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How the Nurse Fits in the Piggy Bank ... or: About Donations

Recently passengers using the German public transport system have been advised about something quite astonishing: Big posters of the Kindernothilfe ('Help for children in need') point out that the reader has got a well hanging on his/her ear and that one rubs school books on one's skin (Oxfam's appeal to donate two pounds a month to provide clean water for an African village is a British version of the same principle.)! The following attempts to show that this does not only appear to be strange, but that it is quite strange indeed.

The context

The poster explains its apparent absurdity in its subheading: 'Buying beauty products or giving a future!' This suggests that the decision to spend money on beauty products automatically implies to not spend money on the well-being of a child (for example in Africa). The reason being that the latter does not cost much more.

... Wait a minute!

This implies that, by spending money, one makes a decision of great importance. A decision that is politically relevant: It is not only the decision not to spend money on children in Africa, but also not to spend it on homeless people, protecting the rain forest, the preservation of species and cancer research. Something seems to be up: There is misery everywhere and all this could supposedly be fixed by the money of the average person? In contrast to high-end fund-raisers, which are attended by wealthy people who do not have to choose between buying jewellery and donations, the poster directly addresses those who have to make a choice. These kind of people are by far the great majority for whom it is an 'either ... or' question whether to save money or to buy lotions and accessories. Every such passenger of the public transport network is supposed to posit the question: How much can I allow myself to afford?

'Compared to the poor in Africa, we are rich!'

The campaign organisers can count on their reader's consent to take this question quite seriously, as the knowledge of people having more of what others are lacking is common. The opposition of either 'buying beauty products or giving a future' appeals to the bad conscience of those who feel that their 'consumerism' has caused the poverty of people in African countries. Feeling guilty like this, people do not acknowledge the restrictions imposed upon themselves. On the contrary, those needs and desires, that can be satisfied in western countries but not in Africa, are being considered decadent or at least their satisfaction is seen as luxury. This way, the appeal to give up on consumption to some extent matches with a guilt-stricken, compliant public.

On the causes of poverty

Overcoming modern poverty is not a question of everybody giving something up. This idea implies a kind of scarcity that does not exist. People in Africa are not suffering from hunger and illness because the workers in the West are having such a jolly good time. Similarly, it does not make sense to argue that the world economy is not capable of producing sufficient food and medication; considering the state of technology today, plenty of food and medication could be produced, hospitals built and wells dug even for people living in the Sahel. But nothing like that is going to happen as long as hungry people are expected to pay for these services. This is a consequence of the way production here and in Africa is organised; the capitalist mode of production. The purpose of this kind of production is not to satisfy needs and desires at all. Instead, its purpose is to make more money out of money. Needs and desires are merely a means for that purpose. Private property ensures that neither the products of labour nor the means of production are available to those who need them but rather to those who do what capitalism is all about: Producing goods which once sold generate more money for their owner than what he advanced. This way, everyone, who does not have a sufficient amount of money, is being excluded from the wealth of society; be it a loaf of bread, a body lotion or a trip to space. This is something that Germany, the U.K. and Africa have in common. Certainly, the results look quite different in Europe from most parts of Africa. The principle, however, which causes the misery there and poverty in western countries is the same; the capitalist mode of production.

And the lesson learned here?

As well-intended as donating may be, these appeals are just as ignorant. They hold those accountable for misery in Africa, who spend the little money they have on the little needs and desires they can afford. The appeal asks to draw practical conclusions from the moral which is used by workers to embellish (but not to explain!) their miserable lives: relinquishment, something every regular user of public transport knows pretty well, is to be increased. However, living in accordance with this moral does not change social relations, and consequently does not abolish the causes of poverty.

P.S.: This is not about being in favour of or against donations

In order to avoid a misunderstanding: It is not our intention to argue whether donations are good or bad. However, some people try to show that it is wrong by pointing out the negative results of donations; local markets have been ruined and new dependencies have been produced. These kinds of critics are saying that people, who earn their living on local markets, lose their source of revenue when their (potential) consumers are being supported by donations. This is a rather cynical way to look at things as it presupposes the market as the natural source of revenue for people, when it is in fact their dependency on the market that makes them poor! If one resents the fact that people are starving, it only makes sense to find out the reasons for that in order to be able to abolish those reasons! We criticise a false consciousness about the causes of poverty in capitalist societies and false consciousness about what donations do to change that.