
PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF POVERTY

Nina Mihaela Mihalache*

*'Al. I. Cuza' University, Faculty of Philosophy and Socio-Political Sciences, Bd. Carol I no.11,
700506, Iași, Romania*

(Received 26 August 2013, revised 31 August 2013)

Abstract

Poverty has been over time a theme and also inspiration reasons and analysis for all areas. The subject is discussed in History, Sociology, Political science, Economics and Theology. Various writings and generous approaches finally find their explanatory refuge in the socio-cultural register. Sociological concerns of recent times on this issue have focused on two directions: one relates to self-perception of poor and the perception of others on the poor persons. Things have also affected the theory, some theories attributing the poverty to the individual and some to the social element. Perceptions and social representations of poverty and theoretical and explanatory guidelines accompanying this topic show that the phenomenon is complex, having an important socio-cultural component.

Keywords: real poor persons, merciful, charity, marginal, responsibility

1. Introduction

At all times, the society was concerned about the economic status and welfare standard of population, in order to prevent certain social inflammation amid poverty. Moreover, all these concerns, poverty and poverty-related phenomena have always existed. Like evolution, the poor persons have benefited from protection and some recognition. Christianity, for example, mercy and helping neighbours is preached, of persons in crisis or in need. This is why religion is considered by many contemporary authors [1] an inspiration for social policies. On the other hand, a number of Church actions are considered as charity and neighbour love fall on a clear social line.

Based on these data, we will attempt below to identify some instances of the needy within the society. Starting from a number of socio-cultural data, that image may vary on a very large scale, from victim to opportunist. Along with this representation, we can also distinguish proper social attitudes: mercy, compassion, protection and help, solidarity on the one hand, marginalization, exclusion, dissociation, on the other hand.

* E-mail: ninamihaela70@yahoo.com

From our perspective, we subscribe to some multidisciplinary analysis perspective. These provide us with a broader view of the phenomenon, which allows changing perceptions and representations, but also the adoption of specific behaviours. So, the religious texts suggest a gentle attitude for understanding poverty. In the Desert Fathers [2] for example, poverty receives a positive valuation. Voluntary poverty becomes a path towards spiritual perfection. It becomes a form of asceticism which completes the rigors of monastic life or in the wilderness. Regarding the biological and ecological perspective, these refer to the subsistence threshold, by accomplishing the basic needs. It also makes some advertisements on the climate changes which could cause disasters associated with the loss of food production and reserves in the context of population growth. Sociological analysis of poverty tries to capture as many variables as possible, variables that enter into the equation this phenomenon. We also include here the statistical analysis which intends to set out the individual, regional profiles of poverty, up to the point when analysis and interpretations reach the mentality and collective representations of poverty. The analyses of this kind loom a certain tendency towards a culture of poverty of the groups with little chance of recovery. This is not a voluntary poverty, undertaken together with a set of values, as in the religious life model, but a model that reproduces intergenerational deficit. Without any doubt, this is supported also by a number of social policies that encourage social support and less the individual involvement.

2. Short historical excursus on poverty

For the Middle Ages, the *poor* persons' image refers only to persons who held no rank, people without a particular prestige and who did not bear arms, being under the protection of the king's people. Although the economic component was obvious, it was not an important factor to be considered as poor. The poor person condition was rather a price of individual freedom [3]. At the same time, the poor had a somewhat privileged status. They were not blamed, and enjoyed the mercy and compassion of the community. This was due to the fact that the Church and religion had an important role in society and the moral precepts appeared as laws. These images and social representations of the poor in a given historical period are due to different interpretations of religious texts that have worked and continue to work in certain social segments. An interpretation that favours the direct sense and less the symbolic dimension of religious messages in different writings is also involved. Thus, the poor in spirit were happy due to their poverty and the chance of salvation was infinitely greater than that of the rich. The camel parabola that is more likely to go through a needle's eye, than the has rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven is a good example in this respect. Poverty was transformed to being a virtue, a sign of divine election. The poor were not responsible for their situation. Moreover, they were considered morally superior to the rich.

This image of the humble and modest underprivileged by destiny begins to fade once with environmental disasters and riots that have depleted all farmers, period that coincides to the dangerous beggar's appearance (thieves, robbers). Along with this, mutations produced by the Protestant Reformation in 1484 [4], that comes with new interpretations and exegesis of the sacred text, would change a lot the images and social representations of labour and poverty. The Renaissance brings forward, for those who are able to work and do not work, the image of "socially incompetent, foolish and dangerous human wrecks who do not deserve any respect for themselves, no respect of others" [3, p. 47]. If by that date the groups were more important than the individual person, with the beginning of capitalism (XVII-XVIII century), the emphasis is on individuality, in pursuit of personal interests, situation in which the poor are no longer a point of interest. The biggest approach for the poor and poverty is that of Ebeneger Scrooge, advocating for social eugenics and pathology, considering that the very poor persons belong to the category of misfits and it would be better for them to die.

An important theological literature considers *voluntary poverty* as a great moral value, as a way of life. Of course, it considers the sacred texts, but depicts more the condition in which poverty becomes a virtue. Meanwhile, Christian churches underlie their social and charitable projects on the teachings of sacred texts. Thus, there arises a social theology that tries a valorisation of individual and community resources on behalf of neighbour love.

The first laws related to supporting the neighbour, even though they were built on religious observances, date from 1100 and belong to the Roman Church. It develops the *Decretum* which, by canon law, obliges the rich to help the poor invoking the law of morality. From the Middle Ages date also the first organized plans for helping the needy, assuming recognition and registration of the poor, taking into account each individual's own resources. It makes the difference between *Worthy Poor* (poor worthy, true) who were disabled, elderly, widows and children and *unworthy poor* (unworthy poor, pseudo-poor) that refers to people who can work, but incapable of finding work. Due to the many social riots and countless war periods, the number of poor people increases and social problems get worse. This is also the time when begging phenomenon gets alarming dimensions.

In 1530-1531 appear in England the first Poor Laws by which the judges are empowered to issue *beggar certificates* only to the Worthy Poores. Instead of the church poor box, it's introduced for the first time in England, in the XVI century, the tax for helping the state budget that has remained impoverished. The memorable Elizabethan Poor Law, regulations published in 1601, has governed almost 200 years and required local taxes from all community members and their management throughout the community, being the first laws on social protection of the poor. In 1795 appear the first concerns regarding the welfare of the population by introducing the poverty threshold. All families situated below the poverty line received supplements and discounts on basic foods. If until now

the focus was on *helping the poors*, starting with the nineteenth century, appears the idea of *self-help* to combat social dependence [3].

3. Mercy, merciful and charity

The Church has always encouraged the parishioners and leaned towards helping the poor population, by urging rich and poor alike to *help their neighbour*, justified by invoking acceptance and *joy of giving*. All major moral precepts promoted by important religions are the basis of the acts of mercy, kindness, translated by love of Godhead and manifested by *neighbour love*. These acts called *charities* have enriched many centuries the role of religion and Church. Charities consist of helping the poor through practical actions of fulfilling basic needs: food, clothing, shelter and medical care in establishments arranged near churches. For performing acts of charity, some rulers and nobles have got involved. In time, the civil society and then the state have also joined. The state goes on through different situations, of *protecting* the rich and the *balancing* of income between rich and poor – by transfer from the rich to the poor.

Ligia Livadă Cadeschi succeeds in highlighting the pity and mercy of old scripts, building a picture of the poor from ancient times, but also showing mercy as a spiritual practice [5]. Both the Old Testament and the Gospel of Matthew encourages the help of the poor as a moral duty and with precedence, with a subsequent reward of the afterlife.

In Exodus 22.21-27 and Deuteronomy 24.12-22, appears the idea that Jesus said to his disciples: “Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth” (Luke 12.33-34).

The Gospel of Matthew says, in turn, that afterlife happiness is promised to all merciful. On the Last judgment day: “Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” Then shall the righteous answer, ... “Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? ” “When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? ” “Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?” And the King shall answer, ... “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.. ”” (Matthew 25.34-40)

According to the Gospels, the relation between religion, Church and poor is an organic one: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8.9).

4. Sociological perspectives and welfare on poverty

At first, the Church performed the social assistance, manifested by true acts of charity for the poor and those physically or mentally unable to work. Social assistance has a long history of being associated with poverty and social marginalization. Its customers were in the position of marginalized individuals. There are several approaches to social assistance customer. L. Livadă Cadeschi classified the marginalized individuals into two categories: *socio-cultural* (the poor, the infirm, and the sick) and *socioeconomic* (beggar and vagabond) [6].

For Bronislaw Geremek, the main feature of the marginalized individuals is non participation in the dominant social (division of labour, social roles, etc.) [7]. The moment in which the social assistance appears as a state concern, as a result of historical events and social changes, becomes important for the addressed topic

In our country, the first social care service was established in 1881 on the City Hall of Bucharest [8]. This change reflects basically two aspects: social assistance passes from the Church's patrimony to the State (Ministry of Health and Social Care) for the monitoring of social care services as part of management, and the second aspect is reflected by the involvement of communities in social assistance. Until now, social assistance has gone through several transformations and approaches, based on historical events and subsequent phenomena. If during the war the emphasis fell more on the care of orphans, single parents, people with disabilities, during the urbanization and industrialization, the emphasis falls on social, family support and social control [9, 10]. After the communist period, the basic idea was the *return* of our country towards Europe, i.e. to capitalism.

Marxist social assistance was designed to eliminate the negative consequences of capitalism, to maintain the obedience of the population, to ensure healthy and educated workforce. Social assistance was intended to *anaesthesia* population, minimizing material/economic difference at individual level.

In capitalism, competition, power, survival by own forces, the ability to adapt to new challenges and responsibility are stimulated. This freedom of the individual to try, to survive, to cause, gives birth to a new social phenomena such as corruption, poverty, unemployment, nepotism, unlimited jurisdiction, local wealthy people called 'barons', politicization, underground economy, discrimination of population found in difficulty, etc.

In the post-transition period, the social assistance in Romania developed in order to support a growing number of higher social assisted persons. By definition, the capitalist society is a materialistic one, and materialistic societies see people as objects [11]. These are considered necessary as long as they are able to work there where work is needed. In other words, the simple notion of *worker* or *non-worker* appears. The category of non-workers includes, directly, in addition to those *who do not want to work* those *who can not work*. Capitalist society is confined to giving clear verdicts: "there are those who are of no use to

society or may not be helpful” and those that are useful in their work [12]. Romanian society can not skip directly from traditional solidarity to *capitalist coldness*.

Socialism has used the idea of wealth created by labour, specific to the Romanian traditional society. In this sense, the state only supported the people who, for some reasons, could not work, the security system being dominated by the principle of compensation of those who work. [13]

5. Causal theories of poverty

The representation and perception of the poverty phenomenon are important for the study of poverty within the population [14]. This perception is related to the content of the phenomenon and is influenced by the political and legislative element. There are some external factors that may favour the state of poverty. These are connected to the social aspects related to the bureaucracy, fiscal and social attitudes, individual (social capital, symbolic, excessive consumption, parasitism and social dependence) and religious aspects [15].

Poverty is perceived in some areas in an individual manner and as effect of democratic freedom – it’s about the choice the individual makes in terms of living standards and personal aspirations, religious beliefs, and in other areas poverty is perceived as a collective phenomenon. This approach is interesting for the Social sciences, for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Very suitable in explaining poverty, but especially the perception of poverty at the individual level, seem to be theories of John Viet-Wilson and Townsend [16]. Both distinguish between *poverty* and *deprivation*, after having seen that these are used as synonyms. Townsend was the first (1979) who distinguished between the two terms, associating the term of *deprivation* with the production conditions of poverty (and not vice versa), by the access failure/inability to satisfy specific needs, and the poverty with the general state of a lack of resources [17] At the same time, assigns the *causality* deprivation and poverty to the *effects* of causality.

A first non-classification of explaining the poverty causes was done in the Dictionary of poverty [17] Thus, according to causality, we can prioritize poverty considering the aspects below.

5.1. Individual approach

It is understood that the causal focus is on the individual and the individual perception on the poverty situation. Two situations are distinguished: the one of personal representation as poor and the one of poor persons around. The explanations are many and are motivated within many situations. The fact that there is the exterior perception that the poor persons are responsible for their own mistakes and that they are facing poverty, influences auto-marginalization and auto-perception of the poor, so that they may perceive themselves as such, or diminish their ability for getting re-established. Some of them may feel

stigmatized by the fact that they receive assistance, and others can accuse them for being dependent of such help and are not capable of getting out of poverty. The group model perception and area in which they live is also added. Usually, there is a tendency to form some groups with the same living customs, so with a different life-style. We consider regions with high unemployment, crime, and alcohol and drugs consumption. It is obvious that one can impose, besides implementing economic programs and inclusion of determination, components for behaviour change in order to reduce social inequalities and increase life quality.

5.2. Social approach

The term *culture of poverty* belongs to Oscar Lewis (1966), when he performed researches on the causes of poverty, but especially on the poverty status of an entire area. According to Lewis's theory, "culture of poverty is not only a way of life, but a negative reaction to the state of poverty, a behaviour that sink further into poverty and tends to form stable chronic poverty bags that, once created, are difficult to treat" [18].

This pattern of *poverty culture* has been criticized for the universality proposed by the author, being shown that there is not a typical poor personality. On the other hand, for the modern culture, the culture of poverty leads to segregation between standard poor persons and the underclass ones (lower class), with little or no possibilities of reducing the poverty situation. Some questions related to the construction of the poor's personality and especially, their motivations appear. Most analysts of the culture of poverty argue that there is no specific pattern or a specific personality of the poor, but rather a situation that modifies the change of behaviour and by default, the poor's personality. Critics agree that poverty stems more from the conditions in which the poor lives, and not from patterns, which is contrary to the theories of social mobility. It is pretentious to say that there is a specific pattern of the culture of poverty, preferring a model similar to that described by O. Lewis. Thus, there is the assumption that the poor have a propensity towards subculture, which tends to be permanent, and that poor creates its own world in which it gets stuck.

This type of explanation refers to the transmission from generation to generation of a specific behaviour pattern, specific to the poor persons. This event was called the 'culture of poverty' by Oscar Lewis, who has conducted studies on the population of Puerto-Rico. As characteristics of the poverty culture, are the single-parent mother families, broken families with many children, marriage, sexual relations and childbearing at very early ages, which implies a poor family cohesion and economic difficulties due to dropout, training and professional experience. The presenteeism orientation is identified, translated by addiction to social assistance and social services, but also an internalization of a certain behaviour. Lewis shows that this type of behaviour is built from values and norms that lead to a total rejection and opposition of other types of behaviour that supposedly could take them out of poverty. Behaviours

associated with the culture of poverty determine a specific manifestation of the subculture, with permanent tendencies, but also the creation of a world specific to the poor (lack of awareness of opportunities, feelings of marginalization, resignation and fatalism). Moreover, the poor perceives the social class difference and assumes inferiority. Moreover, they are labelled as lazy, irresponsible and unable to be successful [18].

5.3. Political and economic approach

Political and economic approach refers to those theories and perspectives that consider the poor a victim of the political system and economic deprivation. Social policies focused solely on economic support of the poor are not a successful solution. There are also theories that consider that market mechanisms can produce new opportunities for all, but only the poor can not access them because they do not know how. Another approach is the fact that there could be unequal opportunities for the poor, because market mechanisms are only for the rich, the poor being excluded. It is known that John Rawls [19] has elaborated the theory of *justice as favourable/opportunity* (fairness), sustaining the principle of equity and social redress via the state [20]. Reactions have quickly appeared, so that Nozick Robert develops the *theory of justice as empowerment*, through which it only recommends the transfer of resources from the rich to the poor, without state involvement, but only as a voluntary act of the rich. By this theory Nozick does not preclude to social redress based on charitable acts, but only opposes to state involvement, which would create *unfair opportunities* for the poor [21].

5.4. Ecological approach

The concern for issues of climate changes and demographic behaviour of people represent for the last quarter of a century, the major concern worldwide due to very wide spread of poverty on very extended areas. Due to excessive use of chemical fertilizers and massive deforestation, desertification and soil pollution lead to decreased agricultural areas that provide food for the population. These issues are added to sudden temperature changes and the emergence of extreme weather (heavy rain, ice, snow or adverse short heat) and natural disasters (earthquakes of high intensity, floods and severe storms) that contribute to the destruction of households, crops and death of the animals. Population growth in some areas while increasing life expectancy drains the state's resources and rapidly causes poverty. To improve these phenomena, the states develop anti-poverty family planning policies, while informing the population about the risk due to severe demographic growth. With all these social policies, underdeveloped states of Africa and India face permanent desertification and the rapid population growth leading to chronic poverty.

6. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, poverty has been and will remain a phenomenon that will always raise issues both from the point of view of practical approach and from a theoretical perspective. If part of the studies and research focused on *community poverty* known as the of *traditional type*, i.e. a modest endowment with utilities and consumer goods but also with low consumption, new research focus on *new poverty*, specific to developed societies [22]. Until the appearance of the *new poverty*, both the poor and the poverty phenomena, were treated in terms of *social exclusion*, or the term *poor* was associated to unskilled immigrants or with the working class. The concept of *social exclusion* comes from French theories and refers to the ‘rupture of social bonds’ and solidarity. French theories used for *new poverty* phenomena the *social exclusion* concept, based on increasing long-term unemployment (once excluded from the labour market), inequality and instability, decreased population solidarity.

Sociological studies and not only these, show that poverty takes many forms. Contextualization is dynamic and constantly determines adapted approaches and interventions. Global and European economic crisis has brought a new wave of the poor, but also serious changes of human values [23]. Gradually, many moral values and that of religion are becoming profane, turning into social norms and values [24]. Many are getting relative and dissipate into a conglomerate of rules and principles in a society increasingly normative. Policies and intervention strategies for the poor are changing too. Focus moves from social exclusion to social inclusion, on individual values and creating opportunities.

In this dynamic in which we easily identify the characteristics of a transparent society, as Gianni Vattimo called it [25], some community spaces where traditional spirit dominates, religious become models for those who think social policies on poverty. Projects and interventions in Europe and not only, discover unsuspected resources, exploitation of communal and individual resources. Most of them are built on religious values and long practiced experiences.

References

- [1] I. Ica jr. and G. Marani (eds.), *Gândirea sociala Bisericii*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2002.
- [2] C. Bădiliță, *Patericul sau Apoftegmele părinților din pustiu*, 3rd edn., Polirom, Iași, 2007.
- [3] G. Poede, *Perspective istorice asupra programelor și politicilor sociale*, in *Politici sociale*, University ‘Al. I. Cuza’, Iași, 2008, 14-15.
- [4] M. Weber, *Etica protestantă și spiritul capitalismului*, Humanitas, București, 1993
- [5] L. Livadă Cadeschi, *Sărăcie și Asistență Socială*, Colegiul Noua Europă, București, 1998, 15-18.
- [6] L. Livadă Cadeschi, *De la milă la filantropie*, Nemira, București, 2001, 10.
- [7] G. Bronislaw, *L’image de l’autre: le marginal*, in *Rapport au XVI-eme Congres International des sciences Historiques*, August Nitschke, Stuttgart, 1985, 67-81.
- [8] F. Pașa and L.M. Pașa, *Asistența socială în România*, Polirom, Iași, 2004, 13-15.

- [9] L. Coandă, F. Curta, *Mic dicționar de sociologie*, ALL, București, 1993, 37.
- [10] V. Miftode, *Protecția umană prin control social, Teoria controlului social*, in *Sociologia populațiilor vulnerabile*, University 'Al. I. Cuza', Iași, 2004, 7-20.
- [11] D. Howe, *Introducere în teoria asistenței sociale*, MaeLink, UNICEF, București, 2001, 106-107.
- [12] S. Spitzer, *Social Problems*, **22(5)** (1975) 638-651.
- [13] L.M. Pop (ed.), *Dicționar de politici Sociale*, Expert, Bucuresti, 2002, 558.
- [14] M.E. Ortega Rubi, *Dualitatea reprezentării sociale a sărăciei*, in *Aspecte psihosociale ale sărăciei*, G. Ferreol (ed.), Polirom, Iași, 1999, 178-193.
- [15] C. Schifirnet, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, **12(34)** (2013) 173-208.
- [16] P. Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Allen Lane and Penguin Books', London, 1979, 31-60.
- [17] C. Zamfir, D. Adrian and B. Voicu, *Dicționar de sărăcie*, ICCV, București, 1999, online at http://www.iccv.ro/publicatii/dictionar_de_saracie.
- [18] O. Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty. San Juan and New York*, Random House, New York, 1966, 198-199.
- [19] T.B. Palade, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **9(Suppl. 2)** (2013) 3-11.
- [20] J. Rawls, *A theory of Justice*, Belknap, Cambridge, 1971, 60-65.
- [21] R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Basic Books, New York, 1974, 150.
- [22] S.M. Stănculescu and I. Berevoescu (eds.), *Sărac lipit, caut altă viață!*, Nemira, București, 2004, 21-22.
- [23] S. Frunza, *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*, **39** (2012) 176-186.
- [24] C. Gavriluță, *The Everyday Sacred. Symbols, Rituals, Mythologies*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbrucken, 2013, 117.
- [25] G. Vattimo, *Societatea transparentă*, Pontica, Constanța, 1995.