

POVERTY ON THE REBOUND: THE WORK OF MODELS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conversations between scholars across disciplinary divides, searching for means to understand the multiple dimensions of poverty, have much to offer a field that continues to be dominated by mainstream economics.¹ An open-ended exploration of alternatives to this approach, represented by most of the papers in this collection, contributes to the emergence of a broader discussion in social science on poverty and poverty alleviation. But open-endedness in this sense is itself a perspective and is challenged by endeavors across the disciplines that seek to establish a foundation on which theory, method, and policy can be developed (Lather, 1986; Campbell, 2001; cf. Bloor, 1997; Gudeman, 2005). If the first of these perspectives – i.e., the notion that everyone is “right” from her or his own point of view and that adding views will result in a more complete or improved understanding – is relativist, the other is not. Interestingly, arguments for or against relativism and foundationalism (or universalism) crisscross in the social scientific field, both within and between disciplines, and are not reducible to a formal academic divide.

In this paper I will offer a set of reflections on the promises of open-ended conversations, but also on the difficulties implied in combining the methodologies, concepts, and assumptions of what some argue are incompatible research traditions (see, e.g., Shaffer, 2005). The focus is on Latin America but the scope is global. While I place emphasis on the relevance of an anthropological re-encounter with poverty, I also aim to measure the contribution of the volume against the current literature by

* This paper grew out of an attempt to introduce the scholarly diversity of this volume. Eventually we opted for a shorter introduction and my co-editors offered me this space to reflect more independently on the contribution of the volume. I thank them and the contributors for teaching me a number of lessons in sociology, international relations, economics, anthropology, and in the art of working across the disciplines. My teachers are not to blame, of course, should these lessons not be satisfactorily reflected in this paper. Thanks also to Beppe Karlsson for last-minute advice and encouragement.

surveying approaches to poverty across the disciplines and to the power (or work) of models in liberal economics.

II. THE APPEAL OF POVERTY – CONCEPTS AND METHODS

The economic crisis in Latin America culminating in 2002 was the first “event” to cast serious doubts on the feasibility of the first of the eight UN Millennium Development Goals of eradicating extreme poverty in the world, initially by halving it by the year 2015 (UN, 2001 and 2002). As it now occurred in countries like Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Mexico, many descended into poverty and the number who escaped from it in less affected places was not as high as had previously been anticipated (see Portes and Hoffman, 2003; Krishna et al., 2006).

According to estimates of the World Bank, every fifth person in the world now lives in extreme poverty (i.e., on less than US\$1 a day) and close to every second lives in poverty (i.e., on less than US\$2 a day) (World Bank, 2006:9). The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL/ECLAC) assesses the emergence of the contemporary state of poverty thus: at the beginning of the 1970s as much as 40 percent of the Latin American population was considered poor. Progress towards the end of that decade was unmade during what has been dubbed “the lost decade” of the 1980s with severe economic crisis due to a combination of debt and adjustment-related recession. People in the region lived through the 1990s with poverty affecting a now even larger proportion of Latin Americans than in the early 1970s (see www.eclac.cl; Londoño and Székely, 2000; Vos et al., 2003). In the autumn of 2002, the poor in Argentina, severely affected by the recent crisis, made up no less than 57 percent of the population, and as high a number as 27 percent fell below the level of extreme poverty (see Maute, 2006). Poverty on a general Latin American level had risen to 44 percent by 2003 (see Vigorito in this volume).

An apparently reawakened and worldwide interest in the issue of poverty alleviation through the not necessarily convergent avenues of redistributive justice and economic growth could be viewed as a response to this dismal development of the last thirty years. Political scientist Alain Noël argues that the UN Millennium Goals prepared the ground for what later developed into a “global anti-poverty consensus” (Noël, 2006:304; see also Townsend, 2002; Grusky and Kanbur, 2006), reflected by the joint rediscovery from both left and right, from grassroots organizations and corporate and government power holders, of the central importance of developing new political means to combat poverty. This broad tendency is evidenced on the one hand by the “Global Call to Actions against Poverty”

of the social movements represented at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2005 and on the other in the summit of top business executives and political leaders in the World Economic Forum in Davos that same year (see Kolk and Van Tulder, 2006). While both OECD and the European Union have joined forces by independently adopting anti-poverty agendas (Schulte, 2002), poor countries are increasingly expected to prioritize the matter too by producing what are termed Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, using the guidelines provided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (see Sletten and Egset in this volume; Craig and Porter, 2003).

Alain Noël's notion of a rediscovery is true in that it concerns the world of policy in national and even more so international political arenas. But while the extent to which these policies have resulted in concrete measures to the actual benefit of the poor is highly debated (see, e.g., Bardhan, 2006), and the local effects of this rediscovery yet to be proven, a "rediscovery" could also be questioned by the claim that both the concept of poverty and the malady it designates, however defined and measured, have long been a centrally placed subject matter in the history of social science. That is, the social sciences that are not aimed at producing models for economic intervention display a more continuous, if somewhat reluctant, interest in poverty as a field of research.

Different, not to say opposed, views have developed both between and within the disciplines on relative or absolute definitions of poverty. Relativizing poverty has generally implied a focus on people's experience of being marginalized, exploited, or dispossessed in comparison to others and against the cultural or local norms of what a good or worthy life should entail (see Auyero, 2000; Widmark, 2003 and in this volume). Absolute poverty, on the other hand, denotes the absence of food or shelter that would meet "the basic needs" for survival.

However, the ways we can measure absolute poverty are neither self-evident nor straightforward since the assets needed to fulfill needs vary as price and income levels vary between national economies (see Steward, 1995; Franco and Saith, 2003; Altamirano et al., 2004; Stedman Jones, 2004). Arguing in such a way against an absolute poverty concept, Townsend famously claimed that "[a]ny rigorous conceptualization of the social determination of need dissolves the idea of 'absolute' need....The necessities of life are not fixed, they are continuously being adapted and augmented as changes take place in a society and in its products" (Townsend, 1979:17-18). The merits of Townsend's emphasis on relativity are acknowledged by Sen, who nevertheless argues that poverty ultimately must be regarded as an absolute notion and stresses the importance of

defining the particular “space” (in his terms, e.g., commodities, incomes, and capabilities) on which the concept is based: “An absolute approach in the space of capabilities translates into a relative approach in the space of commodities, resources and incomes in dealing with some important capabilities, such as avoiding shame from failure to meet social conventions, participating in social activities and retaining self-respect” (Sen, 1983:167-168). In later works, Sen conceptualizes “development” as the expansion of freedoms and argues for the importance of political freedom for economic development. This harks back to the capabilities approach of 1983 in that one type of freedom “may greatly help advancing freedom of other types” (Sen, 1999:37; see also Sen, 2002), just as one type of capability determined or framed another.

Mainstream economics has primarily been interested in the development and specification of measurements that could be applied universally and compared internationally. The work of Sen has contributed to the widening of this interest to one emphasizing the complementarity of the absolute and relative conception of poverty.²

However, the liberal core of Sen’s approach to freedom from political constraints has jarred some analysts. For example, anthropologist Harri Englund, in a monograph on the negative implications for the African poor of discourses and policies promoting the expansion of freedom, advises caution with Sen’s normative approach. Englund argues that freedom easily becomes “entangled in the very rhetoric that needs to be scrutinized” (2006:11) and proposes a more open-ended empirical investigation to reveal what poor people actually regard as being the essence of a legitimate political system (see also Walsh, 1995-1996, forthcoming 2007; Arizpe, 2002; Varoufakis, 2002-2003:468). Jackson and Palmer-Jones (1999) explore this theme as well in their dealings with the manual labor of the poor and what it means in terms of gendered subjectivities. In a polemic with Sen’s broadening of an absolute poverty concept to include freedoms and capabilities, they see the capacities for hard manual labor as a contradictory resolution to the predicament of the poor, and one that bears differently on men and women. Targeting her critique on one of Sen’s freedoms, Walsh writes:

For Sen ... opportunity freedom requires as its base the proven freedom for all agents to realize some minimal level of vital human capabilities. But this attainment of functioning in turn requires to be based on a special kind of growth and development. Until this is achieved, Sen’s argument entails, the world’s wretched “accept” the exchanges offered to them only in the sense in which the old slaves “accepted” their slavery (and indeed the new slaves do today) – they simply have no viable alternative. (Walsh forthcoming, 2007:81)

The relative/absolute divide, even if modified, thus implies different views on the role and indeed nature of power, and it continually leads scholars to place different weight either on inequality (if poverty has to do with relativity and relations, then inequality is key) or on unfulfilled human (i.e., universal) needs, in economics referred to as “preferences” (see Helgesson, 2005).

Having introduced these conceptual quibbles I now turn briefly to methodology in the context of multidisciplinary poverty research, for the differences between the relative and the foundational perspective have repercussions in distinct methodological approaches too, in the qualitative and the quantitative. A theme section of the journal *World Development* was recently devoted to this topic (see Jackson, 2002; Kanbur, 2002; White, 2002). Here, White aims to show how the quantitative approach can benefit from insights reached in qualitative studies, like, for example, developing appropriate models of how poor households make use of non-pecuniary labor exchange and the endogeneity of household size as a means of obtaining labor (2002:519; see also Carvalho and White, 1997). What’s striking in the allegedly “complementary” view of White is the implicit claim that qualitative studies can contribute to the results of quantitative ones, and not the other way around. Does this mean that qualitative methodology has nothing to learn from the quantitative, that the influence can only work in one direction? Or does it mean that, in the end, what counts as valid research is what is done quantitatively, and that qualitative approaches are good as long as they can serve a higher quantitative purpose?

The World Bank’s promotion of multidisciplinary poverty research has induced similar questions in many fields. For example, the intersection of gender and poverty emerged as a topical field of both policy and research in the 1990s, but was plagued by both methodological and conceptual fuzziness. Evaluating six so-called Participatory Poverty Assessments performed in Africa by the World Bank, Whitehead and Okello (2002) reach the conclusion that while everyone seems to acknowledge the importance of looking at how men and women conceive of poverty differently, very little of that insight filters through the overtly quantitative character of the PPAs. And when it does, even quantitatively achieved results leave room, in themselves, for a variety of interpretations (see also Razavi, 1999; Rew and Rew, 2002).

In fact, the complementary view is increasingly coming under attack from a number of disciplinary perspectives. Campbell and Holland (2005), for example, maintain that none of the qualitative methods used by the World Bank are designed to produce any valid data and that participant

observation is not used at all. Furthermore, the combined methodology that the World Bank has sponsored over recent years suffers from an inability to integrate the different methods and, instead, uses them alongside one another. Campbell and Holland conclude that a dominance of econometrics and a focus on household surveys define the field and exclude or make obsolete other approaches. Shaffer (1996), in an attempt to reveal the theoretical contradiction underlying multidisciplinary efforts, finds that the quantitative “income/consumption method” and the qualitative “participatory method” are incompatible. According to him, these approaches generate conflicting results with respect to both the identification of the poor and the suggested prescription in poverty-related policy.

In order to dig deeper into such incompatibility I will now focus on one of the qualitative branches of poverty research, economic anthropology, before I return in the next section to the power of models in liberal economics.

III. CULTURAL ECONOMICS

If the rather diffuse notion of “grappling” in the title of this collection failed to reveal the limited influence of economists on the editorial work, then “discourse” probably did the job. It therefore seems appropriate to confess that none of the editors are trained in economics. Instead, we are social and cultural anthropologists who nevertheless nourish a professional interest in the influence of “things economic” on our lives, and on the lives of others (see, e.g., Rosendahl, 2001, 2002; Widmark, 2003; Löfving, 2005a.). In a similar vein, it should be said that this paper pretends to be nothing more and nothing less than an anthropologist’s account. As such, and somewhat less humbly stated, it is a “humanities attempt” to reclaim from economics the lost concept of poverty.

For in contrast to the current situation, poverty figured prominently in anthropology around four to five decades ago. Leading anthropologists contributed to the discipline’s prevailing reputation in the field of poverty research as one that infamously locates the very causes of perpetual poverty in the culture (and even the psyches) of the poor proper. In 1955, Clifford Geertz, one of the most central figures of 20th-century anthropology, described the communal forms of agriculture among the Javanese in terms of a failure to embrace individualism and other “modern values” by communally and counterproductively sharing the burden of poverty:

Unable either emotionally or technologically to reorganize agriculture on an extensive basis, and unable to increase output through further intensification, the *abangan* (commoner) has been forced to solve his population problem by

lowering his standards concerning what he will accept as a decent level of living for one of a set of equally privileged peasants....This general pattern of response to a worsening economic situation through a division of the economic pie into smaller and smaller pieces might well be called “shared poverty” (Geertz, 1955:11-12).

As noted by Gilman, such a culture-infused explanation for persistent poverty revised an earlier biological and indeed racist analytical framework, but only to a degree. Geertz modeled his new critical explanatory variable *culture* on *race*, “leaving intact other assumptions of older racist theories...” (Gilman, 2002:10). Instead of *evolving* into a modern and market-oriented polity, Geertz maintained in a later book on agricultural *involution*, the society of the Javanese responded to colonial pressure by developing protective “post-traditional” (Geertz, 1963:142) cultural mechanisms that in a post-colonial era of development led to economic stagnation. He even celebrated the disproof of his own equation (i.e., an economic growth) by explaining that an eventual yet surprising economic progress was due to the newly won freedom of the poor from what he called traditional constraints.

This approach probably tells more about dominant notions of development at the time than it does about Geertz’s anthropology (whose fame derives from his hermeneutics rather than from his earlier and more rudimentary economic anthropology). But “the time” is of relevance, too. Positioning Geertz’s take on poverty in the political context of the 1960s, Gilman argues that the reception of *Agricultural Involution* fulfilled the need of American policymakers at the time of the Vietnam War for an understanding of “the hearts and minds” of the peasantry in densely populated rice-growing regions of Southeast Asia.

The importance of the Vietnam War for the reception of *Agricultural Involution* resides in the explanation it gave of peasant behaviour. Involution made apathy or inactivity the norm of peasant behaviour – virtually all progressive political-economic change in Geertz’s writings descends from above, in the form of technocratic meddling or nationalistically oriented political leadership. Broadly seen, the U.S. government’s official line was that insurgency in South Vietnam resulted from intrusion by disciplined North Vietnamese cadres bent on stirring up the primordial feelings of an otherwise passive peasantry of the sort apparently described by involution. Insofar as it could be seen as justifying wars against insurgent peasantries on the grounds that their radicalism had to come from without, Geertz’s narrative of recent Indonesian economic and cultural history fit the ideological needs of those justifying the Vietnam War. (Gilman, 2002:13)

Such a model for understanding the relation of poverty and revolution has a direct resonance in the Latin American context and it

informs a conceptual cum ideological background to Rudqvist's article in this volume on insurgency in Colombia. As argued by Saldaña-Portillo in her work on the common discursive and doctrinal ground of a state-promoted ideology of development and a subversive ideology of revolution, the resemblance between "... these two seemingly vying theories of history lies in their mutual dependence on a teleological and meliorist concept of human development, derived from imperial reason but reformulated through the rhetorics of decolonization, development, and national liberation after World War II" (2003:260). Whether adherents of the *foquismo* strategy adopted from the Cuban revolution, postulating that a small revolutionary nucleus could be the catalyst of a nation-wide rebellion, or of a later wave of Latin American insurgency promoting a more gradual process of consciousness raising, mobilization and prolonged warfare among the rural poor (see Wickham-Crowley, 1992; Castañeda 1993), these ideologues shared Geertz's conviction that a transformation had to be induced from the outside. They thus played into the hands of the counterinsurgency states and their U.S. strategists who were bent on violently breaking the bond established between subversive nuclei and the poor (see Grandin, 2006). It was the notion of the poor in need of being mobilized by others that informed the nature of the state's excessive military response to political mobilization (both armed and non-armed) against poverty and that, in a later paradigm, served to undermine the political legitimacy of revolutionary movements, giving rise to an argument that the revolution was just as exogenous to the aspirations and needs of the poor as the repression and the state that had motivated it.³ The Colombian case analyzed by Rudqvist in this volume recasts this discourse by exploring, first, the extent to which the performance of revolutionary violence emanates endogenously from the experiences of the poor, and second, the politically de-legitimizing consequences of the argument that it doesn't (see also Löfving, 2005b).

It goes without saying that implicit assumptions about the lack of political capacities (or "agency") of the poor are relevant topics of investigation beyond the discussion of violent revolution. The role of culture for the state's organization and regulation of the economy is of equal interest, not least in times of increasingly market-oriented policies for development and poverty alleviation (see Rao and Walton, 2004). To understand that topic and its place in the history of economic anthropology, we must add to the views of Geertz the work of Oscar Lewis – another anthropologist who even more prominently than his world-leading colleague and compatriot came to be associated with the contested notion of a culture (or a subculture) of poverty. In essence, Lewis showed how the

poor, even if subjected to systemic forces of exclusion upon which they have no opportunities to exercise any influence, develop a shared value system that in turn perpetuates their socio-economic predicament. Children in poor families inherit and develop strong feelings of both helplessness and dependency, of “not belonging.” Lack of modern skills and education and thus the ability to see beyond the horizon of their own circumscribed reality block any possibility for the emergence of a class consciousness (see Lewis, 1966a, 1966b, 1969).

Even if Lewis did not claim universal applicability of his concept, others did (see, e.g., Harrington, 1962) and tried it out, not least in the U.S., where it came to inform government policy in “the war on poverty” of the 1960s. So, if Clifford Geertz had provided policymakers with figures of thought in their fight against Communists in Vietnam and Latin America, Lewis did the same for the architects of domestic poverty alleviation. The veritable flood of criticism that this approach provoked seems to relate more to its many (mis)interpretations than to what it actually implied, but it is beyond our scope to review it here. Suffice it to say that while the critics concentrated on the alleged universality of the model (e.g., Valentine, 1968; Goode and Eames, 1980), many seemed to equate Lewis’s discussion with the policy models it had inspired. Instead and ultimately, “the culture of poverty” was suggested as a pattern of adaptation of the poor to the class structure of capitalism, and it was an attempt to reconcile the notion of class with that of culture. For our purposes here, I would like to highlight the argument that a lack of belonging to “society” and its institutions does not necessarily imply a lack of belonging to everything and everyone. The characteristics of a culture of poverty in Lewis’s model, like apathy, passiveness, laziness, etcetera, emerge as pathological, individual behaviors if studied in an imposed and, to the people involved, irrelevant social context. It is only by abandoning a state- (or, indeed, market-) centered view of the agency of the poor that it becomes possible to inductively identify the wider social, but also economic and political strategies they themselves employ, with or without having developed a consciousness of the classes of society (cf. Arizpe, 2004).

The shift in the literature of the dependency debates of the 1970s and 1980s was not as much from a focus on the individual to a focus on structure (as claimed by Moser and McIlwane, 2006:90) as it was from the agency of the poor (individual or collectively cultural) to the structural factors constraining and even determining the agency of everyone – both rich and poor. However, the academic notion of a culture of poverty was exposed to a blow from which it has never recovered.

The days when policy was influenced by anthropologists are long gone. The anthropology of economy (and development) since Lewis has moved in several different directions; I will mention two here, both of them represented and developed by economic anthropologist Stephen Gudeman (1986, 2001). In a recent attempt, both celebrated and challenged, to turn the modernist argument around – that of a mutually exclusive relationship between sound markets on the one hand and culture (or certain cultures) on the other – Gudeman has launched a model which posits social bonds and the cultural notions sustaining them as a constitutive element of all economies, on a par with the market element, or anonymous trade. From this premise, Gudeman develops an argument that innovation and economic profit, in small-scale rural economies as well as in big corporations and nations, draws on shared values non-translatable by monetary measurements, and that economy as such is always about dialectically producing both economic profit and social relationships. The model admits room for inequality and the workings of power by reframing modernization as a transformation of emphasis from “community” to the market realm (see also Gudeman, 2005).

Recent anthropology, along with sociology, has also emphasized the importance of studying economics itself as a discourse – a once-local model problematically elevated to universal norm or “science” (Gudeman, 1986; Gudeman and Rivera, 1990). Today, such a stance on the normativity of economics is taken across many disciplines and developed primarily in economic sociology and the burgeoning field of feminist economics. In his posthumously published *The Social Structures of the Economy*, Pierre Bourdieu (2005) draws on Polanyi’s notion of embeddedness (1944) and opens thus:

The science called ‘economics’ is based on an initial act of abstraction that consists in dissociating a particular category of practices, or a particular dimension of all practice, from the social order in which all human practice is immersed. (Bourdieu, 2005:1)

[E]conomics is always more of a state science [than sociology is] and is, as a result, haunted by state thinking: being constantly preoccupied with the normative concerns of an applied science, it is dependent on responding politically to political demands, while at the same time defending itself against any charge of political involvement by the ostentatiously lofty character of its formal, and preferably mathematical, constructions. (ibid.:11)

With Bourdieu I would like now to give attention briefly to economics as discourse and to the notion that economics (as well as anthropology and sociology, of course, but at different scales and with

different effects) produces models that not only depict reality, but model it as well.

IV. LIBERAL ECONOMICS AND THE ALTERNATIVES IN LATIN AMERICA

In this volume, John Andrew McNeish remarks that a focus on the manifestations of poverty might very well shun both the question why there is poverty in the first place and then an interest in what poor people themselves do to change and improve their living conditions (see also Narayan et al., 2000). This hints at a more problematic dimension of the current poverty appeal, one that draws attention to power and to that which perpetuates poverty in liberal democracies. I have already mentioned Harri Englund and his critique of Amartya Sen's notion of freedom as part of that critical project. Pierre Bourdieu is even more straightforward in establishing a link between mainstream economics and political power.

Neoliberal economics, the logic of which is tending today to win out throughout the world thanks to international bodies like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund and the governments to whom they, directly or indirectly, dictate their principles of 'governance', owes a certain number of its allegedly universal characteristics to the fact that it is immersed or embedded in a particular society, that is to say, rooted in a system of beliefs and values, an ethos and a moral view of the world, in short, an economic common sense, linked, as such, to the social and cognitive structures of a particular social order. (Bourdieu, 2005:10)

If the rising interest in poverty across the political spectrum was suggested as a natural response to deteriorating economic conditions in the South, Alain Noël, again, argues that an interest in poverty reduction also and much less innocently fits a neoliberal economic agenda. He recalls how economic policies in the post-war period were anchored in an ideal of equality, whereas "[n]eo-liberalism replaced this ideal by the more limited notion of solidarity and it made poverty and exclusion, rather than inequality, the central social issue" (Noël, 2006:323). Many analysts across the disciplines agree, claiming that the problem of poverty is inevitable in a liberal political order, an expression of the discrepancy between an ideal of equality and a reality of profoundly unequal societies (see, e.g., Stedman Jones, 2004; Gledhill, 2005; Kanbur and Riles, 2006). This scepticism about current strategies sees them not as genuine efforts at mobilizing against poverty but rather as practices inherently compatible with neoliberal fiscal austerity policies. Craig and Porter (2003) show how the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers place global economic integration as a first (and overshadowing) priority, the vaguely defined yet liberally appropriate notion of 'good governance' as a second (cf. Poluha and Rosendahl, 2002; Lindgren and Heimer, forthcoming), and the reduction of

poverty as a third (and overshadowed) priority. Moreover, the main aim of such a reduction is interpreted by Craig and Porter to be supporting economic growth and promoting political and economic stability – the ultimate aim of which is to benefit the non-poor.

Liberal economics – treated here as roughly synonymous with neoliberal economics – has long asserted a strong influence on the social science of poverty, and liberal economics continues to shape public policy in the realm of poverty alleviation (Sheahan, 1997; Brady, 2003; Rao and Walton, 2004). Short of an articulated liberal economic *theory* of poverty, Brady has studied liberal economic *explanations* of the phenomenon and identified four theoretical precepts: (a) harmonious progress, (b) free market capitalism, (c) worker productivity, and (d) supply and demand (see also Gordon, 1972; O'Connor, 2000; Bush, 2004). In Brady's model, "harmonious progress," the first precept, relates to the liberal confidence in the broader social implications of economic growth. Progress is here believed to lead eventually to the eradication of poverty and deprivation, even though income gaps are widening and inequality is growing in the process (Hayek, 1994[1944]:20; Friedman, 1982[1962]:169-170; see also Sachs 2005).⁴ This precept implies a specific form of politically supported economic organization, namely "free market capitalism," the second precept, which denotes a minimum of government intervention, also when poverty reduction itself is the very goal of liberal reform. Critiques of both development and the welfare state from this perspective see corruption and political dependency as inevitable outcomes of government-restricted markets. Liberal economic efforts to reduce poverty have also often fixated on raising the "productivity of workers," the third precept, and as a precondition, on enhancing productivity through improvements in the realm of education in efforts to release the poor from the prison of their background and socio-cultural milieu. "Culture" in this view is an exogenous constraint and stands in opposition to well functioning markets and to economic progress (see, e.g., Harrison and Huntington, 2000), a contemporary version of Geertz's thesis on culture and involution. Employment levels, finally, influence the balance between "supply and demand," the fourth precept of the liberal model, since unemployment threatens the capacity of households for consumption, which in turn threatens the balance in the economy between the households and the businesses.

The dramatic transformation in the 1980s of models for development was driven by the four theoretical precepts identified by Brady. Structural adjustment policies changed the national structures of production and employment; they reduced import-substitution protections against foreign

competition, reduced employment within the public sector, and increased reliance on private investment. However, in spite of economic growth in the 1990s the poverty rates did not decline and inequality increased (Chant and Craske, 2003; Gindling, 2005). Empirical study of the relationship between economic growth and growing inequality in Latin America thus seems to have proved wrong what is perhaps the most important precept in liberal explanations of poverty (Altimir, 1994; Morley, 1995; Berry, 1997).

Feminist scholarship, moreover, is currently challenging the view of the unitary household, both empirically and theoretically. It complicates the neoclassical notion of the unitary household (as income recipient unit) by treating it rather as a gendered field of interest and power. Feminists have explored the different living standards existing and developing *within* households, a concern neglected in neoclassical theory (see, e.g., Cantillon and Nolan, 2001; Altamirano et al., 2005; Krishna et al., 2006).

Approaching economics, liberal and other, as model or discourse (and not as law of nature) has challenged the other precepts, too. Paul Shaffer traces the fourth precept in Brady's model to the moral theory of David Hume and the emergence of a naturalist normative theory, in turn inspiring modern utility theory and the British empiricist tradition in philosophy (Shaffer, 2002):

The income/consumption approach to poverty ... has four distinct elements. First, the chosen aspect of well-being is preference fulfillment, which is revealed through consumer behavior (revealed preferences) culled from consumption expenditure data in household surveys. Second, actual preferences are usually accepted as given and not second-guessed (sovereign preferences). Third, levels of well-being are represented as "equivalent" consumption expenditure (money-metric utility) after adjusting for price and household composition differences. Finally, a consumption poverty line is drawn that represents a need adequacy level. The "poor" are those with incomes or consumption levels below this poverty line. Poverty, then, may be characterized as the non-fulfillment of basic preferences. This conception of poverty is an amalgam of two variants of utility theory: revealed-preference theory and money-metric utility. Revealed-preference theory is responsible for the reliance on observed preferences, whereas money-metric utility is responsible for the representation of utility as income or consumption expenditure. The approach also incorporates a feature that has been a central preoccupation of utility theory, preference sovereignty. (Shaffer, 2002:57-58)

However, the effects of liberalization programs on poverty and inequality have been different in different Latin American countries (Sheahan, 1997), due in part to the fact that liberalization seldom occurs in its "purest" form but is being remodeled over time and to different degrees in combination with social programs or, in other cases, directed or controlled by the military. Today, the challenge for many studies is to

understand and explain these diverse processes of economic change and of its social consequences. Recurrent themes in the body of literature emerging from this development concern the rise of unemployment and occupational insecurity, and the withdrawal of the state from the economic life of its citizens, from social protection and the provision of services.

Whereas the liberal approach to value puts emphasis on exchange in an unrestricted or “free” market where supply and demand determines the value of goods and of labor (see Kanbur, 2002), Marx-inspired social scientists across the disciplines would argue that market transactions are preceded by a class distribution of resources and that the determination of value is to be found in the process of production, not in the process of exchange (see Graeber, 2001; Gudeman, 2001). That difference informs the divide between liberal economics and the anti-liberal positions we will now briefly explore.

The liberal reforming of states and their economies, sanctioned by nearly all Latin American governments throughout the 1990s, has contradictory outcomes, and the new poverty of recent years has fuelled rather than settled social conflicts. A recent wave of leftist electoral victories has swept the region and placed anti-liberals in power in Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia, and most recently (end of 2006) Nicaragua. What strategies for poverty alleviation do these actors propose, and on what doctrines do they base their claims?

Venezuelan-based scholar Steve Ellner (2004) identifies three strategies in the struggle against Latin American liberalization in the 1990s and early 2000s, all of which are recognizing the changes brought about by globalization (see also Nissanke and Thorbecke, 2006; Thorbecke and Nissanke, 2006). As a consequence, they promote worker cooperatives and small businesses in the private sector in a rejection of the more statist model associated with the Cuban revolution. The first of these strategies stresses an alternative to liberalization and is based on collaboration between the left and more centrist political parties. Achieving social justice and combating inequality are key to this moderate and alliance-building approach, formulated by Mexican intellectual cum politician Jorge Castañeda (1993). It has been partially adopted in Mexico and influenced the national political scenes of Argentina and Chile during the last decade. The second strategy opposes the compromises of the first and focuses more directly on the struggle against economic liberalization. This approach is associated with Chilean Marxist Marta Harnecker and draws on the Sandinista position of 1990. It also embraces the new opportunities for leftist politicians and activists to influence politics by competing in local

elections – an opportunity provided by decentralization, in turn an effect of economic and political structural adjustment programs. Ellner attests that local political adherents of this strategy have won elections in cities from Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua to Venezuela, Brazil, and Uruguay. The third strategy is the one most reminiscent of a previous leftist project, in which anti-liberalization is combined with an explicit anti-imperialism and, in fact, also an anti-capitalism. Here, what the others would refer to in terms of globalization with opportunities that, to a certain extent, are new and positive, is seen as an imperialist pressure on the people in Latin America to comply with U.S. demands. Ellner associates this strategy with the writings of James Petras, who is known to criticize Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's soft stance on privatization.

If these anti-liberal approaches stem from the sphere of party politics and the state, the recent emergence of indigenous identity politics in Latin America offers a different perspective on both poverty and liberalism. In a recently edited collection by Hall and Patrinos (2006), poverty is analyzed from the vantage point of indigenous peoples. While studies showing that they suffer worse socio-economic conditions than the population as a whole are welcome additions to attempts at combating racial and economic discrimination, I find this book wanting in its analysis of how structural discrimination and the identity politics of Latin American history merge to form indigenous subjects. In the quantitative approach propagated by Hall and Patrinos, indigeneity is a given. Taking qualitative studies into account, such as those performed by Eversole et al. (2005) or Zoomers (2006), would show that social class and cultural identity converge and that the assertion that indigenous people are poor therefore, with exceptions noted, becomes a tautology. Poverty research would gain from a focus on the correlation between the indigenous and the poor, how it came about and why.

In domestic political projects in Latin American, we can thus see that, like liberalization, anti-liberalism too is a diverse project and that the purity of doctrines and earlier approaches is challenged. What anti-liberal approaches seem to have in common, however, is a class analysis that centers on the causes of inequality and poverty and “not just [on] its surface manifestations” (Portes and Hoffman, 2003:43; see also McNeish in this volume). To me, the benefits of employing a class perspective in poverty research are several. It implies a focus on the ways in which certain groups work to stabilize the current social order, while other groups seek to subvert it. Moreover, the recent economic crises have affected not only the populations traditionally seen as poor but also other sectors of the populations, experiencing drastically changing conditions and difficulties

in maintaining their standard of living. Boundaries between social classes are thus shifting, and poverty research needs novel tools for an understanding of tensions and conflicts generated by such shifts in order to move beyond an older paradigm of “clashes” and dual oppositions. However, the relatively large size of the informal sector in Latin America has made the conditions for a class analysis different than they are in the U.S. and in Europe,⁵ and skyrocketing unemployment rates during the era of economic reform have made that difference even more pronounced. This, in turn, has implications for political opposition and the forms of such politics. The repressive military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s targeted workers’ unions, but military violence proved less effective in destroying the unions than did the imposed structural adjustments of the following decades. Such a development calls for new approaches to the forms and contexts of political mobilization and a critical look at what it is that constitutes a social class in the current era.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The closest synonym to grapple is struggle. Grappling with a problem, as the contributors to this volume do, means something more than exploring or investigating it. Grappling is the double act of developing an understanding and taking action. This is both the promise and itself the problem of poverty research. Since our understandings are divergent and our analytical tools different to the extent that they always threaten to render conversations (not to mention acts, recommendations, policy) unintelligible, answering the question of what we are up against should perhaps precede the one of how we should go about doing research and how our findings should be put to practical use. The counterargument to such hesitance, that time is running out in the process, is indeed worth taking seriously.

Relativism and qualitative research methods are less influential on policy than quantitative methodology based on (sometimes different but always ideologically constructed) foundations. In this paper I have discussed dominant approaches to poverty and models for poverty alleviation and I have argued that the traditional disciplines within the social sciences are less influential in upholding differences than notions across the disciplines concerning relativism on the one hand and foundationalism or universalism on the other. I admit to having reproduced such a divide since I have also tried to reveal the ideological (or cultural) roots of the latter perspective. In more concrete terms, I have tried to relativize the foundation of liberal economics. Yet I subscribe to the claim of many scholars referred to in this paper that institutions like the World

Bank often fail in addressing people's experience of poverty and that their multidimensional take on the concept therefore works to mystify an inherently foundational approach. Interestingly, for a discipline like anthropology, which is, like economics, the host of a wide range of methodological and theoretical positions, it is notable that the more we aim for universal categories to conceptualize our data and our findings the easier it is to get the attention of power – as if the very framework for practical intervention conditions our models on a certain foundation. Resisting such conditionality is sometimes, and sadly, mistaken for a reluctance to employ a qualitative expertise to benefit the poor.

Notes

- ¹ Here I rely on economist Ravi Kanbur's (2002) outlining of the four cornerstones of the same edifice of mainstream and development economics as (a) the proposition of the benefit of both parties to an economic transaction (see Friedman 1982 [1962]) (b) the assumption of an equal power relation between transacting parties in a market (c) the reluctance to acknowledge consequences for those who are not party to the transaction – so-called knock-on or spillover effects, otherwise a core in the “general equilibrium” approach of mainstream economics – when advising in policy matters, and (d) the position on distribution that “preventing mutually beneficial transactions is an inefficient way of improving distribution” (Kanbur, 2002:480). Whereas the ethics of the “dominance” of mainstream economics is a matter of intense controversy at the current moment, few seem to question that it exists, or to imply that the critical projects in sociology (e.g., Bourdieu, 2005), anthropology (e.g., Graeber, 2001), history (e.g., Hodgson, 2001) and economics itself (e.g., Cullenberg et al., 2001) are fighting a ghost. For recent works, both interdisciplinary and in economics, that critically engage the neoclassical influence on policy and development economics, see Harriss (2002), White (2002), Rao and Walton (2004), Gudeman (2005), Helgesson (2005), Hornborg (2005), Pålsson Syll (2005).
- ² It should also be stressed that the idea that poverty is more than a mere lack of income has influenced a general change in development cooperation and policy. Among international donor agencies there is a broad consensus around the “multidimensional” poverty concept (see, e.g., Peck and Tobisson, 2001; Gordon and Spicker, 1999). Here, social exclusion has become a popular concept due to its supposedly greater sensitivity to the cultural context of people's lives (Chant and Craske, 2003). The UN Human Development Index and Human Poverty Index indeed attempt to capture the multidimensional aspects of poverty, but, and somewhat problematically, through quantitative methods (see Jackson and Palmer-Jones, 1999; Altamirano et al., 2004).
- ³ This argument is the intellectual and ideological engine of Saldaña-Portillo's book. For works with similar claims and political implications, see Stoll (1993, 1998), Grenier (1999), and Collier and Hoeffler (1998, 2004).
- ⁴ For an opposed view, see Sheahan (1997), Londoño and Székely (2000), Dagdeviren et al. (2002), Varoufakis (2002-2003), Edward (2006).
- ⁵ I thank Alejandro Gonzalez for having brought this dilemma to my attention.

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