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A Global Vision of Local Poverty: A Comment

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Abstract

Debating the merits of various definitions has driven the field of Poverty Studies for the last half-century. Over a half century of scholarship has demonstrated that the definition of poverty is immaterial to awareness of poverty's existence. People know that poverty exists even if they do not know how to precisely identify its specific features. As a result, several scholars have concluded that any definition of poverty must conform to lay understandings to be accepted and, therefore, considered 'socially relevant'. This article demonstrates that 'socially relevant' is a loaded term because defining it necessitates an act of boundary setting. It requires determining those whose opinions about relevance are counted and those who are ignored. Since social inclusion is costly, the poor are often unable to participate meaningfully in the process of defining poverty. Yet it is precisely this group that the field of Poverty Studies seeks to understand. Since communities of the poor have their own unique definitions of social necessity, scholars must disentangle the preferences of from the limitations on the poor when defining poverty.

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Introduction

There is no universally accepted definition of poverty. It does not exist. Debating the merits of various definitions has driven the field of Poverty Studies for the last half-century. Numerous monographs and articles have sought to list and compare various definitions. Economists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and historians have shown that every definition identifies a different group as poor. For example, a 2003 study by Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi, Ruhi Saith and Frances Stewart (2003) that used four different definitions to model poverty in India and Peru found that the definitions overlapped by as little as 50 percent. A similar study in the late 1980s applied eight different definitions of poverty to a sample of 12,000 households in the Netherlands and found that they produced poverty rates ranging from as high as 23.5 to as low as 5.7 percent (Hagenaars and de Vos 1988).

These and other comparison studies are even more revealing than their obvious findings suggest. They demonstrate that the definition of poverty is immaterial to awareness of poverty's existence. People know that poverty exists even if they do not know how to precisely identify its specific features. As a result, several scholars have concluded that any definition of poverty must conform to lay understandings to be accepted and, therefore, considered adequate. As Martin Ravallion wrote in a 2010 World Bank report comparing official country-specific definitions of poverty – 'all national poverty lines must be considered socially relevant in the specific country. If a proposed poverty line is widely seen as too frugal by the standards of society then it will surely be rejected. Nor will a line that is too generous be easily accepted.' (Ravallion 2010: 12) A metric that appears scientifically sound but does not meet societal expectations will not be 'socially relevant' and, therefore, cannot form the basis for defining poverty.

'Socially relevant' is a loaded term; it smuggles in so much with it. Determining relevance begs the question 'To whom?' and any answer necessitates an act of boundary setting. It requires determining those whose opinions about relevance are counted and those who are ignored. Edward J. Bird has shown that this process has been explicitly political, at least in the 'developed' world. In these countries, 'poverty perceptions are considered part of the ongoing political and social debate. The process that determines poverty perceptions seems little different from the process that determines poverty policy' (Bird 1999: 274). As a result, the knowledge of the politically marginalized is often either explicitly or implicitly deemed 'socially irrelevant' in the intertwined processes that simultaneously establish a politically viable definition of poverty and determine poverty alleviation policies.

There is another factor that, more broadly, leads to the exclusion of some voices – social inclusion is costly. It is expensive because it requires access to resources. Some goods are socially necessary because command over them is a prerequisite for full inclusion. The determination of which goods, in what quantities and under what circumstances is negotiated at the community level. Anyone who lacks access to these goods in the right quantities at the right time is considered, by definition, on the margins of or completely outside of the community.

Clothing is an illustrative example of a socially necessary good. The ownership of certain clothing, either for fashion or modesty reasons, has been a key prerequisite of social inclusion in most societies. In 1776 Adam Smith noted that 'in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct' (Smith 1776: Book 5, Chapter 2, Article IV). Late eighteenth-century Europe was not unique in this regard. Similar phenomena have been identified for Kangas in twentieth century Zanzibar and Saris in contemporary India, to name just two of countless examples (Fair 2004; Guha 2018).

Perhaps more fundamental than the cost of self-presentation is the cost of exchange associated with community formation. In his seminal work *The Gift* (1925), Marcel Mauss argues that the reciprocal exchange of goods outside of the

market economy is central to creating and maintaining societal bonds. For Mauss, reciprocity is key to full inclusion in society. As he states in the essay's conclusion: 'The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it… The invitation must be returned, just as courtesies must' (Mauss 1925: 83-4). David Graeber builds on the near century of research into gift-exchange inspired by Mauss by showing that a gift that is not repaid is a debt and that debtors and lenders are not coequals. As Graeber puts it: 'During the time the debt remains unpaid, the logic of hierarchy takes hold' (Graeber 2011: 121). Repaying debts and reciprocating gifts is expensive. It requires excess wealth, something that the poor do not have by any reasonable definition.

This points to the paradox at the centre of Poverty Studies. There are some people who are politically and socially marginalized because of their lack of resources. In turn, this marginalization means that they are unable to participate meaningfully in the process of defining poverty. Yet, it is precisely this group, or some significant subset, that Poverty Studies seeks to understand. *Local Visions of Global Poverty*, both this special issue and the multi-sited research project that gave rise to it, is a step towards directly confronting this paradox. The project created a new forum for exchange about the nature of poverty and causes of impoverishment in which the often-ignored voices of the poor could be heard and amplified.

By focusing on the ways that impoverished groups understand their own situation, this project differed from others that have sought to establish a 'subjective' definition of poverty. The term 'subjective' here is a slight misnomer. It is used because there is a strong disciplinary convention that dictates its use. Poverty Studies conventionally classes definitions of poverty as 'absolute,' 'relative,' and 'subjective.' 'Absolute' definitions are based on a firm poverty line, generally set at between $1US or $2US per day for the Global South and much higher in the 'developed' North. 'Relative' definitions are based on a minimum fixed deviation from the median income or consumption level within a community. 'Subjective' definitions explicitly consider a community's understandings of the lifestyle distinctions between the poor and the not poor.

The development of 'subjective' definitions of poverty began in the 1970s. It was initially pursued by a group of economists, including Bernard van Praag and Victor Halberstadt, who used surveys to determine a minimally acceptable national income level in the Netherlands (Goedhart et al. 1977). In the 1980s, there was a scholarly move away from examining income and towards consumption. This shift was spearheaded by Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley, who sought to 'identify a minimum acceptable way of life not by reference to the views of 'experts,' nor by reference to observed patterns of expenditure or observed living standards, but by reference to the views of society as a whole.' (Mack and Lansley 1984: 42, italics in original) Mack and Lansley focused on establishing a national standard for the United Kingdom. To do so, they surveyed a representative sample of people living in that country to find out which goods and services they deemed socially necessary. Poverty was then defined as a lack of access to the identified list of minimally required goods and services.

Efforts to determine 'subjective' definitions of poverty have been criticized for failing to understand that class divisions are often cultural divides. Instead, these efforts have assumed that every society has a single, unified, coherent, and consistent shared culture. However, it is possible, and in fact likely, that the poor do not share the same definition of social necessity as the not poor. As David Piachaud puts it, 'there may be no real social consensus—the opinions of those who are poor, of the majority, of taxpayers, and of those who are rich may be at odds; which opinions prevail depends on the distribution of power in society.' (Piachaud 1987: 152) Rather then produce definitions of poverty that reflects the lives of the poor, these studies often just capture the ways that the living patterns of the poor do not meet the expectations of the non-poor. As Piachaud further states: "If everyone had uniform preferences then there would be no problem: any differences in outcomes would be the result of differences in constraints. Since preferences

differ, disentangling the two is very hard. But it is important to know what is a consequence of poverty as opposed to merely a correlate of poverty. Consequences of poverty can be removed if the poverty is removed; correlates of poverty that are matters of choice will remain unless preferences change. (Piachaud 1987: 158)

Disentangling preferences from limitations is simultaneously more complicated and more important for those studying colonized communities of the poor. For decades, scholars have argued that European colonial agents purposefully tried to instill in their colonial subjects, as Jean and John Comaroff wrote, "needs which only they could satisfy, desires to which only they could cater, signs and values over whose flow they exercised control" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997: 219). The transformation of colonized peoples into consumers of imports was crucial, according to these scholars, to the imperial project because it created a market for surplus European industrial production while simultaneously increasing the supply of cheap wage-labor and exportable cash crops.

This scholarship on colonized cultures, explicitly or implicitly, builds off of Thorstein Veblen's analysis of the link between conspicuous consumption and the construction and maintenance of social hierarchies. According to Veblen ([1889] 2009), elites establish their position at the head of the social hierarchy by appropriating the fruits of subaltern labor. They then create a culture that defines 'respectability' and 'honor' in terms of conspicuously consuming luxury goods purchased with the profits derived from this exploitative relationship. Though this elite culture is inherently damaging to subaltern groups, "the norm of respectability imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence with but slight hinderance down through the social structure to the lowest strata. The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up that that ideal." ([1889] 2009: 59)

Scholars of colonized cultures have accepted some of Veblen's theory of elite conspicuous consumption. These scholars have shown that colonial agents actively sought to link 'respectability' to the 'correct' use of certain consumer goods, such as clothing, soap and baby formula (Comaroff 1996; Hunt 1988; Nestel 1998; Burke 1996; Posel and van Wyke 2019). However, these scholars have generally rejected Veblen's attendant theory of subaltern emulation. Since at least the 1990s, there has been a strong scholarly consensus that colonial subjects did not simply accept the normative culture of their colonizers. Rather, they engaged with it through a process alternately termed 'domestication,' 'hybridization' or 'creolization.' They creatively recontextualized foreign-manufactured commercial goods by selectively bringing just some of them into their own local symbolic universe and, in the process, rendering only those imports desirable. This process both predates formal colonial rule and continues to be practiced to this day. In the words of Jeremy Prestholdt (2008: 12), as these commercial goods move along their distribution chain, they "often receive new social meaning beyond the cultural boundaries of their regions of production" and "these meanings can diverge dramatically from those given by their producers. Yet accounts of historical as well as contemporary global integration still too easily discount the important ways in which people who are labeled the victims of global cultural homogenization conceptually transform imported goods and symbols."

Colonised communities retained significant control over their own symbolic universes throughout the colonial period. They used this agency to find meaning in some, though not all, of the consumer goods available in the market. Those that they liked and could afford, they purchased and used in ways legible to other members of their community (for some examples from this vast body of scholarship see: Brown 2017; Fair 1996; Landau 1995; Ross 1990). This was as true for poor and non-poor colonized communities. The cultures, norms, and expectations of impoverished colonized subjects also evolved historically, though within limitations set by poverty.

Local Visions of Global Poverty builds off of this research by showing that there are distinct

communities of the poor all over the world, with their own cultures, norms and expectations. These communities exist in relation to, but are not subsumed within, the non-poor communities in which they are embedded. Deprivation is one of, but not the only, characteristics of these communities of the poor. Despite their material want, they are able collectively and individually to identify the difference between the choices that are made for them by their material constraints and the choices that they make out of preference. As a result, they are able to define the nature of their poverty.

In the 'developing' world, poverty for the purposes of public policy is often defined without reference to the preferences of the poor. States and intergovernmental agencies promote an 'absolute' definition of poverty, i.e., living below the locally defined minimal subsistence level. There are two prevailing ways of setting poverty lines – the food-energy-intake method and the cost-of basic-needs method. Both anchor this line to the amount of money necessary to purchase sufficient food to maintain human health, though the latter also takes into consideration the costs of adequate clothing and housing (Ravallion 2010: 9-10). Critics of these approaches have convincingly argued that, though they appear scientific, these poverty lines reflect the subjective judgments of the experts and officials who establish them. Costs of food, clothing and housing are not standardized. There is a difference in price between, for example, 100 calories of potatoes and 100 calories of caviar. As a result, these 'absolute' poverty lines are shaped by assumptions about which food the poor should have access to, the quantity of clothing they should have and the quality of dwelling they should live in. Determining the price per calorie/article/unit of food/clothing/square foot of living space that the poor should pay is itself a subjective value judgement about what the poor should be expected to make do with (Townsend 1979: 34-5).

As the articles in this special issue indicate, members of these communities of the poor repeatedly stress that poverty is more than a lack of minimally sufficient housing, clothing and food. Therefore, we should treat this definition of poverty as just another 'local vision,' with its own history and limited community of subscribers. This definition was first developed in the United Kingdom at the turn of the twentieth century by B. Seebhom Rowntree. In his seminal study of poverty in York, Rowntree (1902) established the concept of a poverty line by estimating the cost of adequate nutrition, clothing and housing and defining anyone with an income below this line as 'poor'. Rowntree was hoping that the metric he developed would replace the longstanding, politically salient definition of poverty that focused on lacking the means to maintain independence. This older definition, which had developed over centuries primarily through the local application of the national Poor Law, conceptualized the poor as those who were burdensomely dependent on public goods and service (Charlesworth 2010; Landau 1990). Even Charles Booth, whose late-nineteenth century study of London inspired Rowntree, understood poverty in terms of dependency. According to Booth, the poor "are those whose means may be sufficient but are barely sufficient for decent independent life." (Booth 1902: 33) Despite Rowntree's efforts, as well as those of other subsequent researchers, this older definition of poverty as dependence continues to be represented on television and promoted within the context of electoral campaigns in the United Kingdom (Garrett 2015; Mooney 2009; Jensen 2014).

The British government employs an altogether different definition of poverty. As is also standard in the European Union, the official poverty line is set at a household income of or below 60 percent of the median. The use of such a 'relative' definition of poverty is inspired by the work of Peter Townsend. In the 1970s, Townsend surveyed households in the UK and conclude that: "Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average

individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities. (Townsend 1979:31)

The use of a 'relative' definition of poverty tacitly acknowledges that poverty is not simply material want. Poverty is also a state of social exclusion caused by a lack of access to sufficient resources above and beyond basic subsistence.

Though Townsend makes some leeway for variations in 'ordinary living patterns,' this is only partially reflected in the establishment of a single, country-wide poverty line. There is inherent in any 'relative' definition of poverty the assumption that, given a sufficient increase to their income, the poor would naturally abandon old customs and conform to supposedly 'ordinary patterns.' Again, Piachaud's critique can be applied. The 'living patterns' of the poor are shaped by both choices and constraints. The ways in which these articulate with income and social exclusion are not straight forward. Any method for disentangling them must include listening to the voices of the poor and understanding the impact that material constraints have on their lives.

This critique opens a new way of thinking about the 'social relevance' of definitions of poverty. Rather than be relevant to society as a whole, the definition of poverty must be relevant to the poor first and foremost. Definitions of poverty that do not take into account the ways that the poor understand their situation cannot lead to the development of meaningful poverty alleviation programs. When this self understanding is ignored, the difference between choice and constraint becomes occluded. However, definitions of poverty developed either by or in direct consultation with communities of the poor can locate the precise impacts of material want and social exclusion. This is the central lesson of Local Visions of Global Poverty.

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