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# **Representing poverty and attacking representations: some anthropological perspectives on poverty in development**

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**Representing Poverty and Attacking Representations: Some**

**Anthropological Perspectives on Poverty in Development**

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**Abstract**

*This article explores some aspects of the representation poverty in development studies from an anthropological perspective. Starting from the history of the category of poverty as the central target for development policy, the article shows how the ways in which poverty is assessed not only have implications for the kinds of strategies adopted to address it but for theories about its causes. Such accounts underplay the significance of social relations in contributing to poverty outcomes and the political structures which keep people poor. Anthropological approaches to the study of deprivation and inequality can provide a useful corrective to the homogenising effects of development perspectives on poverty.*

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*Bank staff sustain their livelihoods by labelling. By calling Christmas vegetarian, the powerful turkeys survive (Chambers 2001:304).*

## **Introduction**

This article considers different approaches to the constitution of poverty as a research problem, as an analytical category within the social sciences and as a social experience. Approaches to understanding poverty in development disciplines have largely been influenced by economics and sociology. Despite the concentration of much of its disciplinary research for many years in the very communities and countries that are viewed as poor by development practitioners, social anthropology has produced remarkably little about the problem of 'poverty' (Booth et al 1999). I argue that the apparent disengagement of anthropology from the problem of poverty should not be read as evidence of that discipline's irrelevance for poverty research or for development studies more generally, but rather as a necessary caution concerning the study of poverty. An anthropological approach to the study of poverty in development reveals the role of development institutions in constituting poverty as the key development problematic. This focus on poverty, and its representation in development discourse as a general state external to the people affected by it, or as a threshold below which people fall, risks deflecting attention from the social

relations which tolerate inequality and human suffering and which play a major role in the production and reproduction of poverty (Green & Hulme 2005).

The article introduces the constitution of poverty as an object of study within international development policy and the academic studies that support it, and considers the potential value of an anthropological approach to understanding poverty. Anthropological approaches to the investigation of human society begin with the social constitution of the categories of the subjects of study and an analysis of the institutions through which such categories become salient.

Ethnographic research takes the categories through which people think their worlds and act upon them as the starting point for an analysis of the significance of social practice. Such approaches at their best can challenge the imposition of apparently universal priorities on the social values of others.<sup>i</sup> Ethnographic accounts of the constitution of social worlds, whether those of laboratory scientists (Latour 1987) or of head hunters (Rosaldo 1980), expose the social processes of categorisation through which such worlds are constructed conceptually through practice (e.g. Douglas 1996; Wenger 1998; Bourdieu 1979).

Anthropological studies have consistently demonstrated the social constitution of categories and the importance of social relations as the bedrock of inequality (Dumont 1970; Douglas 1991; Hart 2001). Such accounts point to the distortions inherent in viewing poverty in absolute and ahistorical terms and, in presenting

poverty as a wholly subject position, of denying the agency of those categorised as poor.<sup>ii</sup> I argue that an anthropological perspective throws considerable light on the constitution of poverty, as both a category of development thinking and as a label applied to particular social categories. The application of such categories and the political implications of such classifications are explored through an analysis of some development representations of poverty and a discussion of the new institutional mechanisms for monitoring poverty. Insights from anthropology concerning the social constitution of categories and the role of institutions in creating authoritative knowledge are examined in the context of the recent institutionalisation of poverty as the tangible target of development initiatives in Zanzibar and as the object of new and highly specialised systems of monitoring and knowledge creation.

### **International Development and the Social Sciences**

The concept of poverty has been central to the international development agenda for more than a quarter of a century. The World Bank's assumption of leadership in the attack on poverty is more recent. Fighting poverty is now Bank's stated priority, asserted in its mission statement that 'Our dream is a world free of poverty'.<sup>iii</sup> The Bank has also lead the way in establishing systematic ways of representing, analysing and theorising poverty. These have become internationally significant through the publication of the highly influential annual World Development Report; the promotion of academic

research around poverty issues (Mehta 2001) and, in the past five years, the introduction of the national poverty reduction strategies (PRS) now forming the contractual basis between recipients and donors for an increasing share of development assistance. Alignment between donors around PRS, multi-donor funding mechanisms in support of sector programmes and direct budgetary support imply not only shared instruments of international aid, but shared conceptual frameworks. Poverty, as the focus of the international development efforts, has become not merely the stated priority of agencies such as the World Bank, but rather like the institution of the gift in non-monetized economies, a total social fact (Mauss 1990). More narrowly, the facticity of poverty is attested through the numerous studies and research institutions devoted to the empirical analysis of its scale and dimensions. The various poverty departments, research centres and systems for monitoring poverty nationally and internationally all point to the tangibility of poverty, its existence as an objective subject about which facts can be determined and known.

Although the focus on poverty of international development *institutions* has spawned an army of anti-poverty specialists and a burgeoning literature on its constitution and definition, this has not been reflected across the social sciences, with the exception of the satellite disciplines to development. These disciplines, including the various branches of development studies, exist partially to service international development institutions. Their intellectual agenda is strongly

influenced, if not determined, by this relationship. Consequently, poverty as the object of the international development effort has become the overriding problematic in development economics and development studies. The intellectual agendas of other social sciences are equally influenced by the different institutional contexts of their production. This is certainly the case for anthropology which, with the exception of applied anthropology, in effect a minority sub discipline somewhat marginal to academic anthropology, has effectively maintained a distinct separation from development (Green 2005), and with it from research on and into poverty.

As the impacts of development efforts are tracked through global and national monitoring systems, the measurement and assessment of poverty has become institutionalised as a responsibility of government within aid recipient countries, as well as a specialist function within development agencies. The institutional structure of international development and its globalisation through various policy and funding mechanisms and, more recently, an explicit drive to consolidate the types of legitimate knowledge on and for development, means that much of the content of social science knowledge in development aligned disciplines is more homogenous than in other subject areas of the social sciences. The apparent homogeneity of development knowledge about the social aspects of development is a consequence of shared paradigms in development thinking which privilege knowledge as information in terms of its instrumentality, that is,

its utility for purposes of policy implementation and planning. This perhaps explains why many development studies researchers accept standardized frameworks of representation and analysis, for example 'livelihoods' or 'social capital' as applicable across diverse social forms. Such paradigms also set the parameters of what is recognised as authoritative knowledge within the international development sector (Goldman 2002; Mehta 2001).

As development knowledge is first and foremost instrumental knowledge that can be made to work in realising particular policy priorities, topics for development research tend to be determined by particular interpretations of current policy agendas. Those agencies and agents with a vested interest in poverty as a policy objective determine the agenda for the study of poverty in development.<sup>iv</sup> It is not determined by those people subject to categorisation as poor. Nor is it determined by the findings of other studies which have happened to highlight dimensions of what is characterised as poverty, although evidence from such studies feeds into the knowledge production cycle. Poverty as a research focus is predetermined by the current policy agenda of international development institutions, and the World Bank in particular, which gradually adopted poverty as its priority in the 1970s (Escobar 1995: 21-44; Finnemore 1997: 208). Prior to this, international development institutions focused on modernization and developing the infrastructures of natural resource producing countries, alongside technological investments as the basis for



economic growth. Poverty, merely the assumed converse of failure to develop economically, was rarely the explicit focus of development initiatives, or of academic study. The discourse on poverty became influential, hegemonic even, only after the World Bank under Robert Mc Namara vigorously promoted it in the 1970s (Finnemore 1997: 204-7). Twenty years later under James Wolfensohn, it was promoted further across the multi-lateral and bilateral agencies. The Bank set about trying to understand its enemy better through developing, methodologies for poverty assessment and promoting the study of different aspects and dimensions of poverty. Quantitative and qualitative approaches to poverty were incorporated into Bank poverty assessments, at the same time as the Bank's policies increasingly assimilated civil society and activist *policy* positions.

Conceptualisations of poverty have altered radically during this period, from the biologically informed basic needs approach of the 1970s to today's more sophisticated understanding of poverty as multi-dimensional deprivation, not merely of income, but of capabilities, entitlements and rights (Rist 1997; Carvahlo & White 1997; Ruggeri 200; Kanbur & Squire 1999; Stewart 2003; Sen 1981; Gordon et al 2002). While current definitions of poverty represent a significant advance on more limited conceptualizations poverty, their widespread acceptance in policy making circles and by development economics and development studies professionals derives as much from the multi-lateral

framework of policy and institutions subscribing to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as from their ability to capture the experience of those categorised as poor, or from their explanatory potential in accounting for the state they set out to define. Poverty as an entity is brought into being through the institutions established to describe, quantify and locate it (Escobar 1995). It was only once the Bank realigned its policy priorities to the elimination of poverty that poverty assessments became central (Finnemore 1997).

Poverty as defined through MDG targets and consumption measures is a construct of international development organisations. We do not know what such categorisations mean for diverse individuals within diverse social and economic contexts. What poverty as a scale provides for development organisations is a justification for intervention and a means of ranking units, countries or regions, on a poverty index. Arguably, what the current emphasis on poverty assessment reveals is not so much the scale and magnitude of poverty in the world, as the power of development institutions to make it visible (Escobar 1991: 664). Assessing poverty, locating the poor and trying to measure comparatively the incidence and depth of poverty assumes that poverty is a state universally accessible to such devices. It is such devices that make poverty visible and generalisable, as a state that shares commonalities across diverse settings.

## **Representing Poverty**

Against this background of evolving policy it is not surprising that definitions of poverty, and thus proposed strategies for reducing it, differ significantly between the two *World Development Reports* at either end of the past decade (World Bank 1990; World Bank 2001). Whereas the 1990 report viewed poverty primarily in terms of low income and absence of social safety nets, the 2001 report sees poverty as explicitly multifaceted. Poverty is not merely about income and consumption, but amounts to a state of relative powerlessness and exclusion from decision making processes, as well as low levels of education, high rates of mortality and poor health (2001:31). Although the diversity of the experience of poverty globally is reiterated, through the 'voices of the poor', the report, in constructing poverty as an object, serves to homogenise attributes of poverty and the situation of those categorised as poor. Marginal, excluded, vulnerable, unwell, illiterate, indigenous and female, the poor predominantly live in remote rural areas and urban shanties, with few assets and weak social networks. Their relative powerlessness is emphasised, and by extension the power of various groups over them, not only of local and national elites and governments, but the power of development institutions to recognise and define them, and to determine when poverty matters. The poor have much in common in this representation and the proximate causes of their poverty are represented as being remarkably similar across geographical regions and national boundaries. Corruption, gender inequity, bad government and limited access to markets all

contribute to causing current levels of poverty in the world, just as, it is implied, policy choices to reduce these conditions will light the way out of it.

If the experience of poverty appears relatively homogenous, its quantitative dimensions seem equally striking. One fifth of the world's population is represented as living on less than one dollar a day. High infant mortality and low rates of enrolment in primary education characterise poverty across diverse countries and regions. As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has shown in relation to the effects of the census in colonial India, technologies of representation have important consequences for the kinds of truths they reveal. Similar statistics can create an impression of the similarity of experience (Appadurai 1993:321; Geertz 1984) and of the processes which contribute to poverty in diverse settings. An identity of form rather than content justifies the grouping together of countries that may be quite different, with different histories and different causes of poverty. Such technologies also permit the construction of poverty rankings, in which countries and regions within countries can appear as poorer in the sense of having more poverty than others. Quantitative methodologies for assessing poverty allow magnitude to be addressed. Poverty can be seen to be increasing or decreasing, and the scale of poverty assessed. Quantitative measures also permit the quantification of measures to address poverty, the cost benefit analyses that are the basis of economic appraisals, and which, in the case of income and consumption,

validate the models of growth needed to raise incomes and 'lift the poor' out of poverty.

Quantitative methodologies and poverty lines help to create poverty as a tangible entity, a thing in itself, the scale of which can be captured through measurement. The language used in the *World Development Report*, but which recurs elsewhere in other anti-poverty documentation from other agencies, reinforces this notion. Poverty is ascribed agency to impact on the lives of people who 'fall into' it. Poverty is not described as a consequence of social relations, but represented as an evolving entity that must be 'attacked'. Size matters. The growth in poverty, its sheer scale, prompts a response. Poverty in these development writings is represented as inherently problematic, not only for the poor themselves, whose suffering is graphically documented, but for the wider society which is threatened by it.<sup>vi</sup>

At first sight such representations of poverty seem relatively straightforward, even obvious. Their acceptance comes partly from the fact that they are so familiar and partly because they have become a necessary and expected preamble to virtually any kind of development policy or programme documentation. In practice, such accounts are far from being unproblematic statements about the incidence of poverty in particular places, and are not intended to be.<sup>vii</sup> The kind of poverty these accounts present is both highly

subjective, depending on the perspective of the perceiver, and highly political, that is related to the wider context in which such rankings and accounts become important for justifying proposed interventions (Apthorpe 1997: 24; Pansters & de Ruijter 2000:5). Such descriptions are in fact part of a long established intellectual tradition of perceiving poverty in ways which, in making poverty the focus of analysis, obscure the social processes that make people poor and, in abstracting poverty from people, obliterate the agency of social actors in creating and transcending the limitations of their resources and entitlements (cf. O'Connor 2001).

The rich and processes of wealth creation are rarely the focus of such studies.<sup>viii</sup> This is not because wealth and poverty are unconnected, far from it, but because such approaches are essentially concerned with a normalising vision of society that is premised on the elimination of what is socially accorded the status of pathological (cf. Rabinow 1989: 171; Douglas 1991). Visions of society as functional and holistic characterised normative social thinking for much of the twentieth century. Such assumptions were not confined to the theories associated with the founding fathers of sociology such as Emile Durkheim (1960). They had significant practical implications in a period when social knowledge was starting to be used as the basis of a scientific understanding of society, with implications of prediction and control. Michel Foucault has delineated the intellectual genealogy of such perspectives in the context of the history of social policy<sup>ix</sup> in

France in the nineteenth century. An evidence base concerning the spread of cholera associated the disease with the poor. Surveillance and social control were the imposed solutions, not only to epidemics, but to the potential social disruption that the poor presented. Poor victims of disease were to be treated in public hospitals not only for humanitarian reasons, but in order to generate the knowledge about the disease that was necessary to develop treatments for those with sufficient wealth to pay for it. 'What is benevolence towards the poor is transformed into knowledge that is applicable to the rich' (1976:84). Although the present day institutionalisation of knowledge about poverty in other countries is not directly comparable to the situation of medical knowledge in nineteenth century France, there are obvious parallels. As with the medical profession's capacity to define sickness and, backed by the state, to cordon infectivity, so what constitutes knowledge about poverty and the demarcation of the poor is a consequence of the power of international development organisations and of the national governments with whom they work. With poverty as a subject the poor, who by definition lack the resources and entitlements to reframe the terms of this engagement, become objects of study.

As poverty reduction becomes the stated purpose of development transfers that are no longer oriented solely towards economic growth, poverty becomes a general proxy for un-development. In order to address poverty, to demonstrate progress towards development, poverty as a category expands to accommodate

deprivations along different axes. The various reports of the Millennium Project task forces differentiate between different kinds of poverty; including income poverty, service poverty and absolute poverty, as demonstrated by extremely low human development outcomes. The relationship between these different dimensions of poverty is not straightforward. As participatory styles of poverty assessment become the norm in aid recipient countries, new proxies for poverty are revealed through the selection of indicators of poverty status and with them areas of responsibility for poverty reduction delineated. The constitution of poverty, its characteristics and causes, is highly political, while recourse to poverty as an analytical device in development is, often, intentionally depoliticising. Poverty as both cause and effect of un-development is accorded the kind of agency and contribution to causality that in reality belongs to a range of human actors enmeshed in the complex chains of relationships that make up history.

To assert the social construction of poverty as a category within international development is not to deny that the phenomena grouped today in its classificatory frame exist or have always existed in some shape or form. The social construction of poverty as the target of international development assistance means that what constitutes poverty changes depending on the perspective of those charged with its assessment. It is because of this that poverty, and its very salience as a category cannot be assumed to be universally



present. Shresthra has written about the impact of development agents' categories of 'poverty' and 'development' on Nepalese rural communities, and the social consequences of being defined as lacking what outsiders think they should have (1995). Similarly, Goldman, describing the introduction of donor driven development planning in Laos, quotes a government official poised to write his first concept paper on 'poverty' who remarked that it was not until Bank involvement that their government had 'ever used the term 'poverty' (2001:208). The content of the category of poverty is neither self evident nor universally pervasive. Indeed if it were it would surely have come to the attention of other empirical social sciences outside development, notably anthropology.

### **Anthropological Approaches to Poverty**

Development research and policy documentation represents poverty as an overwhelming global problem. However, despite the apparent scale and depth of poverty in the world, poverty as a research problematic has yet to capture the attention of the qualitative social sciences to the same extent. The Euro-American focus of conventional sociology and the colonization by practitioners of development studies of expertise in so-called poor countries has doubtless contributed to this situation. More fundamentally, a social science perspective from anthropology or sociology would start from a position of interrogating the assumed categories of analysis, in this case 'poverty', rather than assume

attributes in advance. Accounts of 'poverty' from this perspective would not seek to refine globally applicable definitions, nor assume that the experiential dimensions of what was locally categorised as 'poverty' across time and space were similar, although there may well be similarities.<sup>x</sup> Indeed, referring to the 'world of measurement' within which the intensity of famines are conventionally assessed by outsiders dealing with aid, the anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup makes the point that for the person suffering from food shortage, it is not the exactitude of the amount of food which they are missing that matters to them as much as the qualitative dimensions of the experience. This is filtered through cultural expectations and perspectives, as well as those shaped by age, class, individual experience and gender. She remarks, 'when hunger has become famine, quantity has long since been transformed into quality' (1993:730).

An anthropological approach seeks to understand something of this experience, and with a basic methodological premise that the anthropologist must first observe what people do and say and use their categories to understand it. From this perspective, the anthropologist cannot be so much concerned with her own idea of poverty or with concepts of poverty derived from development documentation as with what concepts of poverty do or do not exist in particular places and at particular times. Where do these ideas come from? Who do these categories include? What does it mean to be labelled as 'poor', or as 'destitute' in these settings? How do these categories relate to other social categories?

Moreover, researchers in anthropology, in starting with human beings, as opposed to ideal types read off survey data, perceives poverty as a consequence of relations between people. For researchers in anthropology, as for our informants, poverty is a social relation, not an absolute condition (Sahlins 1972: 37). Ethnographic studies of communities and the social relations through which they are structured have yielded numerous insights into poverty and inequality. These include studies of rural society, and on caste, social exclusion, and the structural transformations brought about by rapid economic growth (Gudeman 1978 ; Nash 1979). Displacement, dispossession, the social construction of property relations and how people have rights over other people are long standing anthropological themes.

As the gaze of anthropological researchers adjusts to accommodate post-colonial landscapes, anthropologists have looked inwards and upwards at their objects of study. Anthropologists now concern themselves not with local societies as self reproducing social universes (e.g. Evans Pritchard 1940), or with the articulation of these into metropolitan or capitalist relations of production as in the Marxist derived visions of the unequal economic integration of third world local communities and first world industrial centres of the 1970s (e.g. Meillassoux 1981), but with the entire span of social relations that comprise the contemporary world. No longer focusing solely on small-scale rural communities mostly in non-Western countries, anthropologists today conduct research into diverse

social worlds in all social contexts and across all continents. Recent works by anthropologists explore the social relations around new fertility practices in the United Kingdom (Franklin 1997), how `ordinary'<sup>xi</sup> North Americans think about mathematics in their daily numerical practices (Lave 1988) and the implementation of education policy on Kilimanjaro (Stambach 2001).

Anthropologists are also exploring the institutions through which contemporary international society is constituted. Examples include Wilson's study of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2001), Nader's work on the social processes through which special kinds of knowledge come to have status as `science', with all the claims to truth that this category implies (Nader et al 1996), and Harper's ethnography of the IMF (1997). <sup>xii</sup>

As well as globalisation and the changing nature of contemporary life in all societies, anthropology *research* has become more concerned with larger issues of human suffering and how these are brought about by the conjuncture of specific social and political relations. Pertinent examples include Malkki's account of the relation between refugee status and the emergence of a politicised ethnicity amongst Hutu exiles in Tanzanian refugee camps during the 1980s (1995), Harrell Bond's classic ethnography of life for the recipients of humanitarian assistance in a refugee camp in Sudan (1986), and Paul Richard's empathetic analysis of the meaning and motivation behind an atrocity filled guerrilla war in Sierra Leone (1996). Away from the aftermath of war, anthropologists have

acknowledged ill-being in the unavoidable 'violence of everyday life' brought about by appalling social conditions in some very poor communities. Nancy Scheper Hughes' (1992) description of the normalisation of infant mortality in a chronically low-income *favela* in Brazil shows how because poor mothers expect that weaker children will die as a matter of course, they do little to save them. Dying infants and those perceived as having minimal chances of survival are treated as little 'angels' who are merely visiting the living and are not expected to be anything other than the most transient of visitors. Scheper Hughes has since turned her attention to the transnational social relations of inequality that promote and sustain the trade in human flesh between first and third worlds- not slavery or prostitution, but the buying and selling of body parts, blood, kidneys and corneas (2002).

If poverty as a state and status is the manifestation of social relations it is also a category of representation through which social agents classify and act upon the world. An anthropological approach explores the content of this category and its genealogy in relation to the specific historical and social contexts in which it has salience for different categories of persons. These approaches reveal the continuity between current notions of poverty in development and social policy, and the assumptions that inform them. As we have seen, these centre on normative ideas of social order and a perception of poverty as an inherent threat to this order. Poverty is not represented as the outcome of historical and social

relations but as a presence in societies that must be eliminated to maintain social functionality. Where social relations are described as contributing to poverty these are represented as flawed in terms of quality, rather than content, as in the policy discourse about social capital where the low quality of local social relations is deemed to contribute to poverty, rather than the terms on which a community is embedded within wider regional, national and international economies (cf. Bracking 2003). The ahistoricism of such visions is also echoed in some contemporary development representations of poverty in which poverty is presented as a state in the present with causal relations similarly present-focused, as exemplified in 'livelihoods' frameworks and some PPAs, rather than as the outcome of longer historical processes.

### **Marginality as a Social Process**

Historically informed perspectives on poverty reveal not only the social construction of the category within specific historical and institutional settings, and the key role of powerful institutions in globalising the poverty agenda, but also the fact that the constitution of the kind of poverty that development practitioners aspire to reduce is itself a product of the socio economic relations of modernity. If poverty is measured in terms of access to services and levels of income or consumption, those seemingly excluded from market participation and services require integration into state and market systems for poverty to be addressed. This integration, or rather the terms on which the certain social

groups are integrated, can be a point of transition from sustainable community to social exclusion, from locally enfranchised to disenfranchised and destitute.<sup>xiii</sup>

The San of Botswana, an ethnic and cultural group associated with a semi-peripatetic lifestyle and a mode of subsistence based on the gathering of wild foods, hunting and casual labour on cattle ranches, provide a case in point. Land reforms have restricted their rights of access to game and wild resources, forcing an increased reliance on low wages in the ranching sector. Those without paid employment have been made dependant on meagre state handouts, which do not compensate for the loss of the hunting resources now claimed by the national elite. Although the San had previously been poor, occupying a kind of vassal position in relation to herding landlords, they had been able to mitigate this with access to game and the possibility of foraging (Wilmsen 1989). Their present situation of destitution is a direct consequence of the terms of their integration into the contemporary state (Good 1999).

Marginality is not always perceived as wholly negative by those communities wishing to limit such engagement. Indeed, some groups strive to maintain their autonomy through marginal relations to mainstream society and the state, relations characterised by Roma and traveller communities in Eastern and Western Europe and by some contemporary hunting and gathering communities in Africa and Asia. Such groups may strive to evade entrapment into the economic relations that characterise the society they wish not to be subject to.

This is achieved through the adoption of livelihood strategies involving nomadism, economic activities that yield immediate economic returns (for example foraging) (Woodburn 1981), and an emphasis on the redistribution of resources through gambling and sharing, rather than accumulation and saving. Such strategies are an important aspect of identity and self-definition for these communities, but the ideological emphasis on freedom is limited in practice by the very real powerlessness they face in relation to other social groups and the state. Subject to discrimination, often excluded from education and denied inclusion on anything other than the terms set by the majority, such groups become encapsulated within highly restricted economic and cultural niches (Day, Papataxiarchis & Stewart 1999). Marginality in relation to place is equally an artefact of social and historical processes, namely historical decisions to situate the centre elsewhere, rather than an inherent attribute of people or places. Anna Tsing's account of a remote forest community in Indonesia reveals how they see themselves as fortunate to live in an 'out of the way' place, far from the parasitical state. The ethnography demonstrates how 'out of the wayness', and marginality, are socially, historically and *intentionally* constructed (1993: 41-71), by those defined as marginal as well as by those with the power to enforce it. <sup>xiv</sup>

### **The Moral Basis of Marginality**



Marginality and social exclusion, once established, are often reinforcing. While deliberate processes of discrimination are rarely admitted, they are clearly evident in the kinds of mutually reinforcing policies applied to many marginal communities and which serve to ensure that the odds against their integration into mainstream society are often insurmountable. Extreme examples of this kind of strategy are the policies pursued by the Australian government against Aboriginal communities (Mc Knight 2002), the Botswana state's policies on the San and the systemic institutionalisation of discrimination against black citizens in the United States of America. Mortality rates for black citizens of some US cities are higher than those in some of the world's poorest countries (Sen 1999) and a significant proportion of young black American men are in prison.<sup>xv</sup> Discourses legitimating differential treatment for communities on the basis of differences in lifestyle and livelihoods accompany these exclusionary strategies, informing not merely racist stereotyping of minority cultural groups but providing the rationalisation for a perception of exclusion as a problem of the excluded categories. Poverty becomes not only a problem of the poor, but also their responsibility.

The notion that certain individuals and social groups are undeserving of assistance because they somehow cause their own poverty is pervasive in the United States, where it informs racist discourse about non-white low income groups (Adair 2002:464). The anthropologist Felipe Bourgois has written about

the problems faced by young male Puerto Ricans in a run down district of New York City who find their access to even low income jobs restricted through a combination of institutional racism and the feminisation of the unskilled sector (2003). One of the few options for young men to earn good money in the neighbourhood is through the illegal drugs trade, selling highly profitable crack cocaine to a client group consisting of addicts from outside the Puerto Rican community. Of course only a minority of men in the neighbourhood earn their living in this way, but the high rewards and glamour of the big dealer lifestyle make an appealing, and rational, career option for those men willing to practice sufficient violence to gain 'respect' and ensure that their supply networks are protected.

Bourgois shows how involvement in violence, drugs and crime perpetuate the stereotypical images of the neighbourhood, effectively a 'no go' zone for those who see themselves as law abiding and for the better off who can afford to live elsewhere. Ghetto dwellers working in the legal economic sector of the city become daily commuters out of poverty, only to commute back in once their working day is finished. Outsiders blame ghetto poverty on what they categorise as the drugs and guns culture of the ghetto. Bourgois shows how the ghetto and its poverty are best viewed in social and historical context, as the products of and reaction to particular social and economic configurations in the United States and the ongoing colonial subjugation of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican poverty has very

little to do with the cultural practices and attitudes of Puerto Ricans but rather serves US interests, both within Manhattan, where Puerto Rican migrants provide a source of cheap labour and in Puerto Rico where industrial production can take place for US firms free of the constraints for the firm and protection for the labourer provided by US labour laws. Interestingly, the cultural values of the men that Bourgois worked with were not very different from those of mainstream American society- a desire to get on, make some money, a belief in the free market and individual freedom, and the belief that poverty is both an individual responsibility and an index of moral failure.<sup>xvi</sup>

The US approach to welfare is informed by an ideology of individual economic responsibility in which failure to achieve, and hence poverty, is viewed as a failure and thus as the responsibility of the individual, a kind of rational choice. The perception of poverty as a moral failure justifies punitive welfare interventions (Adair 2002: 460-2). Welfare regimes based on an assumption that the majority of the poor are undeserving and need to be closely monitored are oriented towards making public assistance hard to obtain and unpleasant to survive on. Various schemes aimed at getting people to work, often for very low wages, aim to make the poor more deserving of assistance through labour, hence the concept of 'workfare'. Claimants must permit state scrutiny of their homes and private lives over their consumption and spending. These attitudes are not confined to the United States. They inform recent attempts at welfare reform in

European countries, including the UK, and underlie the promotion of conditional transfer programmes more generally. These programmes, of which Progresa in Mexico is the best known, make access to support dependant on the recipient's compliance with the objectives of other social programming, notably in health and education (Lazar 2004), that is on being able to demonstrate that they not merely in need but are morally deserving.

Ideas about the responsibility of the poor for their own poverty have a long history in Western society.<sup>xvii</sup> They were the basis of discourses about poverty and social responsibility for the destitute in England until the mid twentieth century, hence the intentionally punitive welfare regimes in workhouses where the destitute could go to seek food and shelter in return for hard labour in conditions that were explicitly designed to replicate the prison.<sup>xviii</sup> Related attitudes live on in popular perceptions of poverty even within poor communities (Woodhouse 2003) and within the international development community. Donor preoccupations with accounting for even trivial amounts of cash when spent in villages reflect similar concerns whereas central spending of hundreds or thousands attracts little audit attention within country and head quarters offices where the emphasis is on millions. There is no doubt that the idea of giving cash as opposed to food aid in famine situations is still widely resisted because of a belief that this would benefit the undeserving poor, despite evidence to suggest that this is cheaper and more effective in supporting local

grain markets and empowering local people than food aid (de Waal 1989; Devereux 2002). Food for work programmes also promote this way of thinking, the idea that the work should be so menial and unpleasant and lowly paid that a person would have to be virtually starving to want to do it, (what is referred to as 'self targeting') rather than simply allocate funds to those in need of support which it is feared would create 'dependency'.<sup>xix</sup> The labour intensive public work schemes for minimal pay to provide relief for the very poor are similar. Such schemes may provide some people with some income but they will never alter the unequal structure of social relations nor address the macroeconomic conditions that keep people in poverty (McCord 2003).

### **Social Critique and Social Transformation**

The social critique of the society of the poor, rather than the society that produces poverty, is equally present in development thinking, even in the very paradigm of international development as a moral imperative itself. Certainly, where the development paradigm is premised on an explicit desire to transform societies deemed as poor and therefore as somehow dysfunctional, a moral judgement implying social failure is never far away. Although small scale sanitation and latrine projects may seem very different on the surface from the recent drive to foster strong social networks and relationships of trust through civil society support programmes thought to build social capital, both types of interventions depend on shared assumption about the unsuitability or inappropriateness of

kinds of social organisation and social practices for achieving development, or conversely, the association between poverty and particular social and institutional forms.

Contemporary initiatives that involve changing the poor to get the poor out of poverty are interesting not only for the discourse of moral judgement they reveal from the powerful over those with little power, but their continuity into the post colonial social relations of international development. Related thinking informed the strategies of colonial Christian missions which strove to associate their ideas of desirable society with what was termed 'civilization', implying a wholesale devaluation of the societies that were the targets of conversion (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Green 2003b). Similarly, the sanitation policies so vigorously pursued in colonial Fiji (Thomas 1994), the mass campaigns for the eradication of sleeping sickness (Lyons 1992) and tsetse fly which involved mass reorganisation of rural communities into new and governable social forms were premised on the notion of the inappropriateness of certain social forms for what was defined as positive change (Chachage 1988).

Although accounts of the one sidedness of developer -developee relationships are no longer an accurate reflection of development partnerships in which poverty reduction strategies are created nationally and in collaboration with those deemed to be stakeholders, the scope for equal partnerships is clearly

limited by the political considerations of aid and the economic influence of donors (Lewis 1998; Crewe & Harrison 1999). It is equally constrained by the dominance of particular visions of development problems and solutions that attain legitimacy at particular times. This explains why the content of development strategies and plans, even when these are prepared under substantial national or local ownership and where participatory modalities have been encouraged, reveal remarkable similarities across countries and continents. This uniformity comes about through the effects of a variety of mechanisms, including the policy influence of a limited number of organisations, the standardisation of development planning and analytical practices across many organisations in development from NGOs to multi-laterals, and the relatively restricted pool within which the same professionals circulate from agency to agency (Green 2003 b). Also significant is the production of what come to be constituted as authoritative knowledge about development, and with poverty as the central problematic, about poverty itself (Cooper & Packard 1997: 24; Goldman 2001; Moore 2001). Claims to authoritative knowledge are dispersed through the development satellite agencies –universities, development research institutes and NGOs, and as part of the World Bank’s strategy to become, as ‘knowledge Bank’, the centre of knowledge about development (Mehta 2001). This power to know is also, inevitably, the power to judge. Just as notions of the deserving poor and the culture of poverty seem natural to apply at the level of individuals within wealthy societies, so the same moral judgements are

implicitly made when advocating mass social transformation or cultural change as precursors to 'development'. And, as with the intrusive state's power to invade the domestic space of welfare mothers in the US to assess whether they have spent their rations wisely or have cheated the system (Adair 2001: 460), so the inequalities of power mean that the benefactor also claims the power not only to judge the moral claims of the poor to assistance, and to police them, but to set the terms of the assessment.

Participatory poverty assessments permit, at least formally, the poor themselves to engage in framing the terms by which poverty in particular places is recognised. They do not radically shift the relations of power through which the non-poor and the outside determines when and how poverty is to be recognised and assessed. New modalities for facilitating local ownership of development strategies through the PRSP process potentially offer space for local definitions of poverty and strategies for action to emerge within the global discourse of poverty reduction (Booth 2003). The extent to which such mechanisms provide an opportunity to address inequality and poverty must remain open to question (Weber 2004). Given that poverty is neither an absolute condition, nor a readily identifiable entity, and that the content of the category is ultimately politically determined, it is not surprising that the new institutional structures for perceiving poverty become politicised contexts where poverty can be claimed not so much as a problem for some social categories, but as a potential asset by



others who stand to gain from the inputs associated with the development relationship.<sup>xx</sup>

This process works itself out in different ways depending on the power relations involved in the construction of poverty. In South Africa under Apartheid for example, what was in effect a participatory poverty study although termed a 'commission of inquiry' financed by the Carnegie Foundation, a US charitable entity, became a forum where the politics of apartheid could be publicly critiqued, within and outside South Africa. Local ownership and involvement in the design of the study created credibility and ensured that the product was viewed as an indigenous, rather than an outsider, vision (Bell 2002). In contrast, the weight attached to development rankings in relation to determining priorities for spending makes the positioning in rankings critical for governments or regions seeking to maximise their credibility as deserving recipients of international assistance, even where these rankings are determined by outsiders. It is in the interests of some countries to be categorised as poor and to be ranked as amongst the poorest in order to justify claims for development support just as it is in the interests of donors to represent them this way. Development rankings, including poverty, are differently interpreted and assessed depending on the policy priorities of different donors and different governments (Viopio 2000:189). These rankings and indicators are never just perceived as data (nor are they intended to be), but as 'message, meaning and judgement...the most strongly

identified and perhaps contested messages... (are) ... official social and cultural values and open or hidden policy agendas seen to be *driving*, not driven by, numerical scores and rankings' (Apthorpe 1997:24, my emphasis).

### **Institutionalising Poverty**

The centrality of poverty reduction to the national strategies of aid recipient governments has necessitated the new institutionalisation of poverty outside the research centres and outside the Bank itself. While the Bank relied on consultants and national offices to work with local research institutes and governments to provide data for assessments, UNDP were working with national partners to establish national systems for monitoring poverty that would provide indicators for progress in the implementation of National Poverty Reduction Strategies and Development Visions. The introduction of Poverty Reduction Strategy papers as vehicles for the formalisation of what are in effect national development strategies based on the development visions and poverty reduction plans legitimated the institutionalisation of poverty monitoring within governments as a function of state. With the institutionalisation of poverty came the need to formally integrate poverty into policy and planning. This entails making *all* policies relate to what has become the overarching policy objective of poverty reduction.

In practice the linking of anti-poverty policies with an evidence base about poverty is difficult. Not only are national statistical and information systems under resourced and weak, but also the indicators selected to stand in for poverty do not necessarily capture its multifaceted dimensions and may not be responsive to the proposed interventions (Lucas 2000: 100). In addition, it is far from clear in poor countries where the line should be drawn, if at all, between degrees of poverty, resulting in a tendency to categorise virtually all policies as poverty reducing and in the imposition of poverty as a blanket label justifying a broad brush approach to resource allocation within and between countries, perpetuating vast inequalities in the allocation of development resources (Baulch 2003; Minujin & Delamonica 2003).

An east African example clearly illustrates the way in which poverty is institutionalised at the national level as an object of assessment and the target of policy. These processes are evident in the ongoing drive to create a poverty focus in Tanzania and Zanzibar, the outcome of an initiative spearheaded by multi lateral agencies, notably UNDP.<sup>xxi</sup> What emerges from a brief comparison of the establishment of poverty as a development priority in these two settings is the politically constructed content of the category poverty and the ways in which poverty, once defined as the main development problem, comes to assume status as an analytical device which is used to account for other problems development policy seeks to address, ranging from agriculture to governance.

Zanzibar is formally part of the United Republic of Tanzania, although it exists as a separate country within the Union, with its own parliament and own spheres of responsibility. Excluded from access to EU aid for much of the past decade, as a consequence of political conditionalities over the management of elections (amongst other things), Zanzibar is in the process of seeking readmission into the ambit of Western development assistance. Excluded from the HIPIC initiative (and hence the necessity to produce a PRSP) due to the aid boycott and the fact that development assistance is a responsibility, formally at least, of the Union Government, Zanzibar is nevertheless striving to demonstrate its commitment to the core aims of international development in a bid to strengthen its relationships with aid donors. As a result Zanzibar has adopted the poverty reduction model piloted on the mainland, and is seeking to frame its development policies in terms of a Zanzibar Poverty Reduction Plan (ZPRP).

The poverty reduction plan approach is promoted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), whose staff provide the technical assistance to adapt approaches developed elsewhere to the new setting. What is interesting about this process is what happens to problem analysis when poverty becomes the predetermined principle of, and principal, cause and effect. The ZPRP represents the situation in Zanzibar as defined by poverty which is equated, in background studies, to the extent and intensity of poverty on the mainland.

Poverty on Zanzibar is attributed to various causes, and assigned various solutions, many of which are economic and industrial. The ZPRP analysis omits reference to the political conflicts which have disrupted governance and public services since the 1960's and contributed to asymmetrical subsidisation of the islands' population of less than one million from the United Republic's coffers. Indeed, according to some estimates Zanzibar received subsidies from the United Republic of Tanzania in excess of \$870 million US dollars between 1983 and 1999, an amount greater than the eleven years of Tanzania's development expenditure from 1986-1997 (Maliyamkono 2000: 214). During this time Zanzibar was not starved of funds. It derived substantial wealth from its foreign exchange and tariff regimes that made its ports a channel through which international goods could be easily imported (Maliyamkono op cit 213, 187). Against this background, poverty as an effect emerges as a result of significantly more complex relations and processes than represented in the ZPRP documentation with its emphasis on feeder roads and access to markets.

The analysis of poverty and equation of Zanzibar poverty with mainland poverty creates the impression that we are dealing with a phenomenon which is fundamentally similar in the islands and on the Tanzania mainland. While this may be the case at the level of manifestation, that is of *effect* in terms of poverty headcounts, poor nutrition and infant mortality for example, the *causes* of poverty, and hence realistic solutions to it are radically different in the two

countries which have radically different economies, different histories and, in all likelihood, different trajectories of development. As both cause and effect of the respective problems of Zanzibar and Tanzania recourse to poverty says virtually nothing about the very different economic and social profiles of the two countries, nor about the very different historical and contemporary political relations which have contributed to the way they are today.

### **The Poverty of Representations**

If poverty as a category in development is the outcome of politically contested processes of negotiation, with variable content, what then does it mean to assert that so many people live in poverty or that poverty needs to be attacked? As we have seen, the content of the category of poverty is not specific. It conveys a range of associations, including consumption measures and access to basic services, aggregated at rather crude levels with an emphasis on magnitude and scale. The quantification of poverty permits the homogenisation of poverty across time and space. This drive to generalise permits the construction of poverty rankings which aim to compare the amount and depth of poverty, rather than its causes and consequences. The tendency to generalise equally informs qualitative approaches to apprehending poverty which have concentrated on how poverty is similarly manifested in different places rather than on the historical and social factors which differentially contribute to poverty in different places. Such accounts tell us that people are hungry because of lack of access to

food or that infant mortality is high because of poor health services. They do not however tell us why food cannot be accessed or why health services are inadequate, but this is essential if effective action is to be taken.

The emphasis on poverty as the problem and the locus of analysis diverts attention from the social relations, local, national and international, which produce poverty as an attribute of people. Very often it is not among the poor that we should be looking for those relations which have contributed most to the poverty of others. The reification of poverty deflects from the issue of agency. Poverty is not a 'thing' to be attacked, but the outcome of social inequalities that must be confronted. Only an emphasis on how the rich and powerful came to have wealth and power can fully bring to light how this process works. The poor are poor not because of 'poverty', but are poor because of other people.

Focusing on people highlights the centrality of the actions and strategies of rich and poor alike in determining poverty outcomes, and the quality of the embodied experience of deprivation. Chambers reminds us that for the most marginal what stands between them and destitution is their bodies; the only asset they have (2002:303). While the able bodied can sell their labour as long as they are able, inadequate access to health services and high risk of accidents renders many destitute. Some are forced to transact this asset in other ways. Prostitution, bondage, slavery and the sale of human organs are the ultimate

reminders that wealth buys life, literally, and other people. It is not so much the threat posed by the poor but the threats to the poor that should concern us.

Quantification can capture the extent of the incidence of such practices. It cannot capture the nexus of desperation which forces people to consider them as choices. As well as encouraging us to be more reflexive about our categories and labelling, anthropology can make a contribution here.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> For a scathing critique of the limits of relativism see Farmer (1999).

<sup>ii</sup> For a discussion of the relation between subjection and agency in academic representations of the 'Other' see Prakash (1994).

<sup>iii</sup> See the bank's website for the full mission statement and accounts of how the Bank works with the poorest people in the poorest countries and its aspirations to be the primary source of knowledge about development ([www. Worldbank.org](http://www.Worldbank.org)).

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<sup>iv</sup> For a comparative example in the West see O'Connor (2001), who shows that while early poverty studies in the UK and USA were influenced by an activist agenda poverty knowledge since the 1960's , certainly in the US, has been largely policy determined. .

<sup>v</sup> See the volume titled 'Voices of the Poor. Can Anyone Hear Us?' (Narayan et al 2000).

<sup>vi</sup> And since '9/11' for global security as leaders such as Blair and Bush make explicit links between poverty and terrorism.

<sup>vii</sup> James Ferguson remarks of such statements apparently based on empirical research which find their way into development documentation and which are contradicted by more academic studies, which are not cited, that 'It must be recognized that which is being done here is not some sort of strangely bad scholarship, but something else entirely..' (1990:27).

<sup>viii</sup> Hence Chambers' rhetorical suggestion that the *World Development Report 2010* be titled 'Challenging Wealth and Power' (2001: 306).

<sup>ix</sup> Or the social history of policy.

<sup>x</sup> See for example Baumann's description of the new 'poor' in consumer societies whose poverty is manifested through inability to share in the purchase of the consumer items through which identity is articulated (1998).

<sup>xi</sup> The book is concerned with averagely educated adults in urban communities in the US, who have not had anything other than elementary education in

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mathematics. Lave shows how most think of themselves as unable to 'do math', but in practice are adept at managing essential calculations in daily life, a kind of popular mathematics.

<sup>xii</sup> Riles' (2001) ethnography of transnational activist networks leading in up to a UN summit is another pertinent example.

<sup>xiii</sup> Devereux's distinction between poverty and destitution is pertinent here, in highlighting the social nature of destitution as a situation where people are rendered dependent on others through social and economic constraints which render their livelihoods unsustainable (2003).

<sup>xiv</sup> Similarly, the economic stagnation of much of southern Tanzania, and its ensuing 'poverty', owes much to game protection policies of successive colonial and post colonial governments which have created and maintained one of the largest game reserves in Africa right in the middle of what was until the early twentieth century the economic heartland of the region (Green 2003 *b*; Seppala 1998).

<sup>xv</sup> According to the 2001 World Development Report, 'the life expectancy of African Americans is about the same as that in China and in some states in India' (2001:46).

<sup>xvi</sup> 'Like most other people in the United States, drug dealers and street criminals are scrambling to obtain their piece of the pie as fast as possible. In fact, in their pursuit of success they are even following the minute details of the classical

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Yankee model for upward mobility. They are aggressively pursuing careers as private entrepreneurs; they take risks; work hard and pray for good luck' (Bourgois 2003:326).

<sup>xvii</sup> Prior to the workhouse, parish relief was quite generous towards the destitute and was unconditional (Fogel 2004).

<sup>xviii</sup> For a contemporary account of the conditions inside workhouses at the start of the twentieth century, and for insights into Victorian attitudes towards poverty, see the novelist Jack London's *'The People of the Abyss'*, originally published in 1903 (1998).

<sup>xix</sup> Aid, Mary Anderson points out, and the way in which its is delivered conveys implicit and explicit ethical messages (1999:55).

<sup>xx</sup> In the form of contracts, large scale, resource transfers, opportunities for employment, travel and study tours, capacity and institution building, seating allowances and so on.

<sup>xxi</sup> For an overview of poverty in Tanzania in the context of PRS see Ellis & Ntengua (2003).