

THE PHENOMENON OF POVERTY AND THE THEORIES OF STRATIFICATION AND OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

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Abstract

According to the social stratification systems, the words *social status*, *social class* and *social mobility*, although they have in common the position that an individual has in community and in society, as well, there are some significant differences. The social status referred to the differentiation of individual inequality through legal regulations, while in case of class *system* these regulations are not precisely defined. An individual may acquire a certain social class and this thing depends on the economical component of his life. This component influences the lifestyle of the people differentiated according to social classes, offering them a certain social status and also a certain social position. Social mobility has an organic nature because it can evolve according to individual aspirations and functions. It is closely related to personal responsibility for economical development and growth. Individuals will establish their further aspirations according to the background performances determining a defence mechanism to protect self-esteem. Thus, the lower the past performances, the lower the aspirations and self-esteem. Analyses show that poverty and its duration is proportional to individual aspirations.

Keywords: *social stratification, social class, social status, social mobility*

Introduction

Poverty and the phenomenon of poverty have a long history. The societies have always been preoccupied by the welfare of their people by assuring a certain economical standard to prevent the appearance of social problems and, of course, the appearance of poverty and the poor. The researches of poverty referred especially to the monetary-economical aspects and less to the representation and the perception of the poverty phenomenon on the population level.

Maria Estela Ortega Rubi (1999, 178-193) supports the *dual aspect* of the social representation of poverty, referring on one hand to *the economical aspects* and on the other hand to *the psycho – social aspects*. The tendency of evaluating and monitoring is towards economics and politics (Mihalache, 2006, 73-80).

The psycho-social phenomena are less taken in consideration in order to carry out researches on poverty. For the author, *the representation and perception* of poverty at the level of population are more important for the poverty's study.

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This perception is connected to the content of the phenomenon and it is politically – legally influenced. In some areas the poverty is perceived in an individual manner and as effect of democratic freedom – it’s about the choice the individual makes regarding his living standard and his personal aspirations – and in other areas the poverty is perceived as a collective phenomenon. This approach is interesting for the social sciences and for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.(Mihalache, 2008, 156-160).

In the Middle Ages the word *poor* referred only to the people who didn’t have any rank, a certain prestige and who didn’t carry arms, either, being under the king’s protection it wasn’t an important factor for being called poor. They were rather considered poor because they didn’t belong either to the clergy, or to the king, it was a price of individual freedom. Due to the fact that the Church and religion were very important in society’s life and the moral precepts were regarded as laws, the poor people had a privileged position for pity and compassion and they were not blamed. Because of the fact that it was considered that the social hierarchy had divine roots, the poor people were neither blamed, nor considered responsible for their situation. Moreover, the poor people were considered morally superior to the rich ones. This concept of the humble and modest poor man by destiny begins to turn pale alongside with the ecological disasters and the rebellions that impoverished all the peasants, period that coincides with the appearance of dangerous beggars (thieves, robbers). The Renaissance comes with a new image of those who can work but they refuse to, an image of “some social incompetent people, ridiculous, and dangerous human wreck who don’t deserve either self-esteem or other peoples’ respect”(Poede, 2008, 47).

Until this period, groups were considered more important than the individual, but since the beginning of capitalism (18-19th century), individuality becomes more important in consideration of personal interests, so in this situation the poor people don’t represent a great respect anymore. The most severe approach regarding poverty and poor people is embodied by Ebeneger Scrooge who pleads for social pathology and eugeny considering that the paupers are a category of unadapted and it would better that they die.

Poverty may be defined in *relative terms* or *absolute terms*. There isn’t just one definition meant to cover the complexity of this phenomenon. In *The Poverty Dictionary*, Bogdan Voicu analyses the definitions of poverty given by more authors. (Voicu, 1999). In explaining the concept of poverty and especially the perception of poverty at individual level, the theories of John Viet-Wilson and these of Townsend (1987) seem to be the most appropriate. They both distinguish between the term *poverty* and *deprivation*, after he noticed that these terms are used as synonyms Townsend was the first (1979) who distinguished between the two terms, associating the term *deprivation* with the conditions that lead to poverty (and not vice versa) through the lack / incapacity of meeting certain needs and a certain need and the term of *poverty* with a state of permanent absence of

resources. At the same time he attributes deprivation to *causality* and poverty to the *effects* of causality.

Example: *I don't have money (effect) because I am poor*, a false sentence in the context of a construction distorted by reasoning. The correct assigning of causality totally changes the perspective.

Example: *I am poor (effect) because I don't have money (cause)*. *Not having money* represents a necessary condition, but not necessarily sufficient for *being poor*. It is not binding and radical for not having money and being poor. Actually, poverty refers to existence of simultaneous forms of deprivation, but also to the effects of deprivation. The danger lies in dissociating the term in *conditions* (objective) of deprivation – implies understanding the situation and the cause – and in *feelings* of deprivation (subjective). These feelings of deprivation are responsible for the appearance of states of confusion and vulnerability that involves feelings associated with social self exclusion. The objective conditions are not exactly problematical because they may be changed by replacing the resources.

Example: *I don't have money because I don't have a job, but I have other resources* (social capital, human capital, symbolic capital) but these may be converted. This type of conversion is related to the social mobility that can be accessed by individuals according to their personal aspirations.

Stein Ringen (1987) believes that poverty may be *directly* or *indirectly* defined. The direct definition of poverty is given in terms of *deprivation* and unmet social needs, while the indirect definition is given through the *terms of subsistence* as lack of resources necessary to consumption. In 1996, Jurgen Kohl, noticed that the difference between the direct and the indirect poverty is given by *difference in conception* regarding the two types of poverty, as reference to social welfare. The direct conceptions refer to *individual's own resources* and those of the household and the *indirect ones* refer to the life conditions of the individual and of the household. In 1996, Novak Mojka, establishes a *causality report* between direct and indirect poverty, giving to the indirect poverty the concept of causality and to the direct one the concept of effect that reflects in the way of life and in the attitudes towards poverty.

These authors and their conceptions are joined by Ringen (1987), Kangas and Ritakallio (1998) who define poverty as “unmet of needs and the lack of economical resources, the two aspects being in a report of mutual determination”. At the same time they say that *the measurement of poverty* must be done by *dual criteria*: referring to *indirect indicators* (for un/met of needs) and *indirect indicators* for low resources and incomes. Whelan (1993) separates the social indicators in *monetary and non monetary*. He detaches from the economical variant of monetary indicators and proposes to be taken in consideration the description of the lifestyle of the household. We cannot talk about poverty without taking into context *the social need* of any nature, need that is not met on one hand, and on the other hand to refer to internal or external *resources* that could be identified for meeting scanty needs and the increase of *social welfare*.

1. The need – as inductor of the poverty state

Whatever the definition of poverty would be, relative or absolute, there is a dysfunction in the life of the social actor regarding the meet of one *need*. Even the term *need* refers to human fundamental necessities, and when these needs are not met situations of non-participation in social life may appear. Bradshaw (1972, 640-643) identifies and classifies four *types* of human needs:

- 1.1. *Normative needs*, refer to base needs established by specialists according to an already established norm. This type of norm can be useful in establishing quantum or some benefices.
- 1.2. *Comparative needs* – are needs that a person requests comparing to other groups. Robert Goodin (1990) shows that needs are *relative* from a society to another, and within the same society. A person can live in a shelter that is specific to a certain geographical area. In other words, the basis need, shelter, is satisfied. The fact that some members of the same society or of a different one can have a bigger shelter could create a state of discontent that leads to the sensation of deprivation.
- 1.3. *Felt needs* - are those needs that people feel;
- 1.4. *Expressed needs* – needs become requests.

Goodin and Doyal Gough (1991) establish the fact that there is a set of needs that cannot be relative but they are *natural* and mandatory to be fulfilled. These are biological basis needs of food (they refer to the daily caloric intake for survival or normality) and what makes them different are the means of satisfaction from a society to another according to the bio geographical area. (Voicu, 1999).

Is already well known that Maslow's Pyramid classifies basis human needs, problem that has been a controversy for a long time. Abraham Maslow defines the need as a state of imbalance appeared inside the organism as cause of a specific lack. He makes a hierarchy of the basis human needs on five levels:

- 1) *physiological needs* (food, shelter, water, clothing);
- 2) *need for security* / protection, order, limits;
- 3) *need for membership and love*;
- 4) *need for respect and statute*;
- 5) *need for self actualization (self– realization)*.

What is truly remarkable at this theory for our context refers to the degree of satisfaction that the individual feels, degree that influences the satisfaction of his behaviour. Thus, if an individual does not have met his basis needs (food, shelter etc) he will rely on meeting these needs and his behaviour won't be determined by superior needs. In other words, if an individual does not have the means and resources necessary to ensure a minimum welfare he won't be motivated for self – realization, that fits the superior needs, and he will feel deprived, thing that sends him to the inferior limit of his needs satisfaction.

Zender și Medow (1963) associate *the degree of satisfaction* with *the level of aspirations*. The individuals will establish their future aspirations according to the historic of their past performances, determining a defence mechanism in order to protect their self esteem. Thus, the lower his past performances the lower will be his aspirations and self esteem. The analyses prove that the poverty state and its duration is direct proportional to the individual aspirations. The more a person remains in a state of poverty the more will lower his aspirations. Beside the poverty's duration, very important for construction individual aspirations is *the social comparison* within the membership group (Zender, Medow, 1963, 89-105). If the persons that become poor perceive themselves as being poor, and the membership group has the same statute, they will reduce their individual aspirations and the chances to overcome this situation (Morton, ed. Sills, 1968).

The International Poverty Glossary, 1999, establishes for the notion of *basis needs*, two components: one that refers to ensuring a necessary minimum for family for its own consumption, and the second refers to household utilities and community's services that appeared as a result of the increase in life's quality (drinking water, health and education services, transportation etc) (Gordon, 1999).

The Poverty Dictionary of the Institute for Research of the Life's Quality (IRLQ) makes specification on the diagnosis of life's quality, in Romania starting with the 1990s. The investigation of life's quality is a programme that has as objectives the assessment of the objective and subjective indicators of life's quality that are the base for a yearly diagnosis of life's quality.

2. Individual resources and social welfare

Throughout time there were developed theories of social resources as well as of their role on social action. Lin (1982, 1998) is the first that distinguishes between individual social resources and the social ones. He defines social resources as being material goods or symbolic ones, socially valued meant to increase the individual chances for survival. Coleman (1990) defines resources as "things upon which the individuals have control and for which they have certain interests" (Voicu, 1998).

The material and financial resources are the most used and they are concrete instruments through which people can satisfy their needs, but can also represent an indicator for measuring poverty. Besides these types of resources, Bourdieu (1986) defines the human capital, the social capital and the symbolic capital. These theories of the capital's types capture actually their replacement or conversion in order to obtain individual goods. The human capital is made up from biological capital and educational capital. The modern theories of human capital developed by Beker, (1974) have a simple and concise direction: individuals' income increases proportionally with their level of education. Later, this theory

was enriched with the synonymy between human and educational capital. The human capital was later used as measure for a country's development. The human capital plays an important role when we are talking about poverty, with the condition that it can not be converted. The human capital passed as educational capital supposes a higher payment in report to the educational level. Beside this increases the adaptability degree towards new opportunities. As an effect of poverty, the human capital can be ranked once by the lack of maintenance but also by increase of the social inequality. (Voicu, 2004, 137-157).

Bogdan Voicu synthesises three definitions for the social capital, for social sciences, seen in the light of three authors that carried on studies on this type of capital:

- Bourdieu (1980,1983), defines social capital as being an attribute of social relations that facilitates individual action;
- Coleman (1988), defines social capital as being an attribute of the social relations but especially of the institutionalization of the social networks;
- Putnam (1995), defines social capital very synthetically, as trust and social relations.

These perspectives offer to the author the possibility of coming up with his own definition for social capital. He defines social capital as “a characteristic of the social structure, being an attribute of the relations between social actors (both individual and corporate) and of the system of norms that governs these relations, having as core the reciprocity and trust”.

The researches regarding social capital identify both functions and typologies all these being built on the base of the relations within the micro and macro social system, being transposed in different conjunctures. The main function of the social capital is that of conversion by mobility and social adaptation. The social capital has influence on the social development and on the welfare level. The study of Banfield, from 1958, regarding a village in the Southern Italy, is very famous. He explained the fact that the village is poor and can not develop because of the community's incapacity to organize itself, by the lack of trust between individuals outside their families. He calls this lack of trust, familial amoralism. To this author's theory also joined other people that proved the impact of social capital on the household development.

3. The poverty state and social stratification

The concept of *state*, from sociological point of view, refers according to G. DUBY (1978) to the prestige degree that a person might have in social context. This state supposes to honor some rights and debts connected to the social position (Ferreol *et al.*, 1998). We refer to the Old Regime of Feudalism in Europe, where there were three states: aristocracy, clergy and the third state. What could be this

third state but the simple population, insignificant as social statute and of course significant as proportion and number. These were the serfs, free peasants and craftsmen. In Europe, that states were connected to the local community and not the national one compared to Japan and China. Anthony Giddens defines *state* as “a stratified form that implies inequalities between individuals, established by law” (Giddens, 2001, 266). In the understanding of the social stratification systems, the terms state, social class and social mobility, though have a common factor *the position* an individual has within the community, respectively of the society, there some significant differences. If the *states* provided the differentiation of the inequality between individuals by legislation, at the *class* system these are not precisely delimited. An individual *can acquire* a certain class and this depends on the economical component of his life. This component influences the life style of the persons differentiated on social classes, giving them a certain status and a certain social position. The same author classifies the main of the major classes, characteristics for the western society, in four categories:

- The upper class (the rich and executive jobs that hold the resources’ control);
- The middle class (professionals, specialists in different activity fields);
- The working class (the workers that provide manual jobs);
- Peasants.

We cannot prove the poverty state of the population without the theories of social stratification. By Giddens, *social stratification* refers to “structural inequalities between different groups of people” (Giddens, 2001, 264). There are four large systems of social stratification: slavery, caste, state and class.

The slavery represents the extreme form of human inequality in which some individuals are the property of others. Happily this system of social stratification was abolished, today existing only isolated cases, at individual level being considered as crimes. Moreover, the world’s legislation punishes any form of discrimination or slavery that would break human dignity and human rights. Figuratively, the slavery has not vanished completely, but it has other faces, being transferred at a politic level by the authority of the class and of the political system over the people. Under the slogan of democracy, the political class has an attitude of favouritism for its own use and an indifference one towards the population. If in old times, *the owners* were favoured by divine elements, in our times they are being political and by law favoured and this protects them.

The caste, is another form of social stratification and it has a more organic connotation enriched with ethnic – cultural and it refers to *limits* that block the social mobility. Time ago it was approved as rule of social functioning in small communities as tribes and highly religious groups but nowadays it is only about races non-discrimination, and their stratification or classification is no longer allowed from the perspective of liberty and human democracy.

The term of *social class* belongs to modernity and industrialization being analysed for the first time by Karl Marx that initiated the first theories. A part of these theories had a special impact on sociology, being points of start for other theories. Another adept of the social stratification theories was Max Weber, who, as his predecessor, referred to a certain complexity of the social classes. Marx states in his theories only two main classes that refer to persons that master the production means and to those that don't. He doesn't limit just to this classification being impressed by the inequalities created by the capitalist system. According to his classification, at the same time with the technological progress, the aristocrats that held the means of production were getting rich at a fast rate on account of the workers that were producing (they weren't producing the means). Besides these two types of classes, he identifies that class of transition as *peasantry in modernized society*. Marx succeeds to emphasize in his works, refers to the fact that the social inequality and the membership to a certain social class of some people “does not refer to the beliefs that people have, but to the *objective conditions* that allow to some to benefit from a higher access to material rewards than others” (Giddens, 2001:270). He was interested in analysing the social classes from the perspective of their revolutionary potential, while Max Weber (1971) tried to explain the social order considering more important the social prestige and statute. (Ungureanu, 1990, 133-144)

“We understand by class situation the gathering of the typical chances of some individuals to dispose of goods, of the exterior conditions of their lives and the life experiences that make their personal destiny. These typical chances derive from a determined economical order, respectively from the size and the nature of the power to dispose (or not) of goods and services; from the way in which this power is used in order to obtain incomes and annuities...We call social class the totality of those class situations among which can be realised relatively easy and in a typical way, a person exchange and a generation succession...” (Weber, 1971, 309).

Max Weber completes Marx's theories regarding the social stratification, bringing two new terms: the State and the Party. The statute that some people have in a society represents a subjective investment but a positive one that can create a *privileged group*, and those that were subjected to discrimination are the *pariah group*. Although the term class corresponds to a given objective, Max Weber enriches it with subjective evaluations of the social differences.

As for the Party, this is seen as a weapon of power that can influence the social stratification no matter the class or statute. Marx's theory regarding social stratification is very interesting and his capacity to see, in time, the risks of a western type society. He relies on very important differences between very rich minorities and the poor majority. According to this theory, the gap between rich and poor would become very deep, if it hadn't been for the social mobility that

takes into account the individual aspiration of every social actor regarding the overcome of his class and statute.

4. Social mobility and the phenomenon of poverty

The social mobility represents an organic feature by the fact that it can evolve according to individual aspirations and functions. It relies exclusively on personal responsibility for development and economical growth. The social mobility can be *vertical*, for the persons that have properties, business with the state or are its employees which gives them a guaranteed ascendancy and substantial earnings but at the same time they can be *mobile descendant*. The nowadays society brings another type of mobility, *lateral mobility*, that refers to leaving the residential space for professional advance.

Social mobility can also be *intra generational* classic, by analysing the increase or decrease of professional career. If, once, by State's intervention and the Party's leading, the social intra generational mobility was only ascendant, the capitalist society brings a balance between the ascendance and decadence of the professional career. A person that has higher and higher aspirations can perfect in a couple of steps but due to the imbalance of the employer or of the state's economy, his career could decrease. This situation is due to external factors that don't depend on individual will and represent a conjectural risk factor. Another example is deprofesionalization or unemployment by enterprises reorganization. The capitalist and private system sees this type of mobility as normal and natural.

Unlike the intragenerational mobility, the intergenerational one has a longer route in time and refers to transmitting the same occupations between a family's generations. Once the manufacturing jobs, agriculture, animal breeding, apprenticeship represented very well the intergenerational mobility. This type of mobility persists even today having two types of approaches:

4.1. Positive approach, by inheriting of the private apparatus and apprenticeship within the family – professional frame. The parents invest in a business that they intend to leave to their followers. This type of approach is possible only in the private area when it doesn't create conflicts of interest.

4.2. Negative approach, by ignoring the interest conflicts (nepotism) and by excessive authority (power abuse) or of the traffic of influence. In the past, *under the state status* there were families recognized by law for their participation to the state's government and this state was intergenerational transmitted. Today, because of the social mobility and of the human rights, can have access to any level of social stratification, level that can be achieved at any time by intra generational ascendant and descendant mobility. As an example for this type of descent we have the family of some social political actors (deputies, parliament members or companies managers) that assign the halo effect to the intra generational mobility having the tendency to transform it into intergenerational mobility. Thus, they and

also their family members benefit from well- paid jobs, the labour safety, and from a permanent favouritism. For them the competitiveness principle resumes to competition between favouritisms.

As a conclusion, the stratification theories and the social mobility ones illustrate the important role of each person for his own social-economical development. People are not blamed for the failure of their social success, but it is pointed out not only the impossibility of identification and improving their personal resources but also the conversion of the human capital detained. The relationship between poverty and the place of a person in the society is sustained by the lack of correlation between personal resources and personal motivations to ascent to improve the quality of life. The personal ascent would offer the fellow a certain prestige that should permanent be improved. The social prestige implies an economical value which influences the life style. For poor people the social dignity is different perceived (Kohl, 1996) and there are references to their conditions and life-style, the resources and the individual merits being excluded. The difference of perception can be influenced by unsatisfactory past experiences for the fellow and this will determine the appearance of a mechanism of defending the self-esteem and a family immorality. This mechanism can be perceived as a resistance to the future challenges and as a blockage to access the social mobility. Due to the theories of stratification and to the social mobility ones, it can be explained not only the poverty but also the conditions of poverty that poor people perceive.

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