

PURPOSELY FORGETTING POVERTY

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A SEDER FOR EVERYONE

AT A PASSOVER SEDER one of the guests at the table said how lucky we were to live in a country where there was no longer any poverty and hunger. He took his privilege for granted, which was hardly surprising given this was a very privileged upper middle-class white group of both Jews and non-Jews. I mention this only to give a sense of what it must be like to be poor and live in a world where you are continually judged by the non-poor in almost all of your situations, from welfare to work to housing and education. This very privileged and well-meaning guest was up on his political correctness and thus knew the right things to say on issues of sexism, racism and nutrition but really had no sense of both hunger and poverty. This at first seemed shocking, since the Seder deals with the misery of the powerless Hebrews and their decision to flee in the face of overwhelming power. But here and now for the poor in the United States there is no possibility of flight and nowhere to go, and even further only the privileged can afford to flee. Ironically, the well-meaning guest seems to know all the details of the Seder but misses its point. Thus, Elijah is still waiting outside the door, still without anyone to listen to his prophecy of the coming of the Messiah.

The well-meaning guest is like current-day economists and businessmen that talk about all the new opportunities of global capitalism but forget that global capitalism still forces billions of people in the world to live on less than two dollars a day.¹ Currently, conservative, neo-liberal economists believe that all economic problems can be resolved by just reducing the involvement of government in the free market.² They believe that the private interest of global capitalism is the same as the general interest. They believe that the seemingly political and social problems only need technical economic remedies. But these neo-liberal economists are forgetting that democracy isn't necessarily beneficial for the specific, individual interests of corporate capitalism. The economists also forget that armed with their science they can still never answer a simple question about the United States labor force. Why can't the capitalist economy produce middle class jobs for over half of the population in the United States? These, "dismal" scientists ignore the class hardships for an enormous number of working people and continue to produce optimistic economic forecasts for the few that can take

advantage of them. Are neo-liberal economists just ignorant of the lives of the majority of Americans or do they just believe that “trickle down economics” will really make “all boats float?” Are they purposely ignorant or has their fetishism of their mathematical models made them blind to the real hardships of ordinary people?

Even as poverty in the United States has been both racialized and feminized, it is also an issue of class. It is about the resources that are required to live a normal life in this society – what Weber called life chances – that is, the opportunities for jobs, wages, education, health care, housing and the access to culture. But the ignoring of these class issues has spread unabated. This seems to be true of those in power in general. To put it succinctly, it is that the oppressors cannot see the impact of their oppression on the oppressed. The powerful are unable to see the poor and the powerless through their own eyes, thus the poor are seen as incompetent and/or mentally challenged, i.e. constitutionally lazy. Their poverty is their own fault, even though fully half of the population lives below the median family income and about 60% is living in hardship as a result of the costs of maintaining their lifestyle and are forced to live in significant debt.³

This willful ignorance about these hardships of life is seen at almost every point in this society. Economists parade their statistics about corporate profits and economic growth as if they are unaware of at least two of their failures. First, they fail to understand the actual human relations that lie behind their statistics. They are cynical about the actual description of the daily lives of the have-nots produced by ethnographers and journalists who spend enormous amounts of time studying the lower classes. Such realistic accounts are dismissed as anecdotal. Second, they fail to understand that their statistics are not absolutes but merely representations. Like all representations they are approximations of reality. They allow for heuristic understanding and suffer from the crisis of representation, what Whitehead called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” that is, “mistaking the abstract for the concrete.”⁴

Here I retell the Seder story as a way to get to the key question for this article, which is how the privileged guest was ignorant of tens of millions of poor people who live in the United States of America and billions more who live around the world. This is typical in a society in which everyone is assumed to be middle class and in which the poor are treated like David Sudnow's terminal patients who the doctors treat as dead before they are dead.⁵ Still the poor are forgotten, ignored and as some say they are invisible.

MEMENTO AND PURPOSEFUL FORGETTING

Forty years ago Michael Harrington told us of the poor who live in the other America and who are invisible to those who are not poor: "The millions who are poor in the United States tend to become increasingly invisible. Here is a great mass of people, yet it takes an effort of the intellect and will even to see them."⁶ Today, David Shipler tells us that to see the working poor, "The first step is to see the problems, and the first problem is the failure to see the people. Those who work but live impoverished lives blend into familiar landscapes and are therefore overlooked. They make up the invisible, silent America that analysts casually ignore."⁷ All these years and the poor still can't be seen.

Harrington's invisible poor, though seemingly true at the time he conceived it, is too passive an interpretation of why poverty was and still is ignored by most Americans and how the poor are treated in the United States. Forgetting the poor is a much more active and purposeful process. The poor are intentionally forgotten and willfully ignored. Jean-Paul Sartre would say, to those to whom the poor are invisible that they are in bad faith. For Sartre, bad faith is a form of willful ignorance and makes the denial of truth and the flight from freedom possible. Sartre writes, "the first act of bad faith is to flee what it cannot flee, to flee what it is."⁸ I also argue that over all of these years the impact of many excellent academic studies of poverty has been forgotten, and that bad faith has been dominant. The poor are forgotten and their aid is continually cut. Thus the war against poverty is forgotten or purposely and wrongly remembered as a failure that should be forgotten. The number of poor people is incorrectly counted and the willful ignorance of this fact and the fact that we have the most poverty of the richest countries of the world both relatively and absolutely is also ignored.⁹ This purposeful forgetting of this fact has a very important impact on social policy: it limits what can be done not only about poverty but also about the experience of hardship in the United States of America for the middle class (e.g., taxes, medical care, etc.) We have also forgotten how to be critical, meaning that it goes unnoticed for most people that American Capitalism is not working for most of the population and that poverty is the most extreme case of the failure of capitalism.

The notion of a willful ignorance combined with Sigmund Freud's notion of purposeful forgetting provides another perspective on the invisibility of the poor. The poor can't be seen because Americans are not motivated to see them. Thus, they willfully and purposely forget that they have seen them.

Freud says, “forgetting impressions, scenes or experiences nearly always reduces itself to shutting them off. When the patient talks about these ‘forgotten’ things he seldom fails to add: ‘as a matter of fact I’ve always known it; only I never thought of it.’”¹⁰ Freud uses purposeful, motivated, intentional forgetting in his analysis of his own forgetting. He observes, “In every case the forgetting turned out to be based on a motive of unpleasure.”¹¹

It is hard to imagine that the poor are invisible because after all the poor are everywhere. They are the workfare workers cleaning the parks; they are the men who work as busboys; they are the Polish, Mexican, and Colombian men and women shaping up for construction work or Sewing knockoffs of designer clothes in the sweatshops of your neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, or Los Angeles. They live in public housing projects, trailer parks, run down tenements or abandoned buildings; they shop with food stamps in the supermarket and use the emergency ward for their medical care. There are officially 35 million of them in the United States, which accounts for more in both absolute numbers and percentage than in any of the other 19 richest countries in the world. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in its comparisons of the richest countries “measures poverty as 50 percent or less of the median income in each country.”¹² But in terms of the OECD study there are many more poor than are officially counted in the United States, in fact 16.9 percent in 1997¹³ compared to the US Census Bureau figure of 13.3 percent in the same year.¹⁴ Poverty is maintained at a lower rate than their actual number in the population by statistical manipulations based on outdated poverty thresholds that have continued to fail at reflecting the real costs of living in the United States. To help visualize the 35 million officially poor in the United States relative to other countries with similar economic development, imagine a number of people greater than the population of Canada or more than half the population of Italy, France, and the United Kingdom.¹⁵ And still we are told by Harrington and Shipler that they are not seen. An intentional and purposeful forgetting of the poor is by far a better explanation.

It is increasingly difficult to think of any possibility for real social change. The only changes that seem possible are practical and mild reforms. In this world where we have forgotten how to be critical we are not allowed to dream of alternatives to the free market. It is as if we already have the best of all possible worlds. But then how does one explain that about half of the population of the United States lives below a middle class standard and that

16.9 percent of the population is living in poverty?¹⁶ Is it that Americans are willfully ignorant or are they just innocent?

In *Truth and Existence*,¹⁷ Sartre tells us that in innocence, “there exists a true knowledge in the ignorance of the innocent person. Through a dialectical reversal, not knowing is the best way of knowing.” In innocence there is “an intuitive grasp of the world,” an ability to see past evil and grasp possibility. At the same time, in innocence there is also the irresponsibility of the young virgin who is unaware of her sexuality and who unknowingly puts herself in danger. Sartre writes, “When a bourgeois decides to ignore the conditions of the working class or the origin of steak, he thus becomes like a young virgin. Historically, moreover, in Genesis knowledge is presented as a fall. The tree of knowledge was a trap.”¹⁸

In biblical times the cost of truth was human freedom. Only God provided truth and humans were left to espouse passive reception. In the world after the fall, when humans are on their own being is always at risk and truth and freedom are difficult to achieve. Willfully ignoring becomes a way to avoid the conflicts of choice, that is, “ignoring is fear of being.”¹⁹ It is also the fear of freedom because “freedom exists only in and through its efforts to make others free.”²⁰ Willfully ignoring allows one to ignore responsibility and freedom as active choices. “As a bourgeois,” Sartre explains, “I want to ignore the proletariat’s position in order to ignore my responsibility for it.”²¹

At the same time, necessary ignorance is crucial for knowing; it is “the starting point for truth.”²² Necessary ignorance is the beginning of the questioning and curiosity that is essential to knowing. Necessary ignorance is a requirement for truth but there also is the danger that the seductive desire of willful ignorance will lead to bad faith. This makes the denial of truth and the fleeing of freedom possible at the same time. Bad faith is a self-deception in which the world is understood as if there are no other choices and no alternatives. It is a flight from freedom of choice and the responsibility of consciousness and action.

We see this dialectic of necessary and willful ignorance being played out tragically in the film *Memento* and in its conclusion, the victory of bad faith. The existence of poverty in the richest and most successful capitalist country in the world is also about the victory of bad faith. For me the movie *Memento* helps us understand the ordinariness of the bad faith of Americans whose willful ignorance and whose purposeful forgetting are necessary for the continuance of poverty in the United States of America.

In *Memento*, Leonard Shelby has a short-term memory problem not associated with amnesia. The narrative of the film is structured by Leonard's identity problem, which is also a memory problem. He is trying to solve his wife's murder, but he cannot remember anything since his wife was murdered. The film is told in reverse and sometimes backward and sometimes forward, because of his forgetting. His documentary evidence, like Foucault's archaeology, is of notes on papers, labeled Polaroid photos and tattoos of important facts on his body. These "facts" lead him and the audience of the film on a murderous journey. He calls his fragmented documents of evidence his system and he feels that ultimately this system will lead him to avenge his wife's murderer. In fact, at the beginning of the movie he accomplishes his revenge with the killing of Teddy. The system has worked, his archaeology is completed. Still the movie proceeds from the end to the beginning, with episodic, mementos of evidence.

At the beginning of *Memento*, Leonard describes his short-term memory condition. "I have this condition ... I have no short term memory. I know who I am, I know all about myself. Since my injury ... I can't make new memories, everything fades, if I talk too long I'll forget how we started and the next time I see you I'm not going to remember this conversation. I won't even know if I met you before."²³

Throughout the movie, Leonard tells his story over and over again. An important part of his endlessly repeated story is about Sammy Jankis who serves as his role model. It was Leonard's first important case as an insurance investigator. He denied Sammy his insurance claim because he concluded that Sammy's problem was mental and not physical. Sammy also has a short-term memory problem as a result of a car accident. Sammy can't remember anything for more than a few minutes and as a result he cannot work and sits at home with his wife who is an insulin dependent diabetic.

After the insurance company rules against Sammy Jankis, his wife gives Sammy his "final exam." She tells Sammy, "It's time for my shot (insulin)." She knows that he loves her and she will be able to find out if he is faking. But he isn't faking and he continues to give her shots of insulin. She dies and Sammy is placed in a home where he does not even know that his wife is dead.

Eventually Leonard tells us how his wife is murdered. He found his wife out of bed and he started to look for her. He heard a muffled scream and he loaded his gun and continued into the bathroom. Inside of the bathroom

he found a hooded man raping his wife who was bound and gagged with a plastic bag over her head. As he went after the man he was hit on the head from behind and knocked out. He awoke to find his wife dead and with his short-term memory problem. The police never believed the story of a second man, so his quest to find his wife's killer, John G, "JG," begins.

In the final scene the movie is explained. Remember that the final scene, in a movie told in reverse is really the beginning. He kills the drug dealer Jimmy Grant, "JG." After he kills him and he takes a Polaroid photo he drags the body into the basement of the abandoned building. He drags the body down the steps and believes he hears him say "Sammy." Leonard looks at his Polaroid's and becomes confused. "What have I done?" he asks.

Teddy arrives and tells Leonard that he is a cop. We now find out that Teddy was the cop who was originally assigned to the case. In Teddy's account we find out that Leonard's wife survived the assault but that she refused to believe that Leonard had his short-term memory condition. It was his wife who had diabetes. Sammy Jankis did not even have a wife. It was Jankis who was the faker and Leonard who unknowingly killed his wife.

As Freud says, "... we may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it."²⁴

Here we find out that over a year ago, Teddy helped Leonard find the real John G. Leonard killed him and was happy for a moment but he soon forgot and started to search again for John G.. Teddy helped him find a new fake John G., who Leonard has just killed. Teddy, knowing that Leonard will soon start searching for John G. again tells him: "You want to have a puzzle that you can never solve."

Teddy now tells him that his name is a nickname and that his real name is John Gammel. As the movie ends Leonard tells himself, "You're John G., you can be my John G. Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy, yes I will." He takes the Jaguar of the man he just killed and drives away, with Teddy yelling after him. He stops at the tattoo parlor. We know he will kill Teddy and then forget. Although the movie ends it seems to be on an endless loop of repetition.

Leonard goes further than Jean Paul Sartre in his concerns with avoiding

knowledge or being ignorant of the truth. His purposeful forgetting is much more actively pursued than Sartre's avoiding and ignorance of the truth. Ultimately, when Leonard finds out that he killed his wife by giving her too much insulin he kills the truth teller and disguises the truth teller's identity by changing the evidence. It is this active forgetting on the part of the hero and his purposeful disguising of the truth which is the key to understanding the forgetting of the possibility of change, especially in terms of ending poverty, in the United States. The premises and the conditions of capitalism that reproduces and maintains poverty are purposely forgotten and just like in *Memento* the poor are degraded and the truth tellers are metaphorically killed, at least in terms of their effectiveness. This is why so many good academic studies of poverty are continuously forgotten.

Memento seems to end without resolution or is the resolution the complicity of Leonard with the purposeful forgetting of the killings? Remember that the crime is so difficult to solve because Leonard doesn't want to remember that it is already solved. That Leonard's willful ignorance of this crucial fact leads him to create an endless and deadly puzzle that can never be resolved even when it has been solved. He also forgets his own guilt in degrading and killing his wife. In the United States, we engage in the same kind of willful ignorance about poverty. Are we as sick as Leonard is? We are like Leonard and have forgotten the poor and are complicit in the maintenance of poverty, even though we continue to "blame the victims." We forget to remember that the possibility of a solution to poverty in the United States is already available. The "unpleasure" related to forgetting in this instance is the unpleasure that is generated by what poverty indicates about the United States and its free market capitalist regime. Poverty is a major indicator of the limits and failures of capitalism to provide for all. It is in capitalism, not with the poor, that we should lay blame.

Here we are also in bad faith and continue our repeating compulsion of blaming the poor for their poverty instead of blaming American capitalism. Again, Freud is helpful. He tells us the importance of forgetting attacks on national identity: "It is universally acknowledged that where the origin of a people's traditions and legendary history are concerned, a motive of this kind, whose aim is to wipe from memory whatever is distressing to national feeling, must be taken into consideration."²⁵

In bad faith we forget the realities of poverty in the richest country in the world, while the political-economic verities that maintain the society are safe. We do not allow ourselves to see the poor; we deny their existence,

especially the working poor. We ignore all of the studies of social scientists and advocates and believe that the free market, new economy will lift all ships. Thus poverty is willfully ignored and the unpleasure of knowing the failures of our capitalist society do not have to be endured. Instead we falsely believe that poverty is a marginal phenomena in the United States and that for those relative few who are poor it is a moral or a genetic problem. But it cannot be forgotten how overwhelming the lives of the poor are and how difficult it is to struggle for even simple changes in their lives of misery. It cannot be forgotten that policy changes that provide more resources for the poor are not enough to end poverty in the United States. Nor can it be forgotten that the conservatives who currently run the country continue to cut programs and make it harder on the poor.

Still the first step in ending poverty is to begin remembering how ordinary poverty and economic and social hardships are in the United States. That even in the years dominated by a liberal administration poverty, though reduced, still existed for tens of millions of Americans. These are difficult issues that require significant changes in our understanding of American society and the hardship of facing up to its failures. Still, if we cannot stop being willfully ignorant of the poor then, like *Memento*, poverty is also on an endless loop.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The World Bank Group, "PovertyNet," Overview, Measuring poverty at the Global Level.<http://web.worldbank.org/wbsite/external/topics/extpoverty/0.:336992,00.htm>
- 2 As John Maynard Keynes remarked in *The General Theory : Of Employment Interest and Money*, about the theoretical rigidity of economists ; "The ideas which are here expressed so laboriously are extremely simple and should be obvious. The difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds." John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory : Of Employment Interest and Money*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964, p. viii. In the same vein but critiquing neo-liberalism and the illusions of the new economy, see; Ellen Frank, *The Raw Deal: How Myths and Misinformation About the Deficit, Inflation and Wealth Impoverish America*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004; and, Doug Henwood, *After the New Economy*, New York: The New Press, 2003.

- 3 Robert J. Samuelson, "A Sixty Year Credit Binge," Washington Post, August 27, 2003. P.A25.
- 4 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York: The Free Press, 1925, 1953, p.51.
- 5 David Sudnow, *Passing On: The Social Organization of Dying*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967.
- 6 Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, New York: Penguin Books, 1962, p.2.
- 7 David Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, P11.
- 8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1956, p.115
- 9 Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, Heathet Boushy, *The State of Working America: 2002/2003*, An Economic Policy Institute Book, Itahca, New York: ILR Press, 2003, pp.414 - 422.
- 10 Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through: Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol.XII*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 p. 148.
- 11 Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965. p.136.
- 12 Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein and Heather Boushey, *The State of Working America:2002/2003*, p.414
- 13 Ibid. p.416.
- 14 Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein and John Schmitt, *The State of Working America: 1998-99*, Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, 1999, p.279.
- 15 U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States:2002*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002, p.824
- 16 Lawrence Mishel, et al, *The State of Working Class America:2002/2003*, p.416.
- 17 Jean Paul Sartre, *Truth and Existence*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.54.
- 18 Ibid. p.55.
- 19 Ibid. p.59.
- 20 Ibid. p.68.
- 21 Ibid.52.
- 22 Ibid. p.59.
- 23 Christopher Nolan, Writer and Director, *Memento*, Columbia Tristar, SONY, 2002. All of the following quotes are from Memento.
- 24 Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," p.150.
- 25 Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, p.148.