

CROP newsletter

Comparative Research Programme On Poverty

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DISCOURSE AND POVERTY

By *Hartley Dean*, Professor of Social Policy, University of Luton, UK.

Notions of 'discourse', once the preserve of rather abstruse post-structuralist theoretical genres, are increasingly permeating more general social scientific thinking. They provide new and critical ways of understanding poverty; not just the sometimes slippery nature of the concept of poverty, but also the way that the experience and meaning of poverty may be objectively shaped through the language and practices of the experts, politicians and 'ordinary' people who discuss and seek to address or cope with it. While people may not agree about the nature or severity of the condition that is to be defined as poverty, it is significant in itself that the concept continues to be debated and that poverty survives as a preoccupation within everyday discourse.

From their respective premises, both socialists and ecologists have argued that the survival of 'poverty' in the era of the modern welfare state and of ascendant capitalist democracy is no accident. Capitalism, they say, creates poverty: it even needs poverty to sustain its internal dynamic. However, this is strictly functionalist thinking. It does not explain how or why poverty presents itself as a problem. In pre-capitalist times most people in most societies were born into what we might now define as 'poverty': it was by and large an ascribed, unalterable and unquestioned status. The disruption of

'traditional' or feudal relations of dependency associated with the coming of capitalist modernity gave new meaning to 'poverty'; it transformed the nature and the experience of poverty and constituted poverty as a visible social problem. However, the consequent introduction in Western societies of welfare and social security systems did not cure the problem. There is a sense in which poverty becomes inseparable from the logic of the practices that are directed to relieving or preventing it; in which poverty is continually reconstituted through the language by which its nature and its existence are contested.

However, if poverty has been discursively constructed as the subject of technical knowledge and as an object of political regulation and control, it has also been constituted as a more general social concern. This is so for two reasons. First, as is well established, in welfare state societies the mechanisms which are calculated to control poverty tend also to stigmatise the poor. This has consequences, not only for those who are poor, but for those who are not: symbolic distinctions - between poor and not poor, between deserving and undeserving, between claimant and tax-payer - bear upon the status, the identity and the conduct of every citizen. Secondly, the process of economic globalisation, far from extending economic security, has generated increased risk, including a risk of poverty which, in spite of the most obscene disparities of wealth and power, might yet affect every human being on the planet.

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With these factors in mind, my own research has focused in recent years, not on expert or political discourses of poverty, but on popular discourses. This work has been done in the UK and it is, of course, important to bear in mind that all discourse in its essence is historically and culturally specific. The term 'poverty' tends to be differently understood in different parts of the world, but it also tends to be differently understood by different people within a single society. Although the UK is one of the most affluent societies in the world, it is also one of the most unequal societies, and an analysis of the various meanings which are attached to poverty in such an unequal society may have at least some relevance for poverty researchers the world over.

It seems to be the case that in popular discourse poverty is either apprehended as a distant phenomenon - as something which existed in the past or which may happen in other places or to other kinds of people; or it is apprehended in pejorative terms - as something blameworthy, threatening or unspeakable. Either way, poverty is not a status which many people embrace or which they would admit to. There is persuasive evidence that even people who are by objective definition 'poor' tend by and large to deny that they are poor.

There are also curious ambiguities about the terms in which the existence of poverty is acknowledged within popular discourse. On the one hand, popular discourse does on occasions share with expert commentators understandings of poverty which relate it to exterior factors, such as social class or structural influences; or else such discourse expresses a sense of moral or charitable concern about the injustice or the awfulness of poverty. On the other hand, the existence of poverty can also be related within popular discourse to factors which are interior to the individual: it may project poverty as something quite intangible, as a frame of mind, a failure of will or a state of shame. Either way, poverty is something to be feared. Once again, there is persuasive evidence that even people who are by any standards 'not poor' may fear poverty.

Popular discourse is both complex and dynamic. It contains a diversity of repertoires upon which individuals can draw as they negotiate the everyday risks of living in an unequal society, and both the nature of those repertoires and the combination of repertoires on which people draw can change over time. It is this feature of popular discourse which helps explain the ambiguous

nature of public attitudes to poverty and to the role of the state in poverty alleviation. Popular discourse accommodates contradictory tendencies - entrepreneurialism and meritocracy on the one hand and reformism and social justice on the other; survivalism and authoritarian individualism on the one hand and conformism and commitment to social cohesion on the other. Such discourse is therefore capable of sustaining a variety of different kinds of welfare state regime, though it will not necessarily move in step with any prevailing political orthodoxy.

In the event, popular discourse in the UK may be said to exhibit a mixture of guarded altruism and pragmatic instrumentalism and I suspect this is to some extent a generalisable finding. Though people do draw on competitive and individualistic moral repertoires appropriate to the ideological discourses of neo-Liberalism, the solidaristic and co-operative repertoires that would be appropriate to social-democratic or even corporatist ideological discourses have been by no means extinguished. Evidence from different sources suggests that, in fact, people do not generally have an accurate sense of how poor or indeed rich they actually are. Just as in a Rawlsian thought experiment they must fashion their thinking on the basis of uncertainty, and this may well incline them to retain at least some adherence to principles of social justice or social cohesion. We ought not perhaps to accept the extreme relativist position, that discourse (the language and practices by which intersubjective meaning are represented) is the only medium through which social reality can be constituted. What I have sought none the less to show is that poverty, when considered as a construction of discourse, is something which can impinge in a real as well as a symbolic sense on almost everybody's fears and aspirations. What is more, an understanding of the different discourses which surround poverty is essential to the construction of strategies to combat it.

NOTE - Hartley Dean's most recent book (written with Margaret Melrose), Poverty, Riches and Social Citizenship, was published by Macmillan in November this year.

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On December 10th it is 50 years since the UN Declaration of Human Rights was signed in Paris. If taken literally and implemented according to the letter, the notion of universal human rights can be turned into a powerful instrument for the eradication of extreme poverty and the reduction of poverty world-wide.

So far most of the attention of the human rights movements has been directed towards the implementation of individual political rights and democratic development. With increasing ethnic conflicts, cultural rights are now competing for attention. But social and economic rights are still kept much in the background and have received far less attention, in spite of the fact that poverty is now occupying an increasing space on the international agenda. It will be interesting to follow the development and see whether the issue of poverty and the issue of social and economic rights will continue to be part of two separate international discourses, or whether they will actually find their way to a joint political arena.

Much of the discussion on human rights has been carried out within the legal sciences. Interpretations of the text have been in focus, as have discussions of the role of the state and the international community as controlling and enforcing agencies.

But this is an area which needs also the increased participation of the social sciences and poverty research. Only then can the impact and application of human rights be better understood. At present political scientists are among those who raise issues such as the relationship between the national state and the obligations the state has towards its citizens to secure basic human rights. Philosophers have brought out some of the many normative issues built into the notion of human rights. Some have questioned the present usefulness of a simplistic legal instrument based on theories of the past when life was simpler and society less complex. Others have argued that increased globalisation can only be met by universal instruments such as human rights. Anthropologists have argued that the individual rights embedded in the Declaration run counter to the tradition of collective rights which are found in many cultures outside the western sphere. Feminist scholars have pointed to the fact that human rights are written in a gender neutral language which in effect makes women, and in particular the poorest women, invisible. They stress that emphasis on equality in the Declaration implies also gender equality.

The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation II

The second CROP-initiated workshop on *The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation* took place in Cape Town, South Africa from the 18th to 22nd of September 1998. The workshop was organised in co-operation with the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) and the University of Cape Town. The main sponsor of the event was the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD), with additional funding from UNESCO, University of Cape Town and CROP.

25 papers were presented and discussed. 42 persons were registered as participants in the workshop and in addition some students attended. 30 of the participants came from Africa, 7 from Europe, 3 from USA, 1 from Asia and 1 from Latin America. The workshop was planned by a Programme Committee consisting of: Dr. **Jan Isaksen**, Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis (BIDPA), Botswana; Prof. **Archie Mafeje**, The American University in Cairo, Egypt; Prof. **Henning Melber**, Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU), Namibia; Prof. **Thandika Mkandawire**, UNRISD; Prof. **Patrick P. Molutsi**, University of Botswana; Prof. **Else Øyen**, CROP, Norway and Prof. **Francis Wilson**, University of Cape Town, South Africa. **Einar Braathen** was the Programme Officer and **Inge Tesdal** served as an administrative officer.

The following papers were presented and discussed: *Poverty Alleviation Strategies and Public Works Programmes: Issues and Choices in Poverty Relief and Development* by **Michelle Adato**, International Food Policy Research Institute and **Julian May**, University of Natal-Durban, South Africa; *The Myth of the Diminishing Role of the State –and Its Increasing Control* by **Katarina Ammitzböll**, UNDP Cairo, Egypt; *Providing So Little for so Few: Botswana's Social Assistance Scheme* by **Arnon Bar-**

On, University of Botswana; *The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation. An Outline of a Comparative Research Programme* by **Einar Braathen**, University of Bergen, Norway; *The South African Women's Budget Initiative: What does it tell us about Poverty Alleviation* by **Debbie Budlender**, Community Agency for Social Enquiry, South Africa; *Democratization and Poverty in the Balkans: The Cases of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia* by **Constantine P. Danopoulos** and **Emilia Ianeva**, San Jose University, USA; *Poverty and Citizenship: Moral Repertoires and Welfare Regimes* by **Hartley Dean**, University of Luton, Great Britain; *Poverty, Impoverishment and the Changing Role of the State in the Middle East* by **Blandine Destremau**, CNRS URBAMA, France; *The Role of the State in Improving the Living Conditions of Workers: The Case of the Shubra El-Kheima Industrial Area* by **Laila Gad**, Social Fund for Development, Egypt; *Democracies and Poverty: Links and Associations* by **Kenneth Good**, University of Botswana; *Trade Policy, Poverty and Inequality: The Case of Namibia* by **Dirk Hansohm**, **Klaus Schade** and **Arne Wiig**, NEPRU, Namibia; *The Nutritional Status of Children in Khayelitsha with a Critical Reflection on the Impact of Government Health and Welfare Programmes* by **Ingrid** and **Pieter le Roux**, University of Western Cape, South Africa; *The Role of Government in Poverty Alleviation in Zimbabwe* by **Jacob W. G. Kaliyati**, University of Zimbabwe; *Poverty Reduction and Policy Dialogue: The World Bank and the State in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi* by **Nazneen Kanji**, London School of Economics and Political Science, Great Britain; *Poverty and Democratization: Popular Participation and in the Performance of the State in Poverty Alleviation* by **Charity K. Kerapeletswe** and **Tsholofelo Moremi**, BIDPA, Botswana; *The Social Context of Urban Poverty and its Effects on Political Participation and Self Help in Africa* by **Norbert Kersting**, University of Marburg,

Germany; *The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation in a War Torn Society – The Case Study of Mozambique* by **Eugénio Macamo**, Universidade de Eduardo Mondlane, Mozambique; *Assets, Livelihoods and the Emerging Strategy for Poverty Alleviation in Rural South Africa* by **Julian May** and **Ann Vaughan**, University of Natal-Durban, South Africa; *The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation: The Angolan Case* by **Gilberto Ribeiro**, National Institute of Statistics (INE), Angola; *Why are the Poor Ignored? Poverty, Democracy and Civil Society in Botswana* by **Roberta C. Rivers**, University of Botswana; *Poverty, Social Justice, and Indigenous Status in Latin America: Mexico as a Case Study* by **Camilo Perez-Bustillo**, Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Mexico; *Redressing Urban Poverty in Post-Apartheid South Africa* by **Christian M. Rogerson**, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa; *Poverty in the Bairros: The Contrast between Public Policy and Performance in Beira, Mozambique* by **Michael Schultheis**, Universidade Católica de Mocambique; *Poverty and Development in Postcolonial Societies: The Role of Foreign Aid* by **Brigitte H. Schulz**, Trinity College, USA; *The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation: Lessons from Malaysia's Experience* by **Chamhuri Siwar**, University of Kebangsaan, Malaysia.

The workshop in South Africa will be followed up by a third workshop on "The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation" which will be held in November 1999. At present the location is not yet confirmed, but is expected to be in Amman, Jordan.

A publication based on a set of papers from both the first and the second workshop will appear in the CROP International Studies in Poverty Research series by Zed books. The volume will be edited by Francis Wilson, Einar Braathen and Nazneen Kanji.

The development of social and economic rights is a field of research which ought to intrigue poverty researchers all over the world. To advance further, we shall need to understand better the legal instrument offered through the Declaration of Human Rights and the implications it has nationally and universally, as analysed by the legal sciences. We shall need to scrutinise the contributions colleagues in the social sciences have made to the interpretations and consequences of social and economic rights, and then set these contributions into the context of poverty and poverty reduction. We shall need to establish a research

agenda which includes basic questions on the nature of social and economic rights, the relationship between social justice and these rights, concrete questions on how social and economic rights can be implemented, under what conditions they can be sustained, the economic and political costs and gains of different models of implementation, and how an international scheme of monitoring the development of human rights can be established which goes beyond the national and international indicators which are presently at use. Just to mention some of the many questions which need to be looked into.

CROP has made the relationship between poverty and human rights one of its focal projects. The first workshop on "Human Rights as an Instrument for the Eradication of Extreme Poverty" was held in Chile in 1997. A publication from this workshop is under preparation, with a preface by Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The second workshop in this series will be held in Mexico in March 1999 and the title is "Poverty and Social Justice in Latin America". You are all invited to come forward with initiatives to continue this project.

Else Øyen, Chair of CROP

JOURNAL OF POVERTY: CALL FOR PAPERS

The journal is concerned with various levels for intervention ranging from direct practice to community organization to social policy analysis. Manuscripts should increase knowledge of oppressive forces, such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, which contribute to the maintenance of poverty and inequality and suggest methods of change leading towards their eradication.

The Journal of Poverty is published by Haworth Press, Inc. Visit their webpage at <http://www.csw.ohio-state.edu/jpov> for additional information.

STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN 1999

The State of the World's Children Report 1999 was launched by UNICEF December 8th. The Report deals with the problem of illiteracy and lack of education for many children. The report stresses the importance of making education a global reality, as a sound investment in a peaceful and prosperous future, in accordance with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

The report can be downloaded from the UNICEF webpage at <http://www.unicef.org/sowc99/>

SEASONS GREETINGS



*CROP wishes all its contributors,
supporters and friends
a peaceful and happy
New Year 1999*

LIST OF CROP EVENTS 1999

March:

18-20: "Poverty and Social Justice in Latin America", CROP/Universidad Ibero-americana/Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey workshop, Mexico City, Mexico.

May:

19-21: "Law and Poverty III: Law as a Tool for Combating Poverty", CROP/IISL workshop, Oñati, Spain

November:

"The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation III" and "Best Practices", a joint CROP/UNESCO/MOST workshop, likely venue, Amman, Jordan

UNDP POVERTY REPORT

The 1998 UNDP Poverty Report, Overcoming Human Poverty, documents the progress made to eradicate poverty since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development. A global survey, conducted by UNDP country offices, found that significant progress has been made, but much remains to be done. Numerous statistical tables accompany the Report. For more information see: <http://www.undp.org/poverty/report/report.html>

The report is priced at USD 15, and can be ordered from United Nations Publications, Sales and Marketing Section, Room DC2-853, Dept. I004, New York, N.Y. 10017, Tel.: 212-963-8302, 800-253-9646; Fax: 212-963-3489

CROP IN BRIEF

CROP is a world-wide network of researchers and experts on poverty. The aim of CROP is to establish an arena for interdisciplinary and comparative research on poverty in developed and developing countries. CROP organises regional workshops, symposia and international conferences, promotes joint research projects and publications, links poverty researchers and disseminates information about poverty research, on a non-profit basis. CROP has developed a database on poverty researchers, and documentation of ongoing research. CROP is chaired by professor Else Øyen, University of Bergen, Norway.

If you wish to have your name listed in CROPnet, you are welcome to write the CROP Secretariat and request a copy of the CROP Database Survey. For further information please contact the CROP Secretariat

WEBPAGE FOR CROP

Those who have an Internet connection and a WWW browser programme installed, find the CROP web page at <http://www.crop.org>. The pages hold general information about CROP, news about past and ongoing activities, as well as the latest CROP newsletter.

Please note: We can no longer answer the increased demand for copies of single papers presented at CROP conferences and workshops. However, if you have the patience, most of the papers become available through the publications that follow the conferences and will be duly announced. We still supply the authors addresses, phone & fax numbers.

AT THE CROP SECRETARIAT

you will meet:

Else Øyen, Chair of CROP

Hans Egil Offerdal, CROP Co-ordinator

Einar Braathen, CROP Programme Officer

Inge Erling Tesdal, CROP Executive Officer

REMINDER

BEST PRACTICES IN POVERTY RESEARCH

CROP has been commissioned by UNESCO and the MOST programme to develop a framework for a project on best practices in poverty reduction, see CROP Newsletter Vol.5, No.3 1998

Deadline for submitting a paper is **March 15, 1999**.

You may contact the CROP Secretariat for further information or visit the MOST webpage at <http://www.unesco.org/most/>

THE QUOTE

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"

Article 1
Universal Declaration of Human Rights