

SUPRA-, INTER AND INTRASOCIAL MOTIONS: PROLEGOMENA TO THE ONTOLOGICAL POVERTY OF SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

Notions of poverty and impoverishment are often filled with value-loaded connotations, and identified with deprivation both as a state and as a process. In this paper, we would like to show that poverty reveals itself not only as lack or scarcity but also as a totality of positive practices, attributes and strategies on individual as well as on group level. The study employs the Christian understanding of poverty to argue that the surpluses are of different nature and are interconnected with various types of deficits, constituting a complex network which equally affects material, moral, social, and spiritual dimensions. Our objective here is to outline certain aspects of a theory that aims at a new concept of “poverty” and “impoverishment”, which will enable us to include both the positive and negative individual and communal states and motions described in Christian tradition and the negative states and motions constituting the object of deficit-centered theories of poverty.

Keywords: poverty, impoverishment, religion, society, social motion

Introduction

There is no research on poverty without having preconceptions about the nature of the phenomenon constituting its object. However, only a fraction of theories serving as the basis for those researches link their assertions on poverty to the preconceived notions that determine the demarcation of

the domain of poverty through the selection and organization of different perceptions in a given intellectual framework.¹ The unidentified nature of such preconceptions is relevant not exclusively in metatheories but it may also make the adequacy of a given theory questionable in additional researches, which results in a situation where these theories can not provide a

¹“(…) the theory itself creates—it socially constructs—the terrain. A theory entails imposing interpretations (definitions, categories, and understandings) on behavior. Once we have a theory in mind, we pose questions that take those definitions, categories, and understandings for granted” (quoted from: Wallis 2010: 103).

general answer to at least two of the most basic questions, namely, “what is poverty” and “who is poor?”. Some compendiums rightly claim that poverty exists as a concept, not as a fact, and must be understood as such (Borgatta & Montgomery 2000: 2209-10), which claim, although does not establish automatically the validity of statements that there are neither theories of poverty (Jordan 1996: 81) nor a sociology of poverty in the true sense (Roach & Roach 1972: 13), but instead reveals that metatheoretical approaches towards the theories of poverty are not unfounded. Accordingly, hereafter I will attempt to

- present a specific underlying assumption which is easily recognizable in major economy- and society-focused theories of poverty and stands behind their deficit-centered concepts of poverty
- raise the question of to what extent deficit-centered approaches are capable to identify phenomena with satisfying accuracy as “poverty”, or statuses as “poverty-stricken”
- trace a possible approach which, by going beyond deficits, tries to include surpluses of different natures among the indicators of poverty, some of them already identified during the history of Christian thought
- and finally, take some new aspects of poverty into consideration by the inclusion of which the conceptualization of impoverishment in some specific cases can reveal the dynamics between the modes of human symbiosis

Poverty as deficit

As indicated before, one of the detectable assumptions underlying many

theories – which is central to our theme – is an understanding of poverty as a lack or deficit, meaning that poverty is a state A' of an (individual or group) entity, which is determined by insufficiency or shortages in dimension(s) relevant to the specific viewpoint of the theory. This state of lack is unfavorable compared to a state A of exactly the same characteristics but not containing the aforementioned insufficiency or shortages. Here, it is not possible to undertake a detailed analysis of these theories or their applications but we may take it granted that such theories exist. We can also maintain that further research is needed to clarify exactly which theories and applications could be included in this category, which I will refer to from now on as “deficit-centered theories of poverty”.

To signify phenomena and entities as “poor” based on some perceptible insufficiency or shortages seems problematic not only from an economic, but also from social and anthropological point of view. Approaches to poverty focusing on economic definitions generally understand deficit in terms of income and different types of capital: The World Bank, for example, defined the absolute poverty line at \$1 (from 2008, \$1.25 measured in 2005 prices) a day, converted to local currencies using purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates (The World Bank 2008:1), while other approaches operate with the lack of such material needs of life as food, drinking water, home, clothing, means of production and medical supplies. However, this type of approach neglects that in economics –if the total cost of production and all the costs and benefits arising from the consumption

² Although in this paper we can not discuss the problem in detail, the full cost per full profit ratio does not correspond to the business costs per business profit ratio relevant to individual contractors and profit oriented organizations. The former also deals with various types of externalities while the latter tends to ignore those.

or possession of a group of goods² are taken into consideration—not all kind of incomes and goods have a positive economical value, or rather there are some types of incomes and goods that on the whole have positive economical value but their costs and benefits belong to different entities and not necessarily at the same time. For example the restoration costs of the economic damages and disadvantages caused by marketing a disadvantageous insurance product or by contributing to the production of a product that causes severe environmental damages may significantly exceed the income benefits of the insurance agent, employees, or shareholders in the industry where they are produced. Moreover, in the income-based definition of the poverty line, only the income of the examined households are considered when summing up the expenses and commitments, whereas there are many additional items – like, among many other things, interest payments on consumer debts and home rental charges – that are easily dropped from calculations (see Short 2005: 35-36, Pressman and Scott 2010: 12). Hence comes the absurd situation where a family with several children living in a rented flat and encumbered with credit card debt, and a single man with an average income and living in his own house but without debt may be classified to the same income category, although the income available for spending after the essentials will differ significantly in the two cases. For material goods, the situation is quite similar in

the extent that there are goods where the restoration or compensation costs of their negative biological effects originating from their possession, consumption, or from a symbolic feeling of loss³ may also carry a negative economical value, independently of the fact that either the state or the individual does not undertake, or only partially undertake, the costs of restoration or compensation.

Conversely, poverty can be conceptualized in the field of economics not exclusively as a lack, but rather as the existence of something, although it still remains true that those values with which we can describe a poor and a non-poor entity will belong to the same scale, even if closer to different ends of the scale. Now from a social point of view, poverty as an existence of something will not refer exclusively to quantitative, but also to qualitative differences in social organization: While a deficit-centered concept of poverty is useful to identify and examine social classes occupying lower positions in a social structure, the concept of poverty as the existence of something seems to be more adequate for describing the relationship between a particular social structure and modes of human existence excluded from that structure, thus forced to organize itself –even within the limits of a state or a geographic region– differently from the societies in which they previously participated. The potential relevance of this suggestion is based on the fact that the characteristics which make the difference

³ In classical economics Adam Smith showed through the famous example of the linen shirt and leather shoes that some things become valuable not only in their material reality or functionality, but also in the opinion-and judgement-producing capacities. *“A creditable day-labourer”,* Smith wrote, *“would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person, of either sex, would be ashamed to appear in public without them.”* (Smith 2009:519). It is not unreasonable to argue that not only the lack of some goods, but also the possession or consumption of culture-dependent “inferior” goods can lead to a sense of shame and humiliation, stimulated by public reaction.

between these “alternative modes of existence” and the societies which they were former members of are not the variations or alterations of former social norms or lifestyle strategies, adjusted to the new situation: On the contrary, in these new modes of subsistence, the narrow sources available are used –in absence of external control mechanisms or other impacts– not for reintegration, but in many cases to develop, maintain and reproduce different types of concretes, namely, institutions, identities, values and norms, which are irreconcilable with and independent from those of the society. This approach, accompanied by the economic view of poverty (which is the dominant model of modernity) leads to the “culture of poverty” theory which we do not need to present here in details. What we need to talk about, on the other hand, is that the causes which leads to the exclusion of entities from a given social structure are not necessarily economic or social, but can be derived from the characteristics of the entity in question, hence there are poverty approaches focusing not only on economic or social, but also to anthropological dimensions. On the whole, although Sen’s capability approach and its criticisms are currently a part of poverty discourses, which we can meet mainly in classical sociology and economics. It is all the more interesting that according to surveys, the perception that link poverty to deviant morality and personal failure (which some 150 years ago in the English Poor Law explained the individual’s incapability to sustain himself and his family without external support with scientific ambitions) still influences the social image of poverty in a large degree (Feagin 1972a, 1972b, Zucker and Weiner 1993, Harmon 2010: 2-10). It is especially true in countries where (neo)protestant thought and new-born evangelicalism have an impact comparable

or even greater than the secular world view. Considering, by the same token the connections that can be shown to exists between religious traditions and local characteristics of poverty policy in Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical countries (Kahl 2005: 118-123), it can be argued that even in our days, the influence of the so-called “religious factor” on the various concepts of poverty is not negligible. However, it can equally be assumed that this influence came from certain historically selected elements of religious understanding of poverty which was found relevant to actual sociocultural situations. This question will be examined further in the next section, divided into two parts; the first being devoted to an outline of different dimensions of the biblical meaning of “poor” using passages from the Bible and traditional exegetical commentaries; and the second dealing with the means and possibilities to produce an intellectual surplus in the field of poverty theories with the consideration of elements not influencing the deficit-centered view of poverty.

The dimensions of Christian poverty

Bible translations based on the Greek texts translate two words as “poor”: *penes* which means poor in a narrower sense and *ptokos* which has a more complex meaning. *Penes* simply means a person who has to work to earn a living, while *ptokos*, as we would like to point out in the following, has many different, context-based meanings. According to these contexts, the word could signify

1. Poor in the material sense of the word

- a. **Involuntary poverty:** here, *ptokos* signifies a person who, independently of their intentions, does not have access, or has only very limited access

to goods needed for satisfying basic biological needs, hence needs to beg for alms.

- b. **Voluntary poverty:** here, *ptokos* signifies the person who, from their own free will, limits their consumption to what is biologically necessary or does not significantly exceed that level (subsistence from begging for alms is not peculiar here either).

At the same time, this type of poverty is defined not only by the extreme lack of material goods: Concerning the identity of the poor inside the Christian community, the identification of Christ with the poor is more important. The poor are a sacramental presence of Christ for the Church, both mysterious and real, therefore, the state of a poor person carries a specific surplus both for themselves, for their neighbors and for the whole community. Behind voluntary poverty stands the longing for living a life according to Christ's teachings, the practical realization of discernment, renouncement and humility. While both voluntary and involuntary poverty give an opportunity to other people and to the community to respond with acts of charity and love by recognizing Christ in the poor.

2. *Spiritual poverty*

Spiritual poverty in a general sense can be used to describe the nature of the human condition as fallible and weak, needing the grace of God. In addition, in Christian literature it is also often used to show a bipolar phenomenon, whose bipolarity is partially similar to the one recognizable in material poverty, but also differs from it in many respects. Similar because in spiritual poverty, as in material poverty, the lack of something is attached to a definite surplus, and also different

because in the latter mode the negatively understood material lack is associated with a positive spiritual and moral surplus, while in the the former case, both the lack and the surplus are positioned in negative value domains: The lack of spiritual goods and virtues are connected with "inferior", "miserable", "godless" attributes, thoughts and lifestyle strategies, hence spiritual poverty describes a human state or condition which is typical of sinners, the errant, and heretics. That approach to spiritual poverty was described in one of the *agraphas* as follows: „*Jesus saith – I stood in the midst of the world, and in the flesh was I seen of them: and I found all men drunken, and none found I athirst among them. And My soul grieveth over the sons of men, because they are blind in their heart and see not [their wretchedness and their] poverty.*” (Griffinhoofe 1903: 60) In addition, according to The Book of Revelations: „*Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.*” (Rev 3.17) Unmistakably, here poverty was not used simply to signify a deficit, but was defined and valorized as the existence of something (in the first text as drunkenness and in the second case as a specific attitude of men to material goods). This bipolarity of spiritual poverty appears in numerous exegetical commentaries,⁴ and generally acts as an exclusive tendency in the Bible to propose inverse analogies between antagonistic subjects: We can get an example of this from the epistles of John, where having the “love of the world” testifies that the man in question does not have the “love of the Father” (1John 2.15), and in the same way, having aberrant and godless thoughts and deeds testifies for the state of spiritual poverty.

⁴ see references in (Lampe 1961: 1206), esp. 'ptokeia' D. And 'ptokos' C.

⁵ cf. Matthew 19:30, 20:16, 18:14 Mark 10:31, 9:35, Luke 18:14, 9:48

3. *Poorness in spirit*

However, inverse analogies exist not only between antagonistic subjects, but can also be defined as the relation between the manifestations of one and the same subject as its different dimensions.⁵ Accordingly, being poor in spirit differs from spiritual poverty in the extent of referring neither to the lack of something divine nor to having godless things and deeds, but it rather signifies the existence of a divine virtue, namely, humility in people. Concerning the “poor in spirit” (*ptokoi to pneumati*), one of the most memorable passages in the Bible is certainly the first Beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven*” (Mt. 5:3) Exegetic commentaries of this passage make it obvious that poorness in spirit comes not from some deficit, but states the meaning of a concrete attribute (and that attribute’s practical outcome):

“What is meant by ‘the poor in spirit?’ The humble and contrite in mind. For by ‘spirit’ He hath here designated the soul, and the faculty of choice. That is, since many are humble not willingly, but compelled by stress of circumstances; letting these pass (for this were no matter of praise), He blesses them first, who by choice humble and contract themselves.” (St. John Chrysostom: Homilies on Mt. 15.2 in Schaff 1980: 92)

„(...) a man being righteous and chosen of God does not esteem himself to be anything, but holds his soul in abasement and disregards, as if he know nothing and had nothing, though he knows and has. This is a fixed thing, like a law of nature, in the mind of men.” (Macarius the Egyptian: Hom. 12.3 in Mason 1921: 90)

„For the faithful, truth-loving soul (...) esteems itself, and its diligence and pains and labor all unworthy in comparison with

the unspeakable promises of the Spirit. This is the poor in spirit, whom the Lord pronounced blessed, this is he who hungers and thirsts after righteousness, this is he who is contrite in heart.” (Macarius the Egyptian: Hom. 29.7 in Mason 192: 222)

4. *The poverty of Christ*

The basis of reference for the poverty of Christ is *kenosis*, the self-emptying process of God where, in Christ, He became man for man’s salvation. The meaning of Christ’s poverty in Christian tradition is that God became man so that man might become God (by imitation and participation). The Apostle Paul said that “*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*” (Phil. 2:6-7) and “*though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*” (2Kor 8:9).

The phrase “that you by his poverty might become rich” indicates that the type of poverty that Christ undertook, besides being an aspect of equality with God, it clearly indicates a deficit as well, at the same time it is presented as a surplus: in the continuation of the previous citation, we can read that “*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.*” (Phil. 2:8-9), hereby, it is not unreasonable to say that according to the Bible, Christ’s poverty carries concrete (in the act of salvation) and potential (concerning the opportunities in the union with God) surpluses for the created man.

The above outlines of the meaning of Christian poverty, although they were

not written with theological pretensions and do not intend to undertake the task of a detailed analysis of the connections between the dimensions they outline, seem suitable to make the following statements about the Biblical meanings of poverty:

1. Poverty in a Biblical context is (generally speaking) a polysemantic concept, with different meanings relevant in different – material, moral and spiritual – dimensions
2. Poverty as a state can be characterized with both having and lacking specific things, attributes and qualities
3. Deficits and surpluses connected to poverty do not manifest independently from each other, but are different ends of a bipolar phenomenon: compared to each other, a deficit manifests as a parallel of a given surplus and surpluses manifest as parallels of deficits
4. These different poles can equally be relevant just as well for the same as for different entities

Concerning the correspondence between the deficit-centered and the traditional Christian approach to poverty, it can be said that on the one hand, differences outweigh the common elements, on the other hand, the hermeneutic potential of the conceptual framework of Christianity is not only different but also affects a significantly larger domain than that of the deficit-centered approach. Recognition of the differences between religious and scientific hermeneutic potentials, independently from scientific disciplines, often results in the renormativization of the religious approach – but our aims by contrasting the two cannot be more different than that: we merely tried to show that in certain cases, the reconceptualization of

poverty as something positive (as having something), or rather as a simultaneous and multidimensional network of deficits and surpluses is able to approach the phenomenon of poverty with a better focus and greater relevance, being either a useful supplement to, or a reasonable alternative of a deficit-centered approach. This alternative – which obviously still needs to be developed further – includes a specific approach that understands poverty as having and using resources of different quality of being, and impoverishment as moving in and between differently organized economical, social, and anthropological structures, a motion which gains the energy needed from operating these resources. As a consequence of that, the category of “poverty” and “impoverishment” equally embed the positive and negative individual and communal states and motions described in Christian tradition and those negatively understood states and motions which constitute the object of deficit-centered theories of poverty. In my opinion, questions flowing from the above outlined integration cannot be bypassed in the field of social sciences, because it shows that expendable resources can be different from the viewpoint of the existence of societies and peoples, and the current situation, which tends to disregard some of these resources but makes others absolute is incompatible with the scientific description of “poor peoples”, “poor societies” and “poor economies”. Instead of positioning poverty due to this exclusivity automatically in negative value domains, it seems more useful to focus on the question whether poverty and impoverishment in the aforementioned sense have, on the whole, positive or negative effects on the individual and collective modes of human existence. This is equivalent to claiming that in this regard, we can equally speak about positive

and negative poverty, maintaining that the reference for this valorization of the phenomenon is necessarily ontological,

and not to be determined merely by according to its economical, social, moral or spiritual dimensions.

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