

## THEORIES OF POVERTY AND OF POPULATION'S IMPOVERISHMENT

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### Abstract

Has poverty existed in all times? Has it been researched and to which scope? Who is responsible for Poverty: individuals, societies or politics?

The concept of "poverty" has been given many definitions, from various theoretical perspectives, as well as from the view of numerous historical periods and cultural backgrounds. Although there have been extremely complex researches on "poverty", one could not provide "recipes" for the eradication of this phenomenon.

The research on *poverty* remains a permanent concern and challenge for the professionals in the field.

**Key words:** poverty – impoverishment, social provisions politics, self will poverty, individual / collective responsibility, new poverty, extreme poverty, standard poverty, anti – impoverishment social politics

Certainly, the title can lead to the first questions about the *space – time* variables and to the dynamics of the impoverishing process itself.

Was the poverty, and still is, a component of all times?

What researches have been carried out regarding this process?

What purpose has the poverty been studied for?

Are there any differences between the terms *poverty* - as a process that already exists with obvious effects and causes – and *impoverishment* – as a desired, determined, suggested process/phenomenon with certain purposes or interests?

Impoverishment is seen as a process in full development, with vague effects. It has the shape of a politics that has certain interests. There

are alternatives as the unconsciousness or the ignorance of the politicians when making political strategies in order to diminish the poverty but also the confusion at the population's level.

### **Is the poverty an effect of the prevising social politics?**

Taking into consideration the political philosophy of Karl R Popper, impoverishment could be one of the effects of the *historicism* determined by the politic. This explanation that is given by Popper refers to the crisis situations appeared because of some prevising political strategies quantitative analysed (Popper, 1996, pp. XXIV-XXVI).

Popper criticises the use of Physics' methods and implicit of the logic ones in the field of social sciences. He argues this aspect by saying that the society works as an *organism*, learning from its own experiences but also by saying that it reacts spontaneous and unexpected. Applying the historicism to the social sciences is reliable for sustaining the political context, without taking into account the relativity of the manners that the population can react.

On the other hand, Karl Popper thinks that when it comes to Physics it's about a pseudo-innovation of the new discoveries. It is actually about a rearrangement of some theories and elements or their combination, while when it comes to social sciences it's about *dynamic* and *new things*.

We cannot talk about a continuous evolution or involution regarding Sociology. It's about the characteristics of dynamics that suggest only change, modification, development, movement in a relative time. Thus, Sociology is *related* to dynamics, considering a causal science.

Regarding the innovation element in the social sciences, it consists in the fact that the society behaves as an organism that learns from his own historical experiences and the probability that an event or social behaviour to repeat itself is almost impossible.

While Physics uses as a method the experiment considering it demonstrative for arguing some theories, for social sciences this method cannot be relevant. Popper argues this by saying that a social experiment can induce a certain behaviour or manifestation by determination or influence. Also, a social experiment cannot be repeated because the

conditions of the first experiment won't be the same since they have already been modified.

As a partisan of the Einstein's theory of relativity of time and space he finds a relationship between it and the theory of the social space where Popper denies the common aspect of social regularities. He also emphasises the identification of the historic space because in comparison to the Physics' laws where the terms remain valid no matter the time the experiment is conducted, in the social sciences the hypotheses and the study variables change from one period to another.

Karl Popper makes evident the infallibility of the generalization in the social sciences.

*The generalization* is a principle that belongs to the methods of Physics and is considered by the author as inutile for Sociology. He argues the in utility of the generalization for the social sciences by the impossibility of the exact repeated apparitions of the same conditions (similar conditions) or circumstances in different historic times. Social sciences present *qualitative* explanations compared to the *quantitative* explanations of the Physics (Popper, 1996, p.16).

Thus, the qualitative analysis of the social methods is based on *tendencies* and *objectives*, which lead to an *intuitive understanding* of the social processes and phenomena.

Popper does not deny the importance and the apparition of the social theories. Thus, we have already said, the generalization in the social sciences is useless from the perspective of repeating the experiments. The generalization appears as an argument of cause – effect type referred to historic periods with own social manifestations.

The social prevision, from the historicism's perspective, appears as a way of political manifestation. The social phenomena appeared at a certain time are generated by causes for the new behaviours but these causes have been effects of anterior behaviours. To these can be added new elements that can modify the prevision. Actually, the history of events *cannot* be prevised but only analysed from the perspective of the causes and effects generated by these. In this respect, Karl Popper refers to *confirmation of certain past theory (retro-diction)* underlining in his writings the fact that the trials to organize the societies strictly by prevision, have failed. The historians that proposed these social solutions

did not take into consideration the relativity of the causes and of the effects, thus generating these crises situations.

The apparition of these crises generates the approach / the use of the Physics' methods in the social sciences, in search for methods in order to improve the crisis on the principle cause – effect. From this moment on, the social sciences seem dominated by the politics as the social measures are imposed by the law and are monitored apparently quantitatively.

Popper finds the argumentation according to which a method can be appreciated as scientifically when it generates answers to hypothesis and these answers generate at their turn, other possible questions. These questions and answers *gravitate* around the method so that the bigger the range of gravity, the closer is that method to gaining the statute of a scientific one.

Popper confers to the scientific methods some characteristics and agrees that a science that generates a very complex field for the critics can also induce the apparition of other sciences. He gives to these sciences a high degree of scientific characteristic.

The political philosophy of Karl Popper becomes useful for the social sciences by its meditative character before making a scientific method for measuring the social indicators. He has the merit to get the attention on the accomplishments of the researchers from a qualitative perspective and less from a quantitative one.

It's up to the social sciences to explain the causes of the changes appeared during historical periods.

### **Theories and approaches of poverty and the poor**

The theological literature sanctifies *voluntary poverty*, as a special moral virtue, as a lifestyle. The interest in the poor raises together with the growth of their number and the growth of the number of economical crises determined by historical events.

The concept of "poverty" has been given more definitions from different theoretical perspectives. Thus, *poverty* takes different *dimensions* throughout historical periods and cultural areas. The *poverty* has its own history.

These theories and definitions clearly refer to *poverty* but also to the population's *impoverishment* from two important perspectives: one that makes responsible the *politics* and the other one *the person*.

The researches carried out on poverty are extensive and covered a lot of the phenomenon's *area*.

When we speak about poverty, we also approach other concepts that contribute to defining and analyzing this phenomenon.

There can not be carried out universal valid researches for all the social spaces. Thus, a person or a place can be considered poor on a certain territory and in a certain historical period and for another territory and time can be considered outside poverty or at the other extreme, much below poverty's limit.

In other words, very complex researches have been carried out on the poverty phenomenon but it couldn't have been elaborated "solutions" for this phenomenon's elimination.

Poverty is a common phenomenon for all times and comes along at each historical transition or period, as a sign of social dynamics. Returning to the philosophy or Karl Popper, the societies neither progress nor regress they are just in a permanent movement, change.

The poverty appears and produces *unfitting* of all society's members to the new conditions of the social's functioning.

Since ancient times great thinkers and researches have tried to give a definition as clear as possible for *poverty*. At the time of the researches is possible that the definition of this phenomenon to have been clear, enough for the representation of poverty. According to the dynamics of society only one definition wasn't enough for the whole historical period.

Maria Estela Ortega Rubi (1999, p.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.

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. 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.

As previously stated, poverty attracted the attention when the number of the people directly affected increased considerably.

Nowadays, the representation of poverty refers mainly to issues regarding work and education. Extrapolating, poverty also troubles the other components of life: the house, living standard, negative determined behaviour, culture etc. The way in which the states handle poverty, as well as the help given to the poor show the level of social responsibility which the states grant.

There have been identified more definitions for poverty according to the objectives of the researches.

Elena Zamfir (1997, p.390) defines poverty as “*a state of permanent lack of necessary resources in order to provide a decent lifestyle, accepted at the level of a given community*”. It can be noticed the usage of the term *resources* instead of *income*, emphasising the economical meaning of the term.

The author identifies two perspectives for defining poverty: one refers to *consumption* and more exactly to the incapacity of satisfying the minimal needs, the other refers to normal *social functioning*, more exactly to the ability of a person to function as a member of a society (Zamfir, 1997, p.396).

Poverty has been defined as being *absolute* when the necessary means for maintaining the living standard are missing or can be found at very low levels compared to the limit of poverty – also known as *threshold of poverty* or *level of subsistence*.

The *subsistence* refers to the rapport between income and people's needs, or more exactly to the satisfying these needs. The subsistence is the state in which a family earns (at least) the minimum necessary incomes in order to maintain the physical health and efficiency of the family's members, concept defined in 1899 by Seeborn Rowntree. The author

established a limit of poverty which refers to the total necessary incomes of a family for a week in order to cover the expenses on fuel, electricity, rent, food, clothes, household and personal ones (Pop, coord, 2002, p.710).

There are well – known the cases of the millionaire beggars or those of the poor millionaires, both situations referring to an inefficient rapport income – needs.

This poverty threshold has a certain *degree of relativity* which refers to the individual's perception compared to his fellows.

Thus, Townsend defines poverty as a state of *relative deprivation* that appears when people” *cannot obtain, at all or sufficiently, their life conditions, which is food, goods and services which allow them to accomplish their roles, to have relationships with the others ...*” (Zamfir E, 1997, p.394).

The Marxist theories suggest that exploitation is the cause for poverty while the right politics find as direct responsible for poverty the individual himself, which inherit a culture of poverty. The communism considers that poverty appeared as a consequence of the inequitable sharing of the incomes. (Pop, coord, 2002, p.714)

While a part of the studies and researches were focused on *the communitarian poverty* also known as “*traditional poverty*”, which refers to a modest endowment with utilities and consumption goods, but also reduced consumption, the newer researches focus on the “*the new poverty*” specific for the advanced societies (Stanculescu, Berevoescu, 2004, p.21-22).

Until the apparition of *the new poverty*, both the poor and the phenomenon of poverty, have been treated from the perspective of *social exclusion* or, the term *poor*, has been associated to the unqualified immigrants or to the working class.

The concept of *social exclusion* comes from the French theories and refers to “breaking off social relationships” and solidarity. (Stanculescu, Berevoescu, 2004, p.23)

The French theories use for the *new poverty* phenomenon the concept of *social exclusion*, starting from the long term unemployment increase (once excluded from the work market), inequality and instability, population's solidarity decrease.

For the Americans and British, the term the *new poverty* is associated with “economical victims” – Gunnar Myrdal (1963), Wilson W. J. (1987, 1991), Gans H. J. (1990, 1996), Kats B. M. (1989) – which represents *underclass*, term that has been given more definitions. Lewis (1964) associates the term *underclass* with the outlaws, the vagrants.

The concept *underclass* is represented by four dimensions, from structural perspective:

- dependence upon the state;
- social isolation;
- deviant subculture;
- racial language.

For the Romanian population neither the term *social exclusion*, nor the term *underclass* are reliable for description and manifestation. As long as poverty is spread at the level of the whole population, in our country we can use the term *extreme poverty*, which refers to a permanent state of poverty, a deep one, a fight for survival. (Stanculescu, Berevoescu, 2004, p.25).

The same author suggests the use of the term *standard poverty* for the poverty associated with the lack / insufficiency of the income for minimum consumption.

The *extreme poverty* represents the end of some intermediate stages of this process, starting from a *situation of critical normality*, followed by a *crisis situation based on needs*, situation that creates a *state of generalized crises* that leads to the last phase represented by *the extreme poverty*. (Stanculescu, Berevoescu, 2004, p.38)

The extreme poverty has been politically ignored since the period of transition, the economic aspect being the evident one and considered for carrying out the researches. But the extreme poverty doesn't only refer to this economic aspect; it refers to psycho – sociological aspects represented by social disintegration, social and human exclusion and auto – exclusion, meant to deepen the poverty as well. (Zamfir, Stanculescu, Berevoescu, coord, 2004, p.2)

The state of extreme poverty involves the state's intervention by implementation of functional, *social policies anti – poverty*. It is true, indeed, that there have been organized institutions of research, elaboration and implementation of the social anti – poverty policies, but many of

them have been created on the economic element, without keeping in mind the human element. Referring again to the authors mentioned above, the social provisions are difficult to determine, because of the dynamic generated by the individual's presence.

Thus, for elaborating some functional social policies, the present human factor should be taken into consideration. Besides, each historical period has its own social policies which may need the implementation of some *repairing policies* (Zamfir, C. Zamfir, E (coord), 1995).

This type of social policies is characterized by the implementation of some immediate fast measures, but which most of the time are considered as being populist and economically inefficient. The social repairing policies usually have positive effects on short term and negative effects on longer term (Preda, 2002, p.112).

Marian Preda (2002, p.157-158) confers the term "a governmental culture of poverty" to the Romanian post – Communist poverty, comparing it with the description and defining "the poverty culture" of O. Lewis. (1969, p.49)

"The poverty culture" is defined by Lewis as being characteristic for a *culture* and for a *lifestyle* of some individuals in the context of a specific society. Thus, a society with a rudimentary banking system and economy, with an unemployment rate higher than the average, without social and political organization, with too low salaries, large number of relatives, only economical values of the dominant class, imputed to the individuals, families or communities with this specific, are even "common" for the post – communist Romanian government.

According to Marian Preda, *the governmental culture of poverty* is characterised by very reduced authority, economical and social disorder, amateurism and inefficiency in economy and a marginal international position as well. Thus the author presents the poverty and the impoverishment of population as a *victim* of the post – Communist government; of inefficient social policies, (implemented in situation of crisis) and less in the area of economical and social development.

The social policies cannot be "imported" and implemented. Of course, the issue of poverty starts from a general defining that has to be "moulded" on the *specific* on the studied / analyzed society, in order to

*decide in the end the efficiency* of the implemented policies (Miftode, 2004, p.425).

For implementing some optimum social policies for reducing the phenomenon of poverty in the context above mentioned, we need a “research” of the typical Romanian phenomenon, and of the *direct action* on the fields taken into consideration as well.

Kurt Lewin, 1959, calls this approach *research – action*, referring to [“investigation activities oriented towards action”] Lewin, K., (Miftode, 2004, p.423– 424). The proposed type of research through the *research – action* method refers to a practical dominant approach from the point of view of the research and of that of intervention as well. The method mentioned above, suggests the implementation of direct actions in order to solve the problems. This aspect refers to *the active – involvement* of the researches and of the public.

The research – action is based on *the understanding of the facts* which are recorded, observed, described and checked by using the participative observation. This sociological technique the closest to ethnological type of observation and assumes the contact on larger period not only with the individuals of a community but also with their lifestyle. It is important that the observer remains objective – in the exterior of the object – in the account of his observations, in order that the results to be as real interpreted as he can, and the solutions to be optimum and functional.

Thus, poverty can be approached from several perspectives:

- from *positivist perspective*, reflects the concern for social problems, in the context of *empirical knowledge* of the social data; it represents a social research *centred on the problem*;

- from *sociological, functionalist perspective* (E Durkheime, T. Parsons), refers to the acknowledgement of the social *dysfunctions* and to identifying the conditions of the apparition of these, in order to solve them and to re – equilibrate the society’s functioning;

- from *subjective – constructivist perspective*, it refers to defining the problem as an answer to contextual demand (Poede, 2002, p.134-135)

The poverty’s phenomenon has been *measured and analyzed* more *quantitative* and less *qualitative*. Both types are necessary for a complete and complex analyze. The qualitative researches of the Chicago School

lead by Charles Booth have been used in the social reconstruction. Regarding poverty he tried to establish the facts from a real, objective point of view, to use the empiric reality and to use several methods for identifying the problems connected to poverty.

Defining poverty as complex and complete as possible represents an important step in elaborating strategies of intervention in making the public policies.

It is certain that there is a long series of other approaches; concepts and elements for analyze this phenomenon that should have been presented into this context. The poverty, as social phenomenon of all times, appears today, as a manifestation of the capitalism, considered by Marx, the transforming force of the modern world, in which, responsible for poverty, is just the political system and not the individual failures of the poor. (Poede, 2002, p.124)

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