DEFINITIONS OF DISTRESS
Who are you calling poor?

Godfried Engbersen

Poverty as a blot on society has been eclipsed by other priorities, especially the need to determine a financially acceptable level of social welfare cover. The swings in public opinion between concern and indifference reflect an ongoing controversy about the nature of poverty. The issue is a political football. And the argument cannot be solved by a straightforward appeal to the "facts" because the statistics are open to interpretation by those who set out to define the characteristics of the poor.

Since the mid-1980s the growth of inequality throughout the world has been accompanied by the re-emergence of poverty in Western Europe and the United States. The coexistence of public poverty and private affluence in the West is nothing new and has given rise to heated debate on several occasions in the post-war period. But only in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s did the extent of the phenomenon become apparent. With growing numbers in marginalised groups (now known as the "excluded"), increasing job insecurity, the direct attack on the welfare state and the difficulties involved in integrating ethnic minorities, poverty has regularly captured public attention. But so far such attention has been short-lived. Poverty as a blot on society has been eclipsed by other priorities, especially the need to determine a financially acceptable level of social welfare cover.

The swings in public opinion between concern and indifference reflect an ongoing controversy about the nature of poverty. The issue is a political football. And the argument cannot be solved by an appeal to the "facts", because the disagreements concern both the relevance of the statistics invoked and their interpretation. Some people say that if low-income groups own consumer durables such as cars, computers and video recorders, then they are not poor. Others say it shows that modern poverty is not just a matter of material needs, it is essentially one of social frustration. In the same way, some people say that the high proportion of unemployed among the poor is to do with the growing laziness of people on welfare benefits. Others stress that fewer and fewer jobs are available. In other words, how you choose and interpret the facts largely depends on your value system.

This can be seen in the linguistic wrangle about poverty. In addition to the language of the poor themselves, at least four types of discourse can be distinguished - bureaucratic, moralising, dramatic and academic - with their terminology resembling the Tower of Babel. Adepts of emotional language complain about the heartless jargon of the bureaucrats. The complex terminology of the social scientists, with its multitude of definitions and approaches, is the despair of politicians. Meanwhile those directly concerned fail to recognise themselves in the welter of conflicting jargon. For the poor, poverty is not a matter of definition. It is the harsh reality of daily life. Bureaucratic language concentrates on defining a poverty line. The poor are those with incomes below a given level. In many European countries the state sets a limit below which it grants assistance. Here the terminology is abstract, technical, almost neutral.
Moralising language is very different. It makes a judgement about the behaviour of
the poor, depicting them either as irresponsible, dangerous and lacking in motivation,
or as unfortunate, innocent and needy. Rooted in American traditions of social help,
this language is mainly concerned to distinguish between those who deserve charity
and those who do not. Its use has increased considerably over the last ten years.
In the 1980s and 1990s dramatic language has played a major role in securing
material aid for the poor and, more generally, in rousing public opinion. Specific,
expressive and emotional, it differs from bureaucratic jargon in describing the daily
problems of the poor - the school transport they cannot afford, the humiliation of the
dole queue, the bitterness of those who suffer in silence. Dutch bishop Martinus
Muskens used this language when he asserted that a pauper with no means of survival
had the right to take a loaf of bread from a shop. And the Dutch prime minister was
speaking the same language when he retorted: "In my family we had to watch every
penny, but we were too proud even to point to something that didn’t belong to us."
In seeking to define a level of poverty, academic language is similar to the language
of the bureaucrats. But it is less categorical and one-sided, employing alternative
concepts like social exclusion and underclass. It pays more attention to the causes of
poverty but, in Europe at least, it rarely looks at those causes together with the poor
themselves. It is mostly concerned with collective phenomena like the growing job
insecurity caused by the transition to a post-industrial society, the weakening of social
ties, demographic trends such as the increasing proportion of elderly people and
immigrants, and the dismantling of the welfare state.

The language of the poor is the language in which those directly concerned describe
their situation. Their voices reach us indirectly, through poverty campaigners or
research that attempts to record their actual words. A good example of this is Pierre
Bourdieu’s book _La Misère du Monde_, in which he and his team reproduce interviews
with people in various vulnerable categories. But even there, the choice and editing of
the extracts is the work of outsiders.

The language of the poor is important in two ways. It provides us with the insider’s
view of a social situation as actually experienced. Do the poor still consider
themselves members of society? Do they feel superfluous or forgotten? Do they use
the term poverty to describe their situation? But it also enables us to assess their state
of mind. The image of the victim, which everyday language employs as if it were self-
evident, is in strong contrast to the fighting spirit of many vulnerable households.
In public and political debate, all these languages conflict. The clash between them
reflects the roles of the varies parties concerned - politicians, civil servants,
academics, trade unionists - and the positions they adopt, but it also reveals
fundamentally different views of poverty and approaches to the problem.

Everyone agrees that people facing hunger and starvation are poor. The differences
arise when the term is applied to modern forms of inequality. This wider use gives
rise to considerable confusion. Many Europeans find it perfectly natural to refer to the
Afro-American inhabitants of North America’s black ghettos as poor, just as they
would to the slum-dwellers of Surat, India’s 12th largest city, where there was an
outbreak plague in 1994. But how far can the term be applied to people in Europe?
Does it apply to immigrants in France’s run-down suburbs, Poland’s unmarried
mothers, unemployed workers in England’s old industrial cities, or those on the dole
in the Netherlands’ larger towns? After all, these groups differ greatly in terms of income, social welfare cover and life expectancy.

The gradual transformation of the concept of poverty in the course of this century provides some answers to these questions. Poverty is now no longer understood as an absolute threat to physical existence (subsistence poverty) but as the situation of people who do not achieve the standard of living that is usual in their own society and are therefore unable to participate in it. This does not make poverty synonymous with social inequality. Poverty implies the existence of social inequality but does not follow automatically from it. If we define those in the bottom 10% or 20% income bracket as poor, then there will always be poor people. But the bottom 10% or 20% in a very rich country can be prosperous. The term does not only denote the relative disadvantage of one group compared with others, it implies a threshold. A household is considered poor when its income is below a certain level and its members are thereby deprived of the material and other conditions necessary for proper participation in the society in which they live.

Obviously, the definition of that level and the relevant income criteria vary from country to country. In some regions of the world, good health, a sufficient quantity of food and adequate clothing are enough for full social integration. But in a post-industrial society, full participation in the life of the community requires more than just food, clothing and shelter. It requires suitable education and modern means of communication and information like television, telephones and computers. Following Indian Nobel-prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, we may conclude that the monetary criteria for full participation in society vary with culture, region and period - even if a recent UN report suggests that they will eventually become universal as a result of globalisation.

On this reasoning, we can consider as poor a recipient of Dutch social assistance (who has full access to all social welfare benefits), a mother on welfare in Naples and a clandestine worker in Berlin (who has no social protection). But we must also beware of overdoing the use of the term poverty. If too many people in rich European countries are considered poor, the term will lose all credibility. It should be confined to citizens (and non-citizens) who have to live permanently or for long periods on a minimum income and are excluded from major social institutions such as the labour market and leisure activities.

Research into present-day poverty adopts countless different approaches, many of which fail to do justice to its complexity. Such is the case, for example, with the “basic necessities” approach used to define poverty in the US, where households are considered poor if their income does not cover the minimum expenditure required to satisfy a number of basic needs. Some other income-based approaches are relativistic: the dividing line is drawn somewhere between 50% and 60% of the average income for a given country. In addition, there are definitions used by politicians, subjectivist approaches reflecting public opinion, and approaches based on investigating how people manage to survive without basic goods and services. All these approaches are open to serious objections. For example, the poverty level taken as a reference in the US is too low to allow full participation in society. Conversely, the relativist approach can lead to groups whose members live comfortably being classified as poor. The drawback of the political approach is that
whenever the baseline for the minimum standard of living is raised, the numbers of the poor increase as more households fall into the poverty category. Subjectivist approaches also tend to produce high figures for the numbers of poor, since they measure income satisfaction rather than poverty itself. Finally, it is very hard to say what goods and services are really necessary in a modern developed society. Not being a member of a club and not owning a television set are not necessarily the result of poverty.

Measuring poverty has been described as a Sisyphean task. The job of the "poverty researcher" resembles that of the legendary king of Corinth, who was condemned to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll down to the bottom every time he got it almost to the top. The concept of poverty is bound to time and place. It has to be perpetually rethought and updated.

The same can be said of the popular new concept of exclusion. The term has appeared regularly in the political vocabulary of the official bodies of the European Union since 1989 and is beginning to determine the framework for scientific research into social inequality and cohesion. It originated in the writings of French sociologists dealing with marginal groups, in particular the homeless. But although its meaning has been expanded considerably in the European context, the official documents neither define exactly what is meant by "exclusion" nor explain what its victims are "excluded" from.

No doubt the vagueness of the term accounts for its popularity. You can read what you like into it. The French debate on exclusion is an example. All the political parties are "agin it", but their reasons differ, and so do the policies they propose. The vagueness of the term also explains scepticism in some quarters about the phenomenon itself. It is very tempting to replace a term like poverty, but new buzzwords may conceal more than they reveal.