

Obama Deplores World Poverty: Welcome to the Theatre of Absurd

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US President Barack Obama is the latest voice from the “great and good” to bemoan the lack of achievement in the United Nation’s Millennium goals, first declared 10 years ago, to drastically reduce world poverty and generate sustainable development. Earlier in the week, former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and ex-UN chief Kofi Annan espoused similar sentiments of disappointment with the fight against poverty and all its miseries. Welcome to the Theatre of Absurd.

Here we have the very managers and apologists for the economic system that generates poverty and environmental destruction on a massive scale seeming to lament those manifestations. Not only that, but they affect a demeanour of brooding puzzlement over why poverty remains so entrenched across the world, with over one billion people (and counting) deprived of basic necessities for a decent life.

Obama’s foray was particularly absurd and insidious. While he oversees a foreign policy involving mass murder and war crimes in several countries, Obama exhorts to the world to get serious about fighting poverty and human suffering. With his typical rhetoric of “deep concern” that sounds increasingly hollow, the US president said that we need to move beyond “managing poverty... to provide paths out of poverty”. He deplored “dependence” on Western aid (sic) and called for greater accountability among poorer nations.

There are several self-serving myths here that, if inculcated, help to reduce not poverty but the public’s understanding of the real cause of poverty. First of all, Obama and his ilk are projecting themselves as having some kind of moral authority because they appear concerned for humanity. This is particularly absurd in the case of Obama given his record of exacerbating poverty, suffering and death all over the planet. Thus, with rhetorical flourish, the enemies of genuine human development somehow are able to appear as guardian angels and escape accountability – accountability that Obama ostensibly recommends – for the misery that they help inflict on a daily basis.

A second insidious mental framework being inculcated is with the use of the words “dependence” and “accountability”. The sanctimonious implication is that the scourge of poverty in Africa, Asia and the Americas is the curse of “backward people” who are resistant to adopting Western development (sic). Perhaps with his own African ethnicity, Obama felt entitled to spout such racist cant.

The great irony is that it is not the people of Africa and elsewhere who are dependent on the West, but rather it is the Western economic system of elite enrichment that is dependent on maintaining conditions of poverty in Africa and the globe generally.

A third myth that Obama's soliloquy on world poverty attempts to inculcate is that poverty is somehow the exclusive domain of foreign, and again, backward lands. The implication is that there is a distinction between the structural causes of poverty in Africa, for example, and recession in North America. A few decades ago when US workers happened to have a relatively larger share of wealth, the distinction between "developed" and "undeveloped" nations may have had some semblance of credibility.

But with as many as 20 million Americans now out of work and nearly 40 million individuals in the US receiving food aid, it is today clearer than ever that poverty and massive suffering is a worldwide human condition generated by the very economic system that Mr Obama presides over. The trouble for him and his other apologists is that the contradiction of elite wealth coexisting with massive poverty has become so patent and palpable that any rhetorical flourish to dissemble otherwise is now truly absurd.

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