Poverty as a Social Stigma

Construction and Deconstruction

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

The distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor is deeply entrenched, and representations of poverty have long been burdened with their share of prejudices and stigmas. Historian Axelle Brodiez-Dolino brings into perspective the changing social boundaries, categories and policies that have constructed, deconstructed and sought to tackle poverty.

Society—whether Christian or secularized, monarchical or republican—has always been, and remains, the product of interaction among individuals bound by a set of rights and duties, one of which is the duty to contribute to the common good as far as one is able. In return, any person, in periods of particular vulnerability (childhood, illness, old age, etc.), is able to call upon the care of others—conceptualized in France as the "sacred debt of the Nation" at the time of the Revolution,[1] as "solidarity" under the Third Republic (1870–1940) (Bourgeois 1896), and as "care policy" in our contemporary societies (Tronto 1993).

Deciding who may receive such care, and when, therefore defines the boundaries of systems of public assistance. And indeed, since the end of the Middle Ages, dividing lines have been drawn between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, with the former receiving compassion and the latter vilification—or even punishment. We shall seek to show, first, that these lines remained surprisingly static until the second third of the 20th century, despite major political, economic and social changes; that, subsequently, the representations underlying these lines have become less justifiable, not least as a result of past incongruities and contradictions; and, finally, that this has led to their deconstruction, both within associations and in the field of sociology, and ultimately to changes in the political paradigm.

The "deserving" and "undeserving" poor: an entrenched construction

While the figure of the pauper initially embodied the image of Christ on earth, and had the social purpose of enabling the rich to obtain Salvation through almsgiving, Europe underwent a paradigm shift from the 14th century onwards. In a context of population growth and numerous crises, settlement and labor policies responded to a need to limit population movements through fear of epidemics, seditious gatherings, and rising labor costs.

Two criteria were established to distinguish between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (Geremek 1987; Castel 1995). The first, geographical, was based on the administrative notion of

[1] Constitution of June 24, 1793, Article 21 of the Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen: "Public relief is a sacred obligation. Society owes subsistence to unfortunate citizens, either by procuring work for them or by providing the means of existence for those unable to work."

"place of residence for assistance" (*domicile de secours* in French): the poor "from here" (the village, the parish, and later the nation) could benefit from local solidarity, unlike the poor from elsewhere ("outsiders" from neighboring villages and later, with increasing migration, other regions). The second criterion essentially ensured assistance for those considered "deserving" because they were unable to work (young children, women in childbirth, the elderly, the sick, the infirm, the incurable). Conversely, punitive treatment—to serve as an example to others—was meted out to rural "vagrants" perceived as able-bodied and who were non-native to the locality in question. In France, this dichotomy between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor was further consolidated during the Revolution and during the economically liberal 19th century, which was marked by a certain inertia with regard to welfare and a resurgence in punitive measures.

While France's Third Republic (1870–1940) laid the foundations of modern social protection, it did not question these punitive measures, and even reinforced them in legal terms. The Republicans rejected the general principle of a right to public assistance, perceived as politically alarming and too costly in economic terms, and instead chose to focus welfare legislation exclusively on "the destitute who cannot work, whether temporarily because of illness or permanently because of old age or infirmity" (Monod 1888). The "able-bodied" were to be covered by the insurance-based protection put in place in the interwar years[2] and, failing that, by private charities and municipal welfare offices.

However, two major developments in the conception of the "undeserving poor" occurred. The first was a shift away from rural figures (vagrants "without house or home"; itinerant monks wandering lanes and villages) in favor of their urban counterparts, as urbanization and industrialization focused proletarianization in cities and, with it, fueled fears of social disorder and immorality (alcoholism, prostitution, delinquency, etc.). The second was that the notion of undesirability shifted towards foreign countries, against a backdrop of ever-widening perimeters of migration, economic recessions, and the construction of social protection leading to a "tyranny of the national interest" (Noiriel 1991).

Largely unfounded criteria

Upon closer examination, however, this binary division is not self-evident and is based on a number of assumptions.

First of all, it is not justified on religious grounds. In the Parable of the Last Judgment, the Bible explicitly advocates providing assistance to six categories of "the least of these [our] brethren": those who are "hungry," "thirsty," "a stranger," "naked," "sick," and "in prison."[3] However, when it comes to helping one's neighbor, no criteria relating to notions of locality or settledness are specified (on the contrary, a lack of settledness may be considered grounds for assistance), nor indeed relating to a person's inability to work (other than due to illness).

Furthermore, categorizing the poor according to their ability to work is as simple in theory as it is complex in practice. The distinction between those who are able-bodied and those who are not is often academic when the bodies in question are too worn out to work before reaching retirement age or obtaining old-age benefits—or in the case of (as yet) unrecognized pathologies. And yet such circumstances all represent obstacles, some of which are insurmountable, to accessing the labor market, particularly when this market contracts (Capuano 2018). We also know how much poverty and precarity can be key factors in the progressive deterioration of health (owing to difficulties in accessing adequate nutrition, health care, and housing; as a result of occupying the most dangerous and disease-prone jobs; or because of anxiety about the future), and vice versa (as physical and

[2] Primarily workers' and farmers' pensions in 1910, social insurance in 1928–1930, the family allowance in 1932, and social security in 1946.

[3] The gospel according to Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31–46.

mental difficulties are often causes of impoverishment). Poverty therefore leads almost mechanically, through a series of induced effects, to poor health.

The split between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" is also based on an ingrained assumption, namely that any able-bodied person who looks for work will find it. On the contrary, historiography has demonstrated the cyclical existence of unemployment since the Ancien Régime, owing to the seasonal nature of many ocupations, cyclical or structural crises in different sectors, international economic crises (e.g. the Great Depression and the 1930s) and employers' eagerness to match supply and demand as closely as possible (piecework, payment by the hour, day or week, short-term contracts, etc.). Moreover, the high unemployment rate observed in France since the mid-1980s has done little to dispel the idea that anyone who *wants* to work *can* work. In this regard, more attention should perhaps be paid to other indicators, such as the ratio between the number of available jobs and the number of people looking for work: on the basis of figures in the 2017 statistical report produced by Secours Catholique (the French branch of charitable organization Caritas Internationalis), this ratio currently lies somewhere between 1:17 (on the lower end of estimates) and 1:42 (on the higher end) in France.[4] Demand for employment therefore far outstrips supply.

Another assumption, based on correlation, associates not working with a form of choice or even comfort. However, since the 1980s, associations and researchers in the social sciences alike have demonstrated the acutely insufficient incomes, the breakdown of social ties, the feelings of uselessness, "of shame, and of humiliation" (Paugam 2009, p. 6), the psychological suffering, and the repercussions on family life that not working brings about. Today, as in the past, it is very much the utter discouragement resulting from repeated failures to access the labor market in a *sustainable* and *decent* way that leads individuals to turn to welfare assistance (Paugam 1991; Castel 1995; Duvoux 2009; Kitts 2016).

A paradigm shift driven by associations and the social sciences

While in the United States "social experts" were the first to lift the veil on these issues, in the back rooms of universities and ministries (Huret 2008), in France this pioneering role would be played by what was at the time an embryonic association called ATD Quart Monde, founded in a *bidonville* (shanty town) in the eastern Paris suburb of Noisy-le-Grand. Its founder, Father Joseph Wresinski, noticed the statistical recurrence of certain factors, and was struck by the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty that he observed. In 1961, before social sciences specialized in this subject even existed in France, he created a "social research office" to organize international symposiums and collaborate with specialists. In 1962, he asked his "volunteers" to record their daily field observations; in 1964, he initiated "family monographs" that followed life trajectories over several generations; in 1972, he launched "Fouth World People's Universities," where the poorest could express themselves.

In 1987, his report to the French Economic and Social Council[5]—the culmination of all these initiatives—highlighted the vicious circle of precarity in education and vocational training, in work and income, in housing and health, which gradually leads to extreme poverty and the reproduction of extreme poverty. This analysis, like those gradually being produced by other organizations[6] and researchers,[7] acquired a new audience with the rise of mass unemployment and job insecurity, the

[4] See (in French): www.secours-catholique.org/sites/scinternet/files/publications/rs17_0.pdf, p. 47.

[5] Translator's note: in 2008, this body was renamed the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council (*Conseil Économique, Social et Environnemental*).

[6] In 1979, Secours Catholique published its first report.

[7] Research in France on poverty and precarity, initiated by ATD Quart Monde with the collaboration of sociologist Jean Labbens in the 1960s, began to develop in the 1970s, in the fields of both sociology and history. Serge Paugam's PhD thesis, defended in the late 1980s, represented a new milestone in this research.

"problem of the *banlieues*," and the massive resurgence in the number of homeless people on urban streets.

In response, public policies in France effected a paradigm shift based on the eradication of the dividing lines between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, which was also supposed to "eliminate the moral judgment" associated with this distinction (Paugam 2009, p. XII). In 1988, the introduction of the RMI (*Revenu Minimum d'Insertion*, a guaranteed minimum income for those seeking work), France's first universalizing welfare measure, confirmed the democratic recognition that unemployment, now a large-scale problem, was not so much chosen as suffered. In the period from 1992 to 1994, vagrancy and begging were decriminalized in both France (Rullac 2008) and Belgium (Zamora Vargas 2017). The universalization of social rights, announced—but not materialized—in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the Preamble to the Constitution of France's Fourth (1946–1958) and Fifth Republics (since 1958), would characterize the 1990s and 2000s in France, with laws passed to combat exclusion (1998), institute universal health coverage (1999) and state medical assistance (2000), and guarantee the right to housing (1990) and accommodation (2007). Policies on schooling, training, and professional integration, as well as "social investment" policies focused on early childhood, also played a role in efforts to prevent the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty.

However, nothing should ever be taken for granted: since 1993, a number of French cities have introduced anti-begging bylaws; national policies that seek to "activate social protection"—including RMI successor measures such as the RSA (*Revenu de Solidarité Active*, aimed at unemployed and under-employed workers) and the *Prime d'Activité* ("Employment Bonus" for low-income workers)—are still founded in part on the age-old suspicion of the poor's idleness; and the fear of free riders (Olson 1966)—"stowaways" leeching off society—fuels the stigmatization of those "on welfare." Clearly, poverty still carries with it its share of "misconceptions" (ATD Quart Monde 2014) and "prejudices" (Secours Catholique 2017), based on historical constructions so deeply rooted that they remain disconcertingly easy to reawaken.

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