

## ◆◆ Chapter 15

# *Power, Vested Interest, and Prejudice: On the Need for Critical Thinking in the Ethics of Social and Economic Development*

### *Abstract*

*In this paper, presented at the International Conference on The Ethics of Development, held at the University of Costa Rica (1987), Richard Paul argues that mass education is essential to ethically sensitive economic and social development. There are two main reasons Paul advances to support this view: 1) politicians, despite their rhetoric to the contrary, do not typically respond to ethical concerns unless those concerns square with their vested interests, and 2) the mass media in each country — the main source of information regarding development for most people — must be critically analyzed to understand the ethical issues implicit in social and economic development options. As Paul puts it, “neither the leaders of powerful nations and groups nor their ‘followers’ are likely to analyze or apply the ethical principles relevant to development in a way likely to do justice to those principles. The thinking of the leaders verges toward manipulations, rationalizations, and narrow ways-and-means analysis while the thinking of the followers tends toward naivete, closedmindedness, and intellectual servitude fostered by their restricted sources of information, limited access to education, and traditional egocentric and ethnocentric prejudices.”*

### ◆ *We Have Appropriate Ethical Principles*

The problem of ethics in economic development is neither verbal nor philosophical, but operational. It isn't that appropriate ethical principles have never been formulated. On the contrary, one could easily identify and set out appropriate ethical principles. The problem is, rather, how to make those principles morally operational, to put them into action when policies and decisions are formulated and implemented by persons and groups in power.

In the next few paragraphs I will provide an incomplete but illustrative list of some moral principles relevant to economic development. For example, the U.S. Catholic bishops, in a pastoral letter on the economy, gave the following “basic and social moral principles” as “guidelines for economic life:”

- 1) Every economic decision and institution should be judged in light of whether it *protects* or *undermines* the *dignity* of the human person. The economy must be at the service of all people, *especially* the poor.

- 2) Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community. The obligation to "love our neighbor" has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader commitment to the common good.
- 3) Everyone has a *right to participate* in the economic life of society. No person or group should be unfairly excluded or unable to contribute to the economy.
- 4) All members of society have a *special obligation* to the poor and vulnerable. It is our duty to speak for the voiceless, defend the defenseless, and assess lifestyles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor.
- 5) Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community. All people have a right to life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, education, and employment.
- 6) Society as a whole, acting through private and government institutions, has the moral responsibility to enhance human dignity and protect human rights.

Similar or supplemental principles have been formulated in the U.N. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" (U.N. General Assembly resolution 2200 of 16 December 1966) and the U.N. "International Bill of Human Rights" (U.N. General Assembly resolution 217 of 10 December 1948).

More recently, the U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development issued a report prepared by 21 commissioners who conducted public hearings on five continents, which concluded 1) that resources must be transferred from the wealthy industrial nations to the poorer developed nations, 2) that global military expenditures (said to be now \$1 trillion a year) use resources that might be employed "more productively to diminish the security threats created by environmental conflict and the resentments that are fueled by widespread poverty," and that "sustainable human progress" can be achieved only through a system of international cooperation that treats economic growth and environmental protection as inseparable.

This report is quite consistent with the ethical principles cited in the American Catholics bishops' letter and the basic U.N. declarations of human rights. The facts upon which they base their ethical judgments are generally accepted by the scholarly community. But the steps being called for sharply contrast with the fundamental mode of operation of powerful nations and groups. Let us now consider why ethical principles are generally moot in the world of economic and political power.

◆ *There Are No Practical Incentives  
for the Powerful to Comply*

If actions speak louder than words, then the powerful nations and groups (for example, international corporations) tell us that there is no

reason to limit the pursuit of their vested interests, profit, and advantage because of the demands of ethical principles.

The overwhelming majority of nations have condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for example, but this condemnation has not persuaded the Soviets to withdraw. The overwhelming majority of nations and the World Court have condemned the U.S.-sponsored invasion of Nicaragua, but the condemnation has not persuaded the U.S. government to desist. Amnesty International and other organizations have documented the extensive use of torture, assassination and terrorism by many nations, but have failed to significantly reduce these ethical violations. Although powerful nations and groups attempt to maintain a positive image in the world press, clearly this image-fostering has little to do with ethical scruples or a willingness to respond to ethical critique. Furthermore, powerful nations spend a great deal of money on covert actions of their intelligence wings enabling them to evade responsibility for much of their own unethical behavior. Hence the fact, for example, that Idi Amin was brought to power by collaborative efforts by the CIA, MOSSAD (Israel), and the MI6 (Britain) is not common knowledge even though scholarly documentation is readily available. Consequently, nations can easily take a strong public stand condemning terrorism while financing it with a lot of money and technical expertise.

The amoral and immoral activities of powerful nations and groups, whether overt or covert, are often at odds with the social, political, and economic development of less powerful nations and groups, so there is a crucial link between the manner in which power is obtained and used and the problems of third world development.

Do not assume I am implying that the leaders of powerful governments and groups are self-consciously or deliberately amoral or immoral in the formulations of their policies and decisions. This I do not intend or believe. Rather my view is that many who rise to political and economic power have highly developed their capacity for rationalizing their vested interests and ignoring viewpoints or lines of reasoning which question what they do. Most discussions over pressing policy decisions focus on ways and means for advancing specific interests; to raise ethical issues in such discussions would seem to the participants "irrelevant", "idealistic", or "hopelessly philosophical". If nothing else, groups vying for power would hesitate to restrict their own use of power, based on ethical considerations, while competing groups, in their view, are not so restricted. Furthermore, since competing groups, in their view, tend to drift toward considering the competing "other" as the "enemy", restricting their activities based on ethical considerations appears to them as "folly".

Jerome Frank has described this tendency with respect to the phenomenon of war in the following way:

The power of group relationships to determine how the members of groups perceive each other has been neatly shown by the vicissitudes of this image, which always arises when two nations are in conflict and which is

always the same no matter who the conflicting parties are. Enemy-images mirror each other — that is, each side attributes the same virtues to itself and the same vices to the enemy. “We” are trustworthy, peace-loving, honorable, and humanitarian; “they” are treacherous, warlike, and cruel. In surveys of Americans conducted in 1942, the first five adjectives chosen to characterize both Germans and Japanese (enemies) included warlike, treacherous, and cruel, none of which appeared among the first five describing the Russians (allies); in 1966 all three had disappeared from American characterizations of the Germans and Japanese (allies), but now the Russians (no longer allies, although more rivals than enemies) were warlike and treacherous. In 1966 the mainland Chinese, predictably, were seen as warlike, treacherous, and sly. After President Nixon’s visit to China, these adjectives disappeared from our characterization of the Chinese, whom we now see as hardworking, intelligent, artistic, progressive, and practical.

The image of the enemy creates a self-fulfilling prophecy by causing enemies to acquire the evil characteristics they attribute to each other. In combating what they perceive to be the other’s cruelty and treachery, each side becomes more cruel and treacherous itself. The enemy-image nations form of each other thus more or less corresponds to reality.

Of course much of the use of economic resources is motivated today by considerations seen as crucial to the “cold war”. Economies and economic and political policies are deeply tied into the role nations and groups appear to play in relation to this struggle between the U.S. and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies. The superpowers try to prevent anyone from remaining outside of their strategic decisions and policies.

Most citizens find it very difficult to make reasonable ethical judgments about questions of development, when most of their information comes from the public media which are heavily influenced (when not overtly controlled) by a perspective on development of powerful groups.

The picture I am painting is as follows. The leaders of powerful nations and groups are involved in an intense struggle for power, within the context of which ethical principles seem irrelevant or somehow intrinsically embedded in their own vested interests. On the other hand, the majority of citizens in the world are provided with information from sources that are tied, in large part, to these same powerful vested interests. Thus, neither the leaders of powerful nations and groups nor their “followers” are likely to analyze or apply the ethical principles relevant to development in a way likely to do justice to those principles. The thinking of the leaders verges toward practical manipulations, rationalizations, and narrow ways and means analysis while the thinking of the followers tends toward naïveté and closedmindedness fostered by their restricted sources of information, limited access to education, and traditional ethnocentric prejudices. The misinformation and disinformation fostered by the vested interests shape the media representations making the question of development a puzzle to most.

◆ *There Is a Need to Foster Critical Thinking  
in the Education of the Ordinary Citizen*

There is little hope that the leaders of powerful nations and groups will of their own volition take ethical considerations seriously in formulating policies and practices that bear on the well-being and development of all. They must be pressured by those not deeply involved in the struggle for political and economic power. But such persons are traditionally ill-prepared to exercise the critical thinking necessary to address the problem of development. Though the relevant ethical principles have been formulated, ordinary people have not been taught those formulations. They have not been encouraged to seek out sources of information not readily accessible in their national public media nor in how to analyze the media critically. They have not developed the conceptual sophistication to see through the bias of their own groups' conceptualizations.

Unless educators in all countries can begin to foster genuine critical thinking in schools accessible to most people, or some other means is developed or generated for helping people free themselves from the self-serving manipulations of their own leaders, it is doubtful that "ethical reasoning" will play its appropriate role in social and economic development. Ethical reasoning, to be effective, cannot be "uncritical" for ethical principles must be applied in the context of human action and interest heavily polluted by distortion and one-sidedness, by vested interests portrayed in the guise of ethical righteousness.