

The Poverty Of Leftism: Arguments From The Sewers

Readers may be appalled to learn that child poverty in rich countries has actually **risen** during the last decade.

We, on the other hand, are indifferent to – nay, quietly satisfied with – this development.

That is because poverty has changed. In the 19th and early 20th centuries a substantial proportion of the population lived in conditions that were uncomfortable, painful, degrading and terrifying. Child mortality was high for various reasons such as bad sanitation, malnutrition, and so on. Leftists wanted to do something about this using government power. Their argument prevailed. Sewer systems were built by the government, and did indeed improve sanitation.

Subsequently, people became less poor and child mortality declined. This was only partly due to the presence of sewers. Nutrition, working and living conditions, clothing, literacy and so on were all improved primarily by improving technology for which market forces were almost entirely responsible.

Nevertheless, Leftists were flushed with success.

They managed to make a case for more and more state intervention in the economy over the following century or more, deriving their argument from the sewers. Unfortunately, the state never really had another success on the scale they had achieved with the sewage system, while on the other hand they caused many collective disasters. For example, the welfare state herded poor people into tower blocks containing hundreds of flats that were so **badly designed** that they rapidly became uninhabitable. Criminals could easily cover the single entrance or lurk in the elevators and so used a tower block's design against its inhabitants. As economists like **Hayek** pointed out, the state was chronically prone to wasting vast resources on such mistakes because it is relatively unaccountable compared to institutions on the market.

Leftists were not daunted by the total crashing failure of their world view, and the fact that their entire *raison d'etre* had disappeared along with the poverty that they had bemoaned. They simply redefined the word poverty. They set up a tradition of redefining it in such a way that it would last for ever.

Hence the definition of child poverty given in the UNICEF **report**:

Hence the definition of child poverty used in this report and widely accepted by policy-makers in many OECD countries: a child is to be considered poor if the income available to that child, assuming a fair distribution of resources within the family and making allowances for family size and composition, is less than half the median income available to a child growing up in that society.

This new definition of poverty has no moral significance. It has nothing to do with relieving suffering, only with justifying continued Leftism. It is arbitrary and ridiculous. It is economic nonsense: according to it, if Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and a dozen other billionaires and their entire companies, were to move to Belgium, child poverty in Belgium would by definition shoot up drastically, even though every last person in the country would be better off as a result. That is, in effect, what has happened to cause the scare headline with which we began.

Underlying these flaws in the prevailing definition of poverty is the inescapable fact that there is no way to make people systematically better off simply by shuffling money around by force. The creativity of individuals tempered by the criticism of the market can produce ideas and inventions that will make the world a better place. UNICEF's beloved socialist bureaucracy, spiteful levelling and pointless bean counting cannot do this and should, at most, confine itself to the sewers from whence it came.

Sun, 03/27/2005 - 04:25 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Average and median

It's clear from the second paragraph on that UNICEF web site you link to that UNICEF does not know the difference between an average and a median. This does not bode well for - well, anything, really.

by a reader on Sun, 03/27/2005 - 05:57 | [reply](#)

The End of Poverty

All formulaic poverty indicators based on relative incomes are terminally flawed.

I propose instead a basic refinement to the present formulas: the Swarzenagger Dumbness Equation. The SDE states that in theory as well as in widely observed practice Sustainable Poverty will always equal Total Adult Dumbness divided by Population ($SP = TAD/P$).

Difficult as the TAD variable is to measure in the laboratory of world affairs, the SDE dumbness equation is a lasting indicator of true poverty since it is obvious causally that no peoples can long succeed if their adults are creatively impoverished. Societal

dumbness unfortunately is a self-sustaining principle until it is no

longer viable.

Hence, to ultimately end poverty in free societies, remove all formulaic poverty indicators and replace them with praxis: the infinite variable of applied Human Creativity Factor (HCF) which fortunately is very simple math.

Overall mental wealth is not only infinitely powerful. It is always also reducible to the power of one. Fostering mental wealth is equivalent to ending poverty, one person at a time.

Practical economics. Practical math.

Few economists and no political hacks need apply.

by a reader on Sun, 03/27/2005 - 14:10 | [reply](#)

Averages

Bryan Caplan recently offered some **good examples** of how deceptive averages can be.

Gil

by **Gil** on Mon, 03/28/2005 - 07:50 | [reply](#)

Median

Umm since they say poverty is less than half of median, if Bill Gates moves somewhere it doesn't change anything. Bring whole companies and ... well might go up a little but not much.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Fri, 04/01/2005 - 06:18 | [reply](#)

Relative Poverty

...and if they incinerated the assets of the rich, then poverty (in the contemporary Leftist definition) would be slashed. One frequently gets the impression that such a measure would not be entirely unwelcome to egalitarians....

by Paul on Tue, 04/01/2008 - 17:37 | [reply](#)

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