
**Poverty: Its Degrees, Its Causes and Its Relief –
a Multidisciplinary Approach
to an Urgent Problem**

Mareike Hansen and Thomas Riis (eds)

Themengruppe:
Die Gesellschaft – Gruppen und Erscheinungen

ESF exploratory workshop on
Poverty: Its Degrees, Its Causes and Its Relief

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Preface

Since the early 1990s, poverty research has been abandoned by most historians,¹ however, numerous studies in various European countries give a satisfactory descriptive image.² Unfortunately, one must also consider the almost total neglect of the historical dimension as far as research into contemporary poverty is concerned. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that physical poverty (e.g. a famine) is only the final and critical phase of a long development³ and that poverty can be transmitted from one generation to another.⁴ In both cases, the importance of the historical dimension is obvious. In this respect, the “Sonderforschungsbereich” of the University of Treves, is focussing on historical aspects of poverty.

As poverty is a relative phenomenon, the lack of a proper definition of the term “poverty” is a major obstacle for comparative interdisciplinary research into the subject. Contemporary studies apply two definitions, identifying the poor with the receivers of social aid or with those whose income does not exceed 50% or 60% of the average

1 The Sonderforschungsbereich at the University of Treves financed by the German Research Council is an exception.

2 E.g. JEAN-PIERRE GUTTON, *La société et les pauvres. L'exemple de la généralité de Lyon 1534–1789*, Paris 1971; MICHEL MOLLAT, *Études sur l'histoire de la pauvreté*, 2 vol., Paris 1974; PAUL SLACK, *The English Poor Law, 1531–1782*, London 1990; BRONISLAW GEREMEK, *La Potence ou la pitié: l'Europe et les pauvres du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, Paris 1987; ROBERT JÜTTE, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2000 [New approaches to European history 4]; OLE PETER GRELL / ANDREW CUNNINGHAM (ed.), *Health Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe 1500–1700*, London-New York 1997; OLE PETER GRELL / ANDREW CUNNINGHAM / ROBERT JÜTTE (ed.), *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Northern Europe*, Aldershot 2002.

3 A. RANGASAMI, “The Masking of Famine: The Role of the Bureaucracy,” in: *Famine and Society*, ed. JEAN FLOUDET & AMRITA RANGASAMI, New Delhi 1993, pp. 53–64.

4 TORSTEN FISCHER, *Y-a-t-il une fatalité d'hérédité dans la pauvreté ? Dans l'Europe moderne : les cas d'Aberdeen et de Lyon*, Kiel 2003 (thesis), published under the same title as Beiheft 187 of the Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Stuttgart 2006.

income in a given society. Both definitions are based on official statistics, and do not consider the various forms of poverty. Hence, the former definition does not deal with the complete spectrum of parameters influencing the economical and social development of a poor individual or a poor family. For instance, the “hidden poverty” (economic poverty hidden by social wealth, refusing public aid) has hardly been systematically investigated until now.⁵ The latter definition of “poverty” is more appropriate, but does not consider the importance of victuals in kind in the individual household (or more precisely: how valuable is the contribution of the vegetables and fruits grown by the poor family itself?).

Finally, contemporary sociological definitions leave out the historical dimensions of poverty, and consequently, the process leading into poverty is not taken into account. Accordingly, poor relief often treats the symptoms, not the evil itself, as its causes mainly remain unknown.

For the reasons mentioned it seemed useful to bring together leading scholars and to invite them to discuss the possibilities of an interdisciplinary approach to poverty and its relief, taking into account both the hereditary nature of poverty and the definition of famine as the last stage of malnutrition. By encouraging this kind of collaboration the coordinators Prof. René Leboutte, Luxembourg (formerly Aberdeen) and myself hoped to develop a medium-term initiative of cross-national and interdisciplinary poverty research.

Generously, the European Science Foundation declared itself ready to sponsor an interdisciplinary workshop on poverty, which took place at Kiel in November 2005. The objectives of the workshop can be divided in short term, medium term and longer-term aims.

In a short term, the workshop participants should examine the different degrees of poverty and identify its causes. In addition, the different forms of present and past poor relief were to be considered in order to gauge their efficiency. Here, the workshop participants

⁵ With one notable exception: GIOVANNI RICCI, *Povert , vergogna, superbia. I declassati fra Medioevo e Et  moderna*, Bologna 1996.

could rely on research already done. This approach would hopefully lead to fruitful discussions about contemporary concepts of poverty.

In a medium term perspective, the workshop intended to map out further collaborative, interdisciplinary research projects and to set an agenda for future academic efforts in this field. Finally, the workshop should be an impulse for the determination of research leading to a strategy for the fight against poverty. In this way, the workshop organisers hoped to initiate a common approach to academic impact on social and economic policy. To meet its objectives, the workshop comprised four interrelated thematic sessions.

The first theme should consider one of the key problems within poverty research, which is the measurement of “poverty” and its degrees. The scope was not only to treat results of past research, but also to link European poverty research with problems coming out of sociological field research in India, where successful fighting against poverty is a most urgent desideratum. The second session would then discuss the causes of poverty in the perspective of different disciplines. The parameters measured and defined in the two first sessions could then form the basis of a debate on medium term aims, which is to say the poor relief systems, once again focussing on past and present approaches in different countries. Finally, the last session would concentrate on the perception of poverty, trying to distinguish the problem circles of a multi-disciplinary approach.

For several reasons, scholars have not only neglected the historical dimension in their efforts to find remedies against poverty, but they have also denied the usefulness of diachronic statistical research for the analysis of the economic and social situation of lower social categories. They argue that it is methodologically impossible to compare facts given in different countries or societies in a long run. However, comparative approaches to other historical topics have been extremely productive for many years. In addition, the possibilities of collecting and analysing large data sets have led to more representative studies not only in contemporary history, economy and sociology, but

also in modern history.⁶ In addition, the results of historical investigations can well be the starting point for interdisciplinary research.

Hence, the workshop wanted to bring together – for the first time ever – researchers from different disciplines working with different methods to get new answers on the urgent problem of poverty. At least, it seemed possible to formulate new questions to be investigated in a mid-term perspective.

Besides to the sponsor, the European Science Foundation, my gratitude is due to my collaborators, Mrs Ursula Kunze, Miss Mareike Hansen who undertook a great deal of the editorial work, Dr Jan Schlürmann, Mr Philipp Schmidt and Mr Alexandre Karwaski, M.A. who translated part of the summaries and two of the contributions into French; without their friendly and competent work the workshop could not have been held.

Kiel, February 2008

Thomas Riis

⁶ As basis for his thesis quoted in note 4 Torsten Fischer collected 15,000 names of poor members of the society in Early Modern Lyons and Aberdeen.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Thomas Riis

For several reasons, scholars have not only neglected the historical dimension in their efforts to find remedies against poverty, but they have also denied the usefulness of diachronic statistical research into the economic and social situation of lower social categories. Consequently, only the short term causes of poverty were taken into account. Thus, there is a considerable risk that the measures of poor relief treat only the symptoms of poverty and not its causes.

The scope of the Exploratory Workshop was to bring together leading scholars in poverty research and to invite them to discuss the possibilities of an interdisciplinary approach to poverty and its relief, taking in account both the hereditary nature of poverty and the definition of famine as the last stage of malnutrition. Unfortunately, it proved extremely difficult to find speakers on every planned subject; in these cases, short communications were presented, summing up the state of research in the field.

The definition of poverty constituted a major concern of the workshop; many scholars argue that it is methodologically impossible to compare facts given in different countries or societies. Nevertheless, comparative approaches to other historical topics have been extremely productive for many years. On the other hand, as already mentioned in the Preface, contemporary definitions of poverty are insufficient from a methodological point of view.

In his study of the building accounts of the bridge over the Rhône at Lyons 1501–1502, Richard Gascon defined the poverty line as the necessity of a family to spend at least half the available income on bread. Studies of poor households in England and Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appear to confirm Gascon's definition, but with a slight modification. Thus the poverty line can be defined as the necessity of a family to spend at least half the available income on bread and its substitutes (potatoes, beans, noodles, rice).

Also as far as housing is concerned a poverty line can be established. As an adult lying on the ground covers about two metres, four square metres can be considered the minimal surface available for an adult. Actually, this was the measure adopted by the British administration in Northern Germany and by the municipal government of Kiel immediately after 1945.

Thus the workshop succeeded in discovering two definitions of the poverty line which can be used in the study of poverty, today as well as in the past.¹

From different angles the degrees of poverty were studied in four papers. On the basis of a documentation from eighteenth-early nineteenth century rural Norway Sølvi Sogner could show that the widely spread mental image of the poor and numerous family must be corrected. On the contrary, she discovered a tendency of later marriages and consequently smaller households where conditions were modest; samples from parishes in Sweden, Denmark and Germany show the same trend.² Moreover, her results are confirmed by my own study of the population of Copenhagen about the middle of the seventeenth century.³

In her paper, Marion Kobelt-Groch asks the question whether or not women were touched by poverty to a higher degree than men. In several towns of fifteenth-sixteenth century Europe (Basel, Strasbourg, Toledo, Luzern) women constituted more than two thirds of the poor, and at Schaffhausen they formed three fourths in the first half of the nineteenth century. When we realize that even today unemployment is more widely spread among women than among men (see table), we must recognize gender as a cause of poverty or at least as an aggravating factor. Why it was so, must be left to future research.

1 THOMAS RIIS: "Communication: la définition de la pauvreté"

2 SØLVI SOGNER: "Size of Families. Are Children Poor People's Riches?"

3 THOMAS RIIS: *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot... Scottish-Danish Relations c. 1450-1707*, II, Odense 1988, pp. 21-28.

Gender Ratios of Unemployment 1994

	Women		Men	
Greece	13	72.2 %	5	27.8 %
Italy	17	68.0 %	8	32.0 %
Spain	30	61.2 %	19	38.8 %
European Community	13	59.1 %	9	40.9 %

Source: KOBELT-GROCH, *Des hommes pauvres*, p. 26.

In his paper, Giovanni Ricci investigates the most elusive group of poor people, namely the so-called shamefaced poor (*pauvres honteux*, *poveri vergognosi*).⁴ Generally, they had known “better days”, but only for craftsmen or other persons accustomed to manual work, this could remedy their situation. For the destitute aristocrat, manual labour would be degrading; discreet aid, an occasional theft or prostitution were to the aristocrat more acceptable than manual work. In the discussion it was stressed that the status of shamefaced poor would be a transitory phase, which would hardly last for more than two generations. Either you would succeed in regaining your social status or you would lose it for good. This conclusion appears to be valid for the Middle Ages, the Modern Period and for contemporary society alike.

Already in the 1970s, the hypothesis of hereditary poverty was formulated, but the study in question was hardly considered by scholars. Basing himself on the rich archives of Early Modern Aberdeen and Lyons Torsten Fischer investigated over 15,000 poor persons.⁵ The hypothesis of hereditary poverty can be confirmed, but in spite of assistance from the public relief system, this did not allow families to break the vicious circle of poverty. Only when the individual had efficient and solid networks at his or her disposal, it would be possible to break the circle. Again the importance of the network is underlined; also the shamefaced poor depended upon good networks in order to regain the lost social status.

4 GIOVANNI RICCI: “Les pauvres honteux, ou l’anomalie légalisée.”

5 TORSTEN FISCHER: “Crossing the Poverty Line or Can Poverty Be Considered Hereditary?”. The paper forms a summary of Dr Fischer’s thesis *Y-a-t-il une fatalité d’hérédité dans la pauvreté? Dans l’Europe moderne: les cas d’Aberdeen et de Lyon*, Stuttgart 2006 (Beihefte Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 187).

The second section of the workshop discussed the causes of poverty. In her comparative paper on unemployment in Britain and France Noel Whiteside⁶ underlines that our current notion of unemployment reflects a special type of work: life-long employment in the same enterprise or authority. However, this system is breaking up: where half a century ago married wives were expected to take care of household and children as unwaged domestic workers, rising divorce rates have forced married women into the labour market. On the other hand, numbers of older workers (adult males between 55 and 65 years of age) have been discharged in the late twentieth century, but they were seldom classified as unemployed but as sick or in early retirement. Thus, unemployment is a relative concept. However, Professor Whiteside discovers that contemporary employment patterns are reminiscent of those of earlier centuries. Moreover, since the end of World War II the cost of the labour market risk has been transferred from the employers to the state and from there to the employees themselves, with an increased risk of poverty as a result.

That excessive taxation coupled with dishonest financial administration could increase poverty to an intolerable degree is demonstrated by Matteo Provasi in his case study of the fiscal administration of Ferrara 1565–1575.⁷ Also economic fluctuations can ruin people; Germany immediately after World War I is a classic example, the monetary troubles of the Reich prior to 1622 (with its repercussions on the Danish and Milanese economies) are another. Illness must also be considered a cause of poverty and both in fifteenth century Florence and Kiel at the end of the twentieth century the break-up of families is equally important as a cause of poverty.⁸

Earthquakes, tsunamis and their effects are studied by Emanuela Guidoboni and James Jackson in Iran since the 1960s and

6 NOEL WHITESIDE: “Constructing Unemployment: Britain and France in Historical Perspective.”

7 MATTEO PROVASI: “Popular Unrest, Bread Riot, Legitimism. Power and Poverty in Ferrara under Este Rule.”

8 THOMAS RIIS: “Communication II: Les causes de la pauvreté : maladies et conjonctures.”

in Southern Italy for the last two centuries.⁹ Subventions by the state to the reconstruction of damaged settlements could give a stagnating regional economy a needed impetus;¹⁰ otherwise, if reconstruction lasted for a longer period, the disaster could have unfortunate long-term effects like loss of know-how and economic relations with the outer world.

For the younger sons of poor peasants in countries like Switzerland or Scotland, war could give them their daily bread, if they enrolled as mercenaries. Further, producers of arms were able to make considerable fortunes. For the civilian population, however, the presence of undisciplined soldiers with their acts of plunder, destruction, and rape was dreaded and often meant the ruin of individuals and the community. Sometimes, the effects of war initiated a chain reaction: if the horses were requisitioned in the region of Liège, the coal mines could not work with unemployment and poverty as a result. With many examples from the region corresponding to present-day Belgium, René Leboutte demonstrates the double face of war.¹¹

That technical innovations were met with protest, is a commonplace of the industrial revolution; especially the textile industry was early mechanized, thus making great numbers of workmen redundant. Also in contemporary society the increasing use of machines and the spread of information technology reduce the number of jobs available. As these are mostly those where less qualifications are required, the new technologies generate poverty, as the persons formerly employed will mainly be unable to find a new employment corresponding to their skills. Finally, huge numbers of the population have not got the qualifications necessary to use the information technology.¹² Also today, the invention of new technologies must be considered a cause of poverty.

9 EMANUELA GUIDOBONI & JAMES JACKSON: "Seismic Disasters and Poverty: Some Data and Reflections on Past and Current Trends."

10 This was the case of the reconstruction after the Sicilian earthquake of 1693, see F. BOSCHI et alii: *Catalogo dei forti terremoti in Italia 461 a.C.–1980*, Bologna (CD-Rom) 1994.

11 RENÉ LEBOUTTE: "Guerre et pauvreté."

12 THOMAS RIIH: "New Technologies as a Cause of Poverty."

If the information technology risks to polarize contemporary society, we find the same tendency in the lifestyle industry. To a decent life belong holidays in the right place, convenient hobbies and signed clothes. As in certain branches the production exceeds the real needs, aggressive publicity endeavours to increase the needs, the automobile industry is an obvious example. Standards of life rise, and only one income does not allow the family to keep up with its friends and colleagues. Increasingly large sections of society realize that they will never get access to the world described by publicity; thus also here, society is polarized, more psychologically speaking than in actual economic terms. However, the sense of privation can become so strong that society explodes, as we saw it in the suburbs of Paris in 2005.¹³

The third and last section of the workshop dealt with poor relief and with the perception of poverty. In his study of Early Modern poor relief Jean-Pierre Gutton¹⁴ stressed that our contemporary notion of efficiency does not necessarily correspond to that of the past. The medieval system of individual almsgiving had proven less satisfactory, but the measures adopted in the first half of the sixteenth century did not abolish begging. Since 1580 the poor were increasingly concentrated in institutions, where they were set to work, a measure adopted already about 1400 in Northern Italy.¹⁵ If the saving of the poor's souls was still a matter of concern in the late sixteenth as well as in the seventeenth century, the mercantilistic ideas claimed all hands to be active; the manufacture was the appropriate place, where the poor could be put to work. Only in the eighteenth century people realized that an efficient poor relief required the involvement of the state; Montesquieu went so far as to consider it a duty of the state to take care of the well-being of its citizens.¹⁶

13 THOMAS RIIS: "Les niveaux de vie et la "société de consommation"".

14 JEAN-PIERRE GUTTON: "Les institutions charitables de l'Europe moderne et la question de leur efficacité."

15 BRONISLAW GEREMEK: "Renfermement des pauvres en Italie (XIV^e–XVII^e siècles). Remarques préliminaires," in : *Mélanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel* I, Toulouse 1973, pp. 205–217.

16 *De l'Esprit des Lois* (1748) livre XXIII, chapitre XXIX.

However, it must be recognized that very often manufactures worked with a deficit; it was rather improbable that a beggar could be taken from the street and after a short training appear as a skilled worker of silks. Under Friedrich Wilhelm I (1713–1740) the wool manufactures of Berlin were successful; they used the wool of the region, the workers lived already at Berlin, and the produced cloth had a guaranteed outlet, as it was sold to the army to be used for uniforms. An interesting feature of Early Modern poor relief is the creation of cheap credit since the fifteenth century (the *Monti di Pietà*, in Northern Europe savings banks). As today most savings banks have acquired a status as ordinary banks, the charitable credit institute disappeared, but the need for it is still there.¹⁷

In his analysis of the historical facts connected with the role of Domenico de' Bretti between 1512 and his death in 1523 Carlo Baja Guarienti confronts them with written and oral tradition. Soon after his death, de' Bretti became a legend, portrayed as a charismatic leader, hard but fair, an Italian Robin Hood. In de' Bretti the economically and socially disadvantaged people saw a mythical figure, who would make justice triumph in the end.¹⁸

Tobias Teuscher investigates the perception of the poor since the French Revolution, beginning with Dufourny de Villiers who qualified them as the Fourth Estate (*Quart État, Quatrième ordre*); in spite of the right belonging to every Frenchman to be represented in the Estates, this did not pertain to the poor. According to Karl Marx, the poor formed a subproletariate (*Lumpenproletariat*), but his definitions of it are far from unambiguous, if not to say contradictory. Directly inspired by the concept of the poor as the Fourth Estate formulated by Dufourny de Villiers, Father Joseph Wresinski who since the 1950s until his death in 1988 fought for the dignity and rights of the poor saw them as the Fourth World.¹⁹

17 THOMAS RIIS: Communication IV: Les réactions de la société à la pauvreté”

18 CARLO BAJA GUARIENTI: “Building a Hero: Poverty and Rebellion between History and Folklore.”

19 TOBIAS TEUSCHER: “Quart Etat, Lumpenproletariat et Quart Monde: ce qu’apportent les révolutions européennes au combat de la grande pauvreté et de l’exclusion sociale et à la reconnaissance de la misère comme violation des droits de l’homme”

Herself a member of the movement (Mouvement ATD-Quart Monde) founded by Father Joseph Wresinski, Madame Join-Lambert pleads for the recognition of misery as a violation of human rights.²⁰

The workshop has increased our knowledge in several fields:

- I. Poverty has been defined in a way that appears to allow comparisons between contemporary poverty and that of the past.
- II. Physical poverty (e.g. famine) is only the final critical phase of a long development.²¹
- III. It must be taken for granted that gender is a cause of poverty, which is not necessarily true for large families, as poor people tend to marry late and to get less children.
- IV. The shame-faced poor will be able to keep their social status for one or two generations after their economic decline; as their network is still intact, they can succeed in regaining their social status.
- V. Poverty must be considered as hereditary in certain families; in spite of public or private assistance they are seldom able to break the vicious circle of poverty, first of all, because they lack an efficient network.
- VI. Contemporary society is exposed to the risk of polarization (and of the reduction of the middle class) because of the expansion of information technology and of the increasing standard of life.
- VII. Poverty must be seen as a violation of human rights.

From these acquisitions it becomes clear that contemporary poor relief treats mainly the symptoms and not the illness; in order to do this, the historical aspect of poverty must necessarily be considered, as only thus the causes of poverty can be identified. The recognition of this fact must be seen as a precondition for the formulation

20 MASCHA L. JOIN-LAMBERT: "Pauvreté et droits de l'homme."

21 AMRITA RANGASAMI: "The Masking of Famine: The Role of the Bureaucracy," in: *Famine and Society* ed. JEAN FLOUD & AMRITA RANGASAMI, New Delhi 1993, pp. 53–64.

of a new social policy. However, discussion during the workshop showed us that poverty is perceived very differently from one region of the World to the next. Before the final conference can be organized in order to discuss a new approach to social policy, a workshop ought to discuss the related questions of the perception of poverty and of the reasons why gender must be seen as a cause of poverty. Five zones should be specially studied as they must be considered to represent characteristic attitudes:

- I. Britain (with the USA and Australia)
- II. Continental Europe (Western Europe as well as the former socialist countries)
- III Africa
- IV. Asia (especially India, China or Japan)
- V. Latin America.

The papers read to the workshop shall be published and will serve as a basis for the final conference dealing with social policy.

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