Common Error No. 10 [1]

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10. "We have to keep universal services in health and education, so that the middle classes will demand their improvement."

This is the "theory of imprisoned misery." The supposition behind it is that the middle classes will support nothing unless they stand to gain from it. Its corollary is that as many people as possible should be imprisoned in shoddy and inadequate services in order that the pressure of their protest will improve things.

It underestimates, in the first place, the ability of the middle class to get what they want out of the system. In any universal service, it is not the articulate and self-confident who suffer deprivation; they are quite able to command the scarce resources. The inarticulate and poor lose out in competition with the middle classes. They get worse health and worse education within the state system.

Critics point to their fear of a two-tier system, with an adequate service for the middle classes and a rotten one for the poor. They fail to see that universal state services themselves create a two-tier system.

They also underestimate the readiness of the middle classes to support causes from which they derive no personal benefit. They are the backbone of most charities and the mainstay of most church organizations. The middle classes have campaigned in the past to improve the lot of the poor, and are no different now. They don't need to be imprisoned in a poor service to work for its improvement. On the contrary, if they are imprisoned within it, they might devote their energies to securing an adequate service for themselves first. If people are free to seek alternatives, new standards might be pioneered which others can benefit from.

The real reason for keeping the middle classes in a universal service might be to promote an egalitarian society by preventing them from choosing alternatives. But lack of competition militates against improvement in the services concerned.

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