



Beware of the Swine of Conservativism

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In the movie, *Malcolm X*, there is a prison scene where the actor Denzel Washington, who plays the title character, is being instructed on how to lead a virtuous life, as part of his indoctrination into the Black Muslims and the Nation of Islam. "Do not fornicate, stay away from drugs and alcohol, do not smoke" ... And oh, by the way, "Never, never eat the white man's pork"!

Denzel played it as a straight dramatic scene. As a member of the audience, I was having a belly laugh. "What, no lip-smacking good pork spareribs"? Think of the repercussions? What good would cold-slaw be? Or baked-beans? Or potato-salad? Moreover, this would lead to the extinction of all barbecue sauce - hot, mild, honey garlic *and* suicide. As you can see, this axiom of virtuous conduct is in fact unthinkable. It would be a fate worse than death itself.

"Never eat the white man's pork!" actually works better as a metaphor. You can play the metaphor straight or as a parody, but the message is the same. "Don't be bamboozled. Don't be hoodwinked. Don't swallow hook, line, and sinker whatever is offered-up as paramount reality. Do not accept what exists as simply a natural occurrence, or as a consequence of nature itself. In other words, take an active rather than passive role in your own fate".

The United Nations recently released its annual assessment of the best countries in which to live, and Canada for the second year in a row received top billing. Canada ranked number one in the United Nations overall "quality of life" statistics. However, at the same time, Canada ranked 10th out of 15 advanced industrial societies in poverty statistics.

The country with the highest quality of life in the Western world paradoxically has many of its citizens who beg in the streets. UN officials refused to comment on how it is that Canada could be a country of tremendous wealth and tremendous poverty at the same time.

This is what sociologists call a "life-world dichotomy". It is a social pathology that has actually come over time to be accepted as "it's just the way things are in Canada". It dominates public discourse and numbs our sensibilities. So the sight of professional beggars and dispossessed squeegee kids becomes commonplace in our great cities; not a social problem but an urban curiosity.

This bit of twisted reasoning is also part of what has been called (and celebrated as) "the new conservatism", which is characterized by the modern-day mantra of "economic restraint and fiscal responsibility", where the current trend is towards the rationalization of resources in the form of streamlining, amalgamating and de-layering operations, and downsizing the workforce.

It is on this basis, for instance, that Canadian banks have recently begun to mount a vigorous campaign imploring the government to allow them to rationalize their resources in block-buster mergers, in order to compete internationally and expand Canadian financial markets.

The new conservatives purport to have an industrial-economic plan for the coming millennium that calls for stabilizing the financial system, and spurring robust global growth. In this plan, people begging in the streets is not seen as an abomination in an affluent society, it is seen as a temporary adjustment to the new economy.

Whatever you do, do not swallow any of this succulent swine!

A recent research report has now confirmed that bank mergers may close up to 1000 branches now in existence. You cannot expand the job base and the economy by closing doors and putting people in the street.

It is true that excessive external debt, and the more excessive internal tax structure has slowed down job creation in Canada, leading to a drop in productivity levels, and in net foreign investment, that has put downward pressure on the economy; and has resulted in recent troubling events like a plummeting Canadian dollar, which in turn has contributed to an overall disarray in international financial markets. This problem-complex must be addressed with a global economic focus.

But the life-contradiction in Canada of tremendous wealth and tremendous poverty can not be resolved as a matter of adjusting our industrial-economic strategy, and making everything "OK". Nor is it simply a matter of using the Bank of Canada as a financial market-maker to expand the economy, as the more ideological new conservatives contend.

The new conservatism is not an industrial-economic strategy that relates to empirical reality. It is, rather, a state of mind that legitimizes greed, and privileged access to society's resources.

The inevitable result here, is not a balanced distribution of wealth that takes people off the city streets, but rather, the entrenchment of vested interests in the city through the dissembling of facts, and the exploitation of public discourse, by those who have the power to control the systems for disseminating ideas and information. In practice this amounts to a widening of the gulf between the "haves" and "have-nots", further implanting the urban adventure of the dispossessed.

In other words, the new conservatism in Canada is an ideology that is hell-bent on convincing all of us that the dichotomy of wealth and poverty in the streets of our cities "is just the way things are" and furthermore, by the way, "we should have more of the same".

Let me reiterate, whatever you do, do not chew on these crafty connoisseur chops!