

The End of Poverty

Présenté à la Semaine de la critique du Festival de Cannes 2008, The End of Poverty bouleversa le public par la rigueur imparable de ses arguments. Fruit de deux ans de tournage en Bolivie, Venezuela, Pérou, Inde et Kenya, le documentaire pamphlétaire de Philippe Diaz démontre par des témoignages et des cas terriblement concrets comment le capitalisme de l'époque coloniale s'est vu systématiquement remplacé dans les lieux les plus pauvres de la planète par une oppression économique tout aussi féroce. A travers des questionnements implacables sur la mondialisation, la dette paralysante, les écarts toujours pires entre pays industrialisés et tiers-monde, le FMI et la Banque mondiale, c'est un film cinglant et nécessaire, en ces temps où les gouvernements trouvent en quelques heures des centaines de milliards pour sauver les banques en péril, mais rechignent à se démenter autant pour œuvrer à The End of Poverty. Sur ce film qui vient de sortir en Belgique, Christine Pagnouille nous communique une présentation signée par Philippe Diaz.

In a world where we have so much wealth, with modern cities and plentiful resources...how can we still have so much poverty that people must live on less than \$1 per day? Where entire families live in one small room in squalid informal housing settlements, far away from skyscrapers and city centers, where they don't have the means to take care of themselves?

Where do we have to look to understand how it all started, where some started to become rich and others poor?

The men who would be known as the Conquistadors and the Colonizers came from Spain and Portugal and later from the United Kingdom and Holland. They stole all the riches of the Incas and the Mayas—all the gold and silver, religious artifacts and jewels—and then started to confiscate the land, which destroyed the natural economy of the people. Such a practice had started long before in Europe, where the upper classes seized communal land from poor families, thus depriving them of their livelihood.

Land was confiscated and appropriated by the Conquistadors and the colonizers throughout South America, Asia and Africa, either by force or by imposing taxes on heads and huts that the people couldn't pay.

Today, more than 500 years later, dozens of years after the independence of their countries, people still don't have their lands back, which are still in the hands of large land owners and transnational corporations.

Having had their natural economy destroyed forced the people to work for their new masters. It is estimated that today 60 to 80 million people still live in slave-like conditions all over the world. They work sometimes with their families, in rural areas on plantations and in mines, as well as in cities in exchange for food and shelter.

The European Empires were built on riches stolen from the colonies and on cheap or free labor provided by the slaves. The gold mines of Brazil and the silver mines of Bolivia, like Potosi, provided the European Empires with the initial capital needed to start and finance their industrial revolutions.

The fortunes created were so huge, that the hill of Potosi was soon represented as the Virgin Mary in religious art.

The Pope himself gave Africa to the Portuguese crown and South America to the Spanish. But the Spanish empire was so indebted because of its holy war against Islam that these riches benefited its creditors in Northern Europe, instead.

In Bolivia, in the bowels of the richest mine in South America, the miners of Potosi have built a museum to honor the memory of their ancestors and their loss.

To maintain this level of wealth extraction, the conquerors needed to keep their colonies in a state of dependency. They assigned a function to each country or region as the producer of certain minerals or a certain crop like tea, coffee, cacao or sugar cane that could be exported back to the mother country.

This imposed monoculture plunged these countries into a locked economy and into a state of total dependency. The survival of their people now depended on the good will of the motherland from which they had to import food. The consequences of that practice can still be seen 500 years later.

Having obtained natural resources and free labor, the Europeans now needed to create new markets for their own productions. They separated agriculture from industry, thus preventing the farmers from making their own tools, clothes and other utensils and transforming them into commodity buyers. All existing industries were destroyed and the colonies were forced to buy manufactured goods and equipment from their colonial masters.



The main legacy of the Colonizers was the change in mentality, religion and culture. They came with a Bible in one hand and a rifle in the other preaching the exclusivity of salvation and imposing Christianity by force upon all destroying any indigenous religious item they could find.

The Conquistadores and the colonizers introduced the concept of superiority in terms of race and culture in which the indigenous people were considered objects destined by God to slave for the white man. This created millions of marginalized people who still today haven't recovered their place in society. In these times, no equality would be tolerated between the white man and the colored one either in church or in state. Today, while a mass is celebrated in the Cathedral of Sucre, the former Bolivian capital, the old indigenous people who dare to enter will still sit on the ground.

At the same time in the next-door chapel built for the indigenous people, a local band tries to recapture their lost culture and traditions.

The belief in a collective form of social organization was the indigenous people's best protection against a commodity economy, something for which they had no desire. They believed in communal property and public utility where the assets of the group were shared by all. This is precisely what the Europeans had to replace with the concept of individualistic interest, which drove the expansion of Europe.

The accumulation of resources in the northern hemisphere created this huge imbalance making the North extremely wealthy, allowing Europe to develop its industry and to create consumer societies, while people living the South became destitute, only able to watch their natural economy being destroyed and replaced by a commodity economy.

When the countries of the south won their independence, the accumulated debts of the colonial powers used to open new markets were transferred to the newly formed governments in total violation of international laws. The only solution offered by the North was more debt with extremely high interest in order to repay the initial one. These newly formed states immediately lost their sovereignty and became even more dependent upon the northern countries, which could then dictate policies on agriculture, trade, and customs, and give special privileges to foreign corporations, such as monopolies over mineral extraction or monoculture exploitation.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the entire third world had been split up amongst the powers of the North. The two world wars forced the North to create new tools to stabilize the now global economy. The IMF and the World Bank were created with such an agenda but rapidly turned their focus toward the Third World where new leaders trying to bring economic independence to their countries had emerged.

The reaction was swift and used all the tools available to bring these countries back to their previous role, like the loans of the World Bank and the structural adjustment programs of the IMF. These would later lead to the crises in Latin America, Asia and Russia and plunge millions below the poverty line. This new U.S.-born economic model became known as neo-liberalism and the set of policies used to enforce it became the Washington Consensus which forced all economies to let the market govern everything.

Neo-liberalism managed to bankrupt many of the economies of the south which allowed international capital to take over. This was achieved by imposing a new form of structural violence that was used for decades to maintain these countries in a state of under-development. Such violence was implemented by the dictators of the South and their repressive apparatus which finally brought social unrest that was unkind to the free market economies. The Special Agents and Economic Hit Men were born and became the new less visible means to maintain such control over the globe's resources.

For decades, poverty reduction and development programs have failed to confront the different forms of power and the structural violence that hold more than two thirds of the world in dire straits. Our chosen economic model has created a global situation in which today less than 25% of the world's population uses more than 80% of the planet's resources while creating 70% of its pollution.

Our chosen economic system always was and still is financed by the poor. They did so first by giving up their land and their access to natural resources, then by financing its expansion through debt repayment, unfair trade, and unjust taxes on their labor and consumption. In addition, by forcing them to overpay for energy, food, and other basic necessities, the North ensures that poverty will deepen and inequality will increase.

Philippe Diaz