

HÉLIO ALEXANDRE SILVA (ORCID: 0000-0002-3636-1591)

## A Critique of Poverty: Exploring the Underground of Social Philosophy

Poverty is the primary focus of this paper; more particularly, the critique of poverty and not its mere description. It would not be an overstatement to say that one of the common grounds for poverty theories is that they describe the poor as those who systematically experience their lives in privation, namely around having the minimum when it comes to needs such as housing, food, health, education, free time, etc. There is, therefore, a theoretical and socially accepted orientation that promotes the sedimentation of a deep affinity between poverty and the minimum. Based on this reasoning, what is set on the horizon is a kind of non-explicit acceptance that the overcoming of poverty can be achieved by granting the poor something beyond the minimum, however elementary that “something extra” may be. Thus, if the experience of poverty involves some sort of lack or privation, and if this condition can be fully filled by something that has already been socially produced, then what would justify the fact that some people are able to fully fill it while others (the poor) can only secure the bare minimum? In light of this, perhaps it would be better not to question the acceptable “minimum” but, rather, to ask: Why would the notion of poverty be guided by this normative criterion? Therefore, a way of

describing my broader hypothesis on poverty would be to understand that it should be measured based on the level of denial of access to what has been socially produced. The further one is from accessing social wealth, the poorer one is. Finally, this tendency toward assimilation between poverty and the minimum engenders a depressive effect on demands for social change.

Keywords: poverty, minimum, social philosophy

If, however, the theoretician and his specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the oppressed class, so that his presentation of societal contradictions is not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change, then his real function emerges. (Horkheimer 2002, 215)

I slept and had a marvelous dream. I dreamt I was an angel. My dress was billowing and had long pink sleeves. I went from earth to heaven (...). God, send me these dreams for my aching soul. (Jesus 2015, 111)

## Introduction

The main object of the present paper consists of contemplating poverty as a multidimensional social phenomenon. More specifically, it consists of showing that this multidimensionality coexists with a crystallized trend around a common form of assimilation theory between *poverty* and *the minimum*. I aim to show here some rates regarding this crystallisation as presented in some of the most influential works about poverty. This will allow us to explore the hypothesis that striving to offer theoretical elements to fight poverty has been crystallized in such a way that part of the fight's actual critical content has been lost. Thus, the quest, praiseworthy as it is, to guarantee the minimum as a way of fighting poverty has been translated in terms of a neutralization of the normative requirements that insufficiently exploit a decisive element in order to understand this social phenomenon, namely, the level of socially produced wealth. Accordingly, a way of describing my broader argument on poverty would be to signal that it should be understood based on the level of denial of access to what has been socially produced.

Now, I must point out that it would be impossible, given this limited space, to carry out an exhaustive analysis of the most influential theories of poverty. Therefore, rather than presenting an inventory filled with theories and reports, what I propose is to retrieve some representative aspects that may strengthen the most structural outlines of the trend I intend to criticize herein. This appears to be an initial effort to shed light on the theoretical inclination of assimilating poverty and the minimum.<sup>1</sup> Thus, my purpose is more to point at this general trend—

1 Although, in fact, “the way in which poverty is habitually defined by the

which marks a great deal of the most influential works on poverty—and less to rebuild and exhaustively analyse the details that support each of the theoretical paths and reports that I will present here.

However, I must disclaim any originality for the views I put forward. The main ideas are well known. My intention has been to organize them into general aspects by mobilizing some traits so that a critical argument of the assimilation between poverty and the minimum can be better appreciated.

It is worth noting, by way of introduction, that in his inauguration speech at the *Social Research Institute* in 1931, Max Horkheimer recalled, particularly in critical thinking, that considerations according to which the philosophical work must distance itself from the “specialized scientific praxis” were outdated. The development of the sciences would have already crystallised this “idea of a continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis” into an unavoidable prospect for critical work. In this sense, social philosophy must be “capable of giving particular studies animating impulses” while “at the same time remain open enough to let itself be influenced and changed by these concrete studies” (Horkheimer 1993, 9). This is a way of presenting the more comprehensive spirit that will guide this paper.

## The Background of a Social Phenomenon

In order to introduce the issue as such, it is necessary to highlight the fact that the growing industrialization that marked the beginning of capitalism was decisive for “workers to be assimilated to the poor.” Housing and health conditions, large families, behavioural traits, and physical appearance were some of the aspects that quickly made workers and the poor indistinguishable<sup>2</sup> (Geremek 1997, 233).

In this sense, when presenting some of the consequences brought by rising capitalism, Marx emphasized in his *Economic and Philosophic*

---

social sciences and the image of it that prevails in society influence each other” (Rego and Pinzani 2013, 27), my interest here is less to investigate a kind of “habitual image of poverty” and more to point out to a common trend present in theories that deal with this social phenomenon.

2 It is worth pointing out that “poverty as a mass phenomenon” arises only by the end of the medieval period and upon the transition to capitalist societies in which the “agrarian structures” gave way to industrial structures (Geremek 1997, 11).

*Manuscripts* that salary levels always tend to be very low when compared to the wealth produced. For this reason, a worker's salary was usually "compatible with common humanity" in such a way that their lives were similar to a "cattle-like existence" (Marx 1988, 20). This means that most times, the worker was treated as a mere "working-animal" or even "as a beast reduced to the strictest bodily needs" (ibid., 29).

The reason that I present these remarks is less because they serve as a starting point to debate elements of philosophical anthropology or based on a specific conception of a good life, but more because they can help build intuitions that are capable of illustrating a common phenomenon in the "poverty theories," namely, the symbiosis between poverty and the minimum. Such proximity can be associated with the type of experience that Marx called a "cattle-like existence." This way of living not only reduces workers to mere working animals, in Marx's terms, but it also considers the guarantee of the bodily needs and immediate survival as virtually the sole aim. Here is an example of the movement of theoretical approach between the worker and the poor, and also between poverty and the minimum.

These approaches gain even greater relevance when some of the results presented by recent research on current levels of social wealth are considered. According to the *Global wealth report* produced by the *Credit Suisse Research Institute*, we saw a record level of world wealth in 2019.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, the report stated that "Aggregate global wealth rose (...) to USD 360.6 trillion, representing a growth rate of 2.6%. (...) Nevertheless, it exceeded population growth, so that average wealth grew by 1.2% to USD 70,850 per adult, an all-time high yet again" (Crédit Suisse 2020, 6). These numbers become even more decisive when approached from the point of view presented in Thomas Piketty's recent work. According to the French economist, the period between 1980 and 2020 showed an increase in inequalities, headed by a "particularly radical form of neo-proprietarian ideology" (Piketty 2020, 20).<sup>4</sup> If there was indeed an increase of the poor, of the middle classes and of the rich, in averagely rich countries, the inequality in this growth is remarkable. In numbers: the poorest 50% had a purchasing power increase ranging from 60 to 120%; at the same time, the richest 1% experienced an increase ranging from 80 to 240%. Although the estimated range lacks precision (60-120; 80-240), it is possible to state that "inequality between the bottom and

3 It is expected that this growth sets new records: "Global wealth is projected to increase 27% in the next five years, reaching US\$ 459 trillion by 2024" See [https://www.cshg.com.br/publico/conteudo/global\\_wealth\\_report\\_201910](https://www.cshg.com.br/publico/conteudo/global_wealth_report_201910).

4 For a summary of Piketty's major arguments, see Silva 2020.

middle of the global income distribution has decreased, while inequality between the middle and top has increased” (ibid., 26) corroborated this scenario by showing that, between 1980 and 2018, the poorest 50% captured 12% of the growth, while the 1% on the social top accumulated 27% of the growth produced in the same period. It is worth mentioning, however, that being anchored to the results of these works is not merely a way of listing information as if the sum of several data would be sufficient to make arguments strong; neither is it a way of preventing the shift of the analysis to an “imaginary scenario” or ideally projecting a certain desirable state of things. In fact, the results of these works allow us to point towards potentials that can more precisely illuminate the referring issue we are approaching herein.

In any case, two aspects interest me regarding the results provided both by the Global Report and by Piketty’s work: firstly, respecting the last 40 years, economic growth has proven to be a fact, especially in more developed countries; secondly, this growth went hand in hand with a tendency to decrease in the “middle layers,” thus expanding the distance between two extremes composed of an increasingly smaller group, the rich, and an increasingly larger group, the poor.<sup>5</sup> One of the obvious conclusions drawn from this scenario is that the common standard of living would be higher for the vast majority of people, especially for the poor, if access to wealth was not brutally unequal.

However, I do not want to discuss more accurate outlines of this potentially new “common standard of living” here, nor am I going to follow the trail of redistribution theories. What matters is that we try to understand, at a time when global wealth has never been greater, the consequences of naturalising the understanding of poverty as being linked to the minimum, especially in a society that has been prone, in the last 40 years, to extreme polarization when it comes to having access to what has been socially produced. Based on this framework, it is essential to define the central objective that I intend to develop here: if,

5 This trend has been detected by authors of different theoretical affiliations since the beginning of the 1990’s. Douglas Coupland assumes that “Brasilification” is “The widening gulf between the rich and the poor and the disappearance of the middle classes” (Coupland 1994); Dardot and Laval, more recently, called about “extreme polarization between rich and poor” (Dardot and Laval 2013); in the same way, the economist and anthropologist Jason Hickel states that “It is easy to assume that the divide between rich countries and poor countries has always existed” but “the gap between the real per capita incomes of the global North and the global South has roughly tripled in size since 1960” (Hickel 2018, 2). Then, theoreticians from different perspectives are in agreement that tendency towards hyper concentration in the hands of a few and increasing deprivation for most.

What matters is that we try to understand, at a time when global wealth has never been greater, the consequences of naturalising the understanding of poverty as being linked to the minimum, especially in a society that has been prone, in the last 40 years, to extreme polarization when it comes to having access to what has been socially produced.

in fact, the poorest are the ones who suffer the most, as they are the ones who experience the lowest levels of access to wealth, would this require that a theoretical approach to poverty be primarily guided by these “lower levels”?

To try to deal with these matters, first I will revisit, in a non-exhaustive way, some studies that are based on different approaches but converge towards the tendency of assimilation between poverty and the minimum. Then, I would like to suggest an alternative reflection, seeking to escape this assimilation.

### Relative Poverty, Absolute Poverty, and Minimum Guarantees

A staggering number of theoretical contributions, in the most diverse areas of knowledge, has been dedicated to the study of poverty as a social phenomenon. All sorts of approaches have been filling this field of research; some have brought the topic, more directly, to the centre of their analyses; others, more indirectly, have approached poverty in association with other themes. Some have approached poverty as the privation of a common standard of living (Townsend 1979, 1987), while others have turned their analyses to the central role of the economic dimension (Lipton 1988)<sup>6</sup> or to the connection with human rights (Pogge 2002). There are also those who have built more focused approaches on an ethical conception (Dieterlen 2006), and, finally, some have focused on the social context of each particular society (Paugam 2013), among many other things. Because it is a multidimensional social phenomenon, efforts towards theoretical approximation have often chosen, deliberately or not, to illuminate a certain aspect of poverty to the detriment of others. In one of the numerous attempts to summarize this matter, Mojca Novak highlighted a geographical distinction, stating that one of the most globally common approaches has been to treat poverty as “a lack of resources.” However, when considering the works carried out in Latin America, the tendency has been to consider poverty in terms of “lack of basic necessities” (Novak 1996, 58–59). For this reason, it is worth resuming, although in an illustrative way, some of these theoretical efforts.

If we move our attention to studies conducted in Europe, Peter Townsend’s late-1970s *Poverty in the United Kingdom* is a milestone. It is the result of a monumental effort to systematize a joint research on

<sup>6</sup> See also: Hagenaars and van Praag 1985.

poverty in the United Kingdom. In order to “show the extent of poverty (...) and give some explanation for its existence,” Townsend stated that he intended to deal with both the “social structure” and the “poor minorities” that exist within this structure (Townsend 1979, 17–18). It is necessary, he insisted, to join forces with the aim of developing a definition of poverty that can be “applied in different countries and regions” (ibid., 40). Having this purpose in mind, Townsend stated that “poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation.” Thus, the poor would be those who access resources “so seriously below those commanded by the average” that often, due to this deprivation, are “excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities” (ibid., 31). Therefore, it is worth highlighting this essential aspect: it is not that any level of deprivation can be characterized as poverty, according to Townsend, but only one that pushes individuals to a way of life that is seriously *below* the standards commonly accepted by a particular society.

Economist Michael Lipton, in turn, took a slightly different path. In a document produced to support discussions on public policies that would be developed by the World Bank, based on studies carried out in India and northern Nigeria, Lipton proposed an analysis that would distinguish the poor from the ultra-poor. He adopted this division because, as he explained, in order to assess the patterns that signalled the existence of poverty, it would also be necessary “to measure the characteristics of the poor.” Therefore, he insisted that “we need a scalar measure of absolute poverty” (Lipton 1988, 8). In this sense, Lipton showed that the measure composed of “the level of income or outlay, per person or consumer-unit” is difficult to be operationalized. Some problems arise when, for example, “two areas [or branches of science] competing for an anti-poverty project” consider “the same income per person”; however, they show that, often, this income “buys’ quite different levels of basic-needs fulfilment in the two areas.” Thus, to “preserve a scalar poverty indicator,” he continued, it is necessary to “measure the level of income or outlay, per person or consumer-unit,” in order to ensure that different families in different areas have the same standard measure of “basic need” (ibid.). To deal with this difficulty, Lipton suggested the following standard: the “ultra-poor” are those who “spend 80 percent or more on food, yet fulfil less than 80 percent of the average calorie requirements for their age, sex and activity groups” (ibid.). Similarly, the “poor” are those who “spending 70 percent or more of income on food, and meeting 80-100 percent of requirements, are unlikely to be undernourished, but are sometimes hungry” (ibid., 9). It should be

noted that Lipton's concern was aimed at the need of assessing the limits between those who meet the average food requirements and those who live, to a greater or lesser extent, with hunger.

Thomas Pogge's (2002, 6) concern, especially in his work *World Poverty and Human Rights*, was openly related to what he called "severe poverty." He wondered why, despite the acknowledged growth in world wealth, there were still legions of people who purely survive "from one day to the next" (ibid., 13). Seeking to investigate the moral problems that emerge from the deepest experiences of poverty, he stated that the "very poor," or those on whom the effects of "severe poverty" are most evident, can be described as those who deal with the "lack of secure access to the minimum requirements of human existence." According to him, these requirements refer to "reliable food and water, clothing, shelter, basic medical care and basic education." This definition, which the author himself acknowledged to be "limited and absolute," corresponds to what the World Bank adopted as the "international poverty line" (Pogge 2006, 34–35). One way of understanding Pogge's effort, therefore, is to recognize his attempt to develop an absolute measurement marker capable of providing theoretical mechanisms that may address the need to ensure access to the minimum requirements for human life.

Coming from a background that "takes the idea of equality seriously," Paulette Dieterlen (2006, 16–17) guided her work, which privileges Mexican experiences, towards the development of an "ethical concept of poverty." To this end, she affirmed that being poor is "not having certain economic resources," but it also invariably means having "low self-esteem" and little "self-respect." In any case, Dieterlen (ibid., 15–16) clearly stated in her book *La pobreza: un estudio filosófico* that her intention was "to explain certain ideas that arise when we speak of poverty and, more particularly, of severe poverty." The concern about ensuring the minimum, indeed, permeates all of her work, where she always seeks to rely on a literature that can credibly produce a "package of needs that must be met" (ibid., 178), thus making it possible to "solve the problem of severe poverty" (ibid., 117). Such a solution becomes clearer when the author states that it is necessary that this "package of needs"—which must be guaranteed—can be thought of "regardless of the differences and singularities of each culture" (ibid., 178). One of the highlights of this work consists of her search for a theoretical setup that meets the requirements to satisfy people's basic needs regardless of social and cultural particularities.

Finally, it is facing the way in which poverty manifests itself, primarily in Europe, that Serge Paugam guided his work. Seeking to rely on

comparative studies, in his work *Les formes élémentaires de la pauvreté*, he presented an analysis of what he understood to be the forms of poverty, highlighting three patterns: integrated poverty, marginal poverty, and unqualified poverty (*la pauvreté disqualifiante*). Of the three forms of poverty, the third one is certainly the most similar to the use I would like to emphasize here as a recurring trend, that is, one related to the approach between poverty and the minimum. According to Paugam, unqualified poverty is the experience of “living standard degradation” and “marginalization” that results in a “situation of extreme poverty on the edge of social rupture.” This scenario, he insisted, fuels a “process of social disqualification” that exposes the fragile condition of “social integration” (Paugam 2013, 181). Thus, extreme marginalization and the associated social disqualification are some of the structuring aspects that characterize the experience of poverty, as shown in this author’s work.

Taken together, the above mentioned remarks could be summarized in the following terms: for Townsend, the effort revolves around showing that the deprivation that characterizes poverty is one that reduces the poor to a substandard in each society. For Lipton, the solution lies in solving the equation: family expenses multiplied by adequate food. That is why, according to him, the poor are those who spend 70% or more of their family income on food and, although they are not exclusively defined by this, they can live with the existence of hunger. Pogge, on the other hand, expressed the belief that the poor can be found where the “minimum requirements for human existence” are not guaranteed, such as access to food, water, clothing, shelter, basic medical care, and basic education. Guaranteeing access to a package of “needs that must be met,” regardless of cultural singularities, is a way to overcome extreme poverty, according to Dieterlen. Paugam, in turn, highlighted the type of social experience that produces social disqualification as one of the three ways of looking at poverty. According to him, phenomena such as marginalization and life degradation are dimensions that arise from such disqualification. In summary, below-average standards, hunger, lack of water, food, medical care, unmet minimum needs, and forms of social disqualification are some of the characteristics that, according to the above mentioned authors, help compose the poverty scenario. In any case, they have not seemed to escape the trend recognized by Dieterlen, according to which “the methods to measure poverty have been established in order to detect what is minimally acceptable” (Dieterlen 2006, 129): minimum social integration, minimum ethical consid-

ration, minimum food, that is, the minimum needs seen as basic by each theoretical constellation.<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted, however, that there are virtues in this theoretical movement that aim to take multidimensionality into account. It is worth pointing out that “the concept of poverty has not remained [completely] unchanged over time.” The increased complexity of the changes has required an effort at a theoretical understanding that is capable of considering some “particularities of highly industrialized countries” and their corresponding scientific development (Costa 1984, 275). Most of these approaches also have the merit of, on the one hand, preventing a moralizing and paternalistic analysis that sees the poor exclusively as objects of charity and, on the other hand, deviating from a functionalist view that sees poverty predominantly as an obstacle that impedes social progress. In this sense, a common way of bringing these works together is to divide them into two major groups: the first one consisting of efforts that focus on the guarantee of *absolute criteria*,<sup>8</sup> from which it would be possible to conceive the levels of poverty, and the second one consisting of theories that focus on *relative criteria*, in which social and economic dynamics are at the core and in which the levels of poverty are conceived. In other words, it is possible to distinguish the approaches on poverty between those that share an absolute concept and those that share a relative concept.<sup>9</sup>

The group more closely related to an absolute notion of poverty has usually set standards for making a distinction between poverty and what is below the poverty line, which is commonly described as extreme poverty, misery, or indigence. A significantly important part of the debate in this field deals with the definition and explanation of a package of minimum requirements—health, education, food, housing, free time, and freedom<sup>10</sup>—whose content varies according to the corresponding theoretical aspect and historical time. The same is true of the theoretical

7 See Edward 2006; Reddy and Lahoti 2015.

8 One of the most common ways of developing these criteria is through different versions of theories of justice that, by focusing on the normative aspect of the theory, seek to reach a level of abstraction that is not restricted to social and political contingencies.

9 For a more detailed consideration of the historical and normative construction of the concept of poverty, see Pinzani 2017.

10 This is the path presented by Sen, when he affirms that, to move away from poverty and to help advance the general capability of a person, it is necessary to guarantee different kinds of freedom (which he also calls rights and/or opportunities). They are political freedoms; economic concessions; social opportunities; guarantees of transparency and protective security (Sen 2000, 10).

group more closely related to a relative notion of poverty. More often than not, they have also been guided by the guarantee of minimum conditions. However, in this case, they have usually considered the poor as the “x” most disadvantaged percentage of the population. In this sense, the poor are those who make up the lowest social levels, or even those who suffer from a higher level of deprivation. In summary, they are those who orbit around the minimum.

This summary attempt aims at illustrating the trend that can be seen in *poverty theories*, which, most of the time, have focused on people whose housing conditions are guided by the minimum (houses that are small and distant from the main spots in the city); whose feeding conditions are guided by the minimum (they only eat what they can and not what they want to eat; they always buy the cheapest and lowest quality products); whose health conditions are guided by the minimum (seeking dental treatment is something unusual; it is given priority to the use of lower-cost drugs rather than effective treatments; they seek medication, not long-term prevention or medical monitoring); whose education is guided by the minimum (they have little time for formal studies, focusing primarily on entering the labour market; at most, reading and writing skills and fundamental mathematical operations are given priority); whose free time is the minimum for an equally minimal recovery of the physical strength required for maximum work performance, etc.

It is noted, therefore, that a potential tension between the group that gathers theoretical efforts around a conception of poverty from an absolute approach and that which comes from a relative approach have in common a normative horizon marked by the symbiosis between poverty and the minimum, although this minimum may contain more or fewer demands. If this synthesis is correct, a movement, that is not necessarily explicit, of acceptance can be observed, which suggests that overcoming poverty can be achieved when such a minimum stage is guaranteed. In this case, the variable element would be that which is contained in the “minimum basket.”

Faced with this scenario, it may not be enough to question the acceptable “minimum”; more than that, the question should be: Why would the notion of poverty be guided by this criterion (CEC 1981, 8)?<sup>11</sup> Why measure poverty using the “minimum” ruler? Wouldn't an

11 The report of the Council of Ministers of the Commission of the European Communities, produced in the early 1980s, provides a definition of poverty according to which the poor would be those “individuals or families whose resources are so small as to exclude them from the *minimum acceptable* way of life of

It is noted, therefore, that a potential tension between the group that gathers theoretical efforts around a conception of poverty from an absolute approach and that which comes from a relative approach have in common a normative horizon marked by the symbiosis between poverty and the minimum, although this minimum may contain more or fewer demands.

effort to critically understand this social phenomenon be able to exploit more demanding potentials? If the experience of poverty involves some kind of deprivation that can be fully fulfilled by what has been produced socially or is available in nature, then it seems reasonable to question the reasons that justify the fact that a portion of people can fully fill such deprivations, some even with surplus, while another portion (the poor) can only be guaranteed the minimum.

Rather than answering these questions definitively, my purpose here is to highlight the fact that the tendency of assimilation between poverty and the minimum has created a new trend, namely, one that pulls down the demands for overcoming poverty. This can be seen, for example, in the diagnosis made by Vivian Ugá on the measures against poverty provided by the World Bank. According to her, the minimum standard of living defended by the World Bank “must be evaluated by consumption.” This means that what must be guaranteed is the ability to meet “the necessary expense to acquire a minimum standard of nutrition and other basic needs,” including “an amount that allows the individual to participate in the daily life of society.” Thus, Ugá continued, “*it is a matter of calculating a minimum amount for each country (or region) (...)*. Those whose income is below this amount may be considered poor<sup>12</sup> and, therefore, unable to live minimally well” (Ugá 2004, 58; emphasis added).

This tendency, followed by the World Bank, to guarantee a “minimum standard” contrasts with the level of world wealth provided by recent studies, such as those shown at the beginning of this paper. In 2019, for example, according to a recent report on global wealth,<sup>13</sup> wealth per adult has reached a new record, exceeding by 1.2% the index accumulated in 2018. Purely for illustration, the horizontal sharing of this socially produced wealth would mean a guarantee of around \$5,800 per month per adult.

---

the Member State in which they live” (CEC 1981, 8; emphasis added).

12 What Ugá suggested as an alternative to the conception of poverty adopted by the World Bank is to think of it through the prism of “social citizenship”; therefore, she explained: “Social citizenship, in its essence, has always been related to guaranteeing rights and not to compensatory programs. She entails a social pact made by society as a whole, based on the definition that the State must guarantee social protection—through social rights—to all citizens, regardless of their income, simply because they are citizens. Thus, social citizenship requires that there is a minimum of solidarity, induced by the need to resolve social conflicts, and a feeling of responsibility of society towards the life of each of its members” (Ugá 2004, 61).

13 See <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us/en/reports-research/global-wealth-report.html>.

Rather than answering these questions definitively, my purpose here is to highlight the fact that the tendency of assimilation between poverty and the minimum has created a new trend, namely, one that pulls down the demands for overcoming poverty.

Faced with such a scenario, it is difficult to justify the insistence on thinking of poverty in terms of deprivation of the minimum. To put the problem in these terms is, to a large extent, to crystallize a particular way of looking at a particular social phenomenon, and it may result in the replacement, at another level, of the form of core domination that was intended to be criticized. A notion of poverty that is built around the minimum always runs the risk, especially when it needs to be transformed into public policies, of coagulating the demands for overcoming it, in terms that are hardly distinguished from what Marx once called “cattle-like existence.” In this case, overcoming poverty means overcoming strictly bodily needs.

Thinking of poverty in these terms can result in the same difficulties that some authors may find in certain critiques of labour. When, for example, precarious labour is seen as a social pathology without questioning its very central role, it can be concluded that it is better to have a job than not to have one, or even, best case scenario, that it is better to have a stable job than an unstable one. Such considerations do not just take into consideration the distinction between what is socially normal or abnormal,<sup>14</sup> but also “endorse a dominant norm [the central role of work] within an existing social order.” Thereby, as Fishbach (2009) explained, “social philosophy quickly becomes prescriptive” and finally, “admitted as a norm, this form is no longer questioned, it is naturalized and inaccessible to criticism.” As a result, the critique itself is prevented from showing that “the dominant form in which work is socially taken may constitute an obstacle in itself” (Fischbach 2009, 150–151).

It is in this spirit that I understand the limits of the symbiosis between poverty and the minimum. Thinking of poverty as a lack of the minimum tends to reduce the limits of the debate itself. Such theoretical procedures tend to establish a boundary that neutralizes our critical capacity to explore the deeper structures that support the object of analysis itself. Thereby, little by little, the fact that poverty is the result of a specific form of domination falls out of sight. If this social phenomenon is synonymous with the lack of access to the minimum or to basic needs, then the assumption is that guaranteeing this minimum is a sufficient condition to overcome poverty. If that is the case, then the entire critical effort turns out to be guided by the debate about what is the accep-

---

14 It is worth mentioning that it is not a question of considering social pathology as a kind of degeneration of a normal social state that should be restored. Although it is not possible to proceed, at this moment, to a deeper debate on this issue, it is possible to think of poverty as a social pathology given that both “refer initially to the finding of social suffering” (Fischbach 2009, 151).

table minimum. As a result, the coexistence between those who have access to all socially produced wealth and those who have access to the minimum is no longer a social phenomenon and, although almost never explicitly, becomes a natural element of the social scene. From the point of view of theory, this naturalization becomes an obstacle that prevents the debate from advancing towards the critique of the very social form that produces and legitimizes the existence of those who have access to everything and those who have access to the minimum. In short, such assimilation tends to legitimize the scenario in which the 1% has access to everything and the remaining 99% increasingly orbit around the minimum. However, if, in fact, considering poverty as a phenomenon linked to the lack of minimum compresses its critical potential, what would be a way to decompress it?

### What Is Poverty? Testing One More Hypothesis

In one of the countless attempts to establish the state-of-the-art studies on poverty, Else Øyen said that comparative works generally lead to a certain path, while investigations focusing on national problems lead to another. Likewise, the adoption of parameters produced in developed countries to investigate the phenomenon of poverty in developing countries tends to produce new obstacles. The sum of these difficulties, insisted Øyen, testifies that both researchers and those responsible for developing public policies have felt that the theoretical divergences about poverty seem to “lead nowhere.” This diagnosis led Øyen to conclude that most of these difficulties lie precisely in the “*lack of philosophy* behind poverty measures and their accompanying concepts and theory” (Øyen 1996, 3; emphasis added).<sup>15</sup>

15 In the same direction, Pinzani (2017, 348) pointed out that “philosophers in general—political philosophers in particular—continue to show no interest on the topic, perhaps because they consider it not very susceptible to a philosophical approach, or because they are convinced that its normative proposals (...) would naturally end up offering an answer also to the poverty issue.” In any case, he continued, “Studies or pages dedicated specifically to poverty will be sought in vain in the work of John Rawls, Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel and other renowned contemporary political philosophers.” However, although it has not been an exhaustive object of investigation by philosophers, Ugá stated that “the treatment of contemporary social ills based on the concept of ‘poverty’ (...) as much as it tries to assume a purely ‘technical’ character, it actually implies a specific philosophy or social worldview” (Ugá 2011, 289). However, it may not be exactly the lack of a philosophical approach, but of a cri-

In view of Øyen's provocation, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to insist on the quite common theoretical movement of assimilation between poverty and the minimum, which tends to place poverty solely where life is compatible with a "cattle-like existence." In this sense, Marx insisted that the worker "feels himself to be freely active," although not when he performs tasks that contribute to the reproduction of his "animal functions," such as "eating, drinking, procreating." However, "in his human functions, he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal." Thus, "animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal" (Marx 1988, 74). Although he recognized that eating, drinking, and procreating are also functions of both women and men, he stated that, when separated from other human activities, these functions change. What Marx helps us understand here is that being guided by the guarantee of maintaining certain elementary "functions" is nothing more than guaranteeing some "animal" features to women and men.

However, as a social phenomenon, the experience of poverty produces obstacles that the accumulation of the currently available social wealth would be able to overcome. In this sense, it is possible to state, as Franck Fischbach pointed out, that if Social Philosophy does not want to renounce its "title of Philosophy," it must follow a path that can be found in Marx's words, which, by developing his critical analysis of capitalism, would come from an approach that pointed both to the core of the capitalist social form and to its properly adversarial nature. For the author of *Das Capital*, the concepts of commodity and value refer to the core of the capitalist social form. The concept of commodity, which is both "sensible" and "super sensible," and that of labour, which is both "abstract" and "living" under the aegis of the capital, designate the tension inherent to the system (Fischbach 2009, 148–149). This is also the path from which I believe it is possible to understand poverty. As a notion that designates a social phenomenon, it must be able to function from the same spirit present in the tension witnessed by the concepts of commodity and value; that is, it shall allow both the diagnosis of a negative social experience (deprivation or lack of access) and the opening to a critical tendency capable of proposing a theoretical consideration of this social phenomenon (expectation of accessing what has been socially produced) that breaks the orbit of the minimum. Based on this theoretical framework, I think it is possible to reposition the notion of poverty, making it more complex, as it distances itself from a kind of exclusive

---

tical approach capable of capturing structural trends that help us point out the current limits of a particular hegemonic way of thinking about poverty.

domain of extreme deprivation experiences. Such an effort may have the virtue of making a clearer distinction between poverty and the experiences of deep deprivation, such as misery, indigence, penury, and other extreme forms of suffering that, taken together, seem to describe a social state of barbarism.<sup>16</sup>

I believe there are several reasons that allow this repositioning. Perhaps one of the most convincing ones is that, although it can be said that the current level of social wealth available is so high that the average life expectancy of a child born on the African continent today is greater than that of a child who lived in London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>17</sup> (Deaton 2017), the gap between those who access social wealth without limits and those who struggle to guarantee the minimum continues to expand. Building a critical notion of poverty requires contemplating it in view of the transformations—especially in terms of the production of goods and the development of technology—that shaped the last period. Therefore, a way of describing my broader hypothesis on poverty would be to understand that it should be measured based on the level of denial of access to what has been socially produced. The further away people are from accessing social wealth, the poorer they are. When this deniability reaches levels that directly threaten survival, such as lack of minimal access to food and housing, what we have is an animal life, or perhaps more appropriately, barbarism.

The socially produced wealth and the inequality that still persist allow us to consider a critical notion of poverty as a lack of access to what has been socially produced. More precisely, poverty is the *denial, at some level, of access*<sup>18</sup> to both what has been socially produced and to what is available in nature, provided that the universalization (becoming common)<sup>19</sup> of access does not impede or weaken social living but contributes to

More precisely, poverty is the denial, at some level, of access to both what has been socially produced and to what is available in nature, provided that the universalization (becoming common) of access does not impede or weaken social living but contributes to the maintenance or expansion of individual and collective potentials.

16 See Hickel 2017, chap. 9 “The Necessary Madness of Imagination.”

17 “How lame an anticlimax!” Marx would say (Marx 1982, 806): “If the extremes of poverty have not lessened, they have increased, because the extremes of wealth have.”

18 Considering the “equality of access” as a central aspect of a reflection on poverty is something that the Indian economist Srinivasan also suggested, particularly in *Poverty: Some measurements problems* (Srinivasan 1977). However, Srinivasan did not develop the notion beyond the requirement of a set of needs that he considered to be essential for overcoming poverty, namely, facilitating access to education, medical assistance, and job opportunities (ibid., 2). In this sense, he insisted on the horizon of the minimum that is embodied in guaranteeing access to these three aspects.

19 One of the essential references here is the work of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, entitled *The Common: An essay on the 21<sup>st</sup> century revolution*

*the maintenance or expansion of individual and collective potentials.*<sup>20</sup>

One aspect that must be pointed out here is that stating that poverty can be understood as a lack of access, to some extent, to what has been socially produced does not under any circumstances mean that fighting poverty involves encouraging consumption and the accumulation of property and goods, such as automobiles, to set an emblematic example. This is because universal access to such goods does not mean expanding social and individual possibilities. The opposite is more likely; that is, it may represent, in the medium and long term, an obstacle, as the increase in the number of cars leads to an unavoidable environmental<sup>21</sup> and urban liability. Hence, the need to highlight, as a way of fighting poverty, not the dimension of possession, but that of common

---

(2016). Describing what they understand by common, the authors claimed that it is a “formula of movements and currents of thought that intend to oppose the dominant trend of our time: that of the expansion of private appropriation to all spheres of society, culture and life. In this sense, the term ‘common’ designates not the re-emergence of an eternal communist idea, but the emergence of a new way to challenge capitalism, or even to consider its overcoming” (Dardot and Laval 2016, 19). However, the element that certainly most contributes to the debate on poverty is precisely the distinction shown in the work as “political proposition 2,” which presents the distinction between “use rights and property.” Roughly speaking, this distinction intends to show that the one who is “user of the common” is fundamentally linked to others through the “coproduction of rules that govern the common’s use.” This is, for Dardot and Laval, a central link, as it is not anchored in the “division of the same piece of property between two unequal subjects,” but in the “co-obligation that prevails between all those who simultaneously make use of a ‘non-proprietary’ resource” (ibid., 926). David Harvey is also an important source as he reflected upon the spatial consequences of adopting the private rather than the common as a constitutive axis of social life (see Harvey 2013).

20 It is worth mentioning, once again, that Peter Townsend, in his work *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979), shared his thoughts about poverty in terms of *relative deprivation*: “Poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation” (ibid., 31; emphasis added). This definition can coexist with the one I present here. However, there is a difference that does not deny what Townsend presents, but adds an element that I believe to be central to building a critical notion of poverty: overcoming this “relative deprivation” does not lie in encouraging the possession of minimum guarantees or basic needs in accordance with the standard of some particular society, but in guaranteeing access to everything that has been socially produced.

21 Although it is not possible to develop this dimension here, it must be pointed out that this is also an increasingly central element when it comes to poverty and ways of fighting it. Particularly because “[the] *poorest* populations will be the first to suffer the disastrous consequences of global warming” (Dardot and Laval 2016, 15; emphasis added).

access to what has been socially produced. In other words, it is less about possessing and more about guaranteeing access. Thus, a critical notion of poverty may not take the economic dimension as its primary aspect, although this is certainly an unavoidable horizon when we think of poverty.

Understood in these terms, the analysis should go in the direction of expanding the social focus from where this phenomenon arises. If the subject is unable to access what has been socially produced, that incapacity cannot be understood simply as an individual limitation,<sup>22</sup> but as an accusation of the current social inability of giving common access to what is produced. This inaptitude not only causes suffering at the individual level, but also offends the principle of equality, which, at the normative level, is one of the guiding principles of the modern times.

If we take the level of socially available wealth as a concrete reference, on the one hand, and one of the normative structuring elements of modern societies (equality) on the other, I believe there is a sufficiently structured scenario to understand poverty in the terms proposed herein. Not to mention the fact that in every description of poverty, a “moral imperative” that “something should be done” is implied (Spicker, Leguizamón and Gordon 2007, 238). It is always worth mentioning that Horkheimer’s (2002, 218) comment that “the meaning of [the critical concept] is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society but in its transformation” based on the experiences produced by current social dynamics.

Therefore, the attempt to see poverty in its social dimension allows us to consider its politicization through the “immanent affirmation of the politics in the social as a space of division and conflicts,” but also of displacements and interrogations (Fischbach 2009, 11–12). In this sense, if poverty is lack of access to what has been socially produced, it is also a negative dimension of the good life expectancy fuelled by each individual. Thus, critically understanding the social field from which poverty is experienced in all its immediate complexity requires a “totalizing and immanent” approach by social philosophy (*ibid.*, 147) in the sense that such a critique must assume, reflexively, its participation in the social world in which it appears and takes as object. This participation, howe-

22 As in the case, according to Ugá, of the policies proposed by the World Bank, which divides individuals into two groups: the incapable and the competitive, the poor would be the incapable individuals; therefore, the role of the policies for combating poverty formulated by the World Bank would have the purpose of transforming the incapable individual into someone capable and competitive (Ugá 2004, 60).

ver, must illuminate, in the dynamics of the current reality, a movement that can abolish its obstacles from within itself (ibid., 145). In other words, this means that the critique should not be based on abstractly isolated elements, but it should be guided by the core of the society it studies in order to at once both understand it and rely on it, thus building a critical point of view (ibid., 147). In these terms, it is not a matter of exclusively knowing whether the critique is immanent from the point of view of its normative principles, but from the point of view of the practical dynamics that irrigate these principles and the ways in which they operate. This form of conducting the critique is guided by a repositioning of the relationship between social philosophy and social sciences. Thereby, “the theoretical critique [which] expresses the critical dynamics that emerge from social experience” lies once again at the centre of philosophy, as it was thought by Horkheimer in the 1930s.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusions

As I have tried to demonstrate here, thinking of poverty as something that orbits around the minimum is part of a trend in the theoretical field that deals with this social phenomenon. However, one of the consequences of this symbiosis, although sometimes well intentioned, is that it tends to cover up a movement of indirect legitimation of inequality and, consequently, poverty. The lack of access to any of the socially produced assets (home, food, health, education, etc.) exposes different dimensions of poverty, but their possession does not necessarily mean poverty has been overcome. Meeting basic needs or minimum conditions, which disregards the level of socially produced wealth, is not enough to overcome poverty. In most cases, the movement symbolized by the explicit effort to guarantee the minimum for many, often functions as an implicit justification that legitimizes the possession of the maximum for a few. The framework presented by Piketty and the research on global wealth mentioned at the beginning of this paper offer very convincing subsidies to this movement. Under the argument of turning to the understanding of the dynamics included in the deepest deprivation experience, that is, of thinking of poverty from the perspective of the minimum, there is a risk of building analyses that reduce its normative element to the expectations of overcoming barbarism instead of finding more promising emancipatory potentials.

---

23 See Dufour, Fischbach and Renault 2012.

One may still raise the question as to whether a conception of poverty such as the one advocated here could be caught in the common trap of confusing poverty with inequality. Regarding such objections, we would have to recall what Thomas Piketty pointed to as a trend in the last forty years. According to what he showed in *Capital and ideology*, wealth has been accumulated in the hands of an increasingly restricted group, and the traditional middle classes have been moving away from the top, getting closer and closer to the bottom of the social pyramid. He has shown, therefore, a tendency towards hyper concentration in the hands of a few and increasing deprivation for most. In view of this scenario, what is the critical capacity of a poverty concept that is normatively guided by the minimum? The criteria of humanity, dignity, satisfaction of basic needs are some of the candidates when it comes to finding ways of fighting poverty. It is important to recognize the value of these theoretical efforts as they help to highlight those who suffer most from the lack of access to what has been socially produced; that is, the poorest. However, since the poor are not the only ones who experience the lack of minimum, these theories tend to be unable to deal with reality, such as that which marks early 21<sup>st</sup> century societies, which brings together, at the same time, two trends: global growth and the concentration of wealth. In a reality where wealth records have been reached year after year, it does not seem reasonable to see poverty as a place where the life experience of the poor limits them to what Marx once called “beast[s] reduced to the strictest bodily needs.”

Obviously, although I did not have time to properly address this matter, this is far from an open defence of unlimited growth and expansion of wealth. The whole recent debate on climate emergency shows where such orientations can take us. I hereby reiterate that poverty is the lack of access to what is socially available, as long as that access does not become an obstacle. When freedom of access to wealth becomes a social obstacle, it is no longer freedom. Limitless economic growth certainly does not meet this requirement, which, after all, is more of a limit placed by nature than a normative requirement as such. Thus, the notion of poverty proposed here maintains the distinction between poverty and inequality, as it recognizes that there are those who do and those who do not have access to everything that has been socially produced. Among the latter, we can find different levels, but they are all poor because they are denied access, albeit in different measures, to what is socially available. There is, therefore, inequality between those who have full access to what has been socially produced and those who do not. Among the latter, the poor, inequality lies in the different levels of inaccessibility.

If poverty is understood as revolving around the lack of access to the minimum, then we can only expect that the policies derived from this concept would be limited to fighting barbarism (hunger and malnutrition, for example). When the normative principle crystallizes around the minimum, this tends to contribute to a relative reduction in the scope of the social demands turned into public policies.

When traditional poverty theories have thought of this social phenomenon, primarily based on the metric of the minimum, they have tended to produce some critical deficits or, quoting Horkheimer, they are no longer “a force within it to stimulate change.” Such deficits can be illustrated by the result, in practical terms (such as public policies), of the efforts focused exclusively on those who live close to absolute deprivation. If poverty is understood as revolving around the lack of access to the minimum, then we can only expect that the policies derived from this concept would be limited to fighting barbarism (hunger and malnutrition, for example). When the normative principle crystallizes around the minimum, this tends to contribute to a relative reduction in the scope of the social demands turned into public policies.

Therefore, as suggested by Horkheimer, the exposure of social contradictions should also be a factor that stimulates social and political transformations. Contemplating poverty from the critique of a theoretical assimilation tendency associated with the minimum, without disregarding it as a multidimensional social phenomenon, can certainly be a step in that direction.

## References

- CEC-Commission of the European Communities. 1981. *Final Report from the Commission to the Council on the First Programme of Pilot Schemes and Studies to Combat Poverty*. Brussels.
- Crédit Suisse. 2020. *Global Wealth Report 2019*. Zurich: Switzerland.
- Coupland, Douglas. 1994. *Geração X: Contos para uma Cultura Acelerada*. Lisboa: Teorema.
- Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. 2016. *Comum: Ensaio sobre a revolução no século XXI*. Translated by Mariana Echalar. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- . 2013. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. New York: Verso.
- Deaton, Angus. 2017. *A grande saída: saúde, riqueza e as origens da desigualdade*. Translated by Marcelo Levy. Rio de Janeiro: Intrínseca.
- Douglass, Bruce, ed. 1990. *Liberalism and the Good*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1998. “Capacidades humanas y justicia social: Una defensa del esencialismo aristotélico.” In *Necesitar, desear, vivir. Sobre necesidades, desarrollo humano, crecimiento económico y sustentabilidad*, edited by

- Jorge Riechman. Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata.
- . 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dufour, Éric, Franck Fischbach, and Emmanuel Renault. 2012. *Histoires et définitions de la philosophie sociale*. Grenoble: Recherches sur la philosophie et le langage.
- Edward, Peter. 2006. „The Ethical Poverty Line: A Moral Quantification of Absolute Poverty.” *Third World Quarterly* 27(2): 377–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590500432739>.
- Fischbach, Franck. 2009. *Manifeste pour une philosophie sociale*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.
- Geremek, Bronisław. 1997. *Poverty: A History*. Translated by Agnieszka Kołakowska. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hagenaars, Aldi, and Bernard van Praag. 1985. “A Synthesis of Poverty Line Definitions.” *Review of Income and Wealth* 31(2): 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4991.1985.tb00504.x>.
- Harvey, David. 2013. “A liberdade da cidade.” In *Cidades rebeldes: passe livre e as manifestações que tomaram as ruas do Brasil*, edited by Carlos Vainer. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Hickel, Jason. 2017. *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and Its Solutions*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Horkheimer, Max. 1993. “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research.” In *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*. Translated by G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer and John Torpey. London: MIT Press.
- . 2002. “Traditional and Critical Theory.” In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Translated by Matthew J. O’Connell and others. New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation.
- Jesus, Carolina Maria. 2015. *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. Translated by David St. Clair. London: Penguin.
- Kerstenetzky, Celia Lessa. 2000. “Desigualdade e pobreza: lições de Sen.” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 15(42): 113–122.
- Lipton, Michael. 1988. *The Poor and the Poorest: Some Interim Findings*. Washington: World Bank.
- Marx, Karl. 1982. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume One. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin Books.
- . 1988. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Novak, Mojca. 1996. “Concepts of Poverty.” In *Poverty: A Global Review. Handbook on International Poverty Research*, edited by Else Øyen,

- S.M. Miller and Syed Abdus Samad. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1990. "Aristotelian Social Democracy." In *Liberalism and the Good*, edited by Bruce Douglass and Gerald Mara. London: Routledge.
- Øyen, Else. 1996. "Poverty Research Rethought." In *Poverty: A Global Review. Handbook on International Poverty Research*, edited by Else Øyen, S.M. Miller and Syed Abdus Samad. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Paugam, Serge. 2013. *Les formes élémentaires de la pauvreté*. Paris: PUF.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2020. *Capital and Ideology*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. London: Cambridge.
- Pinzani, Alessandro. 2017. "Vai trabalhar, vagabundo: retórica anti-pobre e aspectos normativos de uma teoria da pobreza." In *Sob os olhos da crítica: reflexões sobre democracia, capitalismo e movimentos sociais*, edited by Hélio Alexandre Silva. Macapá: Unifap.
- Pogge, Thomas. 2002. *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*. Polity Press: Cambridge.
- . 2006. "Reconhecidos e violados pela lei internacional: os direitos humanos dos pobres do mundo." *Ethic@: An International Journal for Moral Philosophy* 5(1): 33–65.
- Reddy, Sanjay G., and Rahul Lahoti. 2015. "\$1.90 per day: What does it say?" <https://reddytoread.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/wbpovblogoct6final1.pdf>.
- Rego, Walquiria Leão, and Alessandro Pinzani. 2013. *Vozes do Bolsa Família*. São Paulo: São Paulo State University Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 2000. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Silva, Helio Alexandre. 2020. "'Capital et idéologie' de Thomas Piketty: ainda é mais fácil pensar no fim do mundo que no fim do capitalismo?" *Ethic@: An International Journal for Moral Philosophy* 19(2): 464–480.
- Spicker, Paul, Sonia Alvarez Leguizamon, and David Gordon. 2007. *The International Glossary on Poverty*. London: Zed Books.
- Srinivasan, Thirukodikaval Nilakanta. 1977. *Poverty: Some Measurements Problems*. New Delhi: World Bank.
- Townsend, Peter. 1970. *The Concept of Poverty: Working Papers on Methods of Investigation and Life-Styles of the Poor in Different Countries*. London: Heinemann.
- . 1979. *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

- . 1987. “Deprivation.” *Journal of Social Policy* 16(2): 125–146.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279400020341>.
- Ugá, Vivian Domínguez. 2004. “A categoria pobreza nas formulações de política social do Banco mundial.” *Revista de Sociologia e Política* 23(2): 55–62.
- . 2011. *A questão social como pobreza: crítica à conceituação neoliberal*. Curitiba: Appris.
- World Bank. 1980. *World Development Report*. Washington: World Bank.

HÉLIO ALEXANDRE SILVA, Ph.D. – is a professor of Ethics at the School of Human and Social Sciences of the São Paulo State University (Unesp). He is also Professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the Postgraduate Program in Philosophy at the School of Philosophy and Sciences of Unesp. He is the author of *As paixões humanas em Thomas Hobbes: entre a ciência e a moral, o medo e a esperança* (2009) and *Sob os olhos da crítica: reflexões sobre democracia, capitalismo e movimentos sociais* (2017). He is also the author of articles and book chapters in Brazil, France and Argentina. His current research is concerned with Social Philosophy, especially on the subject of poverty and inequality.

**Address:**

São Paulo State University  
School of Human and Social Sciences  
900 Eufrásia Monteiro Petraglia Avenue  
Franca, SP, 14409-160, Brazil  
+55 (16) 3706-8700  
**email:** helio.alexandre@unesp.br

**Citation:**

Silva, Hélio Alexandre. 2021. "A Critique of Poverty: Exploring the Underground of Social Philosophy." *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 42(4): 139–165.

**DOI:** 10.14746/prt2021.4.6

**Autor:** Hélio Alexandre Silva

**Tytuł:** Krytyka ubóstwa: Eksploracja podziemi filozofii społecznej

**Abstrakt:** Głównym tematem tego artykułu jest ubóstwo, w szczególności zaś jego krytyka, a nie tylko opis. Nie będzie przesadą stwierdzenie, że jedną z powszechnych podstaw teorii ubóstwa jest definiowanie biednych jako tych, którzy systematycznie doświadczają swojego życia w niedostatku, a mianowicie posiadają określone minimum, jeśli chodzi o potrzeby takie, jak mieszkanie, żywność, zdrowie, edukacja, czas wolny itp. Istnieje zatem teoretyczna i społecznie akceptowana orientacja sprzyjająca wytwarzaniu głębokiego pokrewieństwa między ubóstwem a minimum. Na opartym na takim rozumowaniu horyzoncie pojawia się rodzaj niewyraźnej akceptacji, że przewyciężenie ubóstwa można osiągnąć poprzez przyznanie ubogim czegoś ponad minimum, niezależnie od tego, jak elementarne może być to „coś ekstra”. Jeśli więc doświadczenie ubóstwa wiąże się z jakimś rodzajem braku lub niedostatku i jeśli ten warunek może być spełniony przez coś, co zostało już społecznie wytworzone, to co uzasadniałoby fakt, że jedni ludzie są w stanie go spełnić, a inni (ubodzy) mogą zapewnić sobie tylko absolutne minimum? W świetle tego być może lepiej

nie kwestionować dopuszczalnego „minimum”, ale raczej pytać: dlaczego pojęcie ubóstwa miałyby kierować się tym normatywnym kryterium? Dlatego sposobem na opisanie mojej szerszej hipotezy dotyczącej ubóstwa byłoby zrozumienie, że należy je mierzyć na podstawie poziomu odmowy dostępu do tego, co zostało społecznie wytworzone. Im dalej od dostępu do bogactwa społecznego, tym biedniejsi są ludzie. Wreszcie, ta tendencja do asymilacji ubóstwa i minimum wywołuje depresyjny wpływ na żądania zmiany społecznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ubóstwo, minimum, filozofia społeczna