let them grow up in dignity.

Social and economic policies vary: while some countries grant more generous unemployment benefits or minimum income guarantees, others prefer to compel unemployed people to accept any job which comes along, whatever its lack of prospects. One could debate endlessly the advantages and drawbacks of these respective approaches, model against model, but at the end of the day, everywhere, it is the most vulnerable who pay the bill. In this way, the most disadvantaged are drawn into very long term unemployment, a situation which our society accepts all the more readily because it feels it does not need them and their contribution. Elsewhere, they will be the first to be excluded from a system based on the idea that « anyone who wants to, can ». In both cases, whatever policies governments choose, there is no policy which sets itself the only admissible aim: that everybody, without exception, should be able to share in human activity. All policies seem to accept as inevitable that a part of the human race - a part which, certainly, everyone would like to be as small as possible - will be left out of account.

The French Minister of Labour recently demonstrated this attitude of resignation when he said that we are moving « towards a form of full employment with a 6% rate [of unemployment] in five years' time ». Are we so sure that these 6% who will be deprived of the right to work will appreciate this very relative form of full employment? Are we so sure, as the same minister maintains, that this rate corresponds to the rate of natural unemployment in other countries? We take the liberty of doubting it, we who have known, in the days of prosperity and full employment, men and women permanently left out of the world of work, men and women whose children and grandchildren are now swelling the ranks of the long-term unemployed. Their unemployment has not been « natural » : it has devalued them, isolated them, excluded them.

As Father Joseph Wresinski wrote in 1983 : « *Our society accepts as self-evident that collective insecurity should weigh heaviest upon those members of society who are least able to cope with it... When improving a company' s competitiveness means cutting staff, it is the least productive workers in the plant being reorganised who get the sack... Their loss of employment seriously endangers the professional and social insertion of people who are often already vulnerable. Their loss of income puts at risk their ability to meet basic needs. In this situation their period of unemployment cannot be used for retraining or for acquiring other advantages which will help with social insertion at a later stage.* »¹

The French model, the "Anglo-Saxon" model, the European model: none of them has so far taken proper account of our co-responsibility for defeating poverty. The model does not exist, it still has to be worked out and constructed in cooperation with all those who, because they are poor, suffer from extreme social exclusion within our societies.

In the past, Europe influenced the world for better or, sometimes, for the worse. Today, in the context of a globalisation characterised by the relative strengths of the great powers, the voice of Europe will only be credible, heard and respected by others to the extent that the poorest among us become the touchstone for the building of Europe.

Editorial by Eugen Brand, Director General of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, in "Revue Quart Monde", n°195, "Vivre en sécurité", August 2005.

Website: www.rev.uequartmonde.org

¹ Joseph Wresinski, « Enrayer la reproduction de la grande pauvreté [Stopping the propagation of extreme poverty] », mission report to the Minister of State, Minister for Planning and for Town and Country Planning, La Documentation française, 1983, p.104.

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR FOURTH WORLD SOLIDARITY

Secretariat

International Movement ATD Fourth World, Avenue Victor Jacobs 12, B-1040 Brussels
Tel: +32 (0)2 647 99 00 Fax: +32 (0)2 640 73 84 atd.europe@tiscali.be www.atd-fourthworld.org