POVERTY PARADOXES:
THE ECONOMY OF ENGENDERED NEEDS

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We are accustomed to think about poverty as a fact, and perhaps the most brutal fact of the world’s condition today. Its objectivity is bolstered by an avalanche of statistics and simplified imagery of the needy and starving. Through the scientific project of counting and classifying poor people worldwide, western audiences have come to feel that they too know ‘the poor’ wherever they are. The ‘non-poor’ imagine what the lives of ‘the poor’ might be like by extrapolating from a combination of these census data and the disturbing images projected through mass media. Recently the face of this poor ‘other’ has emerged in female forms. This is one of the main themes of this paper: the ways in which the poverty discourse, always a gendered one, has come increasingly to spin itself around a feminine subject. We need to understand how this image of the "poor woman" has been thinly conceived from a highly selective cull of income statistics woven into familiar moralising narratives about marital status and mothering. Globally, the whole economist’s vocabulary of poverty has recently been repackaged with feminised and domestic metaphors - we are now dealing with measuring poverty in terms of the cost of ‘food-baskets’ - as if the poor were all consumers in the same global supermarket.

Although popular representations of ‘facts of poverty’ that draws on everybody’s everyday experiences and serve a didactic purpose, the knowledge they produce is inadequate and misleading. I am not suggesting here that economic models are necessarily wrong, or that income, nutritional intake or consumer profiles are not important indices of poverty, or that women are not particular prone to poverty. My point is that this economist’s poverty discourse which dominates the popular imagination has become a seriously reductive one. It appears to give a simple and revealing categorisation of areas, populations and their needs. However, by making income and nutrition the only factors standing for complex social realities, it can just as easily
come to conceal and misrepresent important social and cultural processes defining and creating poverty.

This is because such "thin descriptions", in Glifford Geertz' terminology, model social phenomena in minimal and measurable terms they give a comforting appearance of objectivity and seem to travel with ease across cultural and historical boundaries. Through their endless reproduction in diverse discourses, thin descriptions often assume a taken-for-grantedness that escapes critical scrutiny. They seem context-free and common-sensical and, for their audiences, apparently freed from the contamination of authorship and agency. However, 'thin' images and 'thin' descriptions have a tendency to turn into very 'thick', politicised and controversial ones the moment they move out of global speech-space and become localised and situated in social reality. The feminisation-of-poverty scenario is a case in point.

Take for example the much-publicised image of the solo-mother surrounded by children but without sufficient subsistence and male support. This emotive image lends a standardised face and force to the slogan "women are the poorest of the poor" which, following the UN decade of the woman, has so successfully written itself into the documents discussed in the international donor community. What is intriguing with this feminised figure of poverty is that she is Janus-faced - an image split into two sides, one made for the 'west' and one for the 'rest'. The imagery clearly destined for export and distant countries is emotionally charged so to make demands on our pity and pockets. The best examples of these 'worthy women' are the wretched mothers on the television screen with swollen-bellied children in refugee camps or shanty towns, destitute victims of ecological and economic disasters. The contrastive imagery is made for home-consumption and carries a pejorative charge. It is at the centre of social conflicts over definition of needs and needs satisfaction. It features an 'unworthy woman', the 'welfare mother' typically in the form of a young, unmarried woman whose morals and sexuality are uncontrolled - a promiscuous scrounger. The difference inscribed in this double-image is not only a spatial but also a temporal one - the poor woman in the "Third World" is still embraced by the War on Poverty banner, while her poor sister in the city of the "First World" has been removed from that banner and is now is under attack by the War on Welfare campaign. Throughout this paper, we shall explore the multiplicity of ties which has worked over time to bind together in a dense web these two 'thin' images of women.

The power of simplified representations, whether in the form of statistics or social icons such as the poor woman in the famine camp, is that they make it harder for us to remember that poverty is also a complex discourse, a set of
ideas that does not simply reveal the world of want to us, but interprets it and
gives rise to practices which actively form it in its own image. This is because
hardship and hunger are no more objects or things than are any other aspects
of human relations. The concept of poverty draws a whole constellation of
social, symbolic and embodied states around itself, and it comes through his-
tory trailing changing meanings and issues. Despite these transformations in
the topology of poverty, the discourse always contains a deeply gendered
core. One of my principal points is precisely that beneath its veneer of self-
evident objectivity there lies a conflicting mass of ancient feminine stereo-
types which filter definitions and interpretations. Poverty's register of mean-
ing is characterised by such traditionally feminine attributes as lack,
suffering, emotional excess, dependency, domesticity and passivity. This
gendered meaning inscribed in poverty aligns with a long tradition in west-
ern thought in which the trope 'woman' has been constructed as a site signi-
fying difference, displacement, negativity internal exclusion, marginality
and other-ness.

Given this metaphoric bridge constructed between the register of poverty
and the register of femininity, it is not surprising that the poverty discourse
has become increasingly a stigmatising one, laden with moral judgements on
those unfortunate to be defined by it. And this one of my other principal
points: Since medieval times one of the main effects has been to prescribe a
certain approved form of social life and to institute punitive reforming meas-
ures for behaviours which fall outside it. In this grand project of social
reform, now globalised through development interventions, it is typically
women who have been targeted as the keys to poverty and its abolition. Brett
Williams sums up this dominant position succinctly:

For almost a century, poverty researchers have been intrigued by the 'matriarchal,
'matrifocal', 'mother-only', 'female-centred,' 'female-headed', 'single-parent' 'fami-
lies' they uncover among the poor. Where do they come from? Are they pathological?
Do they cause poverty, or does poverty cause them? (1992:164).

My point is precisely that poverty is always a complex condition at the centre
of a dense web of political controversy, material forces and interpretative
procedures. As a result, thin descriptions always conceal "thick" ones which surreptitiously make themselves felt behind the smooth veneer of econ-
omists and nutritionists definitions. These thick descriptions become discourses which, as Foucault reminded us are "practices that systematically
form the object of which they speak (1972:49)". Focusing these discourses are
what Raymond Williams (1976) defined as "keywords" which are the sites at
which the significance of social experience are encountered, evaluated and established in culturally specific ways. "Poverty" is exactly one such keyword at work in the world, engendering social effects through the specific ways in which perceptions of poverty juxtapose the politics of emotions and the politics of economics.

Precisely because the poverty concept draws such powerful images around itself, it can serve as an idiom for communicating a host of ideas about such diverse domains as, for instance, global politics, gender relations and "normality" or "deviancy". By paying attention to the different discourses in which poverty participates, I shall explore these multiple, shifting and contested meanings in poverty talk. The paper's claim is that poverty, like all images and concepts, is an unstable construction, changing with context, culture and the social conflicts situated in history.

In this paper I want to make a start on this complex analysis, in however limited a way, by sketching a variety of portraits of poverty in different places and in different times. These will establish the relativity of the poverty discourse and the ways in which its measurements and images have changed the social landscape of poverty, but conserved a gendered subtext. The tools I will use to analyse these poverty fragments are, appropriately enough, those of a pragmatic discourse analysis.

In order to trace the poverty discourse through different times and spatial frames, and to see the changing registers of meanings it contains, we need to in some measure distinguish the "world" from the act of knowing the "world". The distinctions we make when we interpret the world are those possible within the pool of the social knowledge available at any one time. New discoveries typically force through a transition of the topology of the known and establish new modes of experience. In this process -social constructs like gender, class, race - which are all very powerful at work in the poverty registers - are constantly being produced anew within different and competing discourses. As a result, their meanings and implications are more fluid and shifting than what we usually have to accommodate in social analysis that limits itself to a contemporary context and the conventional horizon of expectations.

ENGENDERING MEASUREMENT

In an European aid document published this year, we learn: "Women comprise more than half of the absolute poor. UNDP estimates that women's per-
centage of the absolute poor constitutes 70%. Female-headed households are among the poorest and most vulnerable in most countries (Danida 1995, 8). “

This powerful statement about the correlation between women and poverty gives the impression of having been culled directly from census data collected world-wide. The seventy per cent figure serves as a very disturbing sign, and it is this sort of thin datum that has wrongfully tended to suggest that scarcity is a defining and fixed feature of womanhood; endlessly reproduced over time and space, essentially and universally the same. Whatever the case, given the appearance of numeric accuracy and authoritative voice of an international agency inscribed in this claim, it might come as a surprise to some that this feminisation-of-poverty phenomenon only started to show up in national statistics in the west two decades ago - and then only in some countries while not in others. This variation itself clearly bear witness to the fact that poverty is not an essentialistic trait tied to a specific identity, whether "gender, race or culture" - but is a politically produced effect of the social. Whatever the case, an important issue concerns whether the link between poverty and women in western societies really is such a recent one or whether it is rather a question about relative visibility and changing values within the census regimes. For a moment we can hold these possibilities in suspension.

The more precise ways in which socio-economic processes work to widen the gender-gap to the disadvantage of women in the statistics of some countries while closing it in others have been well researched by sociologists. In a comparative survey of a sample of industrialised nations, for example, one team of researchers found that United States tops the list of the countries with the largest gender-poverty gaps, closely followed the Commonwealth countries Australia, Canada and Britain. These are also the countries with the highest overall poverty rates. In contrast, there were no discernible gender-poverty gaps in Italy and the Netherlands, while in Sweden, women’s poverty rates were in fact slightly lower than men’s rates. Contrary to conventional wisdom, they found that gender differences in both shared and single parenthood had moderate effects on the gender-poverty ratio, while gender difference in employment status had large effects on the gender-poverty ratios in all the countries studied. The relative success of Sweden both in eradicating poverty and removing its gender dimension was clearly the effect of having equalised the employment pattern for men and women. In the Netherlands fewer women had paid work but generous welfare provisions prevent any citizen from being caught in a poverty trap. Although Italy had high overall poverty rates, the effect of Catholicism in preserving mar-
riages meant that, according to the authors, men and women shared social status whether in wealth or poverty. The study concluded that differences in culture, religion and government policies and the different pathways through which these affect gender-specific demographic composition, determine the gap between women's and men's poverty rates (see Casper, McLanahan & Garfinkel, 1994).

Let us take a closer look on the poverty scenario in the United States and the United Kingdom since these are sites where the national gender gap is the most prominent in the western world. During a long history of colonialism and imperialism, these countries have been the power centres for the creation of multiple institutional, administrative, and discursive networks that now surrounds poverty on a global scale. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the conceptualisation of poverty within these dominant countries is inscribed in the discourses offered globally. I shall also argue that the definitions, census categories, policies deployed through development efforts not only tend to represent reality through familiar lenses but crucially, through specific interventions, even reproduce aspects of the western poverty-scenario world-wide.

In America, poverty was a major topic in the 1960s and 1970s following the launch of the famous War on Poverty programme. In addition, newly devised official measures of poverty as a matter of low incomes estimated that twenty per cent of the population was living in poverty, the alleviation of which depended on decreasing wealth differences in the population. During the 1980s, in contrast, 'poverty' disappeared from serious public debate and became a non-issue. The earlier well-established link between poverty and excessive wealth, which was held to be produced by a biased redistribution pattern, was swiftly eclipsed. It was replaced by a new economic ethos: the message from conservative politicians being that poverty would soon be "solved" by new policies designed to increase income inequality. This, according to the spin-doctors, would spur the initiative of the prosperous to create more jobs which in turn would benefit the poor through the trickle down effect. From the perspective of the 1990s, we know that social inequalities were not only resilient but resurgence during the period when poverty talk was muted in public discourse. Indeed, the severe effects of impoverishment on everyday living were felt far beyond the more regularly marginalised, like minority groups and the elderly (see Hardy & Hazelrigg, 1993).

What we can draw out of this contemporary case is first that the proposition of poverty in public circulation does not necessarily scan well with the standards of evidence produced by the national censuses themselves. Indeed
it is highly unlikely that such situated political propositions are ever perfect reflections of the circumstances of poverty in any population. Yet this example also demonstrates another important point: that the poverty discourses actively shape reality through policy outcomes - in this case the creation of more poverty. The problem with poverty, as with any other social phenomenon, is that not only does the conceptualisation of it change with context and history, but the conditions producing poverty are also changing. In turn, these new pathways to poverty produces a different demographic mix of poor people.

Although the overall rate of poverty in the United States changed very little during the 1970-1990 period, the composition of impoverished households was reshuffled significantly to the detriment of women. So although the major determinants of poverty have not changed the composition of poverty has been altered a great deal. In order to trace more adequately such reconfigurations of poverty, we need to consult studies that can complement the aggregate picture with analysis of individual level data that allow greater specification of the condition of gendered poverty.

In a recent published study, Hardy and Hazelrigg (1993) found that families with children headed by single mothers had accounted for an increasing proportion of families in poverty, as had households composed of an elderly person living alone. In this case too the compositional shift has been to the detriment of women. Examining comparative evidence across the European countries, Daly reports the same categories of women to be highly at risk: Single mothers, elderly women, and low-paid workers (1992:4). In Britain, elderly women in particular had experienced recent spells of severe poverty (Walker 1987:180), but even in Scandinavia, where poverty rates are relatively very low, there is a public awareness that single, old women are at risk.

This specific demographic mix of young unmarried women and single elderly women which has emerged from the poverty census data since the late 1970s, is the empirical base for the formulation of the feminisation-of-poverty thesis. Some scholars have claimed that it is a recent development reflecting changes in family structures, particularly an increase in the number of unmarried mothers. If correct, this observation would certainly explain why the issue was put on the agenda at such a late stage; until the 1970s there would simply be nothing to discover. But the apparent novelty of this female susceptibility to poverty is only a surface phenomenon. To get a better grasp on the processes that produce poverty, and not only its manifestations in pre-selective, census categories - we need more dynamic tools of analysis than statistics.
If we want to explore the conditions that work over time to push people into poverty, and the differential effects these have on men and women respectively, we would not advance very far by processing the census data according to the two values - 'male' or 'female' - of the variable 'sex'. This is because 'gender' is not only an attribute of persons, but contains a whole series of assumptions already inscribed in the social, economic, and political processes that produce poverty. The gender subtext forms a powerful yet invisible foundation for what Dorothy Smith termed "the relations of ruling" (1987:19). This includes a gender division of labour within the state in which women play a small part in the production of state policy and gendered assumptions about women's and men's unpaid and paid work. These result in gender-differentiated social policies and gendered policy outcomes. However, the gendered subtext of the welfare state is multifaceted and often contains contradictory processes (see Fraser, 1989; Nelson, 1990; Naples, 1991). The state depends upon women's unpaid work as consumers of social welfare services and as mediators between the state and other targets for social welfare such as children, the elderly, or the disabled. Women form the majority of the social workers, teachers, health care providers, and middle-managers in the social service bureaucracies that implement state policies. Decisions by these female managers, among others, to decrease spending for such services as child care and health care have profound effects on most other women's possibilities for employment and the accumulation of entitlements.

I draw attention to the differentiation within the category of 'Woman' deliberately, because to say that gender relations structure the poverty scenario does not mean that we are dealing with a 'war waged by men on women' - to deploy a worn out metaphor from the western poverty vocabulary. It is far too often assumed that when the term 'gender' is used it indicates women, as if they were the only gendered category - the something which is 'other' than the general. One consequence of this is that when the phrase gender relation is used, it is often assumed that this refers to relations exclusively between men and women, and usually between husband and wife. In contrast to this narrow definition, the social construction of gender difference - and the structuring role of gender relations in social, economic and political processes - means that all relationships are 'gendered' relationships including, of course, the ones between women. 'Gender' is a contextual and complex concept. It associates a diverse range of qualities and practices, both enabling and disabling, to its definitions.

However, since we here are concerned with those individuals marginalised within western regimes of wealth and values, the analytical force of
'gender' in the context of poverty is as a complex category of actions, attitudes, and dispositions which is overwhelmingly discriminatory. The overall gendering of poverty occurs through gender discrimination applied differentially over a host of processes and social fields. On the surface these may not be obviously linked to 'sex' or 'gender' at all. This means that many aspects of gendering (like legislation) cannot be simply measured and counted, but must still be accounted for as powerful movers in the social drama of poverty.

As much as it is important to bear in mind the complex and contradictory effects of the state on the gendering of poverty, it is also important to note that such gender subtexts are specific to each society and each historical period and cannot simply be generalised to include the whole world. State legislation, ranging from marriage and property laws to those pertaining to business corporations, labour unions and the management of natural resources - are all grounded in culturally specific complexes of ideas and practices involving gender. On the basis of these, the state defines what sorts of legal subjects women and men should be as well as regulating the relations between them -for example in terms of conjugal contracts (see Moore, 1987). And through administrative procedures and family policy, states participate in defining gender ideologies - conceptions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' which in turn filter into the politics of needs, rights and interests (Fraser, 1989) - the final outcome of which is part of the poverty scenario. Let us employ the case of elderly women as an example.

Since it is so widely inscribed, the effect of 'gender' is cumulative throughout a life career. Thus, it is not surprising that old women living alone form the social category most prone to poverty. Many of these women have spent the bulk of their adult lives as financial dependants in marital relationships because the dominant model of 'Woman' at their time was that of wife and mother. Alternatively, they were working 'spinsters' trying to support themselves on low wages. The problem faced by both kinds of elderly women stem from their living in an economic culture that largely viewed women's employment as irrelevant to the production of a family's financial security. These elderly women have been adversely affected by 'gender' as a dimension of discriminatory practices in the pricing mechanisms which discount or disregard the value of female labour power. Throughout their lives, therefore, they have had less access to the labour-market and the assets that flow from it. In old age, these women must rely on income replacement programs developed to deal with them as dependants. Once their husbands precede them in death, these women shifts from being supported by husbands' pen-
sions to be supported by welfare in the forms of widow’s pensions. Because they are placed on the disadvantaged end of gender-differentiated social policies, women who live alone in old age are much more likely than solitary men to find that a lifetime’s effort has reaped a harvest of poverty.

The time-lag in impoverishment experienced by elderly women is the result of the family wage regime associated with one male "breadwinner" - an obviously gendered one. The change from the principles of a family wage to individual wage - produces a slightly different pattern. As the proportion of adult women entering the paid-labour market has increased, household income has increasingly become a sum of incomes from two major earners. Given the slight growth in average wage, the additional income has been more a matter of keeping up than getting ahead. Thus for most households a loss of a major income recipient - either by divorce, abandonment, or death of a spouse, substantially increases the risk of a household moving into poverty. Although this heightened risk occurs regardless of gender of the lost earner, the extent of increase is clearly gendered, because the mean wage is much lower for women - and men tend to die younger than women. The authors of the American study sum up the spreading effect of gender in the lives of marginalised and impoverished women with these succinct words: "poverty is gendered across a variety of circumstances because the gendering occurs at a level of process that unfolds well before the instantiation of a gender-biased distribution of income (Hardy & Hazelrigg 1993: 269)".

This citation deals with the necessity to model the effect of poverty over a lifetime - that is the impoverishment of women in biographical terms, but what about the historical frame of the feminisation-of-poverty thesis? The recent appearance of this in the census data and the attention to this problem in public and scholarly debate, do not exclude the possibility that this gendering has been a sustained feature of poverty in western societies for a long time. As we shall discuss in more detail later, poverty was disproportionately linked to women also in earlier times - particularly among those divorced, widowed or abandoned. But in the past female poverty was noted and measured only to the extent that it was judged to form a serious threat to the welfare of future cohorts of workers - that is, in situations of mothers who, in trying to prevent poverty with employment outside the home, were stigmatised as "neglectful mothers". Here, institutional processes regulating expectations of family composition, income entitlements and property rights in the household not only shaped public debate but also the census categories themselves. The assumptions about "proper families": - that these were composed of married couples with children; that "income" constituted only what
was earned in cash and not in kind; and notions that household assets are pooled and spent to the benefit of all by the benign male 'head'- all served as a smoke-screen which obscured the conflicts within domestic scenarios and grouped together very different ones. Crucially, it meant that women were invisible in assessments of poverty and often could not appear in official discourses, images and measurements as independent cases of impoverishment. By the same token, it eclipsed the intimate linkages between the developing poverty rates among women, the creation of wage labour and the male provider which occurred in the wake of industrialisation, capitalisation and commodification during the last centuries.

The problem with the 'feminisation of poverty' phrase is that it comes trailing a tangle of stereotypes both about timing - its apparent novelty - but also its tendency to promote an essentialistic linking of poverty directly to the female gender, rather than conceiving it as the cumulative social effects of discriminatory practices that women experience because of their gender. The "povertization of women" - as coined by Abramovitz (1991:380) - is a better representation of such processes and reinscribes the gendering of poverty within a new series of discourses that are more sensitised to the historical and cultural dimensions of social facts.

FROM THE WORK-HOUSE TO HOME

The census categories which tend to screen out so many cases of poor women are made with reference to the classical recipe for "domesticity" - the dominant discourse that organises modern gender relations - made in the 'west' and transported to the 'rest'. This discourse has woven itself from particular patriarchal structures of values and reality claims characterised by a gendered split between the private and public domains. Indeed, the three terms - poverty, dependence, domesticity - seem to glide so naturally into each other that it is hard for us to perceive how historically specific and peculiar this linkage is. It has had enormous consequences not only for European and American societies, but also, very importantly, for the formation of the global discourse of development. A more detailed analysis of this historical aspect of poverty from medieval to modern times is the topic of another paper in preparation (see Broch-Due, 1996). Here I limit myself to highlight some fragments that are significant to the subject of this paper.

The core of this grand domestication project in the Anglo-American world, first accomplished among the prosperous and then extended to embrace the poor, date back to the mercantilist period and the foundation of
political economy. It represents a significant shift from medieval time when poverty was conceptualised and promoted as a semi-sacred state and the Christian need for the redemption of sins through extensive alms-giving prevented mass poverty. Although the medieval and later mercantilist definitions of the poor were not discriminatory, the dramatic difference which emerged with mercantilism was that the prescription for poverty had changed from prayer to productive work. And in this change we see the core of a larger project of re-shaping of the social identity of the poor. In the new mercantilist vision poverty was seen as a precondition for prosperity; without the poor there would be no wealthy. The rationality for the political concern with the poor was not the alleviation of poverty, but the regulation, management and proper ordering of the nation’s poor. Thus one strategy envisioned was to attract the poor to the community or city by means of provision for their relief and work." - and on this premise new institutions were built: the workhouse for the industrious poor, the correction house for the idle poor and hospitals for the sick, elderly and disabled. The notion that the poor potentially could produce huge profits for the nation, soon focused attention on the lifestyle and morality of the poor. There are men, wrote Defoe:

Who with good husbandry honestly entrust their earnings to their wives management. There are others, however, who drink their earnings away at the alehouse, leaving their wives and children starving and in rags to become unwitting charges upon the parish (1704:27)...

The grand reforming project of the domestic life of the poor accelerated in the advance in the wake of Malthus theories that completely turned the mercantilist conception on its head; a large population would lead to poverty, not prosperity. After Malthus’ theories this linkage was reversed. Indeed in Malthus biological model the poor laws were seen as obstacles to the laws of nature: Public provisions for the poor increased population without increasing the food for its support, and therefore created the poor they maintained. They depressed the condition of the industrious by diverting provisions to the lazy and unproductive, thus raising their cost. Poor relief should be abolished because the only way for the poor to better their life was through showing moral restraints in spending as well as sexuality.

After the implementation of a New Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 able-bodied men were refused outdoor relief, so too were their wives and children whether or not they still, or had ever, lived with them. Moreover the full economic consequences of illegitimacy were placed upon the mother. No longer
would an unmarried, pregnant woman be put in prison, but her rights to sue
the father would be effectively withdrawn, and no money recovered from
him by the community would be paid to her. Whereas widows and their chil-
dren were still given public provisions, all other categories of women with
children were to be offered relief only in the disciplining conditions of the
workhouse.

The Malthusian position also signalled a transformation that was occurring
in the linkages between patriarchy, the household, and the state - particu-
larly in the gender relations constitutive of these links. Throughout the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries poverty was surrounded by the creation
of multiple institutional and administrative networks. These social structures
the result of the proliferation of detailed knowledge about the poor. Mayhew
was the first professional scholar on the scene. In his detailed study of London
Labour and the London Poor published in 1861 he summed up the lifestyle of
the "street-folk" - which he called the urban poor - under the heading "habits
and amusement" in the following way:

I find it impossible to separate these two headings; for the habits of the street-folk
are not domestic. His day busily is past in the markets or the streets, and as his leisure
is devoted to the beer-shop, the dancing room, or the theatre, we must look for his
habits at those places. Home has few attractions to a man whose life is a street-life.
Even those who are influenced by family ties and affections, prefer to "home" - indeed
that word is rarely mentioned among them - the conversation, warmth, and merri-
ment of the beer-shop, where they can take their ease among "mates" (Mayhew
1861:11)

Indeed because of this peculiar life style of the poor with its lack of homelife
and great attraction to the public places of amusement, the problem soon
became reformulated as a concern to prevent the industrious poor degrading
into idleness and distress. The reformulation of the poor laws lifted many of
the earlier, paternalistic restrictions: police and confinement of the poor. This
was necessary in order to constitute, or set free, the individuality of the prop-
ertyless, male labourer - so that he could be constructed as a citizen with
rights and duties towards society. This was an answer to both the require-
ments of the economy and the supposed degeneration of the character of the
poor. In other words, these strategies of making the poor responsible for their
condition were crucially about the construction of the independent labourer
as wage-labourer and male bread-winner, making women and children their
dependants ideally to be secluded in the domestic sphere. The problem of the
poor woman was to turn her into a 'proper' mother and wife - to break the
typical life career of these working street women, described by Mayhew in the following way:

When quite young a girl is placed out to nurse with some neighbour, the mother - if a fond one - visiting the child at certain periods of the day, for the purpose of feeding it, or sometimes, knowing the round she has to make, having the infant brought to her at certain places to be suckled. As soon as it is old enough to go alone, the court its play-ground, the gutter its school room, and under the care of an elder sister the little one passes the day, among children whose mothers like her own are too busy out in the streets helping to get food, to be able to mind the family at home (1861:41)

The effects of the new poor law can be seen as a case-study in the formation of the working-class and the commodification of labour within the growing capitalist market. At the same time, it is a case-study in the domestication of women and the formation of a gendered split between the private and public domains. Crucially, it was also about shaping segments of the poor masses into the new middle-class. As part and parcel of the need for population planning to improve public health, housing, and productivity which was linked to the construction of the male breadwinner and wage-worker, attention shifted to reproduction and the family.

To gain more knowledge, detailed case studies of persons; their different habits and histories were collected. The discourse concerned with defining the difference between the respectable poor and the pauper, the worthy and unworthy in domestic terms, became feminised in an opposition between good and bad housekeeping. An 1842 report contrasted the "honest, frugal housewife" who was "ever discharging some household duty in a spirit of placid contentment" with the one "totally ignorant of all habits of domestic economy, and whose house appear filthy, disorderly and uncomfortable" who drove her husband to the alehouse to seek that comfort he was missing by his own fireside. This latter wife represented a kind of dysfunctional family who "grasps at every benefit which the charitable institutions of the place have provided" - there is a uncanny resonance here of the present-day welfare mother.

This "cult of domesticity" in Barbara Welter’s words (1966) contributed to the birth of a feminine sub-culture and was inscribed in nineteenth century feminism. Paradoxically, as Nancy Folbre points out:

The moral elevation of the home was accompanied by the economic devaluation of the work performed there. The growth of wage labour, which separated individuals from traditional family-based productive units, almost inevitably wrought new concepts of productive labour. Goods that could be bought and sold, quantities that
could be expressed in dollar terms, became the new arbiters of value. Indeed the growing enthusiasm for social statistics, reflected in new census-taking efforts, deflected attention from activities that could not easily be reduced to a money metric (1991:465)

While women caring for their families were still considered productive workers in 1800, they were moved into the census category of "dependants" and shared this numeric site with infants, young children, the sick and the elderly by the 1900. Political economists and statisticians played an influential role in the deployment of a new vocabulary -soon exported throughout the western world - that completed the distinction between woman’s private sphere of family and morality and men’s public world of economy and the market. Folbre concludes her study of the many shifts in the constitution of the ‘housewife’ by posing the following question:

What does these examples tell us about the coevolution of political economy and its more pragmatic language of measurement?...It suggests that historians may have underestimated the importance of new cultural conceptions of work by failing to recognise the ways that gender bias influenced ‘objective’ measurement of women’s productive work (1991:482).

The reason why women so recently have started to appear in the census data as separate units of analysis like ‘single mothers’, ‘elderly women’ - is mainly the result of revised measurement and images. Although these have improved the visibility of the intersection between gender and poverty, many of the dynamics discussed so far cannot be picked up by the rather static approach of statistical methods. In fact, the very form of census data as ordered sets of numbers which give census categories such an appearance of being objective and value free, makes it more difficult to remember that their meaning grows out of socially constructed concepts and reality claims. Joan Scott explains it as follows: "Statistical reports exemplify the process by which visions of reality, models of social structure, are elaborated and revised (1988:115)."

FROM MEASUREMENTS TO IMAGERY

The recent visibility of poor women in the census procedures and presentations is a double-edged development. Although it has helped to put on the agenda the fact that many women are vulnerable to poverty because of lack of economic viability and employment, the popularisation of census material for lay audiences has threatened the ‘poor woman’ to over-exposure - offer-
ing her for public consumption wrapped in stigmatising imagery. While the old ladies have largely been left to suffer on the margins of the screen, the unmarried mothers have been brought into sharp media focus. Given that women can still appear in the census as independent cases only if they are 'single' - a civil status that tend to cluster its cases at the beginning and towards the end of the adult life career, those who are unlucky enough to be trapped by its definitional web, receive a disproportional amount of attention and assumptions about their state of affairs. Thus not only does this biased media attention mute the fact that the proportion of independent female cases in the overall poverty census is rather small, but also that the rate of increase in poor people living in families with married parents exceeds the growth of poor people living in mother-only families (Greenstein, 1989).

A disturbing feature of the poverty discourse is exactly how empty it is of factual evidence. This is despite the vast number of fine-grained historical, sociological and anthropological works that could have diversified and enriched both public debate and policy formulation. In making their reports and films about the poor, journalists seem rather to rely on statistics and short day trips into the territory of the poor to "feel the pulse". The poor remain well counted but little known in the public imagination. Indeed mainstream poverty research is still very thin - economists continue to dominate larger discussions on their own terms. As their models have become globalised and successfully linked to the aid bureaucracies world-wide, the frame of the debate narrows and economists indulge in increasingly obscure speculation as they attempt to imagine poor people's domestic lives using the census data and the poverty line.

Economists seems to believe that one can infer the behaviour of all poor people by extrapolating from census data and imagining what their lives might be like. Such research has a fair amount of influence and political appeal. Because the poverty lines serves as a magical device over which one raises or lowers people, technical speculations can move people precisely in and out of income poverty. The complexity of actual household patterns and community structures in which the census cases are enmeshed and which serve as survival networks; the processes that produce and sustain poverty; the linkages between poverty and prosperity; the different regimes of wealth and values that exit world-wide - these are all obscured as the poor "enter" and "exit" poverty. Local, varying complexities are obscured by turning the poor into first a national - and then international homogenised mass. These imaginings do not necessarily prevent useful policies, but they may as well
promote ineffective or even damaging ones. In the absence of the complexity of real life, the move from measurement of poverty to images of the poor has some troubling implications, not only in western societies but world-wide.

The globalization of these discourses has the effect of projecting the historical conditions and understandings of European poverty onto the "Third World" systematically forming, as Foucault said, through policies and actions the object of which they speak. This is particularly so in terms of the way that the expansion of a market economy transforms the structures of family and put strain on its constituent relations. The phrase "women are the poorest of the poor", intended to describe an objective state of affairs in the countries coined the "Third world", is in fact deeply implicated in the process which has produced that state of affairs. In Europe, the establishment of capitalist structures; while highly successful in creating a market for land and labour that promoted production, the surplus of firms, and revenues for the state; exerted heavy economic pressures on families. As we have seen, a historically specific development of capitalism worked to create a crisis in the sphere of social reproduction, leading to a high incidence of poverty amongst mothers and children.

This in turn led to the need for the welfare state and the figure of the "welfare mother", surrounded by a safety net of state benefits. To varying degrees this is the figure so stigmatised in contemporary Europe and North America. However many are unaware that it is precisely these same economic structures, now globalised, which are leading to the creation of women in 'under-developed' countries as "the poorest of the poor" - reproducing similar crisis in the gender and generational relations that constitute families, as it did in the heartland of capitalist development (see Rogers, 1980; Broch-Due, 1987). The stark difference is that in these cases there is no welfare state erected to cushion the effects of unequal distribution of resources. More important to my theme, most aid projects intended to remedy this situation actually reproduce it because they are framed by a European and capitalist construct of women as domestic and dependant (re)producers (Broch-Due, 1982, 1995).

Again, the terms we use to describe social life are also active forces shaping it and discourses on poverty are particularly so. This is because they are drawn upon by all parties in the political struggle to define social reality, to interpret different people's needs and to decide what is going to satisfy the needy. In this process, the voices and wishes of those defined as 'the poor' are often ignored and subsumed under the dominant view of the developers. Within the development discourse itself there are, of course, traces of discursive struggles over the 'proper identity, 'proper place' and 'proper policies'
pertaining to women and other poor people. The problem is, however, that particular words and expressions often become focal in such struggles, functioning as keywords, sites at which the meaning of social experience is negotiated and contested. These keywords, according to Raymond William’s (1976), typically carry unspoken assumptions and connotations that can powerfully influence the discourse they permeate. Thus however much a feminist agenda may have contributed to the globalization of the women-in-poverty stance, that agenda is typically compromised by the series of related registers of gendered meaning conjured up in its unruly wake, many of them not so positive to promoting greater equality and respect for women.

One reason why ‘single mothers’ are picked out in such distorted manner in public debate in western societies is precisely because this category serves as a sign for rupture and displacement within the moral economy that surrounds the family. As Abramovitz notes:

The English language reflects deep ambivalence toward families headed by one parent, despite their unceasing growth. Indeed, the phrase ‘broken home’ often is used when referring to single-parent families, but households with two parents are referred to as ‘intact’...that the two parent household is stable and male-headed (while) families maintained by women are by definition deviant and disorganised (1991:381).

Through this entry into the family vocabulary, poverty weaves itself into an emotional discourse, which increasingly has become a discourse on emotions. In the recent decades this situated deployment of ‘emotion talk’ that surrounds the misery of the poor has moved from the imagery of ‘broken homes’, a social problem, to ‘broken hearts’, a psychological problem, to arrive at the edge of ‘break-downs’ and individual pathology. At this point we experience a shift from a emotional discourse to a discourse where poverty becomes more and more medicalised. Along with these changes the single mother has gone on from being blamed first for her independence (working outside the home), then for her dependence (surviving on welfare payment) to the present situation where she is diagnosed as suffering from a mental defect - the so-called ‘dependency syndrome’ (see Fraser & Gordon, 1992). The ‘welfare mother’ has become a metonymy for the undeserving poor because she stands both for herself - neither married nor working - and for the absent, unemployed man who should be her husband.

The keyword which weaves this domestic version of poor women together with the one in distant countries, is precisely dependency. This resonates within a long-standing European tradition both with the ‘problem of
women' and the 'problem of the poor' - probably unwittingly caught by radical feminists in the slogan "women are the poorest of the poor". The premise is that women and children, like the poor, are powerless and dependant. Yet dependency is a double-edged condition. On one hand, it can either lend itself to the more positively charged construction of being 'innocent', absolute candidates for assistance. This is clearly the interpretation meant to be invoked by the slogan in global circulation. On the other hand, dependency can also be linked to delinquency and bound into the discourse about the deviant person. This double meaning of definitions seem consistently to characterise dominance relationships. Discourses about dependency are, like the social identities of women and the poor, multiple and muddled. They are situated at the cross-road of many registers of meanings; moral, emotional, economic, political, jural etc. Each of these registers undergo major shifts over time and each of them is subject to much controversy at any moment in time.

If we shift attention from the production of development documents to their reception - the cultural and social differences within the western world itself have a crucial effect on the way they are read and how they are understood by domestic audiences. In, Scandinavia, for example, with more homogenous populations, low poverty rates and more equal gender relations, the public have a more sympathetic reading than Anglo-American audiences of the slogan "the women-as-the-poorest-of the poor". Yet the positive sentiments may precisely be the result of distance, both culturally and geographically, to the actual poverty sites. Similarly positive acceptance of this poverty discourse reflects the more positive attitude to the welfare state and the possibility of social development contained in the social-democratic vision which has been so deeply compromised elsewhere in Europe and America.

The difference in reception may also be a temporal one - exemplifying the shift from the 'War on Poverty' to the 'War on Welfare'. The 'War on poverty' discourse is the product of a benevolent state paradigm, endorsing the state's obligation to care for those, who in the eyes of governments, cannot care for themselves or are otherwise deserving of assistance. This paradigm expand or contracts, and has an in-built cultural bias as to whom is justifiably considered vulnerable in society. Children, the infirm and the elderly have traditionally been included in this category. Until the mid-twentieth century, this was also the place reserved for western women. And as we have seen above, the trade-off for being in placed in this category is a loss of individual rights. As Weinberg (1992) reminds us, legislation that limits women's autonomy is
always a manifestation of a benevolent state paradigm and, as such, has the effect of characterising, and ultimately marginalizing, women as vulnerable or dependent.

In America, the gendered imagery has been replenished with racial stereotypes - turning the single mother into proxy for the so-called "underclass" - recently re-discovered and re-described as the concentrated, isolated, pathological, damaged, and damaging black poor. In the words of Brett Williams:

We know the pregnant adolescent, the absent father, the dependant welfare mother (as though welfare was a drug), and the violent drug-dealing poor. As a group or a community the poor come to us via telling metaphors: the underclass is a knot (reminiscent of Moynihan's tangle of pathology), a cancer (growing menacingly, a swamp (both stagnant and festering), a breeding ground (teeming, maggotlike, with dangerous reproductive possibilities) and, finally, "feeding on itself" like an autocannibal (1992:166).

The slums of the big cities conjures up images of battleground - in that sense it conjures up very conventional poverty metaphors. Indeed, in an influential speech of 1969, following the launch of the 'War on Poverty' strategy under the Johnson presidency, Person expanded the targets as follows: "The war against poverty and deprivation begins at home but it must not end there. Both wars must be won. Both problems must be solved (Person, 1969)." Reading this in the contemporary situation gives one almost an uncanny feeling of how shifting and unstable these sites of 'home' and 'abroad' have been, scaled up to the global at its maximum - scaled down to the individual at its minimum - shifting between community and nations, rural and urban, ghetto and savannah, endlessly reconfigured to engulf new targets, fulfil new goals and so on. What is particularly noteworthy with the citation above in which the author plays with metaphors in public circulation, is exactly the way that the 'War on Poverty' - turned into a 'War on Welfare' and then into more bodily images of warfare. This military imagery of poverty does not only bind gender into itself but also the whole medical vocabulary, which according to many anthropologists, has become the dominant discourse of our time - permeating almost all other fields of knowledge and modes of experiences (Kleineman & Good, 1986).

EMBODying POvERTY

Emily Martin argues in a recent article that the more rigid thought structure of gender, for example, is held in place and elaborated through a natural science discourse, particularly in its popular versions. One of her examples is
taken from the imagery of immunology, in which two types of cells are described in ways which conjure up a series of gender associations: The "killer cells" are aggressive, active, penetrating, and tend to die on the battlefield like brave men. The phagocytes engulf alien matter and sometimes die from being penetrated; they are scavengers, preoccupied with cleaning up, and they are housekeepers - an entirely female imagery (Martin, 1990): Martin's examples are true metaphors, trading between established semantic domains. Cultural roles conventionally ascribed to males and females - those of warrior and cleaner, as well as sexual imagery - that of the penetrating and the engulfing - are merged in a didactic attempt to describe something natural and "true"; with the claim to truth that only natural sciences seem able to legitimately claim (see Broch-Due & Rudie, 1993). The result is a sedimentation and conventionalisation of sex-gender-military imagery within an expanding medical discourse - which in very disturbing ways has come to encapsulate and rewrite the whole problem of poverty.

In many contexts world-wide the condition of poverty cannot go under its own name, because to actually say it immediately brings into play an irreducibly political discourse about the injustice of enormously unequal resource distribution - a political discourse which those in power will often go to any length to avoid. This avoidance generates a search for euphemisms which redescribe poverty and insert it into some very different and much less contentious discourse. For example, Scheper Hughes work in a Brazilian community of severely impoverished people demonstrates how the economic conditions of poverty become eclipsed within an emotional discourse. She discusses how the syndrome 'nervios' is part of a discursive practice that transform the symptoms of hunger into the less politically charged terms of emotional anxiety and "nerves" and of individual pathology, whose therapy is tranquillisers rather than a redistribution of food, wealth and power. In fact, 'nervous' is a common complaint among poor and marginalized people in many parts of the world, but especially in the Mediterranean and in Latin America.

The transition from a popular discourse on hunger to one of sickness is subtle but essential in the perception of the body and its needs. A hungry body needs food. A sick and "nervous" body needs medications. A hungry body exists as a potent critique of the society in which it exists. A sick body implicates no one (1993:174).

Through their somatic talk and their starving bodies, the people in this Brazilian community had come to embody this new twist to the poverty discourse. Indeed they have turned in on their own bodies, making their own
bodies the battlefield. They were blaming themselves for their fate, endlessly complaining about dizziness and lack of sleep, turning up at the health-centre with their screaming and suffering babies, not to get food but medication. Shepher Hughes writes:

An obvious subtext ran through these women's complaints: the free-floating anxiety of women, saddled with too many, too sick, and too needy-hungry children and with too little support in rearing them in the final analyziz, the medicalization of hunger is symptomatic of a nervous system, individual and social (1993:169).

In the cultural elaboration of 'nervios' life emerges as dire struggle between strong and weak bodies, powerful and powerless, young and old, male and female, but most profoundly between poor and prosperous. Those placed on the 'weak' body side of this equation - the poor, the young and the female - where susceptible to sickness, suffering, and death. What is particularly interesting about this case is the ways in which these people had changed their own discourse on poverty from a more Marxist inspired one to accommodate the more global medicalized one: Madness, a manifestation of the 'nervios' syndrome, and only two decades ago understood locally as the cumulative angry point of collective hunger, is remade into a personal and psychological problem, one that requires pills and attention of doctors. "In this way hunger is isolated and denied, and an individualised discourse on sickness comes to replace a more radical and socialised discourse on hunger (Hughes 1992:169)".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The particular sinister twist to many of these poverty images are the outcome of what Teresa de Lauretis has coined the "violence of rhetoric" (1987:175). Despite the fact that they are saturated with stigmatising content, most images of the poor widely in circulation are very 'thin' ones in that very specific meaning that they are conceived from a selective cull of census data which is then elaborated through narratives, rather than ethnographies of real people (Williams, 1992). Lack of proper grounding means a greater space for slippages of meaning between formerly unconnected semantic and social fields - for example the coupling between the vocabularies of poverty-military-medicine. The metaphorical intertwining of these separate fields have been worked out and made concrete through the use of metonyms that give sense in terms of narrative, setting, plot, or mood. Crucial to this process have been the metonyms of domesticity-dependency-femininity because these
provide a seemingly intimate and everyday frame for the understanding of distant realities.

Important political conflicts are being played out in such discursive shifts. This is by no means only a modern phenomenon. The condition of poverty has, through a very long history, been shunted from discourse to discourse in exactly this way and always in comparable attempts to defuse its explosive potential. It has been redescribed in terms which relate it to "natural" conditions, "spiritual" conditions, "cultural" conditions, "pathological" conditions and "mental" conditions, and so on. The impetus for each discursive shift comes from historically specific social struggles over the interpretation of the concept of poverty in its previous discursive site. As a result of such struggles it is moved on to a new site where it inscribes itself in a new vocabulary and become the focus of new interpretative struggles. Each of these discursive shifts leaves a trace, a sort of semantic sediment, in the poverty concept with the result that today it has a vast array of potential associations linked to it which can be selectively foregrounded or backgrounded according to context.

This extreme polysemy of the word is made evident in the dictionary definitions of poverty. Beyond its simple economic sense of a "lack of material resources" it refers to a variety of social, corporeal, emotional, moral and religious states. To be poor is to be ill, unfortunate, colourless, infertile, of a lower class, to have renounced comfort as a religious vow, to be unproductive, dependant, humble, lacking in any way, pitiable, abject and a variety of other things, each playing on a slightly different register of meaning, each conjuring a slightly different set of connotations, each characteristic of a specific social scenario.

Behind all these shifts it tries to grasp something that seems to be at the core of all poverty discourses, a constant feature behind the endlessly transforming face of poverty; that is that the condition of poverty brings a whole emotional and moral universe into play. These apparently unavoidable moral overtones of poverty are typically mobilised in situations where solidarity and sharing is being encouraged, challenged or negotiated. At the core of these situations are primary questions of power and sociability. Gender too, both as relation and symbolic resource, is heavily implicated in this configuration of poverty, power and the social person. In all places and times, very fundamental ethical questions are formulated in and through the discourse of poverty.
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Poverty and Prosperity in Africa: Local and Global Perspectives is a series of occasional papers that seek to scrutinise the different perceptions, policies and practices carried by the interrelated concepts of poverty and prosperity. The series seeks to subject social and cultural reality to critical analysis and to present work that is creative, challenging and sometimes controversial. Above all it aims to be a pace-setter for the development of fresh analytical ways of understanding and dealing with the problems of poverty.

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- Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced with wide margins, on one side of the paper only. Authors are advised to keep one copy of their manuscript for reference.

- Illustrations, tables and footnotes should be submitted with the manuscript on separate sheets.

- The title should be brief, typed on a separate sheet and the author’s name should be typed on the line below the title; the affiliation and address should follow on the next line. In the case of co-authors, respective addresses should be clearly indicated. Correspondence and proofs for correction will be sent to the first-named author, unless otherwise indicated.

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