Book Review

Adela Cortina
Aporophobia: Why We Reject the Poor Instead of Helping Them
Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

Adela Cortina is a Spanish ethics scholar, professor emerita of ethics and political philosophy at the University of Valencia, who has also written considerably for Spanish newspapers on ethics. This excellent and interesting scholarly ethics book is translated from Spanish.

Professor Cortina invented the term aporophobia, used in this book. *Aporos* derives from Greek. The term refers to the near-universal "fear and contempt for the poor (aporos), the defenseless person who appears to have nothing to give" (page xi). Cortina argues convincingly that this is not xenophobia and applies as much to the poor native as to the foreigner. Rejection of immigrants is often described as xenophobia, fear (phobia) of the stranger or foreigner (xenos). Cortina demonstrates and maintains that we willingly accept immigrants of certain kinds (e.g. the wealthy; those whose labour is needed) and that what we describe as xenophobia is usually fear of the poor, who "seem to bring problems while offering nothing of value in return" (x).

Cortina has organized her short book into eight chapters.

Chapter 1: A Scourge without a Name, discusses and distinguishes xenophobia and aporophobia.

Chapter 2: Hate Crimes toward the Poor, addresses five issues. Cortina clarifies the key to hatred is the holder rather than the object of contempt; distinguishes two social pathologies, hate crimes and hate speech; employs La Fontaine's Fable of the Wolf and the Lamb to demonstrate how they work; holds that the state and civil society must collaborate to address them; and shows that the poor person in every case is an unprofitable person.

In Chapter 3: Hate Speech. In Chapter 3 she offers many examples of hate speech, from many perspectives, including that employed by Donald Trump in his 2016 presidential election campaign. Cortina thinks that hate speech is as old as humanity and as widespread as culture (p. 30). She says:

> The epicenter of debates around hate speech in democratic societies lies in the conflict between the exercise of free expression on the part of those engaged in presumptively harmful speech acts and those this speech may harm and whom society has a duty to

protect. Freedom of expression is a basic right in open societies and must be defended and reinforced; but it is not an absolute right…. (p. 31).

Cortina carefully defines and distinguishes hate crimes and hate speech. She also distinguishes tolerant and intransigent democracy. Active respect that works against damaging others' self respect is the key to neutralizing hate speech. Cortina references Kant's distinction between political (external) freedom and moral (internal) freedom (p. 39). A totalitarian society suppresses freedom of expression; an open society considers freedom of expression an inalienable right (p. 41). A poor person is one who lacks power in a given time and place (p. 40). "It is not possible to maintain respect for the individual or defend the social basis of self-esteem without morally empowering citizens to consider their fellow citizens as valid interlocutors, worthy of respect, rather than as beings that deserve only hatred …." (p. 44).

Chapter 4: Our Brain is Aporophobic. Interestingly, Cortina makes a number of biologic arguments and suggests that xenophobia and aporophobia are natural. Liberal democratic societies have attempted to modify these tendencies, that developed in early people, when social groups were small, when they were functional and protective but no longer are.

Chapter 5: Conscience and Reputation. Cortina makes the case that society needs to help people develop conscience and that people who do not are more likely to adopt social phobias such as aporophobia.

Chapter 6: Moral Bioenhancement. This chapter examines the interesting question of the morality and ethics of moral bioenhancement, such as through brain implants. These are not yet available but science is on the cusp of developing some possibilities. Morals pertain to individuals; ethics pertain to groups.

Chapter 7: Eradicating Poverty, Reducing Inequality. Cortina divides Chapter 7 into eight issues, as follows: The poor person in the exchange society; Is justice obligated to eradicate economic poverty; poverty is a lack of freedom; poverty is avoidable; Not just protecting society but, above all, empowering people; charity or justice; The right to a free life; and Reducing Inequality: Proposals for the twenty-first century.

Chapter 8: Cosmopolitan Hospitality. In this chapter, Cortina considers the ethical issues in a number of current events, including, for example, asylum and the refugee crisis; hospitality as a sign of civilization; the virtue of life in common; hospitality as both a right and a duty; shelter, an unconditional ethical demand; the urgent and the important; and cosmopolitan hospitality, justice and compassion.

Cortina has taken on some of the trickiest questions facing individuals, groups, institutions and governments today. She defends her positions well and makes interesting arguments. One thing in particular I found I disagreed with her about: she states that people are inherently selfish, they need to be taught not to be, and society had to mature into cooperation and a sense of citizenship. While there are selfish people, and they present a problem for society, it is not my experience that everyone is selfish. At the same time, to my shame, I find people who are selfish reprehensible. If I am not alone in this, it could be a social basis for discouraging it.

Historically, almost all people were poor and a very few people were rich. In the 18th century, the Industrial Revolution created more wealth and the humanistic philosophers of the European Enlightenment proposed democracy and aid for the poor. As the middle class developed and some people had more money than they needed to survive, they began to give some of it voluntarily to the poor. The first social welfare programs were introduced—for example, British poor houses; several social programs in Germany under Bismark, a conservative, starting in the 1880s; pensions for disabled soldiers after World War I in Canada. Starting in the 1920s and 1930s, in the aftermath of World War I and the Great Depression, social democrats were elected to power. Social democratic political parties promoted the idea that capitalism should be humanized by reducing economic inequality through common effort, paid through taxes. They introduced the initial elements of the welfare state, such as unemployment insurance. While welfare programs were initially defined for particular target groups, eventually universal income support programs were established under social democratic governments or minority governments supported by social democratic parties. For higher income people, some of the money was taxed back. During the cut-backs in government spending during the 1980s and 1990s, and since then, universal programs were shrunken to become income-tested and were only made available to low-income people. As predicted, support for these income support programs then declined.

While homeless people disappeared from the Canadian streets during the 1950s, they reappeared during the 1990s as governments cut back their welfare programs to levels that did not cover housing. Abhorrence of poor people returned among some people. Other, concerned, people reestablished soup kitchens, last known during the 1930s, and food banks. In major cities in Canada, a quarter of the population now uses food banks, funded voluntarily and with some help from the federal government. The federal government also supplements funding to the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, that provides food assistance to people experiencing humanitarian crises around the world.[1]

About the Author:

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[1] The Canadian Foodgrains Bank is a non-profit partnership of 15 church and church-based agencies working together to end global hunger. https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/response_conflict-reponse_conflits/foodgrains_bank-banque_grains.aspx?lang=eng