

BEGGING THE QUESTION

Richard E. Wiehe

On the desk in my study are two pictures. One was taken in 1995. In it, two young black men are seated in front of a backdrop with a mountainous winter scene painted on it. One can discern larger tree trunks in the foreground and fir trees in the distance. The snowy slope of the mountain rolls right up to the wooden frame which supports the backdrop. It appears the whole thing might be the set for a high school musical. One almost expects to see Heidi or a happy band of Swiss yodelers come walking through at any moment. The two young men appear somewhat incongruous in the setting. They are dressed in short-sleeved shirts. The younger of the two, who was 18 at the time the picture was taken, is wearing a white t-shirt with what appears to be an American flag and a Desert Storm logo. He is wearing dark blue denim pants and white, high-top athletic shoes with a black stripe on each side of the laces. The young man on his right appears to be four or five years older. He is wearing work clothes, a light blue, button-up shirt, which reveals a white t-shirt over a powerful-looking upper torso, and a royal blue pair of jeans. His shoes appear to be of dark leather and designed for working. Each man holds a child on his lap. They are brothers and the children are their first-borns. The 18-year-old is holding his six-month-old son. His brother holds his 3 ½ year-old daughter. Both men are dark-skinned and the lighting is rather poor, so their features are somewhat difficult to discern, but each appears to be smiling slightly in the self-conscious manner of someone posing for a family photo.

The second picture was taken approximately 70 years prior to the one just described. It also is a photo of two young men. The two appear to be about 20 years old, about the same age of the brothers in the first picture, but in almost every other respect, the second picture contrasts sharply with the first. For starters, whereas the first photo was taken by a Polaroid camera and is clearly the work of an amateur, the second is set in the studio of a professional photographer. It is black-and-white, of course, but the composition is impeccable and the setting does not involve a painted prop. Rather, the subjects of this portrait stand, shoulder to shoulder, turned slightly toward each other, before an ornate Victorian-style fireplace with an elaborate carving above the wooden mantle. Both men are dressed in dark, three-button suits, with white Sunday shirts, well-polished shoes, and very snappy ties. The man on the left has his hands clasped behind his back. His companion rests his left hand on the back of a parlor chair. Neither man is actually smiling, but the hint of a smile – one might almost suspect a smirk – appears to be on the verge of dawning. And they are white.

If someone were to ask you which pair of men was poor and which was well-off, I suspect you wouldn't have to think about your answer – for surely the well-dressed pair has all the trappings of prosperity while the casually dressed young blacks sitting before the simple stage set scenery appear to be of a humble, if not impoverished, estate. As I happen to be well-acquainted with the men in each photo, I can assure you that by conventional measures of wealth and poverty, appearances in these instances are quite deceiving. The young white men in the older picture are my father and his life-long best

friend, Gustav. Both men emigrated to this country in 1923 from Germany – seeking to escape the hyperinflation and socio-political instability of the Weimar Republic. At the time the picture was taken in 1928, they both were employed at General Electric, earning 31 cents an hour (roughly \$4.10 an hour if we adjust for inflation) and working 44 hours a week. For those of you who are mathematically challenged, that comes out to \$180.40 a week or \$9,020 a year for a 50 week work year. According to the 2011 HHS Poverty Guidelines, anyone earning \$10,980 or less falls below the poverty line. So technically speaking, my father and his best friend were living in poverty – and apparently didn't know it.

The young brothers in the other photo grew up in the slums of Indianapolis. Their mother was addicted to drugs (she abandoned the younger of the two brothers three days after he was born – sneaking out of the hospital to return to life on the streets). By the time that younger child, Fred, was 16, he joined his brother, Albert, as a drug dealer. This was in the 1990s – just as the crack epidemic had moved from the coasts and reached the Midwest – and times for successful drug dealers were good, assuming you could stay alive and stay out of jail. Albert had come to control the distribution of marijuana and cocaine in the area bounded by 16th Street and 38th Street on the south and north, and by College and Meridian on the east and west. In addition to his street dealer network, he ran two crack houses and his income on a good week was about \$14,000. Fred had one crack house and earned about \$4,500. They had police on their payroll, there was no gang warfare at that time, and life was good. Needless to say, neither of them was living below the poverty line. In fact, when adjusted for inflation, the two brothers made enough in one week to surpass the 2012 annual poverty threshold for a two-person household. They had approximately \$18,000 in earnings compared to a \$15,130 annual poverty line income.

Comparing the prospects and circumstances of the disparate pairs of young men separated by time, race, and social status may be mildly interesting to some, but is there a point to be made in all of this? Well, a glib answer might be that appearances can be deceiving. But so too arguably can income measures of poverty and wealth – and it is this latter proposition I would invite you to consider this evening. In the past few months, we have heard a great deal about income disparity, the eroding ranks of the middle class, and the proportion of Americans either living below the poverty line or just above it in a category the Census Bureau has suggested may be termed the near poor. While each of these issues is rather complex – and certainly interrelated – our analysis of the problems and search for possible solutions is, in my opinion, greatly compromised by a serious distortion in how we think about poverty and wealth. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, but to frame this issue more provocatively, I would invite you to consider whether we do not typically beg the question of poverty in most of our discussions of the topic.

My thesis is that politicians, policy makers, and even John Q. Public may be said to be begging the question of poverty when the topic is discussed. I will suggest we do, in fact, beg the question both literally and figuratively at what might be termed micro and macro-analytic levels. At the micro-analytic level, we beg the question when we presume poverty to be defined as essentially a matter of lacking an income sufficient to meet our minimal wants and needs. My contention in this regard is that at best, a paucity of finan-

cial resources may be thought of as a necessary but not sufficient condition of being poor. At the macro-analytic level – and we speak more figuratively here – we beg the question of poverty when we construe it as primarily a personal or individual problem rather than as a marker of socio-economic dysfunction. My contention is that misconstruing poverty at either the micro or macro-analytic level largely precludes or renders impossible any effective, long-term solution to the problem.

Well, that essentially summarizes the argument of the first segment of this essay. Now, in the immortal words of Ed Schultz, host of MSNBC's The Ed Show, 'Let's get to work!' And we will start by discussing what we mean when we speak of begging the question. As the term, begging the question, is often employed rather loosely, let us begin with a quick definition. The Oxford American Dictionary defines the strict meaning as denoting "a logical fallacy in which a conclusion is based on a proposition that is itself in need of proof." Thus, a prosecuting attorney who, in his closing argument to a jury, asserts that if they find the accused innocent they will be returning a dangerous criminal to the ranks of society may be accused of begging the question of the man's innocence. Consider, now, a second statement: "If we want to eradicate the scourge of poverty from America, we need to build a stronger societal safety net and significantly increase job training for our youth – including reform of our schools!"

In what way does this latter example involve begging the question of poverty? Well, if we accept the proposition that a person is poor because he has few or no material possessions – which, by the way, is how the Oxford English Dictionary defines *poor* – and if we believe, further, that being poor involves lacking the means to "procure the comforts and necessities of life" – again an extension of the first definition offered by the OED – then it would seem to follow that the way to mitigate poverty is through transfer payments of one type or the other (i.e., welfare) or through job training programs or both. But suppose that the essence of being poor was not simply lacking material possessions or the means of procuring them. Suppose poverty involved something more than mere material want. Then, quite possibly, welfare programs and job training programs and other iterations of a war on poverty might prove to be less than effective.

There has been much hand wringing over the years, as you may be aware over just such apparent lack of success in eliminating poverty despite billions of dollars spent on such efforts. Why is that? I'm not sure we have enough time this evening to cover all the explanations and demagoguery which have been offered on this topic. One simple explanation is that we have mistakenly taken as a given that poverty is defined purely in terms of material want. We are, in other words, begging the question of poverty. Fortunately for those of us who try to solve social problems by rummaging through dictionaries, the Oxford English Dictionary offers an alternative definition in which being poor is said to be, "ill-supplied, lacking (in some possession or quality)". The question, of course, is whether there is a significant difference between the two definitions. Doesn't having few or no material possessions and by implication lacking the means to procure them equate to being ill-supplied or lacking in some possession? That is 'lacking some possession' may be understood as 'lacking money'. But we are told that being poor may also involve lacking in some quality – that is lacking in something that is nonmaterial. The issue here

is more than a semantic quibble: For the way by which we construe poverty largely determines how we attempt to address it. Welfare payments seek to address poverty by making direct payments to households deemed to have an inadequate income, i.e., “having few...material possessions.” Job training programs, on the other hand, seek to provide people “the means to procure the comforts or necessities of life.” To date, neither approach seems to have done much to mitigate the problem of poverty in this country. Indeed, back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a political scientist by the name of Edward Banfield provoked a firestorm when he suggested in The Unheavenly City and The Unheavenly City Revisited that programs such as the War on Poverty would never be able to provide enough money to get the hard core poor out of poverty because they would invariably squander whatever money they were given. Often, of course, that is true – and presumably is why we now often find that the proposed solutions for poverty in our country involve more job training and/or better schools. But that approach hasn’t worked that well either. Stated somewhat differently, providing people with fish may prevent starvation, but our efforts to teach them to fish have largely been unsuccessful. Could this failure be due to the fact that we don’t, ourselves, know how to fish? Hardly. Could the poor, themselves, be incapable of learning? Possibly, but there is yet another explanation – namely, we aren’t very good at teaching others how to fish, at least not others who come from backgrounds quite different from our own. In short, by presuming poverty to consist primarily of an inadequate income, I suspect that we may end up seeking solutions for it which omit critical factors.

Michael Harrington, a well-known political scientist and an eminent socialist, wrote a very influential book in 1962 entitled The Other America in which he argued that the poverty he found in rural Appalachia and in the urban ghettos was largely out of sight and out of mind for almost all Americans. After John Kennedy confronted the poverty in West Virginia during the 1960 primary there, he asked his advisors for a book which might provide him with some perspective. Harrington’s book is what he read. What is rather remarkable about that book is what Harrington had to say about the new class of poor in post-war America.

Indeed, one of the most important things about the new poverty is that it cannot be defined in simple statistical terms. Throughout this book a crucial term is used: aspiration. If a group has internal vitality, a will – if it has aspiration – it may live in dilapidated housing, it may eat an inadequate diet, and it may suffer poverty, but it is not impoverished....[T]he new poverty is constructed so as to destroy aspiration; it is designed to be impervious to hope.

To claim, as Harrington does, that one may suffer poverty but not be impoverished is to recognize that hope or a sense of aspiration is what is truly essential. The Oxford English Dictionary’s second definition of being poor, the lacking or being ill supplied in some quality, is what he sees as the critical distinction between being poor and being impoverished. I would contend that this distinction is what policy makers have long overlooked in their efforts to deal with the problem in our society, and that this oversight may be attributed in large part to their customary begging of the question of poverty. In this context, it is interesting to return to the two pairs of young men in the photos. Fred and Albert had high incomes, but they continued to live in a slum. Didn’t they have hopes

or aspirations? It's hard to say. I didn't know them when they were living high on the proverbial hog. But I know both of them fairly well now – Fred especially – and my sense is that they tend to live in the moment. They don't seem to think in very realistic ways about the future. Indeed, they don't seem to think much about the future, period! They were then and to a large extent are now still looking to get rich quick. The difference between then and now is that neither of them is any longer trying to make a killing by dealing drugs, if you will pardon the expression. Compare Fred and Albert's circumstances around the time their picture was taken with that of my father and his friend. Although the two young immigrants were living below our present day poverty line in terms of their income, as we have noted, they had high hopes and were filled with aspirations. Attired in the garb of successful members of the middle class, they viewed America as truly a land of opportunity. They had no thought of getting rich – at least not getting rich quickly.

There is one thing I have not yet mentioned about that picture which, I think, tells you all you need to know with respect to their sense of aspiration and of living in what they perceived as a land of opportunity: It is literally a picture postcard. They had copies of their photo made up on postcard stock to send back home to their friends and family in Germany which essentially was saying, 'Come on over; the water's fine!' The snapshot taken of Fred and Albert, by the way, was taken when Fred was visiting his brother in prison at the outset of Albert's 12-year sentence.

The case that aspiration, hope, and a belief in the promise of the future are as critical to a definition of poverty as are income and material assets is based, to this point, on the anecdotal accounts of two pairs of young men. On the one hand, we have individuals who earned incomes that by today's standards would leave them well below the poverty line, but who came to this country filled with high aspirations. On the other hand, we have two young men who were earning six figure incomes as big time drug dealers, but who, nevertheless, were living in the moment and giving very little thought for the future. (One bit of evidence confirming this assessment is that within a week or two of Albert's arrest, Fred had next to no income and very little in the way of material possessions. His brother did have some investments – having purchased an auto body shop on the southwest side of town and a one third interest in Shannon's Irish Pub on north Meridian – but these assets were soon liquidated.) As things turned out, the young immigrants became financially successful and were well regarded in the community while the two brothers are, as previously noted, more or less living hand-to-mouth.

The problem with all of this is that anecdotal evidence is frequently selective rather than representative of the world at large. An obvious rejoinder to all of this, is "So what?" What, if anything, does all of this prove? A certain amount of skepticism is probably warranted. Not every immigrant to America turns out to be another Horatio Alger. Nor, for that matter, does every set of brothers growing up in inner city ghettos end up with six figure incomes dealing drugs. Are we really justified in contending that Harrington's *aspiration* is the factor that is truly necessary to prevent a very low income from being impoverishing? To move beyond the limitations of the fortuitous anecdote, consider the case of the Amish in America. They often fall well below the poverty line and many, if

not most of their number lives in what sociologists sometimes call generational poverty – living at or below the poverty line for two or more generations. Just to give one example, I know an Amish family of 13, whose household income is about \$40,000 annually. The 2012 poverty guidelines issued by the Department of Health and Human Services say that a household of 13 needs an income of almost \$59,000 to rise above the poverty threshold. Thus, by standard definitions of poverty, they are unquestionably poor. But what they most certainly do not lack is a sense of purpose and aspiration in their lives. Nor do they lack a tightly knit family or a supportive community. In other words, although many of the Amish live in what technically would qualify as generational poverty, they do not exhibit behaviors characteristic of a culture of poverty – a culture in which crime, sloth, and vice are prevalent and which is typically conflated, by the way, with generational poverty.

If living in generational poverty results in behaviors which are nonproductive, anti-social, or dysfunctional in one set of social circumstances but does not do so in another set of social circumstances, and if in the former case aspiration is largely absent while in the latter case it is very apparent, we might conclude that being poor is not simply a matter of having a meager income (a micro-analytic perspective). It also suggests, in my judgment, that perhaps poverty might be more productively construed at a macro-analytic level in terms of social institutions which do or do not appear to correlate with the prevalence of aspiration among those living in such an environment. Rather we tend to simply focus on the individual particulars of those deemed to be poor.

In the concluding segment of this essay, I will argue that it is, indeed, our social policies and institutions which lead to the generation and preservation of a class of impoverished people in our country. If we recall that a burgher was a citizen who lived within the protective walls of a medieval city, enjoying certain rights and privileges appertaining to such status, the argument which follows might be thought of as *the beggar/burgher thesis*. For those of you who enjoy an occasional play on words, this section might be incorporated under the heading of ‘Begging, the question of poverty.’

Let us begin by attempting to provide a brief explanation of what is entailed by our so-called beggar/burgher thesis. Essentially, what this thesis maintains is that the middle class, a class which enjoys the full range of political privilege as well as the economic and social benefits bestowed on members of proper or respectable society, that middle class is responsible for creating and maintaining social policies, programs, and institutions which spawn an underclass defined by its awareness that it is not at present nor is it likely to ever be members of the middle class. Those of you who have managed to avoid nodding off thus far may instantly realize that what we are talking about here is how social policies, programs, and institutions may be employed to effectively dampen the hopes, aspirations, and sense of socio-economic promise which the future might hold for a particular group of people. Historically, the underclass of the early American republic certainly included slaves and most women – Abigail Adams, Dolly Madison, and Betsy Ross being, we presume, notable exceptions. Thanks to emancipation, the civil rights struggle, and the various iterations of the feminist movement, being an African-American or a woman no longer automatically relegates one to the underclass – although Rush

Limbaugh, at the moment, seems to be doing his best to change that for at least one of those groups. In contemporary America, I am contending, our policies, programs, and institutions may be thought of as *equal opportunity destroyers*.

How, specifically, does this work, you may be wondering. Well, I offered one example in last year's essay when I spoke about the educational syllogism taught to children from all social strata. If getting a good education is absolutely essential in ensuring a viable future in a modern global economy, and if my grades in spelling, math, and reading are consistently low, I don't have to be a genius to realize that I don't have much of a future. If I don't have much of a future, what am I doing continuing to come to school? And if I am unlikely to ever make it as a middle class American – my teachers are the only middle class Americans I even know – then why should I care? You get the idea.

Our educational system is just one institution which functions to quash the aspirations of a sizable segment of our society. In this case, it is teachers who serve as agents of the burgher class. Other institutions and their respective agents which also serve to teach certain members of our society that they are not likely to become one of us include the welfare system and its case workers, the health care system and its bureaucratic gate keepers, and the so-called justice system, whose agents, the police, are pretty much free to do what they want to members of the underclass. As members of the burgher class, most of us never see the underside of our social system. We aren't in the inner city classrooms where teachers who are burned out from spending too much time in combat zones (to use military parlance) struggle to motivate their students and keep control of their classes. Nor are we in the waiting rooms of the welfare office or the emergency rooms hoping to get medical attention. And finally, most of us have never been around to witness the police beating a vagrant or pressuring a female member of the underclass for sexual favors. But this goes on all the time, and it exacts a very high toll on our society.

The impact of a social system which effectively quashes the aspirations and sense of living in a land of opportunity is hard to measure. One result is the creation of a beggar class mentality which can vary between a sense of hopelessness or depression to a mindset which is essentially out to game the system. Panhandling is just one of the more obvious examples. Panhandling may be thought of as literally begging, but it is almost always a cynical form of gaming burghers who are too naïve to understand what is going on.

The essence of my contention in this final segment of this essay is that poverty in our country is to a significant extent the result of policies and practices which effectively mute any real sense of having a future in middle class America. In creating a beggar class we end up generating poverty, crime, drug abuse, and a host of other problems, which I would maintain, are the markers of a dysfunctional social system. And until we take meaningful steps to correct this dysfunctionality, I fear our problems will only continue.