

Poverty in a rich country

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"Has social justice in Germany waned over the past three to four years?" This question was put forward in 2005 by the Allenbacher Institut für Demoskopie and 80% of all those asked answered "yes". A constitutional writer commented that "The Germans are sick because they want equal rights for everyone".

Theses

1 An incessant "new" poverty

Since the middle of the seventies the industrial nations have been discovering similar splits and tears which up to then had only been observed in developing countries. A majority is involved in the growing prosperity and a minority is excluded. In 1972 Heiner Geissler discovered poverty amongst women, female pensioners and those women needing care. During the eighties unemployment was the main reason for poverty. In the nineties poverty affected those in employment. At the beginning of this century one referred to the "increase in child poverty". In 2006 a "precarious situation of those excluded from society" was identified. 8% of the population considered themselves to be excluded from society due to poverty. Among them were lots of unemployed people and workers. They had very small incomes, no financial reserves and lived in great uncertainty as to whether they would be able to maintain their standard of living or not.

2 The way society deals with poverty

Germany is an unusually rich country. The real gross national product has increased eight fold in fifty years. Even between 1991 and 2004 it increased by a further 18%. Poverty on the scales of that in Bangladesh does not exist in Germany. Poverty is being combatted by unemployment benefits (Arbeitslosengeld II). The receipt of unemployment and social benefits is a free decision, a part of a plan to enable people to become creative. Whoever is poor does not remain poor. The poverty suffered by a particular section of the population is an incentive for the majority to achieve better performances in their jobs.

3 The definition of poverty

Poverty cannot be discussed that simply. Absolute poverty means a life on the existence minimum. Relative poverty covers an average living standard amongst the population, for example poverty through low income or through one's position in life. The denotes a defective provision of material goods. In the EU nations persons and groups are considered poor when they have so little material, cultural, or social means at their disposal that they are excluded from the lowest acceptable standard of life in the country in which they live. The quota of those at risk of poverty is the portion of people in private households whose net income falls below that necessary to fulfil their financial requirements. The "poverty gap" shows how far the average income of those in poverty has fallen under the poverty line.

4 The faces of poverty

According to the federal government's report on poverty and wealth the percentage of children, unemployed, single parents and those in low paid jobs is above average amongst those affected by poverty. The characteristic of German society as being a three quarter society has proved to be true. Three quarters of the population are spared the risk of becoming poor, whereas the other quarter is either once, repeatedly or continually poor.

5 The poor and the rich

Poverty and wealth are extreme poles of the distribution scale. The share of income of the upper tenth of households in relation to the country's total income rose to 3% between 1973 and 1998, whereas the share of the income of the lower tenth sank by 13%. In 2003 the upper tenth of all households had 47% of the country's wealth at their disposal, the lower half only 4%. The debts incurred by the lower tenths of all households increased by 13% between 1993 and 2003. Educational opportunities are determined by the social or national origins of a person plus the standard of education and occupational jobs of his or her parents. The chances of a child of an academic being recommended for a grammar school are three times as high as those of a child of a worker. The chances of entering a university are seven times as high. The concentration of the poor and unemployed in certain city areas lead to the provision of poor public facilities.

6 Those who have been made poor

Middle class elite groups have waged a 25 year campaign against the social state. It is allegedly too expensive, cannot be financed in the long run and is being led in the wrong direction. Globalisation, demography changes and the technical revolution have led to all social achievements being closely examined. This has resulted in the protection against unlawful dismissal being relaxed, standard wage scales being broken up, wages and salaries being reduced as well as social benefits. Patients have to pay more money if they wish to make use of the health service and must also make additional provisions in order to protect themselves against risks.

Party representatives have propagated a new justice through freedom which would adjust itself to the large challenges of the 21st century. The population should then say goodbye to fair distribution. The new name for justice is "Equal chances for all" especially in education. The fact is that people's talents and ability to take strain are completely different from each other which leads to the Performance and Market fairness having priority over the needs and solidarity of the people. The conflict between young and old proves that the generation justice has been violated. Church leaders have taken part in this debate where they advocated a "fair share" which comprises "fairness according to aptitude or an equal share which would amount to a fair exchange.

The conservative-liberals, the red-green and the black-red coalition have given way to public pressure and have blown up and deformed the social system. They have individualised social risks, privatised public concerns and commercialised the basic rights of the population. These so-called reforms of the century have cut into the legal pension, health and unemployment insurances. The trust of those insured who have no private wealth at their disposal has been destroyed. The number of those at risk of poverty in the lower income group has risen from 50% to 65% particularly through "Hartz IV": The freezing of the fixed amount, the arbitrary "Referenzgrößen", the conversion into a flat rate of all special payments and the obligations of having to pay more money have caused "Arbeitslosengeld II" to fall by a fifth below the existence minimum wage.

7 Ways out of poverty

The political key to the prevention of poverty is the creation of a new system - the opening up of new markets and employment which would result in the involvement of all those who can and wish to take part in socially organised employment. In order that companies look at market success instead of the stock exchange, invest realistically and create jobs means that the financial markets will have to be open to public inspection. The three forms of employment - traditional industrial employment, private relations employment and civil engagements should be fairly distributed between the sexes. As well as this employment capital and social income should be honoured. The basics of life should be achieved again on an enlarged foundation, namely the value of life in the constitution.