

*On a Coalition of the Poor and the Concerned*

I should say from the standpoint of my own Christian religious belief that, whatever else it means to be authentically religious, it means to be a proactive member of a certain coalition: the coalition of all human beings who are poor and deprived, on the one hand, and of all other human beings who, having identified with their cause, are in solidarity with them, on the other.

John Kenneth Galbraith has this to say about what I take to be the same coalition:

"The responsibility for economic and social well-being is general, transnational. Human beings are human beings wherever they live. Concern for their suffering from hunger, other deprivation and disease does not end because those so afflicted are on the other side of an international frontier. This is the case even though no elementary truth is so consistently ignored or, on occasion, so fervently assailed" (2).

"The new political dialectic," in the sense of "the economic and political alignment today," is very different from the old dichotomy of capital and labor. "On one side, there are now the rich, the comfortably endowed and those so aspiring, and on the other the economically less fortunate and the poor, along with the considerable number who, out of social concern or sympathy, seek to speak for them or for a more compassionate world" (6, 7).

"[T]he problems and possibilities of the human race do not respect national frontiers; in a civilized society there is concern for the world as a whole. And there must be special concern for the millions and hundreds of millions who live outside the boundaries of the more fortunate nations. These . . . are people too" (121)

"Because in the modern polity there are two groups that are unequal in power and influence, democracy has become an imperfect thing. On the one hand, . . . there are the favored, the affluent and the rich, not excluding the corporate bureaucracy and the business interest, and on the other, the socially

and economically deprived, along with the considerable number who, out of concern and compassion, come to their support. It can be, and most clearly is, an unequal contest" (138 f.).

"Democracy has its compelling requirements. There must be a clear perception of the goals to which the majority is, or should be, committed. . . . And there must be organization to mobilize voters and persuade legislators and Presidents in support of those goals. In recent times the nature and magnitude of this effort have become wonderfully clear.

"Money, voice and political activism are now extensively controlled by the affluent, the very affluent and the business interests, and to them much political talent is inevitably drawn. The expression of their goals is then accepted as public opinion and, a significant point, is so designated by the media every day. In the United States the Republican Party is avowedly on the side of the fortunate, and to the influence and wealth of the latter the Democratic Party, or many of its members, are also attracted. The result, or at a minimum the possibility, is a two-party system in which both parties respond in policy and action to the needs and desires of the well- and richly endowed.

"In the good society voice and influence cannot be confined to one part of the population. In the United States the only solution is more active political participation by a coalition of the concerned and the poor. And their instrument must be the Democratic Party, for this has been its past role and the source of its past success. It has traditionally spoken for effective action by the state on behalf of the less advantaged when that was required. And it has resisted the currently avowed tendency to identify government as a burden when it comes to the aid of the poor but not when the needs or preferences of the affluent are being addressed" (141).

"[T]he central flaw of the good society is not democracy but that democracy is imperfect. Only when all vote—all but the eccentric few—will the good society achieve its urgent goals.

"It is inevitable that critics . . . will say as with one voice that what is here written is out of step with the times. The fortunate, including those who speak for them and those allied in politics, are securely in command. They are the political reality; so they will be for the foreseeable future.

"Not necessarily. Let there be a coalition of the concerned and the compassionate and those now outside the political system, and for the good society there would be a bright and wholly practical prospect. The affluent would still be affluent, the comfortable still comfortable, but the poor would be part of the political system. Their needs would be heard, as would the other goals of the good society. Aspirants for public office would listen. The votes would be there and would be pursued. As now with the safety net, health care, the environment and especially the military power, the good society fails when democracy fails. With true democracy, the good society would succeed, would even have an aspect of inevitability" (142 f.).

(All page references are to *The Good Society: The Humane Agenda*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996.)

20 April 2003