THE 'POOR' AND THE 'PRIMITIVE'
DISCURSIVE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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In this paper I want to outline a genealogy of the concept of poverty—of the way it has developed over time and of the perceptions, policies and practices it carries. I am particularly interested in how poverty became constituted as an object of social knowledge in European traditions—both scientifically, in terms of theory and strategically, in terms of interventions; and finally, how these processes and perceptions have been projected and reproduced in African realities. What I would like to suggest is that poverty—far from being a straightforward condition of deprivation and destitution—forms part of a contentious and complex discourse, encapsulating a vast range of historical struggles, constantly changing cultural values and social forms of life. Precisely because powerful images cluster around the concept of poverty, I want to show how poverty can serve as an idiom for communicating a myriad of ideas about such varied domains as, for instance, global politics, gender relations, "normality" and "deviancy". My claim is simply that poverty, like all images and concepts, is an unstable construction, changing with context, culture and social conflicts situated in history. As Karl Polanyi said: "The Figure of the pauper, (now) almost forgotten, dominated a discussion the imprint of which was as powerful as that of the most spectacular events in history." (1957: 83-84)

In order to historicize the figure of the pauper we must begin our account in the European middle ages. What I would like to draw attention to is that while medieval discourses on poverty are very distant from modern ones, they hold within themselves, of course, the seeds of what was to come later. In medieval society the lives of the poor and prosperous were much more closely linked than was the case after the rise of the modern state and the capitalist economy which would interpose the market between them. Medieval poverty was not solely or even primarily an economic condition but one which, in many arenas, carried with it a sense of spirituality and sacredness.
People in the Middle Ages (particularly in the wake of St. Francis) were very conscious of the fact that early Christianity was created as a religion of the poor. Poverty was praised as a self-chosen ideal, modelled after the image of Christ and his apostles. By highlighting the religious dimensions of poverty and downplaying its socio-economic aspects, the poor and prosperous became linked in a highly paradoxical fashion.

While the Church offered the central organising principle in the medieval world, the gap between its ideals and practices produced severe tensions and had some notable contradictory social effects. While almost everyone professed a belief in the renunciation of everyday, mundane existence, few renounced it in practice and no part of the establishment less so than the men of the Church. While the Christian attitude towards worldly property and profit-making was one of active antagonism, the middle ages were no less concerned with money and possessions than any other age. Similarly, while the dominant political ideal of the ruling class was to champion the oppressed, the violence and lawlessness of these noblemen was a major cause of disorder (Geremek, 1991).

The only means available to redeem the many breaches of the moral code and to secure a firm foothold in the after-life was alms-giving. The church, not the government, sponsored the care of the needy. The ill and the orphaned, the crippled and the lepers, the homeless and the handicapped were all supported by the belief that alms-giving bought merit and for the donor, a place in Heaven. Based on this principle, Christian charity was self-serving but efficient. Nobles gave alms daily at the castle gate to all who came, in coin and in kind. Donations from all sources flowed into the hospitals, merchants bought themselves peace of mind for the non-Christian business of making money by allocating a certain percentage of their profits to charity. A Christian duty of special merit was the donation of dowries to enable poor girls to marry, as in the case of a nobleman of the fourteenth century who left 100 coins to "those whom I deflowered, if they can be found" (quoted in Tuckman, 1978). Corporate bodies accepted the obligation to help the poor as a religious duty. The statutes of craft guilds always set aside a penny for charity. The Christian need for the redemption of sins through alms-giving prevented mass poverty through a system of large-scale redistribution of resources.

In other words, the prosperous needed the poor as much as the poor needed the prosperous—they were deeply united, less in terms of some economic reciprocity than a spiritual one. This was expressed in the words of a medieval saying: "God could have created all humans wealthy, but he
wished there be poor people in this world so that the prosperous should be given an opportunity to redeem their sins". What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that in medieval society the poor and prosperous were perceived as mutually dependant—not only in the religious register of meaning, but also legally and politically. The state and the household mirrored one another. There was a complete continuity in the complementary and hierarchical relations between monarch and subjects, governors and governed, master and servant, husband and wife, father and child, and patron and pauper. Alms were handed out at public sites in a rotational manner and crowds of all kinds would regularly travel to the various sites to receive them and celebrate (Geremek, 1987; Tuckman, 1978).

In practice of course, these preindustrial arrangements of mutual dependency and the distribution of alms did not always provide satisfactorily for the needy. In the fourteenth century, new, stronger states began to limit the movement of the poor and to develop and codify distinctions between those worthy and unworthy of assistance. By the time the English Poor law of 1601 enshrined this distinction in law, it was already shameful to ask for public assistance. But cultural values at the time never disapproved of dependency nor did they value individual independence. Rather the aim of the poor law was to return the mobile, uprooted and excessively 'independent' poor to their local communities and, hence, to enforce their traditional dependencies (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Dean, 1991).

This concern with settling the poor was motivated by a reconstruction of the relationship between the poor and prosperous made possible by the fact that to profit from other people's work was no longer a vice but a virtue (see Townsend, 1970). Thus the new linkage was the mercantilist one between the numbers of hands at work in a nation and the generation of wealth. Indeed poverty was seen as a precondition for prosperity; without the poor there would be no wealthy—and the more poor to set to work the better! For example, in a text from 1662, William Petty argued that "Fewness of people is real poverty; A Nation wherein are eight millions of people is more than twice as rich as the same scope of Land where are but Four" (Petty 1963: 34). In other words we have here a particular conception of the positive relation between a large population and the wealth of nation.

The Poor were not treated as those afflicted by poverty but as a category which bore upon the well-being of the nation and was essential for wealth creation. Poverty was not a contingent and relational condition but an intrinsic one. The poor were not just people who for a variety of reasons had nothing, but an essential and foundational ("natural") component of society—its
lower orders. The rationality for the political concern with the poor was not the alleviation of poverty, but the regulation, management and proper ordering of, and provision of employment for, 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. Population was favourably linked to wealth on the condition that it was made up, as Petty stressed, of those able to provide their own subsistence by means of proper work and not by the "burdensome trades of begging and stealing".

Thus what was at stake was to increase the number of the industrious poor and decrease the number of the idle poor. In order to do so it was necessary to define who constituted the poor, their relation to the notion of ‘work’, and the proper treatment of each category by the community. Thus the duties of the local church communities under the poor laws in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were defined as "work for those that will labour, punishment for those that will not work, and bread for those that cannot work. (Mayhew, 1861)" The mechanisms for providing work and punishment was the construction of institutions, the workhouse for the industrious poor, the correction house for the idle poor, and hospitals for the sick, elderly and disabled. Indeed many poor were shipped off to overseas plantations in the new colonies (Dean, 1991).

Given that the basic problem of setting the poor to work was one of transforming idleness into industriousness, the forms of life among the poor came into sharp focus. The ‘poor’ and the ‘commoners’ continued to be interchangeable categories during early capitalism and they were still conceived of as excessively mobile—whether they eked out an existence as Jacks of all trades in the countryside or in the towns. This mobility of the poor influenced the organisation of their social relations and their everyday lives. A report on the urban poor, typically described as the street-folk, summed up their lifestyle 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 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 merriment of the beer-shop, where they can take their ease among 'mates'. (Mayhew 1861: 11)

Indeed because of this peculiar lifestyle of the poor with its lack of homelife and great attraction of the public places of amusement, the problem soon
became reformulated so that the concern was to prevent the industrious poor from degrading into idleness and distress. "There are men"—wrote Defoe in 1704:

-- 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 (Defoe 1704: 27).

From this perspective, the problem of the poor no longer consisted only of how to set the beggar, or wanderer, or even the idle labourer, to the discipline of work and to useful employment for the benefit of the nation. It was the problem of the labouring poor—of those already in work and their susceptibility to the luxury of sloth, a weakness inherent in what Defoe terms their "temper and genius." It was also the problem of the irresponsible use of patriarchal authority by the Poor man. Just as the workhouse fulfils the educative functioned of teaching the idle a new industrious mode of life, so the alehouse functioned to transform the Poor, but in the precisely the opposite direction. In many ways the figure of the labourer at the alehouse, where he risked the moral dangers of drinking, gambling, and other entertainment, was seen as far more dangerous in the eighteenth century than the vagabond or the beggar (Tribe, 1981).

For this labourer was in the process of being constructed as the head of a household, no matter how humble, over which he had patriarchal control, and which would follow him even in distress. What was at stake was to identify the processes and institutions at the source of moral corruption and politically mobilise the nations' most valuable resource, its industrious Poor, reversing the consequent dependence of their wives on public relief, and the education of their offspring in the ways of sluggishness and worse.

As a medicine for these social ills of the poor, there were sustained attempts at policing by using the law to prevent the recreation of the poor. This was done by withholding fairground licences, throwing travelling entertainers in prisons, withdrawing access to commons on grounds of public security and so on. Calculations of the waste of holidays can be found from the end of the seventeenth century. Henry Fielding, for instance, distinguished between the Rich, whose problem is to kill time, and the Poor, who are born to labour six days under the command of God." (quoted in Dean, 1991). Alongside this anti-recreational campaign were measures designed to promote work-discipline, including the division and supervision of labour in workshops and factories, the introduction of clocks, fines, and timetables,
and the general moral preaching directed at the poor. The concern with the lifestyle and morality of the poor—which still meant most people—was a continuous element in the perception and policies formed around the Poor. We see here how the poor were becoming an object of knowledge, and were being constituted as a field of national policy and practice (Foucault, 1979).

The conceptual link drawn between the size of population and prosperity, however, is one which was rapidly and radically turned around in the wake of Malthus' theories. The new problem was the link between population and poverty. In 1796, William Pitt advised the House of Commons to favour large poor families as part of relief policy so as to distinguish between "those who are able to provide for themselves by their labour, and those who after having enriched their country with a number of children, have a claim upon its assistance for support" (Ricardo, 1951).

After the publication of Malthus's "Essay on the Principle of Population" in 1798 the dominant opinion was that to encourage the poor to procreate without regard for the availability of the means of subsistence was not only backward and naive but dangerous. Based on his notion that growth in population is much faster than the growth in food resources, the healthy, and consequently the reproducing body, was reconceptualized as the treacherous container growing the disordered future society full of starving bodies and social ills. Malthus expressed it as follows: "Provisions no longer flow in for the support of the mother with a large family. The children are sickly from insufficient food. The rosy flush of health gives place to the pallid cheek and hollow eye of misery."

By rhetorically melting one generation into another in this way, Malthus broke with the mercantilist tradition exemplified by Pitt's views of using the healthy body to signify the healthy society (see Gallagher & Laqueur, 1987). The boundaries between bodies were erased and Pitt's healthy body of the poor became something less agreeable; a body about to divide into two feeble bodies that in turn threatened to become four starving bodies. Indeed in this biological model the poor laws themselves were seen as obstacles to the laws of nature and indeed the very source of misery and mortality. Public provisions increased population without increasing the food for its support, and therefore not only maintained but also created the poor. They depressed the condition of the industrious by diverting provisions to the lazy and unproductive, thus raising their cost. Relief to the poor should be abolished because the only way for the poor to better their life was through showing moral restraints in spending as well as in terms of sexuality.
What is important to stress is that Malthus' principle of population embodied a rationality for radically extending the project of specifying a form of life for the poor. Malthus created additional virtues to the list already demanded of the poor. They were not only to be docile, industrious, and sober, as in the previous century, but also to be prudent in domestic economy, avoiding dependency on relief at all cost, practice proper restraints from unconsidered marriage and careless breeding, join a friendly society, and make regular deposits of savings in a savings bank (see Townsend, 1970).

Matters of marriage and procreation had long been on the agenda and a point of overlap between the interests of the church and the state (Poynter, 1969). The problem was that the poor were not interested in marrying and showed little respect for private property—and the challenge therefore has to force them to reform on these two fronts. However the Malthusian position underlined the consequences of the marriage contract and procreation for the poor, and their differences for poor men and women. It also signalled the transformation that was occurring in the linkages between patriarchy, the household, and the state—and particularly in the gender relations constitutive of these links. According to common law, wives were constructed as legal minors: a woman could neither own property nor make contracts in her own right. All her property belonged to her husband.

However, Malthus' concern for marriage was for those who were propertyless—the common poor. In this context, marriage made the poor man a breadwinner, one who was economically responsible for his family (MacFarlane, 1986). Moreover, it rendered the poor woman a dependant in the fullest sense of the term, so that her future survival and that of her children depended on this man. Her fate was tied to his fortune. And, in the absence of a male 'breadwinner' who was contracted by marriage to support her and the child, the mother and her illegitimate child were the subject of social disgrace and at the complete mercy of the society on which they were a burden. In other words, the Malthusian prescription for the poor was to allow those laws of nature to operate which bind the poor man to the burden of wage-labour through the mechanisms of hunger, and bind the poor woman to the burden of conjugal dependence through child births.

We shall know examine the cultural rationality that emerged and which was capable of not only formulating a way of living for the poor as a targeted group but also of producing the institutional strategies which would promote it. The first measure focused on reconstructing the family in ways which were to reinforce patriarchal relations through a model of domesticity. 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 fell on the mother*. No longer would a 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 children 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 (Checklands, 1974).

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 division between the private and public domains. 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 new 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 propertyless, male labourer—so that he could be constructed as a citizen with rights and duties towards society. This was an answer to both the requirements of the economy and the demoralisation of the character of the poor. In other words, these strategies of making the poor responsible for their condition were centrally about the construction of the independent labourer as wage-labourer and male breadwinner, making women and children their dependants and, ideally, confining them to the domestic sphere (Folbre, 1991).

To foster responsibility and new forms of family life—that is to keep the poor masses of wage earners on the right moral track, two measures were needed. First, the living environment of the respectable poor needed to be improved, particularly the sanitary conditions of houses, streets and work-
places. Second, this positive series of signs and spaces had to be contrasted with negative signs and spaces—of conditions and characters that signified dirt, dependency and deviancy—and which served as a reminder of what would befall those who strayed from the path to material salvation. The figure of the pauper was reconstructed and pauperism came to signify the whole constellation of vice, crime, disease, deviancy and moral degradation. The workhouse was refined to cater to a number of categories of paupers, each of which required special treatment and discipline in order to reform.

Thus, as a response to the problems of population management and the prevention of pauperism, nineteenth century Europe virtually became an enormous huge 'workshop' in which power and knowledge were fused with the help of new types of micro-technologies. This new power/knowledge regime—in Foucault's terms—helped the state to organise its citizens, including the poor, so they could be seen and known, and thus controlled. These institutional procedures combined new sites (prisons, factories, hospitals and schools) with new disciplinary practices (surveillance, observations and classification) and with new kinds of scientific knowledge and specialisation (criminology, economy, statistics, medicine, demography, teaching, psychology and anthropology).

Together with the need for population planning to improve public health, housing, and productivity—all of which was integrally 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 and their different habits and histories were collected. The discourse concerned with defining the difference between the respectable poor and the pauper, the domestically worthy and unworthy, became feminized in the opposition between good and bad housekeeping. An 1842 report by Chadwick, 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 that "grasps at every benefit which the charitable institutions of the place have provided"—and we can see that these traits of pauperism will soon move them behind the walls of the workhouse.

The creation of these multiple institutional and administrative networks which came to surround poverty was the result of the proliferation of detailed knowledge about the poor. And it is in this project of producing
knowledge about the poor that we find some surprising parallels to Africa. In the next sections of this paper, I want to sensitize the reader to the ways in which the concept of poverty, historically and culturally specific to Europe, influenced, and was influenced by, colonial encounters; particularly to the ways in which ideas of the "poor" and the "primitive" were juxtaposed in social reports and policies and continue, in various transmutations, to effect contemporary discourses of development and their implementation.

The domination of poverty imagery in European discourses about Africa dates to the early colonial encounters. Indeed, perceptions of poverty were central to the model through which the whole of Africa was conceived and conceptualised. They were also central to the models of change and "progress" which the colonists sought to impose. However the source of these images and concepts of poverty was much closer to home. In the eyes of the cultivated colonist, the slums of Victorian London and the savannah of Africa were both unknown spaces, their populations to be explored and controlled. Thus the two figures that featured so centrally in much nineteenth century social theory—the pauper and the primitive—became inextricably linked in rather unexpected ways.

Take, for instance, the following words written by a missionary to Africa in the 1820’s: "We are all born savages, whether we are brought into the world in the populous city or in the lonely desert. It is the discipline of education, and the circumstances under which we are placed, which create the difference between the rude barbarian and the polished citizen—the listless savage and the man of commercial enterprise... in Africa, we see, as in a mirror, the features of our own forefathers" (Philip, 1828)

The imperial fringe, as Achebe (1978) points out, was an imaginative frontier on which Europe reconstructed itself—while at the same time incorporating Africa into the political economy of the metropolis. Indeed the projects aimed at the poor in Europe provided the model and ideological basis on which the whole of Africa was conceived. It was, paradoxically, the slums of Liverpool and London which were the most significant sites for the ways images of Africa were shaped, both because the homebred slums were the focus for the new style of social reportage and because they were a site for the shaping of social reform. The dominant mode of description and explanation was evolutionism—the ideas of Malthus and Darwin combined in social theory.

Mayhew was the first professional scholar on the scene. In the preface to his detailed study of London Labour and the London Poor published in 1861 he promised to "supply information concerning a large body of persons, of
whom the public (has) less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth". Indeed, he invokes the information already at hand about these distant tribes as comparative tools in order to comprehend the exotic habits of the homebred poor. Thus on the first page of his book, Mayhew quoted the ethnographic explorations of Andrew Smith in South Africa as a model for his own account. In every society, he said, wanderers are distinct from settlers, vagabonds from citizens, nomads from civilised people, in every society, elements of each "race" were to be found. It is curious, Mayhew continued "that no one has yet applied the above facts to the explanation of certain anomalies in the present state of society among ourselves". According to this Africa-derived Scheme, London labourers had a "savage and wandering mode of life"—much like the South African "bushmen" living besides the settled ("hottentot") peoples. The resemblance once discovered, we learn, "Becomes of great service in enabling us to use the moral characteristics of the nomad races of other countries, as a means to comprehending the more readily those of our own".

Mayhew offered his own speculations for the reasons behind the inferiority of the nomadic race in England and beyond:

Whether it be that in the mere act of wandering, there is a greater determination of blood to the surface of the body, and consequently a less quantify sent to the brain, the muscles being nourished at the expense of the mind, I leave physiologists to say. But certainly be the physical cause what it may, there is a greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature of man, and that they are all more or less distinguished for their high cheek-bones and protruding jaws—for their use of slang language— for their general improvidence—their repugnance to continuous labour—their disregard for female honour— their love of cruelty— their pugnacity—and their utter want of religion.

Hebdige (1988:20) notes that the scourge of polite society were youthful "nomads" who were often compared to African Savages. In Mayhew’s classic description of costermongers—poor street traders—it was said that they wore beaver-skin hats and moleskin collars just as African pastoralists wore greasy animal hides. Both alike shunned civilised clothing of "cotton and woollen manufacture". Furthermore, many "eyewitness" reports repeated the theme of the primitive poor, claiming that the lack of a settled homelife among these destitute youths made them seem like the "wandering tribes" of "unknown continents". Their plight justified "the growing moral impetus towards the education, reform and civilisation of the working-class masses". Echoes of colonial evangelism, and later aid agents, could not be more audi-
able. These latter examples have been extracted from James Greenwood's popular travel books entitled: *The wilds of London* (1874).

The connections between accounts of Africa and those of the poor in England varied in their explicitness and degree of elaboration. Significantly, writers like Mayhew (1861) and Greenwood (1874) portrayed themselves as "social explorers"; the former in fact introduced himself as "traveller in the undiscovered country of the poor". In so doing, they invoked an obvious parallel with the geographical missions abroad, the exploratory project in which Europeans visited remote parts of the world, "discovered" them and brought them within the compass of intellectual and material control. In other instances it was more the style of the account—travellers tales where the middle-class taste for travels and discovery could be drawn upon. The parallels between the images used to describe the dangerous poor at home and primitives abroad wove together the styles of travel, colonial and missionary literature; they blended the moral tale with the adventure story, preaching, in all instances, with the desire for the exotic. Another notable example is Thomas Archer's *The Pauper, The Thief, and the Convict* (1865). Its subtitle "Sketches of Some of Their Homes, Haunts, and Habits" brings together hints of the naturalist's notebook, the traveller's tale, and the erotic gaze.

Discourses about the poor and the primitive became virtually identical on several fronts. Yet as above authors make clear, the conceptual traffic moved in both directions. In the same way that the British poor were used to imagine the African savage, so too were Europeans' notions of Africa mobilised to remake the British underclass. Numerous European discourses held up the "dark continent" as a negative image through which to devalue its own peasants and proletarians. In Mayhew's words:

> The notions of morality among these people agree strangely, as I have said, with those of many savage tribes—indeed it would be curious if it were otherwise, they are part of the Nomads of England, neither knowing nor caring for the enjoyments of home.

The circle was closed. The wildernesses of London and Africa differed little. They were equally "other", equally undomesticated. And so the sacred task of the colonising mission was to reconstruct the home life of both—all in the name of civilisation. Middle-class reformers and missionaries alike drew on an ideology of domesticity in their effort to reconstruct the homelife of the poor and primitive. Africa was mobilised as a *negative image of the ideal of European middle-class values*—their "filth and promiscuity" became a measure against which to evaluate conditions and classes back home and to frame
appropriate social and evangelical policy. In writings of this style, the image of Africans was of people on intimate terms with animal nature. It remained only to show how the English poor were similarly disrespectful. A mid-nineteenth century report declared: "It is no uncommon thing, in a room twelve feet square or less, to find three or four families stayed together... filling the same space night and day—men, women, and children, in the promiscuous intercourse of cattle... In all offices of nature they are gregarious and public,... every instinct of personal or sexual decency is stifled,... every nakedness of life is uncovered there" (quoted in Jephson, 1907)

The practical conclusions were clear. Both social policy and the civilising mission had urgently to transform the domestic life of the poor, at home and abroad. This involved 1) creating the conditions and attitudes of cleanliness, so that a world in which all matter, beings and bodies were in their proper place, 2) reforming sexuality by encouraging legal, Christian marriages and the creation of nuclear families, 3) spreading the ideal of private property, beginning with the family home, and 4) reconstructing gender relations and the social division of labour (see Comaroffs, 1992).

All this is the classical recipe for "domesticity"—the dominant discourse that organizes modern gender relations—created in the west and transported to the rest. This discourse has woven itself from particular patriarchal structures of values and reality claims characterized by a gendered split between the private and public domains. It also organized European discourses about African poverty by binding together Africans and the underclasses of Europe. This has continued to the present. Until very recently the dominant narratives of colonialism were written as global economic epics—its active agents were Europeans, its object or "targets" the natives of other lands. The so-called civilising mission was a double process, at once seeking to cultivate the primitive and to engage in the restructuring of society at home, most explicitly in domesticating the homebred poor.

In the final part of this paper I want to further develop these themes by looking at the ways in which the discourses on poverty, domesticity and dependency have become intertwined in recent history. The three terms—poverty, dependence, domesticity—appear to evoke each other so naturally that it is hard to perceive how historically specific and peculiar the linkage between them actually are. It has had enormous consequences not only for European society, but also, very importantly, for the formation of the global discourse of development.

As we have seen, feudal society was organized around ties of dependence, dependence on a master was modelled on the dependence on God. Women's
dependency, like children’s, meant being on a lower rung in a lengthy social ladder; their husbands and fathers were above them but below others. For the agrarian majority, moreover, there was no implication of a gendered structure of economic dependency within the family, because women’s and children’s labour was recognized as essential to the family’s subsistence as men’s labour. In general, women’s dependency in preindustrial society was less gender-specific than it later became. The lives of almost everybody—children, servants, tenants, and the elderly were—overlaid with multiple layers of dependency.

Indeed the contrasting term independence applied only to aggregate entities, like a church or a nation and not to individuals. In the eighteenth century an individual could be said to have been independent, meaning an ownership of property, a fortune that made it possible to live without labouring. To be dependent, in contrast, was to gain one’s livelihood by working for someone else. This of course was the normal and proper condition for most people, for peasants as well as serfs and slaves, for most men as well as most women. The commoner and the pauper were fused into a single category. Provisions were generously given to everyone who turned up on the occasion.

What in preindustrial society had been a normal and unstigmatized condition became deviant and stigmatised in the nineteenth century. More precisely, certain dependencies became shameful while others were deemed natural and proper. As nineteenth century political culture intensified gender difference, new, specifically gendered senses of dependency appeared—states considered proper for women but degrading for men. Likewise, emergent racial constructions made some forms of dependency appropriate for the "dark race" but intolerable for "whites". Dependency became differentiated and could be socio-legal—or political or economic. Moreover, dependency now need not refer to a social relation; it could also designate an individual character trait (see Fraser & Gordon, 1994).

In the age of democratic revolutions, the newly developing concept of citizenship with its civil and electoral rights rested on the notion of independence. Dependence became antithetical to citizenship. This development meant a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of wage labour to clear it of the association with dependency. As wage labour became increasingly normative, it was precisely those excluded from wage labour who appeared to personify dependency.
In the new industrial semantics, there emerged three principal icons of dependency, all effectively negatives of the dominant image of the worker. Each signified different aspects of non-independence (see Fraser, 1989).

The first icon of industrial dependency was the 'pauper' who lived on poor relief. The image of the pauper was made in the new moral psychological register in the poverty discourse. Paupers were not simply poor, but degraded, their character corrupted and their will sapped through reliance on charity.

The second icon of industrial dependency was embodied in the figures of the 'colonial native 'and the 'slave'—the so-called 'primitive'. These of course were very much internal to the colonial economy, their labour often fundamental to its development and industry. Whereas the pauper represented the deviance of economic dependency, natives and slaves personified political subjection. Their images as savage, childlike and submissive became salient at the same time as dependency in a territorial sense (i.e. the inevitable "dependency" of colonies) became intertwined with a new racist discourse developed to justify colonialism and slavery. A drift occurred from the older sense of dependency as a relation of subjection imposed by an imperial power on an indigenous population, to a newer sense of dependency as an inherent property or character trait of the people so subjected. In earlier usage, locals were dependent because they had been conquered, while in nineteenth century imperialist culture they were conquered because they were dependant. In this new conception, it was the alleged dependent nature to natives and slaves that justified their colonisation and enslavement.

Like the pauper, the so-called "primitive" and the slave were excluded from the category wage labour and thus became negatives of the image of the worker. They shared that characteristic, if little else, with the third major icon of dependency in the industrial era: the newly invented figure of the 'housewife.' As we have seen, the independence of the working man presupposed the ideal of the family wage, a wage sufficient to maintain a household and to support a non-employed wife and children. Thus for wage labour to create male independence, female dependence was required.

Women were thus transformed from partners to parasites, despite the fact that both employed and non-employed wives continued to perform work once considered crucial to the family economy. Thus the image of the male breadwinner only obscured the fact that few husbands were actually able to support a family single-handedly, so most households still continued to depend on the income, work and care of women and children. Nevertheless, the family wage norm become extremely powerful in shaping a new sense of
domesticity and new forms of domestic relations between men and women. In other words, gender relations were reconfigured.

Several different registers of meanings collected around the figure of the housewife (Folbre, 1991; Welter, 1966; Fraser & Gordon, 1994). The housewife linked together women’s traditional sociolegal and political dependency with their more recent economic dependency in the industrial order. Continuing from preindustrial usage was the assumption that fathers headed households and that other household members were represented by them, as codified in law. This legal dependency of wives enforced their economic dependency, since married women who were wage labourers could not legally control their wages. But the connotations of female dependency were altered. Although formerly dependent men gained political rights, most white women remained legally and political dependant. The result was to feminise and stigmatishe sociolegal and political dependency, making this appear increasingly intolerable. This led eventually to the laws’ being dismantled. Consequently, those who aspired to full membership in society would have to distinguish themselves from the pauper, the native, the slave, and the housewife in order to construct their own independence.

These distinctions were embodied in the ideal of the family wage. On the one hand, the ideal of the family wage was premised on the workman’s independence which consequently implied his wife’s subordination and economic dependence. But on the other hand it simultaneously contrasted with counter images of dependent men—first with the degraded pauper who received assistance and later with racist and ethnocentric stereotypes of ‘the primitive’. The family wage therefore was a vehicle for elaborating meanings of dependence and independence that were deeply inflected by gender, race, and class. In this new industrial semantics, working men appeared to be economically independent. Yet this only masked their actual dependence on two fronts: first on the contributions of wives and children, and second, their dependence and status as subordinates in a unit (factory or firm) headed by somebody else, their employers. Thus, hierarchy that had been relatively explicit and visible in the peasant-landlord relation was mystified in the relation of worker to factory owner. The result was that aspects of dependency that were fused in preindustrial usage were now differentiated. Whereas all relations of subordination had previously counted as dependency relations, now capital-labour relations were excluded.

The point I want to make with this succession of icon-figures, each representing a significant discursive shift in the formation of the poverty discourse, is that such discursive shifts also mean a shift in the social identity of
the poor—and by extension, the ways their needs, rights and interests were defined and satisfied. For instance, as we saw in medieval Europe, beggars were highly visible figures and not at all stigmatised. Clustering in crowds around castle gates or travelling from one festival to another in the religious calendar, they were icon figures reminding everybody of the sanctity of the state of poverty. It is this same figure who, centuries later, would become the highly stigmatised figure of the dependent poor—first interned in workhouses and then herded into the slums of the newly industrial city. Indeed, the very term pauper changed meaning. In the fourteenth century it referred to the common people—almost everybody. In the sixteenth century, the term was still quite inclusive meaning simply a poor person and, in law, one who was allowed to sue or defend in court without paying costs. By the nineteenth century, however, it had taken on a more restricted definition, denoting a new class of persons who subsisted on poor relief instead of wages and whose social behaviour were held to be deviant and blameworthy. One of its latest configurations in Western societies is the so-called Welfare mother—imaged in the form of a young, unmarried mother of uncontrolled morals and sexuality—a scrounger who is now diagnosed to suffer from a dependency syndrome—a mental defect!

Along with this broader historical process of redefinition and reinterpretation of poverty and dependency there has been a corresponding redefinition of what a proper response to it might be. What it means to be poor has dramatically changed over time. The importance of these changes in definition is that they are followed by real changes in resource allocations. In other words, discourses about poverty and definitions of the poor are not only talk—they are at the same time real interventions in the world. Just as the nineteenth century poverty discourse prescribed not only a way of dealing with poverty but a grand project for the reformation of the poor into a new form of life, so development discourses prescribe a new form of life for peoples of other cultures. Policies implement discourses and make them a reality.

In making claims against one another, members of any social collective must necessarily draw on the historically and culturally specific ensemble of discourses available to them. These political struggles over the interpretation of needs and rights inevitably involve conflicts over the definition of the social identity of the poor and how this relates to other identities, such as: gender identities, class, ethnicity—the list is long. This is because definitions of identity and the claims and rights appropriate to them are crucial weapons
in the struggle to reinforce opinion or change it, to legitimize or deny, to define realities and the actions appropriate to them.

This should at least remind us of the fact that the images and the contemporary poverty discourses that collect around Africa have a long history and continue to be shaped by that history. We should be mindful of the political and social processes which have gone into the production of the many discourses about the African poor and that, like all discourses, they are created within particular traditions by particular people for particular reasons. They reflect certain points of view—usually those of people with power to define and intervene.

The final point I would like to make is simply that development projects in Africa and elsewhere are never simply about a change in production strategy necessary to "alleviate poverty"—as the rhetoric so often implies. It often involves, at the same time, a change in gender relations, family structure and ownership patterns—in other words a total reconstruction of the social fabric of these societies. The cumulative impact of development interventions organized around the model of domesticity may result in gross impoverishment of those involved. To quote my own report written of 1982:

Among the pastoral Turkana aid agencies have introduced commercial irrigation agriculture and fishery to cater for poor people who, in increasing numbers and for various reasons, are being pushed out of the livestock economy and social system. On the contention that households, rather than individuals, are (or should be) the basic economic units, planners vested the bulk of new production factors in the hands of men, and in an amount suitable for nuclear families, in the belief that women would benefit from men's holdings. However, these western ideas run counter to the traditional set-up among the polygamous Turkana, where husbands and wives have their own pools of assets, and where the separate spheres of both can be interwoven by mutuality beneficial transactions. Lack of arrangements for wives and heirs, coupled with insufficient incomes, have altered the size and composition of domestic labour. The family control over adult male labour has been broken since so many young men have left on labour migrations. This has been followed by instability of household in general and a rise in female headed households in particular.....In conclusion, an unfortunate combination of demographic, social and economic dynamica has turned these modern sectors into poverty traps.

In this paper, my intention has been to alert the reader to some of the discursive shifts that have gone on historically concerning the notion of poverty. Starting with the transformation from medieval to modern discourses of poverty, we have arrived at some of the capitalist notions of poverty which now dominate the discourses of aid and development. These discourses have
the effect of projecting the historical conditions and understandings of European poverty onto the "Third World", systematically forming, as Foucault said, the object of which they speak. We should remind ourselves that mass poverty in Africa has in no sense been alleviated by modernity or the "modern" sphere of development. Through the social differentiation created by the discourses and institutions of modernity it has been vastly increased—just as it was in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is particularly so in terms of the way that the expansion of a market economy transforms the structures of family and puts strain on its constituent relations.

Behind all the shifts in definitions and interventions we can see the contours of something that seems to be at the core of all poverty discourses, a constant feature behind the endlessly transforming face of poverty: 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. Ideas of gender, race, domesticity and ethnicity, both as relations and symbolic resource, are heavily implicated in this configuration of poverty, power and the social person. In all places and times, fundamental ethical questions are formulated in and through the discourse of poverty. As Karl Polyani once noted, "Pauperism and political economy together form part of an indivisible whole: the discovery of Society".

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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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