

7th day - Jesse James + insurance staff
The United Society - what it means to
be poor

Highlander Center
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n.d.

THE POOR IN AMERICA

CONCEPT

(Contrasting economic situation of Negroes and whites. Are we poor?)

Bob Parris

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION IN FREEDOM SCHOOLS

1. Who are the poor people in America?

Do we have enough money, enough food to eat, and enough clothing to keep warm, and enough beds in our house so that everyone in our family can have a place to sleep? Do we have electricity, and running water, and refrigerators, and toilets? Do we have other things, like T.V. sets, food freezers, clothes washers and dryers, air conditioners, and cars? Do we need some or all of these things? Are we poor?

2. Who is not poor in America? Are most white people you know about poor? Are some white people poor?

What kinds of houses do white people you know about live in? Do they have electricity, and running water, and toilets, and many of the other things we mentioned before? Are most of them poor?

(Why people are poor)

3. Why are people poor?

- Some people say it's because we are lazy, or stupid, and don't really want to work; is this true?
- Is it because we are Negro?
- Because we live in the South?
- Because we have little education and few skills?
- Because there are not enough jobs? Why not? Are our jobs being taken away by machines?
- Because we are old?
- Because we are sick?
- Because nobody, including the federal government, cares enough about poor people to do anything about poverty?
- For all of these, and some other reasons?

(Who decides who shall be poor and who shall not: the owners of the plantations, farms, and factories; also discriminatory labor unions.)

4. Who decides what kinds of jobs Negroes can get?

- The white man who owns the plantation?
- The white man who owns the farm?
- The white men who own and run the factories?

- Who are the owners of most of the plantations and farms where we live? Why are most of them white and few of them Negro? How much money do these owners make? Why do they make so much more than we do: is it because they work harder than we do? What kinds of houses do they live in?

CONCEPT

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION IN FREEDOM SCHOOLS

- What are the biggest plants and factories in your town? Your state? Who runs them? How do plants make money (legal and illegal ways)? How much money do the men who run the plants make? How much do the people who run the machines and do the other labor inside the plants make?
- Do you know any Negroes who work in the plants? What kinds of jobs do they do? What kinds of jobs do the white people who work in the plants do? How much do Negroes who work in the plant earn?
- Whites? Is there a union in the plant? Does the union help Negroes as much as it helps the whites, or does the Union also discriminate against Negroes? (Does the union make sure that Negroes who do the same work as whites get paid as much as whites? Does it make sure that Negroes get promoted to better, higher-paying jobs as often as whites? Does it make sure that the plant hires Negroes? Does the union protect the jobs of Negroes who try to register to vote, or who, in other ways, support the civil rights movement?)

(How we can change things so that Negroes and other poor people will have jobs, and better, higher paying jobs.)

4. How can we change things so that Negroes and other poor people can get good jobs?

- What is a "good" job? How do we feel about the work we do? Does your mother like her job? Your father? What is work?
- Should we organize ourselves into unions so we will be strong against the men who hire and fire -- the bosses?
- If we do organize into unions, should they be independent, or should they be part of larger, already-existing unions? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?
- Should we try to gain power through the vote?
- What other kinds of things can we do?

RESOURCE MATERIALS FOR USE IN DISCUSSION ON THE POOR IN AMERICA

Most Americans are not poor. In fact, most of them are rich compared to other people around the world, and to most of us. The average family of four in America makes about \$7,000 to \$8,000 each year. Most Americans live in homes they own themselves (although many of them own them on long-term mortgages); these homes have electricity, running water, and bathrooms. Many of them (in fact, one-sixth of them) have clothes dryers, food freezers, and air conditioners.) Most Americans take good care of themselves, too; they visit their doctor 5 times a year, and their dentist 3.

But among all of these fairly rich people live 40 to 50 MILLION poor people. A family that earns less than \$3,000 a year is poor, because \$3,000 is not enough to buy all of the food, clothing, schoolbooks, and other things people need, nor to pay the rent, the doctor bills, the phone bills, and other bills that a family has to pay.

Why are poor people poor? Some people, usually the rich ones, say that "poor people are just too lazy to work hard; they don't really want to work, and besides that, many of them are really too stupid to get a job. Therefore, the poor don't deserve anything better. They should be poor?" But we know that many of us, and many of our mothers and fathers, work very hard. Our fathers bend over all day long in the hot sun picking and chopping cotton. Our mothers scrub floors, and toilets, and wash clothes, and cook meals for white women all day long. And sometimes we work too, for long hours, in the fields. Yet still we are poor. So we can't be poor because we are lazy and don't want to work; we work very hard, but we are poor. Why?

We are poor because we are Negroes and because we live in the South. There are not many jobs in the South, and many of them -- especially the ones Negroes can get -- don't pay very much. There is a law, passed by the U.S. Congress, that says everyone who works in some kinds of jobs must get paid at least \$1.25 per hour. But most of the jobs we do are not covered by this law; all people who work on plantations or farms, and all maids are not covered by this law. They can be paid whatever the boss can get away with paying them. So many of us get paid only \$2.50 or \$3.00 for working a whole day in the cotton fields; many of us get paid only \$10 each week for working as maids for white women.

To see what kinds of jobs people who are not white (95% of all people who are not white are Negro; others are Puerto Rican, Indian, and others), look at the Table below:

<u>JOB</u>	<u>PERCENTAGE OF NON-WHITES HOLDING THESE JOBS</u>
Professional, technical	4.7
Managers, officials, other bosses	2.1
Office workers, clerks	3.7
Skilled craftsmen, foremen	4.7
Machine operators	10.8
Service workers (like gas station men); (Not including maids)	20.2
Laborers (not including farm and mine workers)	25.7
Household workers, like maids	54.3
Farmers and farm workers (sharecroppers, migrants, etc.)	14.4

You can easily see from this Table that Negroes and other non-whites have very few good, well-paying jobs, and most of the hard, bad-paying, dirty ones.

RESOURCES FOR DISCUSSION OF THE POOR IN AMERICA, CONT.,

Now what about how much money non-white people make? The Table below shows what a big difference there is between what most-non-white people make, as compared with what most white people make.

Whites	\$5,424
Nonwhites	3,058

Nonwhites, then, earn only a little more than $\frac{1}{2}$ of what white people make, or 56%.

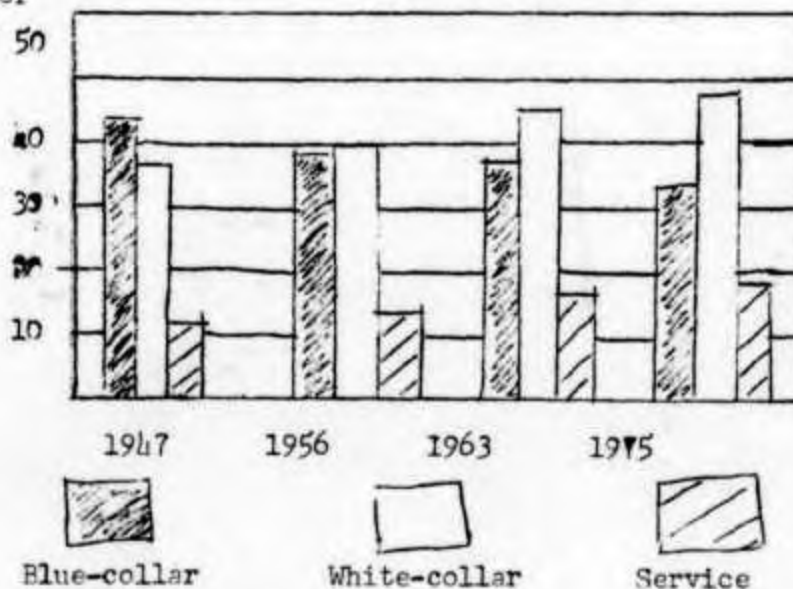
What does automation, or the replacing of working men by machines, have to do with this?

Our country has always believed in the idea that if a man worked -- if he helped to produce the goods people in our country need and want to buy -- then he could earn enough money to buy these goods for himself and his family as well. But now the machines are doing the work of producing the goods, and the men have no jobs. This means they earn no money to buy the goods with. So many of the goods -- like rice and cotton -- are not bought. Instead, they are stored, by the U.S. Government, in huge storage bins, warehouses, and other places. The Government spends \$1 billion each year storing these things. Meanwhile, about 40 to 50 million people live in poverty.

How many people loose their jobs because of the machines? No one knows exactly how many, but some people guess that it is around 40,000 every week. We do know that the unemployment rate (the number of people out of work) is 5.5% of the total labor force. This is twice as high as any other major industrial country. Teenagers have an even higher unemployment rate; it is 15%, and for high-school drop-outs 30%. For teenagers who live in the ghettos of northern cities, it is often as high as 50%.

Machines are not taking everyone's jobs away. They are taking away mostly the jobs we call blue-collar -- the jobs where people work with their hands as farmers, miners, factory hands, and the like. The number of blue-collar jobs open to people is dropping every year. But the number of jobs open to white-collar workers, like doctors, teachers, lawyers, technicians, and the like, is increasing every year. Service jobs, too, are increasing. The Table below shows that this is so.

Percent of
total em-
ployment



Source: U.S. Dept. of Labor

RESOURCES FOR DISCUSSION OF THE POOR IN AMERICA

Most of the people who write about, or talk about the problem of automation think that the responsibility for doing something about poverty lies with the federal government. This is because they think that only the federal government has enough money and enough power to really solve the problems of poverty and unemployment. The federal government has done some things already. Let's look at what these are.

There are three main programs the federal government has developed recently to deal with the problem of unemployment and automation. These are:

- 1) The Area Redevelopment Act, passed in 1961
- 2) The Manpower Development and Training Act, passed in 1962 (MDTA)
- 3) The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 --Johnson's War on Poverty.

The Area Redevelopment Act

This act provides federal help (in the form of loans, grants, advice, and training programs) to areas which are economically underdeveloped. An area is considered a "redevelopment area" if it has continued and widespread unemployment. In order to be eligible for federal assistance, a local committee in such an area, which must be representative of the community, gets together and outlines a plan for economic development of that area.

Over 75 counties and other areas in Mississippi were listed by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1963 as eligible for ARA programs -- many of them because of the low incomes of Negro families. Despite this fact, there were no ARA training programs in Mississippi in 1961. In all, only about 160 Negroes in the entire South were trained under the ARA, even though Negroes make up a very high percentage of the unemployed in the South. Part of the problem with the ARA in the South is that its programs must be approved by the state concerned before loans can be made. This makes it difficult if not impossible for Negro communities to benefit from ARA programs; and, as a result, the ARA has had no real importance in the South for Negroes.

The major thing wrong with the ARA program is that it is too small. In its first three years, the program trained only 35,000 workers and helped create between 110,000 and 115,000 jobs (according to the U.S. Department of Labor.) There are approximately 4 million unemployed people in the United States, and perhaps another 4 million who would seek work if they thought there was any chance of finding it. So you can see that this small government program was not nearly big enough to solve the problem of unemployment.

In June of 1963 the Senate agreed to set aside new funds so that the ARA program could continue. But the House refused to agree to this, so the program has been discontinued. It will get no more additional money.

RESOURCES FOR DISCUSSION OF THE POOR IN AMERICA, CONT.,

The Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA)

This program, paid for jointly by the states and the federal government, and run by the states, was set up to train workers for jobs which had been found through research, labor market surveys, and other means. In other words, it was not set up to create new jobs, but rather to match unemployed workers with jobs that were already available. To be in this program, a person had to be: one of the following:

- unemployed, and a member of a family whose income was less than \$1200 a year
- working at a job below their skill level
- working much less than full time
- working in a job that would soon be taken over by a machine
- between the ages of 16 and 22 and in need of training and more education

The main things wrong with this program, like the ARA, is that it is too small. In 1963, the MDTA had 1,622 projects, with 59,595 men being trained. In the four states of the Deep South (Ala., Ga., La., and Miss.) there were 51 projects, with 2,099 men being trained. The breakdown by states was:

	<u>Projects</u>	<u>Trainees</u>
Alabama	30	1,569
Mississippi	5	125
Lousiana	---	---
Georgia	16	405
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Total	51	2,099

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 — Johnson's "War" on Poverty.

There are five key programs set up by this Act:

- 1) The Job Corps will offer work, training and new surrouddings for 40,000 boys and girls in 1965 and 100,000 by 1966, with most of them coming from the slums, and being high-school drop-outs. The young people will be paid \$50 a month. One staff person will work with every 5 young people in the program. Training will take place in national parks, forest facilities, veterans hospitals and other areas far away from the slums.
- 2) Youth Work-Training program for about 200,000 young people. This will try to keep potential school drop-outs in school. The students will earn enough money in various jobs in federal, state, and private agencies, to allow them to stay inschool -- or to return to school if they have already dropped out and wish to return.
- 3) Work-study programs will give 140,000 college students part-time jobs and vacation work in labs, libraries, and so foeth, with costs shared b the U.S. Government and the University. This is to help students get enough mon ey to stay in school.

RESOURCES FOR DISCUSSION OF POOR IN AMERICA, CONT.,

- 8) Community Action Program will give funds to communities to help them fight poverty in their community. Plans will be made by the people in the community. These will probably be things like community centers, playgrounds, adult-education facilities, and health clinics.
- 5) Adult Work-Training programs will try to retrain and find jobs for people on relief. There is a literacy program for adults included.

Again, the problem with this program is that it is too small. A mere \$784 million has been set aside for it. To see how small this amount is, we can compare it with the other 42 agencies and programs of the federal government which deal in some way or another with poverty; their total budget was \$15 BILLION in 1964. So Johnson's "War" is not really a "War" at all. It is more like a minor skirmish.

There are two other things wrong with this program. First, everybody who is to receive anything through the program must first sign a loyalty oath. Secondly, every program proposed by the people of a community is subject to a veto by the Governor of the state.

(Information from the Research Dept. of the United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers, and from the Act.)